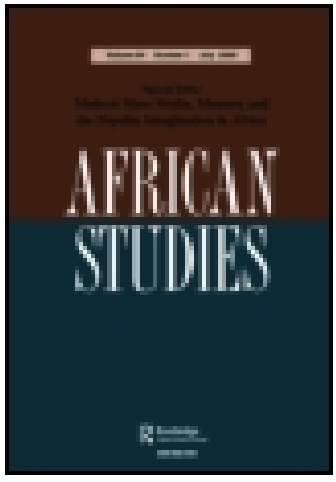

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The mantis, the eland and the meerkats

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The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats

Conflict and Mediation in a Nineteenth-century San Myth

David Lewis-Williams

Given the rich heritage of indigenous southern African folklore, it is surprising that so few scholars have attempted detailed exegeses of specific myths. An exception to this generalisation is David Hammond-Tooke. His numerous, insightful analyses of Nguni myths and cosmology, written over more than two decades, are models of what can be done (e.g., Hammond-Tooke 1972, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1981, 1992). The present paper deals with San rather than Nguni folklore. Nevertheless, his example and influence will be readily discernible on every page.

In the 1870s the philologist Wilhelm Bleek and his co-worker and sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, recorded a large number of /Xam myths.[1] The /Xam were a southern San (Bushman)[2] group living in the central Cape Colony (now Northern Cape Province); the informants had been brought to Cape Town, where the Bleek family lived, as convicts. After their term of penal servitude had expired, some remained in Cape Town so that they could continue teaching the Bleeks their language and lore. Some informants went to Cape Town with the express purpose of assisting Bleek and Lloyd. Using a phonetic script that Bleek had himself developed, he and Lloyd took down the narratives verbatim in the /Xam language and prepared a line-by-line, literal English translation (for accounts of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection see Deacon and Dowson 1996).

Prominent among these myths is a series of episodes concerning the adventures of the Mantis (/Kaggen), the southern San trickster-deity (Schmidt 1973, 1989; Lewis-Williams 1981:117-126; Hewitt 1986:123-44). The

principal episodes include the Mantis's creation of the Eland from a shoe, the death of the Eland, the Mantis's fight with the Meerkats (suricates: small furry mammals), and the Mantis's creation of the moon. What we may call auxiliary episodes include the Mantis's nurturing of the Eland on honey, the Mantis's piercing of the Eland's gall, and the Mantis's seizure of the Meerkats' belongings. Hewitt (1986:216) has shown which of these episodes were used by each of Bleek and Lloyd's informants. Only one of the episodes, the fight with the Meerkats, appears in each of the recorded performances of the tale that describes how the Mantis created the Eland. Early in the twentieth century, the fight with the Meerkats was also recorded by Currlé (1913).

The Bleek and Lloyd manuscripts do not make it clear whether each of the narrations that they recorded was seen by its narrator as a complete performance. The myths were told under what were, for the San, highly unusual circumstances – painstaking dictation in a suburban garden. Some episodes may have been specifically requested by Bleek or Lloyd; the omission of certain episodes may therefore be no more than a function of the way in which the narratives were recorded rather than any conceptual unity that the narrators may have entertained. It seems misleading to refer to each of the narratives as a 'version'. Nevertheless, differences between the performances show that, even if Bleek and Lloyd influenced the direction of the tales, the narrators felt free to combine, eliminate and, especially, elaborate the episodes and auxiliary episodes as they wished (Hewitt 1986). For a full analysis, it is tempting to conflate all the available performances and so be in a position to demonstrate the relationships between such recurring symbols as honey, water, shoes and gall.

My interest here, however, is more restricted, and I consider only the performance that Lloyd recorded in September 1871 but did not translate until October 1896. The narrative was given by one of the Bleek family's most prolific informants, //Kabbo, a man who, according to Lloyd, 'much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books' (Bleek and Lloyd 1911:x). Elsewhere (Lewis-Williams 1996), I have argued that //Kabbo was a *!gi:xa*, a /Xam word that has been translated as 'medicine man' (Bleek 1933b), 'sorcerer' (Bleek 1935) and, I believe legitimately, as 'shaman' (Lewis-Williams 1992). As we shall see, his status as a shaman gives his narratives a special interest and helps to explain certain aspects of his performance. Very similar kinds of shamanism were practised by most of the San groups that have been studied, such as the !Kung (Lee 1968, 1993; Marshall 1962, 1969; Biesele 1978, 1993; Katz 1982), the Nharo (Guenther 1975, 1975/76, 1986), the G/wi (Silberbauer 1963), the !Kõ (Heinz 1975) and, of course, the /Xam (Bleek 1933b, 1935, 1936). Where necessary, I cite some of these other San groups' shamanic beliefs and practices to supplement the Bleek family's record of the /Xam. Demonstrable parallels between various beliefs and rituals (not only in shamanism) of many San

groups justify my recourse to this material (cf. Lewis-Williams and Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 1981, 1992).

The narrative with which I deal was published, in part only, as a component of what Dorothea Bleek, Wilhelm Bleek's daughter, called a 'First Version' of 'The Mantis makes an Eland' (Bleek 1924:2-5). In fact, this 'First Version' is not a 'version' at all; it is her own compilation of parts of performances given by //Kabbo (two performances) and another informant, Diä!kwain (one performance). //Kabbo's complete narrative is summarised here for the first time from Lloyd's MS pages L.II.4.489-493 and 504-514. I entitle it:

THE MANTIS, THE ELAND AND THE MEERKATS

The Mantis stole /Kwammang-a's shoe and put it into a waterhole. When /Kwammang-a missed his shoe, he asked his wife, the Porcupine (the Mantis's adopted daughter), about it. She replied that she knew nothing about the matter.

