



GENDER AMBIGUITY IN KHOISAN RITUAL/MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXTS:  
A PARADOX FOR DARWINIAN THEORY

by

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Knight (1991, Knight *et al.* 1995) posits a model of symbolic cultural origins based in a female strategy of periodically refusing sex to all males except those who returned 'home' with meat. The symbolic domain emerges through collective female defiance expressed in ritual performance. The predicted signature of sex-strike is systematic reversal of the 'normal' signals of animal courtship (Knight *et al.* 1995: 84). Where mate recognition in the animal world involves signalling 'right species/right sex/right (i.e. fertile) time', sex-striking human females would deter male advances through ritual pantomime of '*wrong species/wrong sex/wrong (i.e. infertile) time*'. Real or cosmetic menstrual bleeding as a signifier of 'taboo' is nevertheless a powerful signal for manipulating male behavior since it is a good indicator of impending fertility. Males are predicted to pursue mating effort to bond with menstrual females (Power and Aiello 1997).

Crucial to this female strategy is enlisting support of male kin and demonstrating that support to any non-cooperative outgroup male. Such kin alliance can be most graphically advertised through symbolism of shared blood using cosmetic bodypaint, kin relations being 'blood relations'. Within kin groups, signalling of brother-sister alliances through conflation of attributes – penises 'belonging' to sisters, wombs to brothers – is predicted, amounting to a general state of androgyny. Specifically, men in identifying with 'bleeding' sisters should also identify with bleeding game animals ('wrong species'), while menstruating women, identifying with brothers should also be hunters ('wrong sex').

Sex-strike theory (Knight 1991) places lunar/menstrual periodicity at the core of the earliest cosmology. The moon is the most appropriate clock for synchronising 'strike' action in the form of collective ritual performance which precedes and motivates collective hunting of large game. The most favourable time for hunting is the period leading up to full moon, when the moon gives good light after sundown. Therefore the best time to commence ritual action should be dark/new moon. The ritual cycle should be structured around the lunar cycle with waxing moon ritually potent, waning moon ritually insignificant. Simply put, ritual power is switched ON by blood/wetness (menstrual non-availability); dark/crescent moon; extinguishing of cooking fires (no meat to cook); hunger (prior to hunting); and abstention from marital sex (sex-strike). Ritual power is switched OFF by the opposite terms: light; full/waning moon; cooking fires; feasting; and marital sex.

This 'time-resistant syntax of ritual power' should be preserved in the structure of ritual and myth worldwide (Knight *et al.* 1995: 91). Initiation ceremonies are expected to prove most conservative of these archaic symbolic structures. This paper uses data from Khoisan initiation rites and associated mythology to test whether the predicted lunar/menstrual scheduling of ritual, coupled with sex reversal, obtains. Its wider aim is to advance Darwinian studies of symbolic systems to the status of science through the method of formulating *testable* predictions.

### **Khoisan female initiation**

The most renowned of Khoisan initiation practices is the Eland Bull dance, the climax of a girl's first menstruation ceremony. Prevalent in the Kalahari, this dance or its close equivalent probably belonged to Southern groups as well. A painting at Fulton's Rock in the Drakensberg Mountains (*fig. 1*) has been interpreted as representing the dance (Lewis-Williams 1981: 41ff.).

The central figure – the secluded girl – lies under a cloak inside a hut, like a Ju/'hoan initiate. Among the Ju/'hoansi, the girl is 'created' an adult when women of the band dance, pantomiming the mating behaviour of elands. The painting expresses two strong antitheses, observed in ritual practice. One is between the menstruant in her state of potency and hunting weapons: in the panel, men and their weapons are kept to the periphery. The other is between the maiden and sexual contact with men. One man standing aside but watching has a large penis with a bar across. Other visible penises in the picture are similarly barred. This common rock art motif was first interpreted by Vinnicombe (1976: 257-9), in the light of Khoisan ethnography, as a reference to the sexual abstinence required as a condition of hunting luck.

Yet, sex is occurring in this picture – a fantasy of animal sex. The women pretend to be eland cows, dressed with tails of ostrich eggshell beads, wagging their buttocks towards the girl in the hut. In typical Ju/'hoan or Nharo practice (Barnard 1980: 117-8), one or two older men may join the dance wearing horns as 'bulls'

(two figures carry sticks in the picture). They sidle up to the 'cows', sniffing at their rears. The heavy, deliberate dancing, the clicking of adze blades as eland hooves, and the women's Eland Song summon up the presence of the eland (seen next to the ithyphallic man in the picture).

