Human-Animal Relationships in San and Hunter-Gatherer Cosmology, Volume II

Imagining and Experiencing Ontological Mutability

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For Stephan and Daniel

The original version of this book was revised. This book was inadvertently published with few errors which has been corrected now. An erratum to this book can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21186-8_8.

Preface

This book is written to fill two gaps in anthropology, in two of the discipline's research fields, the one in hunter-gatherer studies, specifically its subfield of Bushman studies, the other in the more recent field of what some refer to as "the anthropology of ontology" (Scott 2013) and others have dubbed the "New Animism" (Harvey 2006: xi)—as opposed to its "Old", evolutionary rather than relational, predecessor, *pace* Tylor. These two fields at present exclude each other, in terms of ethnographic substance and theoretical discourse, to the detriment of both. This book sets out to bring the relational ontology paradigm to San studies, and vice versa, to the respective research field's benefit.

This goal is all the more apposite in that hunter-gatherer studies and relational ontology have been linked from the start, back in the 1990s. This is when the "ontological turn"—which has since then been taken in socio-cultural anthropology generally (and is part of an even wider—post-humanist—turn across Western thinking generally)—was first taken in Amazonian studies, among such hunting people as the Achuar, Araweté and Avila Runa, by Philippe Descola, Eduardo Vivieros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn, the three leading voices in Amazonian studies (Costa and Fausto 2010). Through the influence of another leading voice, Tim Ingold, studies of relational ontology were undertaken at around the same time in the Subarctic, from northern Scandinavia, through Siberia (Brightman et al. 2012; Halbmayer 2012) to North America, where ethnologists such as Adrian Tanner, Harvey Feit, Robin Ridington, Colin Scott and Robert Brightman had worked on relational and cosmological aspects of hunter-prey relations even before the 1990s. The influence is

evident in these ethnographies of another Subarctic researchers, Irven Hallowell, who a generation before, in an essay on Ojibwa ontology that has since become a foundational article in relational ontology, conceptualized the "non-human person" (or "other-than-human person"), thereby widening the field of social relations—and the concept of both society and culture—beyond humankind (1960). A similar recasting of "animism as relational epistemology", which acknowledged Hallowell's influence (Bird-David 1999: S71), was the theme, 20 years ago of a then seminal and now classic *Current Anthropology* article by Nurit Bird-David, which situated relational ontology among a number of hunter-gatherer-horticulturalists in southern Asia.

Yet, the ontological turn, for all of its paradigm-shifting effects on the study of hunter-gatherers during the last and first decades of the previous and present centuries, all but by-passed the Kalahari, among whose hunting-gathering people ethnographers were wont to examine the human-animal relationship not in social, cosmological, mystical fashion but instrumentally and strategically, as a meat-on-the-hoof resource, cherished—more so than plant—for its high caloric yield and thus a key concern of the "foraging mode of production" and its *modus operandi*, "optimal foraging strategy". This cultural-ecological, theoretical-materialist bent in San studies was especially marked and engrained in San studies, with the San, ever since the path-breaking "Man the Hunter" conference in 1966 and as a result of a large number of high-quality ethnographic writings on the San. The effect of all of this was to render this foraging group one of the two (alongside the Aché) textbook cases of the optimal forager, whose "immediate-return" subsistence economy afforded people "affluent" lifeways. When Amazonian and Subarctic hunting became considered in social-relational and cosmological terms rather than instrumental-alimentary ones, in the 1990s, the materialist paradigm continued to inform research in San studies (albeit, not exclusively so, especially through the "Revisionism Debate" this field generated, in terms of political economy and World Systems theory, both paradigms the discursive links of which to relational ontology are no closer than they are to optimal foraging).[1]

I set out in this book to show that San world view and lifeways are in fact also pervaded—at the ontological level, the way people conceive of, perceive and experience their interaction with animals, along with other beings of their (preter)natural world—with relationality and intersubjectivity (and have done so in the past, on the basis of ethnohistorical and