Then, at the waterhole, the Mantis made an Eland out of the shoe and fed the animal on honey that he should have taken home to his family. /Kwammang-a was angry when he missed his shoe, and he told his son, the young Ichneumon,[3] to spy on the Mantis to see what he was doing with the honey.

The next day, the Ichneumon accompanied the Mantis, and, whilst pretending to sleep beneath a kaross, he saw him call the Eland out of the waterhole. When the Eland came up to the Mantis, he wetted the animal's hair and smoothed it with honey. When the Ichneumon saw this, he jumped up and cried out, 'This is the creature who is eating the honey! The Eland is drinking the honey!' The Eland went back into the reeds, and the Mantis and the Ichneumon returned home.

The Ichneumon told /Kwammang-a what he had seen and said that /Kwammang-a should collect honey and take it to the waterhole. Then, if he moistened the honey and called, he would see the Eland.

He did so, calling out what the Ichneumon had told him to call: '/Kwammang-a's shoe's heel!' The Eland jumped out of the reeds and trotted up to /Kwammang-a. As it drank the water and the honey, he shot it. It sprang back and ran off to die.

Later, the Mantis went to the waterhole and found that his Eland was no longer in the reeds; he wept. He saw blood on the ground. He returned home.

Meanwhile, /Kwammang-a went to Ki-ya-koe and the Meerkats, and together they tracked and found the dead Eland. /Kwammang-a took his arrow out of the carcass and returned home.

While the Meerkats were cutting up the Eland, the Mantis came and pierced open the Eland's gall, thus angering the Meerkats. The Meerkats

then fought him and threw him on the Eland's horns. The Mantis fled.

At home the Mantis lay down because his head ached. He trembled, and the tree on which the Meerkats had placed the Eland's meat and their clothes came out of the ground, flew through the sky and came down near the Mantis's head, thus making a shelter for him.

The Meerkats returned to their home naked, and the women asked them why they had brought home neither eland meat nor their quivers.

This myth is so rich in significances that it is doubtful if a full exposition of its 'meanings' could be achieved; I certainly do not claim that what follows is the only possible interpretation of the myth (cf. Schmidt 1996: 105-108). As we shall see, it communicates simultaneously on a number of different levels; its complexity is especially apparent if it is considered along with the other performances of the same and related episodes. Here, however, I concentrate on one of the social dilemmas that the myth addresses. I argue that the negotiation of social relations between affines and a specific conflict resolution mechanism lie at the heart of the myth. This mechanism was brought into play to deal with internal social stress in the years of contact with Bantu-speaking agropastoralists and, later, white settlers, with the stresses that increasingly characterised the final years of the southern San communities. To provide an understanding of the functioning of this mechanism, I first outline, very briefly, the cosmological stage on which many southern San myths were played out and also the kinship relations within the Mantis's family.

COSMOLOGY

An analysis of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection suggests that southern San cosmology was not rigidly conceived by every member of the community, let alone expounded. What follows is therefore one researcher's formulation inferred from a reading of the texts; it is essentially an heuristic device.

In broad terms, it seems that the /Xam conceived of a two-component universe that, I argue, was informed by shamanic concepts and experiences. San shamanism was not some sort of floating, virtually independent superstructure (Lewis-Williams 1982); rather, it lay at the heart of the San worldview and permeated many areas of life (Lee 1968; Marshall 1969; Katz 1982; Biesele 1978, 1980, 1993). As a result, many (possibly all) San myths are unintelligible without an understanding of how shamanic beliefs and experiences articulated with San cosmology. Certainly, that is true of 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats'.

The /Xam cosmos comprised the realm of material, daily life and an 'adjacent', immanent, spiritual realm that included a region below the earth and another situated in the sky. I deal with each realm in turn.

The realm of /Xam material life comprised three conceptual areas: *//nein*, *!kau:xu* and *!khwa*. Bleek and Lloyd translated these words, respectively, as 'home' (sometimes 'hut' or 'house'), 'hunting-ground' and 'water'. Because *//nein* is frequently used to mean a collection of dwellings, I prefer to use 'camp'. 'Hunting-ground' has a distinctly male gender bias, even though the women's important food-gathering also took place there. Bleek and Lloyd's choice of the English word may have been a result of their informants' being principally men. On the other hand, 'hunting-ground' may be a legitimate translation of the word (at any rate as used by men) that reflects the /Xam gendering of space. In which case, *!kau:xu* may have been contrasted in some contexts with *//nein* because, in the narratives, the women often remain in the camp while the men go out on to the *!kau:xu*. Despite the word's gender bias, I retain Bleek and Lloyd's 'hunting-ground'. The third element, *!khwa*, I give as 'waterhole' because this word more adequately denotes the nature of water sources in the semi-arid Northern Cape Province than simply 'water'.

The camp, located a mile or so from the waterhole, was the focus of /Xam social activity, and its associations were essentially of order and co-operation. It was here, by and large, that shamanic curing dances took place. By contrast, the hunting-ground was the place of wild animals and unknown people. Its quintessential animal was the 'angry' lion. Its associations were of danger and unpredictability. This binary opposition of (positive) camp and (negative) hunting-ground was mediated by the waterhole, where both people and animals met by chance or by design (see, for example, Heinz 1966). Relationships here with animals could be either beneficial, in the case of antelope which could be shot, or dangerous, in the case of carnivores which could attack people. Carnivores, antelope and people were all dependent upon waterholes in the semi-arid veld.