### **Maiden as Hunter**

In Khoisan cosmology, the 'coldness' of menstrual blood opposes the 'heat' of effective arrow poison (Bieseke 1993: 196). A Ju/'hoan man will not hunt while his wife menstruates lest his poison 'cool' and he himself become hunted by carnivores (1993: 93). Hunters' fears of menstrual blood are recorded among the G/wi (Silberbauer 1981: 119) and !Xõ (Heinz 1966: 209). A menstruating woman, then, negatively affects hunting and hunting gear. Yet, during initiation, the new maiden ritually and metaphorically *takes up hunting weapons*. Of the Ju/'hoan girl, people say: 'She has shot an eland' (Lewis-Williams 1981: 51). Among the !Xõ, this shooting is ritually enacted. On the final day of seclusion, the maiden takes up hunting weapons 'to bring them luck' (Heinz 1966: 122) and shoots at the mask of an antelope. Belief in the girl's potent effect on future hunting is expressed in the Fulton's Rock painting by the game shaman (seated, right) who points a finger of power at the giant eland summoned by the women's dance.

### **Maiden as Eland**

Just as the maiden is a hunter she is also the most desired hunted animal. According to !Kun/obe, an old Ju/'hoan woman:

The Eland Bull dance is danced because the eland is a good thing and has much fat. And the girl is also a good thing and she is all fat; therefore they are called the same thing. (Lewis-Williams 1981: 48)

Great energy is invested in ritual and language to stress this identity of girl and Eland Bull. The ochre design painted on the young woman's cheeks and forehead may represent the eland's red tufted forelock (Lewis-Williams 1981: 70); her seclusion at menstruation may be described in terms of 'eland sickness' (Lewis-Williams 1981: 43, citing Biesele); during that time, she must not eat eland meat (Biesele 1993: 136) and must use the respect or avoidance word *dabba* for eland; on emergence, she must keep her eyes down and not look around, so that the eland will not see the stalking hunter (Lewis-Williams 1981: 51); and she is smeared with eland fat. Similar injunctions were placed on /Xam and !Xõ maidens. Merely by looking up, the /Xam girl could make the game 'wild' (Hewitt 1986: 285).

The Ju/'hoansi informed Lewis-Williams that among all the antelope species they hunt, the female always has more fat, *except in the unique case of the eland* (1981: 72). The emphasis on the identical fatness of girl and eland confirms that *she is the bull eland*, that bull being curiously female in its fatness.

Eating or drinking fat, writes Biesele, is a Ju/'hoan euphemism for sex (1993: 86). Men, as carnivores, hunt and 'eat' women, as herbivores (*cf.* McCall 1970). The good hunter fears eating or sleeping with his wife in case his arrow poison cools. After a successful hunt, however, he would greet his wife 'with special fervour. He

would “praise the meat”...he would see her buttocks and her legs and would be happy “because the meat had fat and was fat”.’ (1993: 197) It is hard to tell, comments Biesele, which meat – animal or woman – is being discussed: ‘The metaphors tying women to the enchanted, hunted prey are so intricate as utterly to defy untangling’ (1993: 197).

### **Maiden and the Moon**

Both maiden and Eland are also identifiable with the Moon. Widespread Bushman groups released a menarcheal girl from seclusion at the appearance of the new moon (/Xam, Lloyd VI-2: 4001-2; !Xū, Bleek 1928a: 122; G/wi and G//ana, Valiente Noailles 1993: 94-7). The /Xam equated the menstruating girl and the Moon through their commensurate powers of cooling arrow poison (Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 67, 77). In the story *The Moon is not to be looked at when game has been shot*, the Moon’s dripping water, like liquid honey, falls on the game, cools the poison and revives it. The prohibition on hunters looking at the Moon refers to the terrible consequences for a man if the secluded girl should glance at him: he is turned into a tree or a stone (Hewitt 1986: 79).

The Moon as it waxed, like the fat Eland, changed its gender. The !Xū say of the Moon: ‘as a man it comes, as a woman it dies away’ (Bleek 1928a: 122). A similar grammatical gendering – male crescent, female full moon – has been found by Silberbauer (1981: 126-7) among the G/wi, and by Marshall among Nyae Nyae Ju/’hoansi, Nharo, G/wi and G//ana groups (1986: 181).

