

# San Folklore and Heidegger's Great Art

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'Once at KwaFubesi' – these words will always hold all the magic of story-telling for me. The universal opening once, which sets it in dreamtime and the unknown, strange sounding name KwaFubesi, which promises strangeness and adventure are everything the heart desires of stories, and new or different worlds.

The San do not only live in a very different part of the earth from us, they also live in a very different world - conceptually different. This difference is Derridaean because it jostles – or should jostle our conception of the world from its certainty a little, but today I just want to look at it on its own, without postmodernist hang-up of uncertainty. It is a world based on a different belief system and therefore a different relation to all that surrounds one.

At the centre of San mythology and cosmology stands mantis or Kaggen! The hero of many stories, the bringer of fire and the word, the creator, the first. That this small insect, rather than the elephant say or the lion should stand at the heart of a belief and a way of life tells us already a great deal about the San people, their sense of irony, their humour their perspective on themselves and their world.

The first the greatest can be found in the smallest – in the insect. This insect is the creative spirit at the centre of their world: he/she (Mantis is androgynous) must through trickery and imagination eke out a living in a difficult often barren world and does so through wit and trickery; she often makes mistakes, makes a fool of herself, but she recovers, smiling and determined.

And he is the one who creates a world the San can live in.

First there is his own family: there is Mantis – tiny promethean tricky, creative foolish. Then there is his partner: the dassie, or rock rabbit, which lives close to the ground in tight knit and busy social groups. In the stories Dassie is the social realist, grounding mantis' flightiness. They have three children, which we know little about. Two sons, one of which is a younger mantis and one who is quiet and withdrawn – an introvert of the highest order. Then they have an adopted daughter: the porcupine, who with her black and white quills and nocturnal

quiet and peaceful habits represents the anima of the family. The soul the dreamer. Mantis loves porcupine dearly – and the San reflect this in their affection for the animal, who is also naturally hard to get to know or close to.

Porcupine marries: and she marries Kwammang-a. Kwammang-a has leather sandals, so Mantis and his family cannot immediately tell what sort of a creature he is. He remains undefined in many ways – a bit of the rainbow in some stories, at other times the child of the dreaded all-devourer. Certainly a stranger. But when Mantis steals his sandal to make the eland (his most beloved of the antelopes) he sees his true spoor and knows that he is a pawed creature – one of the dangerous ones. The predators. So the quiet, small carnivorous mantis family has married has stepped into relationship with the lions – and their offspring are meerkats, who in turn produce lions and so on.

An unlikely, not to say bizarre family set up. Biologically impossible – and it seems to sit oddly with the scientific and careful categorisation based on close and accurate observation the San have of the animals in their daily lives. They know the habits and the qualities of animals and plants in finest details - their lives depend upon it. And only on that, in their understanding. There are no ritual sacrifices to the gods for rain or good hunting in San folklore – their survival in the harsh desert world they often inhabit is absolutely scientific and realistic to the approval of our western rationalist eyes.

Why then these whimsical stories? This odd family. Well, because families are odd and when the hunt is done and the water has been safely brought to camp from the sip wells, there is a long evening ahead of you in which you need to get on with not just your blood family but the odd ones, the ones your daughter married, who are rivals for the same resources. And stories are a way of doing that – making them stories about the world, including characters from the daily world gives the listeners a way in.

Stories are links between the imagined world and the daily world. The characters are recognisable from the outside world, what they do and say is recognisable from the inner world. What they teach is the mythology of the culture they inhabit. Is mythology then merely a leisure activity – for after the hunt?

Of course belief, we feel intuitively, is more than that – but what it very obviously does not do in the San world is explain the physical world. To understand what it does we need to know what it is a little bit more – bear in

mind that most of the people who belonged to this culture are dead, and that those that remain have become protective and secretive about who they are and how they live – they often answer anthropologists and linguists and other scientists in riddles.

The San cosmology comprises three planes: one below the earth, where the dead dwell, the earth, where the living dwell and the sky, or possibly beyond it, where the gods dwell. These planes of existence are distinct from one another, but interconnected at the same time, because humans can move between them – must live in one and can dream of the other two.

The earth plane in microcosm of the 3-planed world is understood in terms of three distinct yet related places:

Home, the place of safety, of socialising and eating – associated with Mantis and his children

The hunting ground, where you have to venture to find food, but which is dangerous and unpredictable - associated with Kwammang-a and his children

And the meeting point of these two areas is the watering hole, where animal and human can meet – for the same reason: need for water. Associated with Porcupine.

Water in fact is the mediating element in all these planes: as the watering hole, it mediates between home and wilderness;

As rain falling from the sky it mediates between the heaven and the earth

And as rivers welling up from deep within the earth, it mediates between the dead and the living.

The San were inland people of Africa – I have found little in their cosmology about the sea.

Water of course in the arid areas where the San live is a centrally important, and rare, precious, factor in life – as everywhere, it makes life possible, but in their arid conditions, the San are more acutely aware of its importance than many other people. And sanity for them – living well means keeping the three worlds connected and in balance. And the ones who do this, who keep the connections open are the shamans.

The San are a shamanic people. But Shamans amongst them are not a special class of people, are not privileged or treated differently in any way. They have a gift – yes, but they do not seem to have power over others in the way shamans and witch-doctors sometimes have in other cultures, both African and elsewhere. In a San community, everyone has the potential to be a shaman – and it is part of everyone's education to be trained for transcendence, to attempt the journey in dreams and trance through the various realms/planes of existence.