Notions of regions below and above the plane of material life were closely associated with shamanic experiences and were less well defined. Taken together, they seem to have comprised a spiritual realm that was immanent rather than separated spatially from the daily world. Nevertheless, distinctions can be made. The region below was associated principally with the dead, and the region above with god, shamans and the spirits – though spirits can also be 'by you', even if you do not realise it (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.27.2463 rev.). Ascent to a realm in the sky and descent through a hole in the ground are common shamanic experiences worldwide. The division between the level of material life and the two spiritual realms was, like the division between the camp and the hunting-ground, mediated by water, which both falls from above and wells up from below (Lewis-Williams 1996: fig. 1). The /Xam had only one word for water and rain, *!khwa*. In numerous myths *!khwa* has transformative and regenerative powers. For example, in one narrative an ostrich feather placed in a waterhole grows into a full ostrich (Bleek and Lloyd 1911:136-45). In other, better watered, parts of southern Africa the walls of rock shelters seem to have played a similar mediatory role

between the material world and the spiritual realm (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990).

Even as waterholes and rock shelters mediated the two-component cosmos, so too did /Xam shamans. The spiritual journeys that they undertook between realms, accomplished in an altered state of consciousness, often started in a waterhole or in a rock shelter (Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989, 1990). From these points of breakthrough, the shamans could travel underground (cf. Biesele 1980:54-62) or through the sky (Lewis-Williams 1996). One of the shamans' tasks on these journeys was to make rain, and this also involved transcending the realms: they left the material realm and entered a waterhole where they captured an hallucinatory creature known as *!khwa-ka xoro*, animal of the rain. They then led this rain-animal through the sky to the place where they wished the rain to fall, often the top of a mountain. There they killed it, its blood and milk falling as precipitation (Bleek 1933a, 1933b; Lewis-Williams 1981:103-16).

The /Xam cosmos that I have now briefly outlined was the home of the Mantis and his family, as well as the place where ordinary San people lived. Indeed, for the most part, the Mantis and his relatives behave as normal San people, hunting, visiting and so forth. In exceptional circumstances, such as those in numerous myths, including the one I have summarised, the Mantis, unlike any other member of his family, is seen to have the ability to transcend the realms.

THE MANTIS'S FAMILY

I now consider only those members of the family who are germane to an understanding of 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats' (Figure 1). As we shall see, the Mantis's kinship relations paralleled certain aspects of the /Xam cosmos, and were, moreover, underpinned by complex symbolism that is directly relevant to 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats'. I deal first with the Mantis's family and then with his affines.

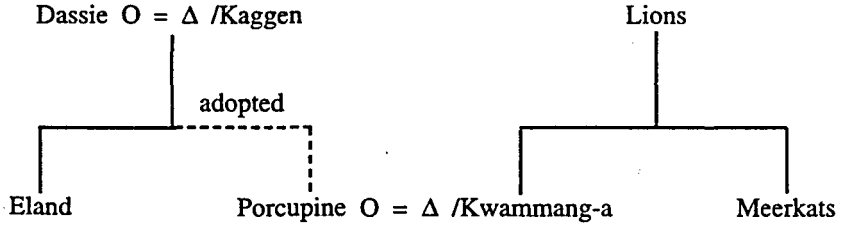

Figure 1. Members of /Kaggen's family as they feature in 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats'.

'/Kaggen' has long been translated, somewhat misleadingly, as 'the Mantis'. The praying mantis insect, *Mantis religiosa*, is in fact only one of his numerous avatars: he could also change into a snake, an eland, a louse, an eagle and a hartebeest (Lewis-Williams 1981:117-26). Although other transformations take place in the /Xam tales, /Kaggen's highly protean aspect is not shared by any other /Xam mythical people; he alone frequently transcends categories of creature as well as realms of the cosmos. He is able to accomplish this by means of his shamanic powers; indeed, the Mantis was the original shaman. The Mantis's wife was /Huntu!katt!katten, the Dassie (rock rabbit, or hyrax), and their adopted daughter was !Xo, the Porcupine.

The factor that unites this seemingly disparate nuclear family is important, though not immediately apparent. The Mantis, the Dassie and the Porcupine are all associated in various ways with fat and honey. First, dassies and porcupines are both creatures known for the large amount of fat that they possess. Secondly, the dassie is an animal that lives in the rocky cliffs, which are associated with bees and honey (Bleek 1924:47); indeed, among the !Kung the wife of the principal deity, though not said to be a dassie (there are few cliffs and, consequently, few dassies in the Kalahari), is known as 'Mother of the Bees' (Thomas 1969:145). The Mantis himself, being a hunter, is the provider of both fat and, as the myth I am analysing confirms, honey.

In San thought, honey and fat are associated with one another in that they are both anomalous foods. They are the only two foods that people both eat and drink (Biesele 1978). In the myth that I am discussing, the Eland is, significantly, said to eat and drink honey. Honey and fat are both greatly desired as food, but they are also closely associated with a supernatural potency that the /Xam called *!gi*, *//ke:n* and */ko:ode* (Lewis-Williams 1981). The !Kung believe that a fat eland has more potency than a lean animal; the potency resides largely in its fat. They also have a medicine song called 'Honey' (Marshall 1969:367). Marshall (1962) has likened this potency (the !Kung call it *n/om)* to electricity: in intense concentrations or out of control, it is dangerous, even lethal; harnessed, it can be used for the good of all people. It is this potency that shamans harness to go on journeys between the realms and to cure people of sickness, both known and unknown, physical and social (Lee 1968; Marshall 1962, 1969). Importantly, this potency is associated, through fat and honey, with the Mantis's family.