Just as the potency of the maiden influences hunting success, the underlying associations of the Moon's gender concern the future availability of food, especially of fat. Khoisan ethnography is replete with references to beliefs linking success in the hunt to lunar periodicity (*e.g.* Kohler 1978/9; Viegas Guerreiro 1968: 97, 297; Estermann 1976: 17; Silberbauer 1965: 101; Bleek 1920-21: 302, 328, 455, 469; Lloyd V-6: 5206-40). The waxing phase is believed to be beneficial for hunting luck. The full moon, by contrast, is associated with satisfaction (Marshall 1986: 180) being the ideal time to provide large game as brideservice (Potgieter 1955: 11).

### **Maiden and the Rain**

A further term in the identities of Maiden, Eland, and Moon is the Rain. Again, this involves a construction of gender. The /Xam distinguished between the desired, gentle 'female' rain, which fell softly; and the destructive 'male' rain (Bleek 1933: 309). The danger lay in the maiden's capacity to summon and unleash this 'male' power. Violation of menarcheal observances roused the wrath of the being !Khwa, manifested as a whirlwind, black pebbles, lightning or Rain Bull. Culture itself unraveled – skin bags reverting to their 'raw' form as game animals – and the girl and her kin were transformed into frogs, the Rain's creatures (Hewitt 1986: 77-79). Female rain is never mentioned in puberty lore (Hewitt 1986: 284). The word !Khwa stood for water, and also connoted menstrual blood (Hewitt 1986: 284). /Xam informants emphasised that !Khwa was attracted by 'the odour of the girl' (Hewitt 1986: 285). The girl's contact with water was rigorously controlled during



seclusion (1986: 279). Yet, on emergence, such contact was vitally necessary for *preserving* supplies. The maiden had to sprinkle the current water source with powdered haematite (Hewitt 1986: 281), otherwise !Khwa might cause the pool to dry. She painted the young men with haematite stripes 'like a zebra', to protect them from !Khwa's lightning. 'When she is a maiden, she has the rain's magic power' explained the /Xam informant Diä!kwain. She could snap her fingers to call the lightning and 'make the rain kill us' (Bleek 1933: 297).

In summary, the Khoisan female initiate takes on the role of the hunter, while being identified with the Eland Bull. She possesses the 'male' powers of the waxing moon, bringing luck and light to the hunt, and the terrible Rain which punishes violation of menstrual taboos.

#### **Ju/'hoan and /Xam first-kill observances: parallels with menarcheal rites**

Close parallels between menarcheal ritual and the boy's first eland-kill ceremony have been well-observed by both Hewitt (1986) and Lewis-Williams (1981).

Like the maiden, the young hunter is symbolically identified with the eland. Where the girl suffers 'eland sickness', the boy limps slowly as the wounded prey; both boy and girl keep their eyes down, so that the game will not look about; both boy and girl are marked with specific 'eland' designs, and smeared with eland fat in the course of initiation.

The young hunter is conceptually identified with the menstrual girl *from the moment he has shot the poisoned arrow into the antelope*. The /Xam explicitly likened the

first-kill hunter to a menarcheal girl (Lloyd VI: 4386). Counterpart to the super-destructive !Khwa, guardian of menarcheal observances, is /Kaggen, a gender-ambivalent trickster (Hewitt 1986: 153-4). Creator and protector of the game, /Kaggen tries to trick the hunter out of his prey. During the critical waiting period after the animal has been shot and before the hunter can start tracking it down, /Kaggen provokes the hunter to break the tenuous link between himself and the animal by sudden or vigorous movements which would revive the game, and counteract the poison. The hunter's slow limping mimics the desired effect of the poison on the prey.

Like the maiden, the boy is in an antithetical relation to hunting weapons – he cannot touch the shaft of the arrow (Hewitt 1986: 126, Lewis-Williams 1981: 58ff.). In both cases there are strictures concerning bloodshed and the cooling of arrow poison; if /Kaggen comes in the form of a louse and bites the boy, the boy cannot kill the louse because 'its blood will be on his hands with which he grasped the arrow and when he shot the eland, the blood will enter the arrow and cool the poison' (Diä!kwain's account, in Bleek 1932: 233-40). Where the boy limps painfully back to camp, a girl who starts menstruating in the veld cannot walk back, but must be carried. She must not draw attention to her condition but sit and wait silently for other women or girls to approach. A young /Xam or Ju/'hoan hunter remains silent and peripheral until approached.