And the process of transcending these realms is attempted communally, in public; there is nothing secretive about it. It happens through dance and song: the music the rhythm, the movement (which can go on all night) lead some of the participants into trance, in which they then move through the various planes of existence. The ones who go into trance are supported and helped by the others – the women who sing and the other men, dancing, not in trance, who help to regulate the n/um – the energy the kia experience for the ones in trance – especially if they are young and inexperienced. The trance experience can be both physically painful and frightening. But those who go – come back able to heal and bringing rain and so it is considered worth it and everyone tries. Some have a knack for it – it often runs in families – and they become regular trance dancers – may even be sought by others, from different clans, who need healing or solace. The healing is at times physical, but often it is to do with psychology and even more often with social issues and tensions, which are soothed by the perspective from a different plane.

Medicine, hallucinatory herbs are occasionally used in the training of a shaman. If someone for example has the knack, but cannot get over the initial fear or pain of trancing, drugs may be used to ease the way. But I can find no record of the habitual use of drugs for trancing. Partly I think because of the reverence in which the trance journey is held – and partly because the point is to bring these subconscious realms to mind, not to escape anything and the drugs might affect the ability to recall the trance journey, and the ability to control the n/um – the powerful energy which comes from it and which must be directed for the greater good of the whole clan – healing or bringing rain.

These trance dances and trance journeys are then held in great reverence, without there being any inner sanctuary involved or exclusivity. And they are remembered in the acts of healing that might occur – in stories and most importantly in the paintings, which mark not only the events of the trance journey but also often the place where they might have happened.

So as well as water, humans are a mediating factor between the various realms of San cosmology – and the ability to move between the various realms has purposes both personal and social. The purposes of healing and fetching the rain, for which the shaman sets out on a harsh and frightening journey.

Doors through which he or she may enter the other realms are imagined in trance and stories to be made of water or sometimes rock. The start of the trance experience is often experience as a kind of drowning, of being surrounded by water. The trance experience is often recorded in rock paintings. And what anthropologists are now discovering is that the rocks themselves – are not a blank canvas for these paintings, but form an integral part are seen themselves as significant in the painting. The cracks or seams of quartz for example are the doors, through which the shaman entered the other realms and through which he will return with the rain animal in tow, bringing the relief of rain.

This is the journey that archaeologists have found the rock paintings record. The swim through a river, a long period of darkness, finding the rain animal (in various shapes – it is a shape shifter) communicating with it by taking on an animal form yourself or becoming a therianthrope (half animal half-person) or going hunting and then bringing the animal back to earth, leading it to the place where the rain is wanted or needed.

These aspects of San culture have interested me in particular for a long time. I grew up on a farm in South Africa, which was home to many San paintings. Bushman's hill – as it was known in those utterly nonPC times – was a favourite destination for outings and walks. It was a small hill, not too far from the old mission graveyard and some ruins of older missionary settlements. The graveyard and the ruins had always the mournful feel of something lost, while the hill seemed to glow serenely in the fierce sunlight. And it was always a relief to go scabbling about its sides and a joy to find the paintings. Even in daylight – out in the open veldt unprotected from the elements – it felt like church. So the paintings have stayed with me as extraordinary moments of happiness in a wonderful childhood – and as marking something beyond the ordinary. As children we knew no more of this – in Apartheid South Africa San mythology was not taught in any way.

So it is only as an adult and in a different country that I have come back to that. And I have come back for two reasons in particular:

One is the link that is often made between trance experiences and schizophrenic episodes

The other is to do with the role of art, which I do feel is a little lost in the modern world. Partly because it no longer has a spiritual component. I am not asking for a religious polemic, you understand, but a holistic conception of art – holistic in a way that the mere stylistics we are encouraged to practice can never be. There is a risk involved in such a conception of art and of living:

Mythographers and psychologists between them have written extensively now on the similarities between schizophrenic episodes and shamanic experiences. In my novel, *The White Kudu*, Joshua is driven by guilt to something very like a schizophrenic episode, but it is interpreted for him through Hendrik's shamanic world view and so he is able to integrate it, even learn from it how to function in the world he has now entered, rather than to dismiss it as illness or madness – as his rational scientific approach alone would have done.

I am often amused by aggressively self-styled rationalists, who upon the fairly obvious discovery that mythology does not explain the existence of the physical universe are so caught up in that one point that they lose track of all the things mythology does do: like offer a compass through altered states of consciousness (dreams and visions for example), like offer a way of relating to the world that is not mere consumption, like offering a way of being in the world, being with the world – a way of dwelling, rather than simply existing.

Now that the 'Great War' between the inquisition and science is over, most religion of the non-fundamentalist kind does not challenge science for territory at all – it is about a different side of existence – the bits that are not physical – for all they might have physical and neuro-chemical causes.

Knowing for example that visions etc may be caused by neuro-chemicals may be helpful in a small sense, in that knowing the cause of things can be consoling, and in that drugs might stop the visions, but it cannot help in dealing with the actual content of such visions. For that one would need something else – mythology, or stories or paintings - in the case of the San culture – rock art.

The rock art and stories of San culture seem to me to fulfil uniquely Heidegger's criteria for great art. Heidegger, quoting Hölderlin, wants humankind to dwell poetically. And that means the following:

- Authentic community

- Care of the environment
- To step into relationship with the fourfold: that is with earth and sky, with mortal and immortal

And the art of such dwelling should therefore:

- Depict the visible so that the invisible can be seen
- Understand from that transcendence, the sublime and the holy
- And therefore express mankind's relation to these

Paul Klee says that art makes the invisible visible and San folklore, San rock paintings do that. They depict with accuracy, with careful observation with humour and compassion the real in such a way that the numinous is revealed through them and the viewer, or the listener is able to respond to understand and if he/she has looked or listened mindfully to dwell for a moment in all the planes of existence: in kinship with every creature or object, from the carrion eating hyena and a dangerous son-in-law to the renewing rain animal and the fire-bringing mantis.

In the San desert, it seems to me it is still possible for us to dwell poetically.