Another member of the family, one who draws together some of the themes I have outlined, is the Eland. Although the Eland does not live in the camp with the rest of the Mantis's family, this animal may, in some respects, be considered his child. In a performance of the 'Creation of the Eland', /Han≠kass'o, //Kabbo's son-in-law, repeatedly spoke of the Mantis as the Eland's 'father' (Bleek 1924:6). The Eland is indeed the Mantis's special creation: although it never assumes a fully human role, as do the other

members of the family, the Mantis loves it dearly and weeps when it is killed (Bleek 1924:3,8). Diä!kwain, another of Bleek and Lloyd's informants, explained, 'The Mantis does not love us if we kill an Eland' (Bleek 1924:12). Further, the Mantis sat between the eland's horns and sprang various ruses to facilitate its escape from the hunters.

A San man from what is now Lesotho explained more about this special relationship between the Mantis and the Eland. In his version of the creation of the Eland, the Mantis's wife, here called Coti, gives birth to an eland calf; the Mantis 'folds it in his arms' and leaves it to grow in a secluded kloof (Orpen 1874:3-4). When Orpen (ibid:3) asked the man where the Mantis was, he replied, 'We don't know, but the elands do. Have you not hunted and heard his cry, when the elands suddenly start and run to his call? Where he is, elands are in droves like cattle.' This was no doubt the same cry that, in the /Xam myths, the Mantis used to call the Eland out of the reeds.

In addition to being the Mantis's favourite creature, the Eland has a physical characteristic that links it to other members of the Mantis's family. Like porcupines and dassies, it is an animal that has a large quantity of fat; San people talk a great deal about the extraordinary amount of fat that can be obtained from an eland, especially a bull eland (Lewis-Williams 1981). The large quantity of fat on a bull is, moreover, the factor that makes it an anomalous creature. In the 1970s San people explained that in antelope species the female has more fat than the male; in the eland, this contrast is uniquely reversed, the male having more fat than the female (Lewis-Williams 1981:72). In some sense, the eland is androgynous (Dowson 1988). It thus mediates categories, as do the shamans who draw potency from it. Moreover, the eland was, in /Xam thought, associated with honey. //Kabbo told Lloyd that the kudu eats honey, and its scent is therefore like that of the eland (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.3.466). The eland thus smells of honey. Although they do not mention honey specifically, some early writers noted the distinctive aroma of the eland; they commented on the strong, sweet perfume that arises as an eland is skinned, and the sweet, aromatic smell that it leaves in the grass where it has been lying (Bryden 1899:422, 427; Shortridge 1934:613).

The importance of this animal in /Xam thought is summed up in an explicit statement that Lloyd obtained from Diä!kwain: 'The Hartebeest and the Eland are things of the Mantis; therefore they have magic power' (Bleek 1924:10). This 'magic power' is the potency that shamans harness, and it is this power that links the Mantis and the Eland so closely. In /Xam thought, the Eland was at the centre of a nexus of interrelated significances.

We now come to the other group of actors, the Mantis's affines. The Mantis's adopted daughter, the Porcupine, was married to /Kwammang-a who came from a family that comprised carnivores – Lions in the older generation and Meerkats in the younger. /Kwammang-a's origin explains why his and the Porcupine's son was the Ichneumon, a small, furry carnivore.

The unity of the Mantis's affines is thus easier to discover than the unity of his own family: the affines are all carnivores, or 'pawed creatures', a phrase the !Kung also use to denote strange and potentially dangerous people (Biesele 1978). Significantly, /Kwammang-a is the only member of the Mantis's family who does not have an animal identity. It is as if his origin as a carnivore – a dangerous stranger – is being suppressed, a point to which I return below.

In summary, the Mantis's family comprises honey-fat creatures; his affines are all carnivores. The Mantis's family is associated with the camp, the location that embodies concepts of harmony and co-operation. By contrast, the Mantis's affines are associated with the hunting-ground, that embodies concepts of danger, strangeness and conflict. The two groups are linked by the marriage between the Mantis's daughter, the Porcupine, and /Kwammang-a, whose carnivore origins are concealed by the suppression of his animal identity.

These preliminary remarks about the realms of the /Xam cosmos and the Mantis's family enable us to discern certain themes in 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats'. For convenience of analysis, I divide the narrative into two major sections: the creation of the Eland and the fight with the Meerkats. The principal theme that I emphasise, tension between affines, has already been hinted at by the anomalous status of /Kwammang-a as a carnivore who married into in the Mantis's family.

THE CREATION OF THE ELAND

This part of the myth starts in the camp, moves to the waterhole and then back to the camp.

The very birth of the Eland sprang from tension between affines: the Mantis stole /Kwammang-a's shoe. Understandably, /Kwammang-a was angry when he discovered that his shoe was missing. The shoe itself has various significances. One is that San are able to recognise people from their bare footprints in the sand. This ability is seen in another myth in which the young Ichneumon recognises individual members of his father's family when they visit the Lion's house: 'This is my brothers' spoor. One brother's spoor is here, the other brother's spoor is there. My grandfather's spoor is here, my other grandfather's spoor is there' (Bleek 1924:15). By wearing a shoe made of antelope hide, /Kwammang-a was able to alter his footprints, thus masking his identity as a pawed creature and concealing his anomalous position in /Kaggen's family. When the Mantis stole his shoe, his true spoor (and thus identity) was revealed. The concealment afforded by shoes may account for the nineteenth-century San practice of placing their weapons and their shoes on the ground when approaching people whom they were visiting; bare feet expose the truth (Chapman 1868(2):23).