Like the menstruant, the first-kill hunter is secluded and tended as if 'ill' (Lewis-

Williams 1981: 58). The same ritual injunctions are placed on both boy and girl – food avoidances and rationing, keeping away from cooking fire, keeping out of the sun, not moving or not touching the earth. The /Xam took precautions over the dangerous ‘scent’ of both boy and girl.

### **Tricksters and ‘devils’**

Literature on Bushman male group initiation practice is sparse. Typically boys endured a month of hunger and hardship under the supervision of medicine men; no woman came near. The boys had no fire, nor meat, subsisting on a little water, and raw berries and roots. ‘The weaklings die,’ Bleek asserts (1928b: 23). The main activity among the Nharo and Auen was performing the /*gi* medicine dances each night. On one night, a supernatural being called Hishe approaches the dancers, circles round and is driven away by the medicine men. According to the older Nharo men who had seen this being, it ‘was like a woman in appearance’ or ‘not like a person at all, but a creature about three feet high with a flat head, red eyes..a black body, wings and claws’ (1928b: 24). The Auen described two beings, male and female, like lions but walking upright, with children like baboons. The name Hishe among the Nharo is given both masculine and feminine endings (1928b: 27), and can almost certainly be related to Heiseb or Heitsi-eibib, trickster deity of the Nama. Similarly identifiable with Hishe are the beings known as Huwu or Huwe, and //Gāuwa. Known to the Nharo as Huwu, Huwe is the name of the spirit who appears at the !Xū initiation dance ‘sometimes as a youth, sometimes in double form as man

and woman' (Bleek 1928a: 122). Huwe's name could be substituted for that of the New Moon in the song Bleek recorded for the Raingiver (1928a: 123). Hishe, Heiseb and Huwe seem to be generic titles for spirit protectors of game (resembling /Kaggen, see Bleek 1928a: 123); //Gāuwa – often translated as 'devil' thanks to missionary influence – is also a generic name for a trickster being who may be custodian of trance medicine or trance 'arrows', and linked to the spirits of the dead. In Guenther's account (1989: 116-7, and see 1986, chapters 7 and 8), //Gāuwa is the presiding deity of Nharo male initiation: 'the divinity may be presented to the young men as a woman whose voice may be simulated with a bullroarer'. The being takes on 'female guise, displaying yet another dimension of the trickster's ontological ambiguity'. Guenther compares //Gāuwa's role in the female ritual, where he appears as a jealous male. He hovers around the menstrual hut, making sure the proper rules are observed (here, compare !Khwa for the /Xam). Above all, he keeps young men away from the secluded girl. Yet, to the secluded male initiates, //Gāuwa appears as a woman with the voice of the bullroarer. //gāūa, a spirit of the dead and the lightning, presides at the !Xū girl's menarcheal dance.

In Fourie's account of the Auen ceremonies (cited by Schapera 1930: 124), the boys are smoked by the 'devil's fire' and must drink the 'devil's urine'; they are blackened from head to foot, and must walk through a pan of water. Later, they are introduced to the 'devil' – the dance where Hishe appears as a woman or monster – and they must partake of honey gathered by the 'devil'. Such honey recalls that used by /Kaggen in /Xam myth to nourish his newly created bucks. It is particularly

the state of the honey that alerts /Kaggen to the death of his favourite buck, the eland. When honey dries, 'blood is flowing'; he finds eland blood in place of the honey he has gathered (Hewitt 1986: 224). In /Xam belief, the moon's water, dripping like liquid honey, has the capacity – like menstrual blood – to cool arrow poison and revive the game. A cyclical logic of alternation between blood and honey, death and revival of the game is being expressed.