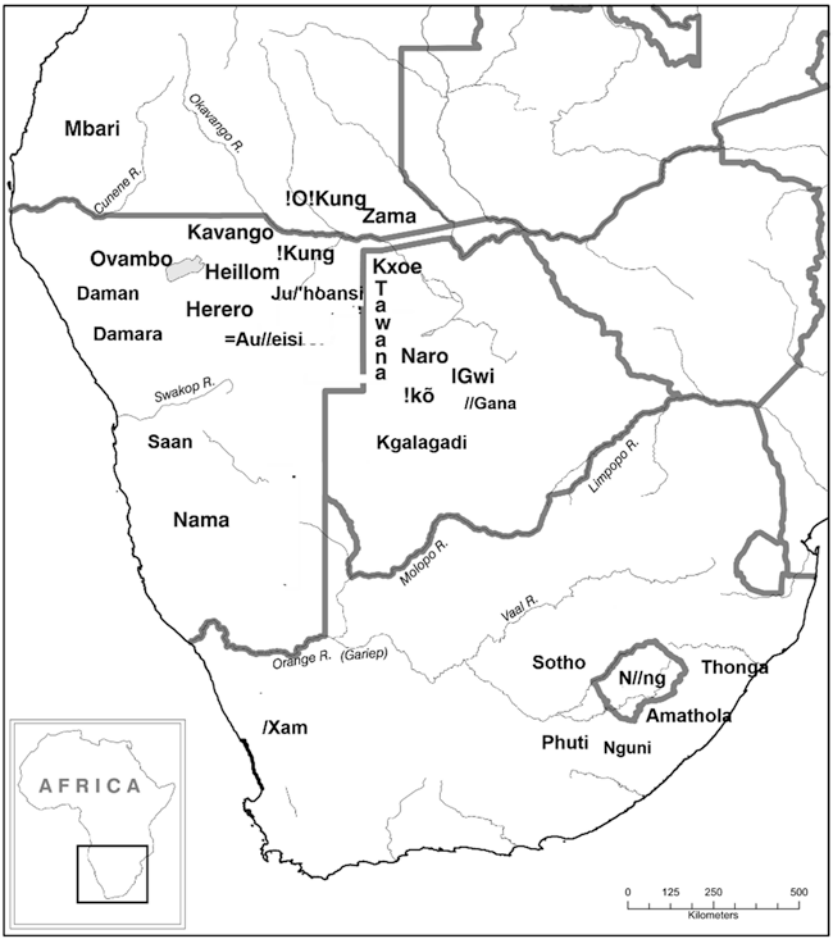
[1] For elaboration on these points see Guenther (2015: 281–82, 302–9; 2017: 3–4).

archaeological evidence largely on southern San that will be marshaled). In filling this gap in our understanding of San ethnography and culture I will also fill the gap in ontological anthropology, which has excluded these southern hunting people from its neo-animistic purview. Apart from adding new insights to the relational ontology perspective in anthropology, this study, of San-imism, also underscores the important insight that animism is not some monolithic schema or cosmologico-religious complex but something diverse and multiplex, structurally varied, ecologically and historically contingent. Indeed, as I will also argue, one such included in many and varied animisms of people and cultures of this world are those from the West.

I have recently dealt with these issues in two exploratory articles on relational ontology in the context of San cosmology and lifeways, namely "'Therefore Their Parts Resemble Humans, for They Feel That They Are People': Ontological Flux in San Myth, Cosmology and Belief" (in *Hunter-Gatherer Research* 2015) and "'The Eyes Are No Longer Wild: You Have Taken the Kudu into Your Mind': The Supererogatory Aspects of San Hunting" (in *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 2017). These articles gave me the impetus, with some encouragement from colleagues and friends, for this book. It adds to, as well as expands and complements, what is presented, more or less provisionally, in these two articles.

The ethnographic base of this book consists of both my own field work and of ethnographies by other Kalahari anthropologists, as well as of ethnohistorical sources, both published and archival. Given the quantity and variety of this entire source material, most of the contemporary and historical San linguistic groupings of southern Africa are referenced in this book. (See Map 1 for their distribution over southern Africa, and of some of their Khoe- and Bantu-speaking neighbors.)