The Mantis's theft of the shoe points to a fundamental contradiction in San society: how to live and share resources with one's affines, people with whom one is, at least in some measure, in competition. Linked to this dilemma was the problem of residence. Should a newly married couple live with the bride's or the groom's family? Among the San, the couple usually goes to the bride's camp, where the groom performs bride-service until a couple of children have been born. They then return to the groom's camp. Many narratives in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection deal with the tensions created by bride-service, as do the !Kung narratives that Biesele (1993) collected. In 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats', /Kwammang-a was performing bride-service for the Mantis, having married his daughter, and this accounts for his residence in the Mantis's camp.

In the next part of the narrative, the Mantis takes /Kwammang-a's shoe from the camp to the waterhole, the mediatory element and locus of transformation in the San cosmos. At this point, it is important to note another aspect of the significance of the shoe. It would have been made from antelope hide; further, some sources suggest that it was probably made from eland hide (Spaarman 1789:156; Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.3.454; Steyn 1971:291). Out of the shoe, the Mantis fashions a creature that will itself be anomalous, or mediatory, and that will have more supernatural potency that any other creature. The eland will become the shamans' power-animal *par excellence* (Lewis-Williams 1981:75-102).

According to the /Xam, there was potency in an eland's heart. Diä!kwain said, 'When they have cut it [an eland] to pieces and cut out the heart, then he [the man who shot the animal; probably a boy in his first-kill ritual; Lewis-Williams and Biesele 1978] joins the men who are cutting it up, after the heart is out because they are afraid that it is a thing which has (?)' (Bleek 1932:237). Lloyd's question mark leaves the word */ko:ode* untranslated. Elsewhere, it is translated 'magic power' (Bleek 1956:320); it seems to mean a particularly intense and potentially dangerous concentration of potency. An association between eland and the shamanic dance appears even more explicitly in a !Kung avoidance word. The usual !Kung word for eland is *n!*; in ritual contexts, they call it *tcheni*, a word which means 'dance' (Biesele, personal communication). The /Xam and the !Kung evidence thus suggests that, when hunting eland, men were also hunting power for the shamanic dance. Southern San rock paintings depicting men running after eland should probably be seen in the light of these associations. It is not just food that they are after; like the Meerkats, they are 'hunting' supernatural potency. So too, it seems clear that paintings of eland, singly or in herds, were not merely references to meat but to power (cf. Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988; Lewis-Williams 1981, 1990).

Animals are, however, not the only source of potency. In another nineteenth-century account, the Mantis is said to have given the San the 'song of this dance' (the trance, or curing, dance) (Orpen 1874:10). 'Medicine

songs', as they are known (Marshall 1969), contain potency; they are named after powerful things, such as Sun, Eland, Giraffe and, as we have seen, Honey. The bestowal of the 'song' is another way of saying that the Mantis created and vouchsafed the potency that shamans harness. The potency, or song, that shamans most desire is that of the eland. Further, there is reason to believe that, when the San of the south-eastern mountains were said to be 'of the eland' (How 1962; cf. Vinnicombe 1976), it was the sharing of all the people, not just shamans, in eland potency that was being highlighted (Lewis-Williams 1988). One of the principal points about the creation of the Eland is thus that, in making this mediatory, potent animal, the Mantis created the basis for /Xam shamanism.

The order of the Mantis's actions is significant. His creation of the foundation of shamanism followed his theft of /Kwammang-a's shoe. The Mantis thus first exposed the anomalous position of an affine within his family by revealing /Kwammang-a's pawed feet. He then began to prepare an answer to social tensions created by, amongst other things, the presence of affines by imbuing the eland with the potency that shamans would learn to harness.

The Mantis, it must be noted, did not make the Eland out of nothing. Part of the new creation had to come from another family, here represented by /Kwammang-a and his shoe. The act of creation, or birth, is thus linked to sexual relations with affines and points away from incest. The sexual element in the narrative is developed in a further, equally oblique, way. When the shoe grew into the Eland, the Mantis fed it honey that he should have been taking home to his family. Both honey and fat are rich in sexual symbolism. The !Kung San use the phrases 'to eat (or drink) honey' and 'to eat (or drink) fat' as euphemisms for sexual intercourse (Biesele 1978). Feeding the Eland honey and moistening its flanks with honey are therefore probably references to sexual procreation. This component of honey symbolism is also expressed in Diä!kwain's statement that the Mantis used different kinds of honey to give the antelope their distinctive colours: for instance, 'The Eland was the one to whom the Mantis once gave some wasps' honey; this is why he is dark' (Bleek 1924:10): different sources of honey produced different creatures. The shoe, then, came from an affine; the honey (probably a symbol of semen), on the other hand, belonged to the Mantis.

The first part of the myth may now be briefly summarised. The Mantis created the Eland by using his honey and something belonging to an affine, a shoe; in doing so, he created the potency on which the whole shamanic enterprise is posited. The act of creation took place in a waterhole, a point of breakthrough between realms, one of the points of access through which shamans reach the spirit realm. The Mantis moved from his camp to the waterhole for the process of transformation, and then back again. In the next part of the story he goes to the hunting ground and then, finally, back to his camp.

THE FIGHT WITH THE MEERKATS

When /Kwammang-a learned about the Eland and what the Mantis was doing with the honey, he himself collected honey and went to the waterhole and there imitated the Mantis's call. When the Eland came out of the reeds, /Kwammang-a shot it, no doubt with a poisoned arrow, and it ran off to die out on the hunting-ground. /Kwammang-a went and spoke to his relatives, the Meerkats, and to Ki-ya-koe, who appears to be one of the Meerkats. They followed the Eland's spoor until they came to the carcass. Tracking an animal the day after it had been wounded with a poisoned arrow was a common San practice (Bleek 1932:233-40). After removing his arrow from the dead animal, /Kwammang-a returned home, leaving Ki-ya-koe and the Meerkats to cut up the Eland. Meanwhile, on finding that his Eland had been shot, the Mantis returned home, weeping. Then, it seems the next day, he tracked the Eland and found the Meerkats cutting it up. The fight ensued.