Heinz's close account of !Xō male initiation reveals point by point similarity in the treatment of initiate boys and the menarcheal girl (1966: 125ff.). The boys must not talk to each other, and must look at the ground. They have the same gemsbok mask painted on their faces as the maiden, and are sent a hat – just as the girl – to be worn until the rain breaks, meant to protect them from the sun (1966: 128). They too shoot at a gemsbok shield, to bring luck to the weapons (1966: 131). Other similarities in the boys' and the girls' rites include ritual tattooing; 'opening the eyes' of the candidate at the end of the ceremony; and the imposition of elaborate food taboos, which are lifted in a series of rituals subsequent to initiation. The dance parallel to the Eland Bull dance is called *tsoma*, and may be danced in front of women on the men's return.

However, disclosure of secrets concerning cult objects (bullroarers?) to the uninitiated is punishable by death (Heinz 1966: 129). The men use a 'counterfeit' story to arouse fear in the women, about a horrible animal called Gausi who lurks in the bush 'frequented by women', with two eyes in front and two behind. Boys must

have the courage to face it. Women say Gausi 'has a hard tongue with which it licks blood and one or more wives who may insult the village women' (1966: 133-4). Men tease women for their fears of the dark by using a 'cult object' (presumably a bullroarer) to mimic the voices of Gausi or Gausi's 'wives'. Gausi then is a being desirous of women and blood (compare with //Gāuwa for the Nharo, and indeed !Khwa for the /Xam); while, like //Gāuwa in female form, 'Gausi's wife' may have the voice of a bullroarer.

### **Khoisan mythology and religious belief: the Moon**

Ethnographers from Hahn (1881) to Schapera (1930) and Barnard (1988) have consistently placed the Moon at the centre of Khoisan religious ideology. The most general observable 'structure' is of a great (high or sky) god, an associated lesser deity, and various spirits of the dead. The almost universal Khoisan term for the latter is *G//āūa*, or a variation on that name, connoting 'the evil god, the evil aspect of the good god, the evil spirits or the spirits of the dead' (Barnard 1988: 226). The same name may appear as a title of the lesser or 'trickster' deity (cf //Gāuwa for Ju'/hoan and Nharo), and is very generally associated with trance, as the source of magic, curing or 'poisoned' trance arrows. As far as Hahn was concerned, the 'bad being' ||Gaunab, connected with ghosts and the dead, represented the fundamental layer of Khoisan religious thought, 'of much older date than Tsūi||goab and Heitsi-eibib' (1881: 86). Yet, any rigid ascription of 'good' or 'evil' to these different beings does not work: the spirits of the dead are called upon for healing;

the sky god does good, evil or merely exists; the 'trickster' deity is both creative and destructive. They occupy a spectrum where, to a greater or lesser extent, they share in the Moon's 'inherent existential ambiguity' (Barnard 1988: 220).

Lunar time may be perceived as the structuring framework for the relationships between these powers. Still today, the lunar cycle structures the rhythm of dancing in Bushman society. The full moon may be the most frequent and propitious time for dancing (Barnard 1988: 220). But in early accounts of the Khoekhoe, it is consistently the appearance of new moon which occasions all-night celebration, religious gathering and rituals of licence (see Hahn 1881: 37ff.). If the Moon was worshipped as such, then it is the New Moon to which prayers were addressed, for rain, for light and hunting luck (cf /Xegwi, Nharo, Khoekhoe for rain, /Xam, G/wi, Ju'/hoan and Kxoe for hunting luck). Beliefs in menstrual synchronicity – if any lunar time was specified – always attached to dark moon. This may be referred to in the Khoekhoe custom of women dressing themselves in red ochre for their 'worship' of Heitsi-eibib, or sprinkling red earth on the 'graves' or 'head' of Heitsi-eibib (Hahn 1881: 37, citing a 1691 account).

On the one hand, 'an association of the Moon either with the High God (!khwa, 'the Rain', keeper of menstrual taboos) or with the Mantis (/kaggen, the trickster figure) has long been argued for the /Xam on both etymological and mythological grounds' (Barnard 1988: 222, citing Schapera, Schmidt, Hewitt, Bleek and Lloyd). On the other 'Tsūi-||goab, Haitsi-aibib and perhaps the Moon too, are pretty much

interchangeable in Khoekhoe mythology' as are their adversaries ||Gâuab and ≠Gama- ≠Gorib (Barnard 1988: 226, citing Hahn, Schmidt).