Most of the archival source consists of unpublished /Xam texts from the Bleek/Lloyd archive. They are referred to by the notational system used by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd that differentiated between interlocutors, informants (by the first, Roman numeral), and by the notebook number and its page number(s), e.g. L VIII. – 4, p. 6365 rev. (Lloyd, /Han‡kasso, notebook 4, page number 6365, back of page). These archival text references can be readily looked up in University of Cape Town's open-access digitalized Bleek/Lloyd archive ("Digital Bleek and Lloyd", lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.za). The identifying Roman numerals for the other two key narrators are II for //Kabbo, V for Diä!kwain; for the two main !Kung informants, !Nanni and Tamme the identifying numerals are XI and XII. For more information on the /Xam informants see Bleek and Lloyd (1911: vi–xvii), Deacon and Dowson (1996: 11–43), Guenther



Map 1 Distribution of Khoisan- and Bantu-speaking groupings of southern Africa

(1989: 25–29), Lewis-Williams (2000: 32–33) and—for the most comprehensive account—Bank (2006a).

In addition to these mostly anthropological sources I draw on the writings, rich in quantity and quality, of scholars from a number of other disciplines who have worked in the field of Khoisan Studies (many of them drawing on the Bleek/Lloyd archive). These are archaeology, rock art studies and history, as well as folklore, art and literary criticism. The inter-

disciplinarity of source material has also left its imprint on the content and scope of this book, which, in volume two, moves from the San to their Khoe- and Bantu-speaking neighbors in southern Africa, to the Inuit of the eastern Arctic and to the Two Cultures of the West.

Waterloo, ON, Canada Mathias Guenther

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Acknowledgments

In the process of this far-reaching project, I have engaged with the ideas of many scholars, both through their writings and in person. Many of these researchers are recognized in the introduction—the section on interdisciplinarity—and here I again acknowledge the quality of their scholarship and the intellectual stimulation I have derived thereof in my own work, over the years and decades.

I especially acknowledge the many colleagues and friends whose ideas and counsel I have been able to draw on with respect to this project in discussions, both at home in Canada, or at various conference or guest lecture venues in other countries, and in southern Africa. The former, in alphabetical order, are Leila Baracchini, Alan Barnard, Megan Biesele, Laird Christie, Ute Dieckmann, Thorsten Gieser, Jean-Guy Goulet, Erica Hill, Bob Hitchcock, Rockney Jacobsen, Dean Knight, Tihamer Kover, Frédéric Laugrand, Megan Laws, Jenny Lawy, Richard Lee, Chris Low, Andrew Lyons, Harriet Lyons, Junko Maruyama, Bob McKinley, Mark Münzel, Amali Philips, Sigrid Schmidt, James Serpell, Thea Skaanes, Sian Sullivan, Renee Sylvain, Liz Marshall Thomas, Ingrid Thurner, Thomas Widlok, Rane Willerslev and Sandra Woolfrey.

Before turning to the long list of colleagues from Africa, I acknowledge three special debts of gratitude. They are to Pieter Jolly and Neil Rusch of the University of Cape Town, for inviting me (in October 2017) to accompany them on a field trip to the Northern Karoo, the home territory of // Kabbo, /Han‡kasso, Diä!kwain and the other /Xam storytellers from whom Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd obtained their—and the world's—treasure trove of /Xam myth and lore. Apart from viewing many rock art

sites that derive from ancestral /Xam hands and specific features of the landscape that are referred to by the storytellers in one or another tale, this visit afforded me a feel for the landscape—the /Xam *!kau:xu*, or "hunting ground". Another debt to my two hosts and travel companions is that they gave me permission to use some of their images (photographs and rock art tracings).