In the performance with which we are dealing, the fight with the Meerkats communicates on at least three levels. The first derives from /Xam hunting observances. Hunters (the carnivorous Meerkats) have killed one of the Mantis's favourite animals, the Eland, and he is trying to punish the culprits (Lewis-Williams and Biesele 1978). In an account of /Xam hunting observances, Diä!kwain said that the Mantis does this by various ruses designed to cause the eland to survive (Bleek 1924:11-12). Here, being thrown on the Eland's horns is probably an ironic inversion of one of the Mantis's ways of resuscitating a wounded eland. Diä!kwain put it like this: 'He [the Mantis] goes and strikes the Eland's horn, and the Eland arises, the Eland eats, because it feels that it has quite come to life by means of the Mantis's doings, although it had nearly died' (Bleek 1924:12). In the myth, instead of striking the animal's horn and so causing it to arise, the Mantis is himself thrown on to it, and it hurts him. His way of saving a wounded eland is frustrated.

On a second level, the Mantis attacked the Meerkats because they had taken his child. In San thought, hunting and mating are symbolically equivalent (Marshall 1959:354; McCall 1970). In terms of this equivalence, /Kwammang-a's shooting of the Eland and the Meerkats' appropriation of it symbolise the marriage of the Mantis's Eland into the Meerkats' family. The Eland's 'marriage' into the Meerkats' family is thus an inversion of /Kwammang-a's marriage to the Porcupine. In /Kwammang-a's marriage, he, the man, is legitimately performing bride-service for the Mantis. By contrast, the Meerkats' shooting of the Eland with an arrow violates the norms of bride-service in that 'she' goes to her husband's (the hunters') camp. The Mantis was thus resisting the surrender of his child to a family of pawed creatures who would become his affines.

Thirdly, the fight with the Meerkats is, like the creation of the Eland, explicable in terms of San shamanism. The Meerkats stole, not just an

animal, but supernatural potency. The effect of this unauthorised appropriation is described in another performance of the myth; because of its crucial significance, I consider it in some detail. The narrator, Diä!kwain, said that the Mantis intended to 'fight the Eland's battle' (Bleek 1924:4). As translated by Lloyd, the sentence seems to mean that the Mantis intended to fight on behalf of the Eland, but this translation is an example of the confusion that sometimes arose from Lloyd's unfamiliarity with /Xam shamanism; neither she nor Bleek, it should be remembered, actually witnessed /Xam rituals. The /Xam word that Lloyd translated as both the verb 'fight' and the noun 'battle' is */a*. Those meanings are, in some contexts, correct, but Lloyd also gives */a* as 'danger'. In Diä!kwain's performance of the death of the Eland (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.V.1.3640), a portion of which became part of Dorothea Bleek's 'Second Version', the Mantis says, 'It seems as if danger has come upon my home' (Bleek 1924:3). This is when he finds that the honey is 'dry' and 'lean'. Lloyd also translated the word as 'curse' (Bleek 1956:267).

One of the meanings of the word is clarified by the way in which the !Kung use it. Although the !Kung and /Xam languages are largely lexically distinct, both have this particular word. In addition to 'fight', */a* can, for the !Kung, mean a potentially dangerous concentration of supernatural potency (Biesele, personal communication; Marshall 1962:239, 1969:351). Bearing this and the various uses of the word in the /Xam language in mind, I argue that the passage in question would be better translated to mean that the Mantis intended to fight against the Eland's great potency, which had been appropriated by the Meerkats (Lewis-Williams 1983:46-47). Then, when the Mantis shot at the Eland, his arrows were deflected back at him and he had to dodge them. The Eland's potency, now in the hands of the Meerkats, was too strong for him.

This interpretation is borne out by the observation that, in the Kalahari, the San like to dance next to the carcass of a freshly killed eland because, they say, the place is redolent with the antelope's scent and released potency, and they are able to harness it for a particularly effective trance dance (scent is thought to convey potency). A shaman who has special control of eland potency enters trance and cures all present of known and unknown ills. During such a dance, the spirits of the dead, attracted to the place by the beautiful dancing, shoot small, invisible arrows-of-sickness at people. The shamans, fortified by the eland's supernatural potency, deflect these arrows and remove any that may have penetrated people. I therefore argue that the image presented by //Kabbo's performance of the fight with the Meerkats is, in essence, that of a San curing dance.

Finally, and still on the shamanic level, I consider the curious role of the Eland's gall. In //Kabbo's performance, the Mantis angers the Meerkats by piercing the Eland's gall, and this act causes darkness. Other performances develop this episode at greater length. In them, the Mantis first leaps into the

darkness created by the gall and later creates the moon. /Han≠kass'o's performance gives the incident thus: 'Then he pierced the gall, he made the gall burst ..., and the gall broke covering his head; his eyes became big, he could not see. And he groped about feeling his way' (Bleek 1924:9). Then, with an ostrich feather, the Mantis wipes the gall from his eyes. Finally, he throws the feather into the sky and it becomes the moon. Clearly, the gall is highly significant. When Diä!kwain was telling Lloyd about what happens to people after death, he said, 'And, our gall, when we die, sits in the sky; it sits green in the sky, when we are dead' (Bleek and Lloyd 1911:399). Here, it seems that gall is associated with the spirit of a person. The importance of an animal's gall is emphasised by !Kung shamans who sometimes eat the gall of a lion in the belief that it is the centre of that animal's power. Further, lions eat people; by eating a lion's gall, and thus power, a shaman is, in a sense, consuming human flesh (Wilmsen, personal communication). Particularly powerful shamans are believed to have the ability to walk abroad at night in the form of a lion. This is another of the ways in which a shaman's ambivalence is expressed: on these nocturnal journeys, he bridges not only categories of being but also realms of existence.