### **!Khwa and /Kaggen**

We have already seen the structurally parallel roles of the super-destructive !Khwa (as 'male' rain and lightning) and the ambivalent /Kaggen in governing menstrual (female initiation) observance and hunting (male initiation) observance respectively. In the series of myths collected by Bleek and Lloyd on violations of menarcheal taboos, the punishment of the disobedient girl and her kin is to be reduced to permanent wetness, transformed into frogs, and deposited in ponds (Hewitt 1986: 77-8). A notable motif is that of cultural reversion: artefacts and possessions change back to original forms; skin bags become animals, arrows become reeds, bows become trees. /Kaggen, as protector and creator of game, also causes reversion. If the respect customs applied to various species of game were not observed, he could make game 'wild' (as could a menstrual girl) or make a wounded animal revive, by cooling poison (as menstrual blood and the waxing moon could). In the myth of /Kaggen's creation of the eland from a shoe, we have a reversion of an artefact – a leather shoe, becoming the game animal precisely similar to the characteristic motif of !Khwa's punishment.

### **Eland, Moon and shoe**

The stories of /Kaggen's creation of the eland from a shoe, or his creation of the Moon, from a shoe or an ostrich feather, provide structurally similar narratives that



identify the eland with the moon (hence the fattening of the eland with the waxing of the moon). As Hewitt says: 'it must be assumed that the moon which /Kaggen created was a new moon, arc-shaped like a feather or a curling veld-shoe' (1986: 223). In these creation stories, wetness (the element of !Khwa) and darkness, 'dirt' or staining appear as essential ingredients. /Kaggen makes the eland from a piece of his son-in-law, /Kwammang-a's, shoe, by taking it to a pool (1986: 214). /Kwammang-a finally kills the eland, and he and /Kaggen quarrel. On pretence of finding his lost shoe, /Kaggen goes back to where the eland has been cut up to find its gall. He pierces this, plunging everyone, himself included, into utter darkness. He wipes the gall from his eyes with a feather; the stained feather, thrown into the air, becomes the Moon (1986: 221-2). A version collected by von Wielligh (cited by Hewitt 1986: 217) makes clear that the Moon can be created directly from a shoe – and gives an inkling of what the 'shoe' represents. One of /Kaggen's shoes was chafing him, so he asked his daughter, the Hammerkop, to put it in water and soften it. The great watersnake was enraged by /Kaggen's dirty shoe in his water, and caused the water to freeze overnight, so the shoe was stuck in the ice. The Hammerkop brings the shoe with shiny ice on it to /Kaggen, who is upset, throwing the icy shoe into the sky where it shines as the moon. Here, the watersnake is decidedly identifiable with !Khwa the great rain animal (bull or snake) who forms into and inhabits pools. He is roused to anger by the 'dirty shoe', just as !Khwa is by the smell of menstrual blood. Icy cold is associated with women, blood and the moon; here it is a female who mediates /Kaggen's contact with the shoe and the

water. Recurrently, in world mythology, a shoe is an obvious vagina symbol (Dundes 1980: 47). A 'dirty shoe', then, encodes a reference to a menstruating vagina.

### **Interchangeability of !Khwa and /Kaggen**

So, in !Khwa's sphere, we have the menarcheal maiden, linked to New Moon, who rouses too great powers of wetness, causing dead skin to change back into animals. In the /Kaggen creation stories, we have dead skin in the form of a shoe, made wet, 'dirty' and/or cold, and transformed either into the game, or into the New Moon. Two more stories suggest that the roles of /Kaggen as protector of the game and !Khwa as jealous 'guardian' of the menarcheal maiden were fundamentally interchangeable. Only one narrative features !Khwa unconnected with menstrual violations, when the Rain takes the form of an eland (the myth is quoted by Lewis-Williams 1981: 106). The eland is hunted and shot by 'people of the early race'; they follow the Rain's spoor, until they find it lying down. They try to cut up the meat to roast it, but it just vanishes on the fire. At last, the men decide this is 'an eland whose meat we do not eat' and start to go. But the 'Rain's navel' shuts them into their hut. They suffer the customary punishment of being transformed into frogs. !Khwa's wetness, if it does not revive the eland, at least defies the cooking fire. The specific violation in this story is unclear, but it could concern offence against normal rules of distribution: the men sit down to roast the eland on the spot, and do not return with it to camp. To parallel this myth, one story of /Kaggen