At the occasion of that trip to South Africa I also visited David Lewis-Williams, who had invited me to Witwatersrand University's Rock Art Research Institute (of which he is the founder), as well as showed me around its exhibition at the Institute's Origins Centre museum. I have admired David's work on San religion, mythology and art ever since I first became acquainted with it when reading and reviewing his path-breaking *Believing and Seeing* almost four decades ago. I was eager to discuss my current project with him at the occasion of my visit (which, as expected, was most fruitful).

The third debt of gratitude is to the late Irene Staehelin, founder and *spiritus rector*, as well as initial funder, through her Swiss-based UBUNTU Foundation, of !Khwa-ttu, a San culture and education center which, quoting from its mission statement, "celebrates San culture, present and past, for a better future". This NGO has been able to do all that and more, in the 20 years of its operation. I have been fortunate to be associated with !Khwa-ttu on a couple of occasions. One was in 2011 Irene invited me (along Megan Biesele) to assist in setting up a museum exhibition on /Xam cosmology, around the theme of "The Mantis and the Eland". It was the discussions, planning and research on this project, and head-long delving into the /Xam Archive, that spawned this book project. Irene, who died early this year (2019), has drawn a number of other San researchers to !Khwa-ttu, to assist and consult, with the salutary effect of making and keeping them aware of problems and issues about the San people that are more real and urgent than so much that "academics" think and write about in academe's ivory tower.

Colleagues in southern Africa who provided valued input to my project over the past few years are Sam Challis, Josè Manuel de Prada-Samper, Janette Deacon, Janet Hermans, Jeremy Hollmann, Mary Lange, Willemien LeRoux, Al Morris, Alicia Mullen, Richard Northover, John Parkington, Rian Rifkin, Pippa Skotnes, Andy Smith, Larissa Swan, Carolyn Thorpe, Helize van Vuuren and David Witleson.

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the rock art images; to Maude Brown of Kuru Development Trust for the same assistance with respect to the contemporary San art; to Stephan Guenther for producing four of the rock art tracings (nos. 3.15, 3.18, 3.21, Vol. I, 4.1, Vol. II); to Brittany Ostic and Daniel Guenther for assistance in copy-editing, to Mary Al-Sayed and Linda Braus at Palgrave Macmillan, New York, and Beth McAuley and Lesley-Anne Longo at the Editing Company, Toronto, for their invaluable assistance in editing the manuscript and getting it in ship-shape condition for the printer.

Contents

Note on Orthography

All San (and Khoe Khoe) languages include clicks within their inventory of consonants (Guenther 1999: 11). The four that are best defined, phonetically and phonemically, and that appear throughout this book whenever vernacular words, terms and expression are cited are the following:

1. The dental click (/), produced by placing the tip of the tongue against the back of the upper incisors, creating a sound similar to what we transcribe as "tsk, tsk" (the vocalization used when gently chiding a child).
2. The lateral click (//), produced by placing the sides of the tongue against the sides of the upper row of teeth, creating the sound a rider makes when urging his/her horse on to greater speed.
3. The alveolar click (ǂ), produced with the tongue pressed against the bony projection on the roof of the mouth (alveolus).
4. The cerebral (or alveopalatal) click (!), produced by placing the front of the tongue against the roof of the mouth, behind the alveolus, creating a "cork-popping" sound.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> "Attentiveness", "attunedness", "subjective identification with the prey", "extension of people's senses", "tapping into sense perceptions of other species": the language of the last two paragraphs of this chapter, which also reverberated throughout the entire discussion of hunting, as it did through that of ritual and ludic dancing, is the language of the body, of perception and experience. The effect of the reiterations of this experience of cross-species intersubjectivity and its transforming effects on the human being's being within these different domains of San culture, and of thought, imagination and action, is that the central theme of San cosmology, ontological mutability, is both mutually corroborated within the people's thought world and grounded, at times bodily, in experience.

The previous volume of this book ended the chapter on hunting, and the volume, with the epigraph that introduces the present volume. It also stated that the experiential dimension of San cosmology is the present volume's central concern, specifically its ontological component, on the intersubjective human-animal relationship and the porous species divide.

Before proceeding, a brief synopsis of the book as a whole (i.e. Vol. I and II) is provided, as a broad background and context for the matters dealt with in the present volume.