Together, these beliefs and practices suggest that, when the Mantis pierced the gall, he was releasing the Eland's potency. In the performance of the myth in which he leaps into the resulting black cloud, he is immersing himself in the antelope's potency, and the way in which he gropes about in the darkness graphically suggests a man disorientated by trance.

We now move on to see how the Mantis used the potency after he had been humiliated. In the performance with which we are dealing, he simply left the scene of conflict and returned home. By omitting the incidents of the deflected arrows and the creation of the moon, //Kabbo was setting the stage for the denouement of a personal performance of the narrative. He had a different ending in mind, one in which the Mantis would not be defeated; after all, he was as /Han≠kass'o put it, 'a Mantis's man' (Bleek 1936:143; for more on this phrase see Lewis-Williams 1996). According to //Kabbo, the tree with the Eland's meat and the Meerkats' belongings rose up, passed through the heavens and settled next to him. Again, this episode communicates on different levels.

On the most straightforward level, the Mantis had his revenge by causing the tree to fly to his home. On a second level, the Meerkats' violation of the norms of bride-service was corrected: the 'bride' returns to the Mantis's camp, albeit in the form of meat (cf. Biesele 1993). On a third level, the means by which the Mantis achieved his righting of an unacceptable situation is crucial because it takes up a recurring theme that was present in the creation of the Eland, in the Meerkats' appropriation of the Eland, and in the Mantis's fight with the Meerkats.

To understand this theme as it is presented in the last part of the narrative we must examine //Kabbo's use of certain words; as elsewhere in the myth,

they are the key to the significance of the passage. When the Mantis reached his camp, he lay down because his head ached. Then, said //Kabbo, he 'trembled', and the tree travelled through the sky to his camp. The /Xam word translated 'tremble' is *!khauken* (also *!kauken* and *!kouken*). The *Bushman Dictionary* (Bleek 1956:425, 445) gives *!khauken* as 'to tremble' and 'to beat', but one of the examples that it gives points to a specific context in which the word was used: 'When he returning comes in from the place to which he had gone on a magic expedition, he trembles.' The 'magic expedition' (*/xau*) is the out-of-body travel performed by shamans in dreams or during trance dances. In other /Xam narratives, *!khauken* similarly refers to the violent trembling of a shaman in trance: for example, 'The others hold him down and rub his back with fat, as he beats (*!kauken*)' (Bleek 1935:2); 'He beats (*!kauken-i*) when he is snoring [curing] a person with his nose' (ibid; the suffix *-i* signifies duration of action: Bleek 1928/29:168). Today, !Kung San shamans still tremble violently as they enter trance (Marshall 1962:250, 1969:370, 376; Katz 1976:286, 1982:65).

The potential confusion of 'trembling in trace' with 'beating' in the sense of 'striking' is again evident in Lloyd's notes on another of the Mantis's adventures (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.22.1965-2042).[4] In this tale the Mantis fights the Cat. As it first appears, *!kauken* means 'strike' – the Cat struck the Mantis. The second time the narrator used the word Lloyd was puzzled; her transliteration of the passage reads: 'Therefore, thou didst get feathers, as thou beating stood ... thou ascendest the sky' (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.22.1986). Lloyd noted her perplexity: 'Can this be a passive (beaten)? JT [the narrator, //Kabbo] explains that the Mantis was beat*ing*. But I am not very sure, if I have the explanation rightly' (Bleek and Lloyd MS L.II.22.1987 rev.; Lloyd's emphasis). This is another instance of how Lloyd's unfamiliarity with Bushman shamanism, its physical effects and idioms among the /Xam sometimes resulted in uncertainty about exactly what the informants were saying to her. As we have seen, it is clear that the nineteenth-century /Xam sometimes used 'tremble' to mean 'to enter, or to be in, trance'. Lloyd's narrator was therefore right: in the story of the Mantis and the Cat, it was through 'beat*ing*', or 'tremb*ling*' (i.e., entering trance), that the Mantis was able to grow feathers and escape from the Cat by flying through the sky, part of the spirit realm to which shamans have access (cf. the Mantis in 'A visit to the Lion's house', where 'trembling' also leads to flight (Lewis-Williams 1996).

There is a final piece of evidence as to the significance of the Mantis's trembling. In a passage that Lloyd added after she had taken down the complete performance of 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats', //Kabbo elaborated on the flight of the tree together with its burden of meat and the Meerkats' belongings. Lloyd's translation of part of this addition is as follows: 'It itself [the tree] mounts up into the sky, at night, of itself it goes to stand on the ground, because the mantis has ? conjured it' (Bleek and Lloyd

MS L.II.4.511 rev.). Lloyd's question mark shows that she was again unsure of her translation of the /Xam word as 'conjured'. Using a concept with which she was familiar, she translated the worrisome /Xam word as best she could. The word that //Kabbo used was, however, *!khau-ka*, a form that seems to be cognate with *!khauken* (to tremble). The additional passage thus confirms my understanding of the episode of the tree: I argue that it was through entering an altered state of consciousness and employing his powers as a shaman that the Mantis was able to cause the tree to fly through the sky and to alight at his camp.