concerns violation of menstrual seclusion (cited by Hewitt 1986: 189-90). /Kaggen 'dreams' that the /Kain /kai:n bird (which has a bright red bill) is attacking girls in their puberty huts, by stabbing them and smelling the blood from their 'noses'. /Kaggen warns the mother of one girl to give her daughter a knife, and to tell her not 'to play' with the /Kain /kai:n. The girl succeeds in stabbing and killing her attacker. In this myth, structural inversion is apparent. The general /Xam prohibition for menstrual girls was not 'to play' with young men, in case of contact with menstrual blood. So the /Kain /kai:n seems to be infringing taboos on contact as if a potential sex partner. Yet, it smells out menstrual blood in the manner of !Khwa, who generally enforces such taboos (and must be classed an avoidance relative).

#### **Gender ambivalence of /Kaggen, the 'Mantis'**

The narrator of the /Kain /kai:n tale stressed at the end that, though /Kaggen often deceived, 'he had spoken the truth this time'. As protector of the game, /Kaggen cheats and teases hunters; as protector of menstrual girls, he tells the truth. In both cases, he acts to uphold 'ritual respect', either respect observances of the game, or of the menarcheal girl. In mythological character, /Kaggen is generally a classic trickster, cheating, anti-social, greedy, aggressive, but cowardly and weak, using tricks to get the better of those bigger and stronger than he is. He is also gender ambivalent (Hewitt 1986: 153-4): he carries a weighted digging stick, decidedly a female implement; he 'made everything with his left hand', this being female in San conception. He has special knowledge of what goes on in puberty huts; and he is

identifiable as ‘the chaser of game’ who makes tame game wild – comparing in this respect to a menstrual girl. His creations include the gender anomalous Eland and the gender mutable Moon. His namesake and manifestation, the Mantis, may, as Hewitt points out (1986: 154), be a signifier of reversal of sex characteristics. As the eland bull is a fat herbivore, strangely female in its fatness, so the female praying mantis is much larger than the male, and devours its mate – so, it is a voracious, female carnivore!

### **Haitsi-Aibib’s initiatory powers of death and rebirth**

The mythical battles between Nama trickster Haitsi-aibib and Gâ-gorib have been interpreted in terms of the ‘recurrent cycle of the phases of the Moon’ (P. W. Schmidt 1933, cited by Schmidt 1986: 210). Haitsi has a distinctively lunar character. The most famous ritual landmarks of Namibia were the so-called ‘graves’ of Haitsi-aibib, really no more than stone cairns, but supposed to be marking the spots where he died and was reborn (Hahn 1881: 56). Nama passers-by would place some offering of a stone or stick on the ‘grave’, and women might use red ochre. The prayers that would be addressed often sought luck in the hunt, food, or cattle (Schmidt 1986: 229), which compare to the prayers for the New Moon. Among the Dama in particular, Heiseb was believed to have power over game and over rain (1986: 234-6).

The myth cited by Hahn of Haitsi’s ‘death’ is revealing (1881: 56-7). Haitsi eats too many ripe wild grapes or raisins, and is taken ill. Before he ‘dies’, Haitsi bids his

wife and son bury him under soft stone, and tells them not to eat the fruit, or they will be 'infected'. They bury him, but as they leave the place behind, they keep hearing rumbustious noises of singing and raisin-eating. The words go 'I, father of !Urisib,/Father of this unclean one,/I who had to eat these raisins and died/and dying live'. The reference to the son as 'this unclean one' makes clear that the tale, nowadays recited as a comedy, derives from a myth of male initiation. Among the Nama, a boy would remain with his mother and other women until initiated, taking his place with the men. In the story, the 'old man', as an initiate, separates himself from the 'unclean' wife and boy by 'dying'. He achieves his initiatory death and rebirth through eating the raisins (which make him ill and incontinent). He warns the uninitiated not to eat them.

Heiseb or Haitisi has several classic trickster characteristics. He commits incest on his mother, a story which Hahn thought referred to Haitisi as the Moon growing big and small (1881: 135-6). He offers his own intestines as the product of the hunt – a typical Bushman trickster motif (Schmidt 1986: 214). Like an initiate, he always wears a cap to shield him from the Sun, because angry bees have torn off the top of his head, since he stole their honey (1986: 218). All told, these myths reveal Haitisi as lunar, incestuous, raw or bloody, and craving the dark.