M. Guenther, *Human-Animal Relationships in San and Hunter-Gatherer Cosmology, Volume II*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21186-8_1

Synopsis of Book

The two volumes of this book are complementary, the first being primarily descriptive in tone and substance, the second discursive. The ethnographic information of Vol. I is presented in anticipation of the arguments of Vol. II, which in turn refers back to the preceding volume, grounding analysis here in the description there. Ideally, the two volumes should thus both be read.

However, each volume also to some extent stands on its own; the first as an ethnographic monograph on San cosmology and ontology, and the second as an anthropological study of ontological ambiguity or, as I refer to it because of the inherent dynamic element of transformation, ontological mutability. It does so in terms of what in the discipline is a standard, tried-and-tested, two-pronged *modus operandi* for anthropological analysis. The one mode is an in-depth study of a certain matter in one culture, the one visited by and known to the writer on the basis of intensive and protracted ethnographic fieldwork that strives toward an understanding of the visited people in terms of their culture. The other is comparison, in an attempt to broaden the understanding gained on the researched matter by the first study. In this book, the latter endeavor, dealt with in Vol. II, inherently, through its epistemological operation, refers to the San ethnography in Vol. I; however, in presenting new ethnographic information on other cultures and peoples this part of the book also tells its own story.

Volume I deals with how ontological mutability is manifested, through hybridity and transformation, via the imagination, in myth and lore, conveyed by storytellers as well as, more concretely and starkly, through images produced by past and present-day San artists on rock surfaces or canvas and paper. Also considered is how ontological mutability enters people's awareness not virtually, via the imagination, by means of stories and images, but actually, through experience, in the lived world, specifically the real-life contexts of ritual, play and hunting. Each of these events provides the principals and participants involved in them—trance dancers, intiands, play dancers, hunters—moments at which being-change may be experienced, either mentally ("feeling eland") or bodily ("being eland").

How ontological mutability is experienced, as well as the impacts of this inherently disjunctive and potentially disorienting experience on human and personal identity and integrity, is elaborated on in Vol. II, as

that volume's primary concern. This is examined in the context of the San and with reference throughout to the ethnographic information presented in the other volume, in terms of epistemological, experiential and environmental parameters, through which awareness of ontological mutability is conveyed to and through the mind and the body and through being-in-the-world groundedness.

After this discussion, the ethnographic ground and analytical scope shift and expand, to how other people and cultures think about, perceive and experience ontological mutability. This is done within a loosely comparative framework referenced to the San. It considers three cultural contexts, each broader in scope than the next, expanding the number and kind of factors—structural, acculturational, historical, ecological ones—that impinge on how people in different cultures engage with animals. The first is the Bantu-speaking neighbors of the San with whom some San groups have had contact for centuries, with mutual influences on one another's cosmologies, mythologies and ritual practices and their human-animal aspects. The second comparative context is another hunting society, in another, remote and ecologically radically different part of the world (Inuit of Canada's eastern Arctic).

The third context, the one broadest in scope and vision, is Western cosmology, especially its post-Cartesian, posthumanist take on the human-animal nexus and animals' personhood, being and *umwelt*. All this is quite a new and little-charted cosmological territory for anthropocentric, species-solipsistic Westerners and outside their epistemological and ontological mainstream, raising fundamental questions and issues, about species identity and autonomy and, more generally, human beings and being human. For the San, and other hunter-gatherers, such matters lie in their intellectual and cosmological mainstream and within well-charted terrain. Thus a study of their view of human-animal relations—of the kind here presented—may provide Westerners, specifically the recent researchers, cognitive ethologists and other Western "anthrozoologists" who have jettisoned the Cartesian perspective, with helpful clues and insights in their new and novel, intellectually recalibrated take on the age-old and universal question of what is human.

The book's conclusion discusses critically the impact of the relational ontology paradigm on San studies and considers epistemological and ontological implications of the San (and hunter-gatherer) perception of the human-animal relationship for Western ideas on the same matter.