Exactly what the Mantis's shamanic intervention achieved is best understood, in the first instance, in terms of San sharing practices. Amongst the !Kung, an animal that has been shot is 'owned' by the person to whom the fatal arrow belongs. He or she sees to the first distribution of large portions of meat. Thereafter, the meat is generally distributed along lines of kinship. In the end, everyone in the camp receives a portion (Marshall 1961). Thus, if the killing of the Eland had been a straightforward hunt, custom would have demanded that the Mantis receive a share of the meat by virtue of his relationship with /Kwammang-a. But the Meerkats denied their obligation to share meat with their affines, the Mantis and his family, when they beat him and drove him away. The Mantis then resorted to shamanic trance performance to right the wrong and to cause the meat to come to his camp. Because meat-sharing symbolises kinship relations, the Mantis was symbolically restoring the social rupture caused by the Meerkats' refusal to share.

There is, however, a further dimension to the context of meat-sharing. Among the San, it was and still is a frequent situation in which ill-feeling can be generated; if people feel they have been slighted by receiving a niggardly portion, arguments erupt. The kinship ties which meat distribution celebrates become strained and, if the strain is unchecked, it jeopardises the survival of the social unit. It is therefore no coincidence that a shamanic dance often follows a substantial kill which attracts visitors (Marshall 1969), as the quagga meat attracted the Mantis, /Kwammang-a and the Ichneumon to the Lion's camp in another of the /Xam myths (Bleek 1924:15-18; Lewis-Williams 1996). The ill-feeling arising from inequitable distribution can be reduced by a shamanic dance.

All these events are played out on the stage of /Xam San cosmology. The Mantis returns to his home, the place of order, before he rights the wrong by means of his shamanic powers. The tale thus moves from his camp, to the hunting ground where the conflict with the Meerkats takes place, and then back to the camp where wrongs are righted and where shamanic dances usually take place. Further, when shamanic experience is evoked in this righting of wrongs, the realms are mediated: the tree leaves the mundane realm, travels through the realm above (the one through which shamans, too, fly), and then returns to the mundane realm. Like a waterhole, a tree itself is a

mediator of realms in that its roots are below and its branches are above the plane of daily life.

In the reading I have given, 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats' asserts correct sharing along the lines of kinship and the Meerkats are punished for breaking the rules by losing their equipment and clothing. At the same time, a way of lessening conflict and righting wrongs is created.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Tension between affines and the need to share scarce resources are dilemmas that cannot be resolved; they are inherent in San social structure and life (Biesele 1993). This is the sort of contradiction that Lévi-Strauss (1968) believes lies at the heart of many myths. All that can be hoped for is that such tensions be mitigated, and the mitigating mechanism posited by the /Xam myth is shamanic activity. The San still recognise that shamanic dances dissipate tensions. Indeed, they contrive to have men between whom there is animosity dance one behind the other, so that rhythmic unity can re-establish emotional amity (Biesele, personal communication). Marshall gives a dramatic example of the efficacy of shamanic intervention that she witnessed. A fight that threatened to spill over into really serious violence was interrupted by the women, who started singing a medicine song in full voice: 'In minutes, two of the men from [one] group and one from the other group went abruptly into frenzied trance and soon fell unconscious.' The tensions were dissipated (Marshall 1969:374).

Recognising the importance of shamanic beliefs and rituals for the San, I argue that performances of 'The Mantis, the Eland and the Meerkats', especially those in which the narrator developed the shamanic episodes, served to reproduce acceptance of the key role of shamans in coping with social tensions. //Kabbo, himself a shaman, set up and elaborated the denouement of his performance so that the importance of shamans was foregrounded. For him, this and other San myths and their structures were not immutable givens; rather, they constituted a resource on which individuals could draw and which they could manipulate in the negotiation of their social statuses (cf. Giddens 1984; Lewis-Williams 1996).

Performances of the myth, elaborated in this manner, entrenched the positions of shamans in San communities. As the degree of contact with other peoples increased and became more conflictual, the positions of shamans became increasingly political: it was they, rather than the community's hunters and gatherers, who began to control access to resources through performing rain-making rituals for their farming neighbours. As mediators of conflict both within their own communities and between their communities and their neighbours, the shamans held the balance of power. The shamanic tasks of rain-making, healing and tension-reduction were, paradoxically,

exploited in the negotiation of personal power. The performance of certain myths was one of the ways (rock-painting was another; Dowson 1994) in which shamans consolidated and increased that power. People accepted that the myths derived from the ancient time when animals behaved as if they were people; as a result of their association with this primordial period, the myths were believed to embody incontrovertible truths, and the personally varied performances of them were consequently influential.

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NOTES

1. I do not here address a distinction between /Xam myths and folktales. If such a distinction exists, the criteria for the categories need to be established by reference to /Xam thought, not in universal terms.
2. Bushman communities speak many mutually unintelligible languages. There is therefore no single Bushman word to cover all groups. 'Bushman' is, in the view of some, a pejorative word, although some Bushmen themselves do choose to use it. 'San', a Nama (Khoekhoen) word, is preferred by many, but by no means all, academic writers. Unfortunately, it means something like 'vagabond' and is therefore also pejorative. There is no unanimity on which word should be used. In using 'San' I explicitly reject any pejorative connotations.
3. The *Bushman Dictionary* gives */ni* as 'ickneumon, Herpestes' (Bleek 1956:348), and a translation in one of /Han≠kass'o's notebooks (L.VIII. 1. 6145) gives */ni* as 'slender tailed meerkat, Herpestes [*sic*]'. There may

be some confusion here because the ichneumon is the Egyptian Mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*). It is not found in the dry, central parts of southern Africa (Goss 1986; Smithers 1986).

4. Another performance of this tale (Bleek and Lloyd L.II.5.547-565) was published as 'The Mantis and the Cat' (Bleek 1924:19-21).

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