He also goes in for sex changes. In a comic, but structurally significant story, he acts up as a beautiful young woman, to get meat out of an avaricious man (Schmidt 1986: 215). He carries a gourd, filled with water and wrapped up like a baby. In

bed at night, whenever the 'scrooge' tries to have sex, the 'young woman' frustrates every attempt by spilling some water and shrieking 'the child pisses!'. In a Hai//om story (catalogued by Schmidt 1989, tale 290), Haiseb courts 'the girl who has rejected all suitors' (i.e. during menstruation); he sports horns of a wild ox (he is a rain animal, compare the /Xam Rain Bull carrying off the menstrual woman). The maiden agrees to marry him, but when her little sister goes to the wedding hut to make a fire, Haiseb appears in the form of an ugly old woman. This 'wedding hut' seems more like a puberty hut, and the 'marriage' rather a relation of blood kinship.

A Cape Khoekhoe tale of Heitsi Kabib places him in the role of cosmic creator. He throws ashes onto the tail of his dog to burn it off; the ashes become the Milky Way. This is matched by a couple of /Xam stories of the creation of the Milky Way (Schmidt 1989, tales 54, 55, 57). In one, the 'first' girl, hungry and angry at the time of her first menstruation, throws up ashes to make the stars. In the other, it is again /Kaggen's shoes which become the Milky Way. They are made wet by the Moon's 'dew', placed by /Kaggen's daughter close to the Sun's fire to dry. The Sun is angry at these 'dirty' shoes and burns them to cinders. The girl throws the ashes into the sky. In this Cape Khoekhoe and southern Bushman material, we have explicit parallels of Heitsi burning the dog's tail; the first female initiate in seclusion; and /Kaggen's daughter and the 'dirty shoes'.

### **Conclusion**

Gender ambivalent and lunar periodic tricksters, it seems, can perform the same

functions as menarcheal maidens. !Khwa and /Kaggen themselves, prime representatives of the typical Khoisan sky god/trickster creator pairing, are identifiable at the level of myth. Fundamentally, they appear to enforce a principle of cyclic alternation between states of taboo – non-availability of flesh for consumption, whether female or animal – and relaxation of taboos, making flesh available for consumption. In a Ju’/hoan trickster tale discussed by Biesele, this cyclical logic is expressed through transformation of the trickster’s wife from being ugly and thin, when she is rejected by her husband, to becoming beautiful and fat, when he is so violently attracted that he rapes her (Biesele 1993: 171ff.). Her recovery is only thanks to her son who surreptitiously feeds her pieces of eland fat that his greedy trickster father failed to supply. Biesele comments on this tale:-

‘That [women] ‘like meat’..is not just taken for a whim, to be gratified or not as males choose, but as a biological and social fact with which men must creditably reckon. If they do not, they risk the censure, not only of women but of other males, in particular of males in their wives’ families of birth...

In the last episode of the trick series, it is clear that Kaoxa even risks the murderous fury of his own son by withholding meat – but taking sex – from the boy’s mother. Ultimately he is unseated and nearly replaced by this son as his wife’s sexual partner, just because he has failed to heed the elementary social stipulation that ‘women like meat’.’ (1993: 184-5).

*Table 1* summarises the ideal structures of Khoisan initiation. Sex-strike theory posits

a strategy by female coalitions, backed by male kin, of periodically refusing sex to male partners who fail to bring home meat. The main predictions of the theory, that menstrual taboos will be linked closely to ‘wrong species, wrong sex’ signalling, and placed within a lunar-governed ritual framework, with waxing moon construed as the ritually potent phase, appear to match the Khoisan data with precision.

*Table 1 Syntax of Khoisan initiation*

<b>waxing moon (male)</b>	<b>waning moon (female)</b>
ritual time	ordinary time
hunger of initiate	food taboos relaxed
fattening of eland bull	consumption of eland
flesh raw, bloody	flesh cooked
male rain	female rain
lightning, medicine fire	cooking fire
death	life
menarche/sexual taboo	sexual availability
women naked/‘male’/‘animal’/unavailable	women modest, available
eland bull is female initiate	woman is meat, wife
female initiate is hunter	woman is gatherer
male initiate is wounded prey	husbands feast on meat
kinship/avoidance relations	marital/joking relations.



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FIGURE 1 *Fulton's Rock, Drakensberg, Natal.*

(Lewis-Williams 1981: 42).