Outline of Chapters

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 consider the experiential implications of a cosmology in which ontological mutability—ambiguity and inconstancy—holds sway. The central issue considered is how people experience ontological mutability and deal with this profound identity issue mentally and affectively. The matter is dealt with in general terms in Chap. 2, which lays out three avenues followed in this phenomenological consideration of transformation: a general receptiveness to ontological ambiguity; the experiential impact, on the mind and senses, of transformation; an intersection of the myth and spirit world with reality. They are the topics for the subsequent three chapters.

The first (Chap. 3) chapter is about what might be deemed a "tolerance for ambiguity" in San's world view and mindset. I considered this sort of tolerance in my previous book, at the level of social-structural and conceptual ambiguity (Guenther 1999: 226–37), and I ask here whether such tolerance is found also at the more fundamental level, of ontology—being, being-in-the-word and species identity—than of social organization and epistemology. Does tolerance for ontological ambiguity underlie the other type of ambiguity, the same way ontology constitutes, as argued by Tim Ingold, the foundation for epistemology, the former concerned with life and being, the latter with thought and knowing (2006: 19)? How do people whose human identity at times merges with that of animals deal with the matter of monsters, the prototypal embodiment of which is held—by Westerners—to be a being that confounds ontological categories (Cohen 1996: 6; Weinstock 2014: 1)? And how do they deal with what is perhaps the profoundest of existential issues for humans, the basic contradiction, conundrum and moral dilemma, over eating the flesh of animal-persons?

Chapter 4, on the impact of the experience of transformation, considers this impact from two perspectives, one virtual and vicarious, through myth via the imagination or as witnessed by someone watching a shaman's lion transformation, the other actual and direct, through the person's body and the senses.

Chapter 5 deals with the at-times hovering closeness of myth and spirit beings and presences in the natural and social world of the San that brings some of the myth and spirit world's ontological inchoateness and inconstancy to this world. The San forager's being-in-the-world place and space

is the natural environment, in particular the hunting ground, the arena within which animals are encountered most directly, eye-to-eye and cheek-to-jowl. This in itself keeps humans constantly aware of ontological ambiguity and mutability, their sameness—as and otherness—from animals whose identity they may assume mentally and bodily at certain moments in the hunt. That awareness is intensified by the presence, in the same landscape, and, at times on hunting ground, in the form of a lion- or jackal-shaman or a trickster-eland, of the ontologically uber-fluid beings or states from the mythical and preternatural domains. This presence potentially transforms their being-state, from virtual, imagined or thought-out myth and spirit beings to actual ones, seen, encountered or even "become" by people.

Given that the conceptual and expressive arena wherein ontological mutability is played out most extravagantly and explicitly is myth, and given its evident intersection with reality, on the hunting ground and its doings, a number of phenomenological questions are raised: How does an *umwelt* that contains mythic beings and mystical happenings affect people's lives, as they walk, gather and hunt, instrumentally and prosaically as they must in marginal environments? Do mythic and mystic presences enhance or diminish their "being-in-the-world" experience, over which, Ingold, one of the leading voices of the New Animism, would fly a flag bearing "the insignia of life" (2013: 248)? How do so "prosaic" a hunter-gatherer folk as the San are by some researchers alleged to be square their prosaicism with enchantment? Or do they? Is the latter something from the past, more or less remote and situated not within the San's imagination but instead within the analyst's "pre-colonial imaginary", all of it superseded by a more disenchanted present? The last question is dealt with in the last section of Chap. 4; the other questions, intimated in the chapter, are returned to in the conclusion.

Chapter 6 considers San animistic cosmology, in terms of the New Animism paradigm of relational ontology cross-culturally by comparing "(S)animism" to other animisms. Each of the two sets of people and cultures focused on in this comparative exercise is linked to the San, one in terms of geographic contiguity and the other in terms of cultural similarity. The first are neighboring Bantu-speakers with whom some San groups have had close and long-standing contact and whose culture contains mytho-magical notions and practices about animal hybridity and transformation, inviting speculation on inter-acculturative influences The second