

# **!Khwa and Menstruation in Narratives of the /Xam Bushmen**

Belinda Jeursen

The narratives referred to in this paper have been selected from the collection of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd according to specific criteria. Firstly, they are stories involving the people of the Early Race, whom the /Xam referred to as the '!Xwe!na-sshok'e' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:73), and secondly, they describe conflict between an individual, usually a young woman, and traditional customs or rituals. They are distinguished from other narratives which appear in the Bleek and Lloyd collections because they all deal with gender issues. This does not exclude comparison with the other narratives in terms of characteristics of form.

All the /Xam stories and accounts recorded in the Bleek and Lloyd collection share the function of education in belief and survival. In addition, they all function as a form of entertainment and communication. The present selection focuses on the study of the educative qualities concerning the puberty rites of young girls. These served as a reinforcement of the tradition and custom of gender-based rites, with emphasis on appropriate behaviour. Above all, the narratives are warnings against disobeying the observances propagated in the stories. Ignorance or disobedience of the traditional structures leads to punishment, either by a supernatural force operating via the elements, or by means of inter-personal violence. The importance of keeping to custom to avoid dramatic, or even tragic, consequences is emphasised; conflict arises when there is defiance of traditional roles, or ignorance of customary 'laws'.

I propose that through the use of extended metaphors the stories give mythological accounts of customs concerned with menstruation. There is no evidence indicating whether or not these were strictly adhered to in reality. Tension is skillfully built up, created by the temptation to ignore custom in

the face of discomfort, and show both the rewards for those who choose to obey, and the punishment meted out to those who choose to ignore the rules. The stories were probably used to persuade unwilling participants to adhere to tradition. These rituals were, according to Bleek and Lloyd's /Xam informants, very much a part of everyday /Xam life, as were other rituals, such as rainmaking and trance healing by shamans. With reference to the gap between rule and practice, Roger Hewitt in his study *Structure, Meaning and Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San* (1986), distinguishes between beliefs acted upon and beliefs used to make sense of the world. More importantly, he states that: 'Whatever the status in belief of these narratives, their intention is at least clear' (Hewitt 1986:88).

It is important to recognize that within these stories, opposition in a ritual context does not occur between individuals, but between an individual and gender-biased traditions. Always strongly associated with /Xam traditions are two male supernatural entities, /Kaggen and !Khwa, who enforce tradition by means of trickery or punishment respectively.

Male characters in the /Xam stories are generally not punished for disobeying ritual laws; they are merely thwarted in their hunting. The punishment meted out to women who disobey includes their families and is often harsh. Responsibility weighs heavily on female characters to not only accept and obey the observances set out for them, but to do everything in their power to prevent the wrath of the supernatural being !Khwa from descending on them and their families. As will be illustrated, this requires discipline as well as wisdom.

Because the focus falls on women, and particularly menstruating women, the supernatural being !Khwa is a central figure in my analysis of the narratives. /Kaggen, the Mantis, who is a trickster figure, is referred to mostly in connection with hunting observances in /Xam narratives.

The characters in these myths belong to the time period in the Bushmen mythology when all creatures were people.

The First Bushmen were those who first inhabited the earth ... When the first Bushmen had passed away, the Flat Bushmen inhabited their ground. Therefore, the Flat Bushmen taught their children about the stories of the First Bushmen (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:57).

The First Bushmen are referred to as the people of the Early Race, meaning those beings who were once people, before becoming the animals and heavenly bodies we are now familiar with.

The Sun had been a man, he talked, they all talked, also the other one, the Moon. Therefore, they used to live upon the earth; while they felt that they spoke. They do not talk, now that they live in the sky' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:57).

Barnard (1992:83) distinguished between the first and second creations:

After the first creation, the original animals and humans were undifferentiated by species and lacking in their defining attributes (in the case of animals) or customs (in the case of humans). In myths of this type, the characters represented by animal species can just as well be taken as human. The second creation entailed a transformation, whereby animals and humans acquired their salient characteristics.

//Kabbo, one of the informants who worked with Bleek and Lloyd (1911:73) in compiling the narratives, said that: 'These people are said to have been stupid, and not to have understood things well'. It is their stupidity which results in their transformation into animal form. No clear distinction is made between those who remained people and those who became animals, unless they became frogs, as some do. The story of the Leopard Tortoise, which I discuss in this paper, is one example of the intermingling of human and animal traits. The narratives are, on the whole, a fascinating hybrid of fact and fiction, ritual and fantasy, filled with the magical transfiguration and transmutation of human beings, as well as the transformation of inanimate objects. Unusual events are prevalent and the supernatural being !Khwa slips in and out of the narratives with startling ability. Social boundaries and categories are upset, however,

these inversions, ambiguities, transgressions and hallucinations generally survive only until the end of the story where the accepted moral order is unequivocally reinstated (Hofmeyr 1993:36).

!Khwa, whose name means rain or water, there being only one /Xam word for both, (Woodhouse 1992:84), was one of two supernatural beings prevalent in the /Xam oral tradition, and apparently in the everyday life of these people. He is portrayed as a highly powerful male figure, predominantly destructive in his actions. He was associated primarily with rain or water, and lightning, and could take on various forms, which were usually water-orientated. !Khwa never appears in human form in the narratives, which serves to establish a distance between him as a supernatural figure and the human beings whom he punishes. Roger Hewitt emphasises that his presence is consequential on the action of others, that is, he appears only when there has been some transgression of menstrual observances (Hewitt 1986:60). He is also attracted by the scent of menstruating women, which required further ritual involving buchu and animal horns<sup>1</sup>. These rituals are elaborated on in 'A Woman of the Early Race and the Rain Bull' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:193), discussed in this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Buchu, or *Agathosma betulina*, is a shrub of the rue family, found in South Africa. Its leaves, powdered and dried, yield a diuretic drug.

Besides rain, water and lightning, !Khwa was identified with reptiles, especially snakes and frogs. Young girls did not eat snakes, and frogs were widely avoided as they were believed to have once been young girls. This belief originates in some of the stories considered in this chapter, where young women are changed into frogs for failing to comply with menstrual rites.

In a footnote to 'The Girl of the Early Race Who Made Stars' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:77), //Kabbo explained the puberty rites of young girls. He said that when a girl had 'grown', she was put, by her mother, into a tiny hut with a small door, which was closed behind her. If the girl left the hut, which she was only allowed to do for the purposes of defecation, she had to keep her eyes cast down to the ground until she returned. She did not walk far from her hut at this time. When she became a 'big girl', she was only allowed, on the occasion of her first exit from the hut, 'to look afar over her mother's hand'. //Kabbo also warned that during her time in the hut, the girl was not supposed to look at the springbok, in case they became wild.

The hut itself was built by the girl's mother and was isolated from the other huts. It was only big enough for the girl to lie prone. The confinement of the girl lasted until the next new moon, during which time she had to observe certain eating practices. (In 'The Girl of the Early Race Who Made Stars', instruction is given towards the end of the narrative on the eating of meat.) Furthermore, the girl was subjected to rationed food and water, being given only small portions of each. The 'xoakengu', or 'mothers', (elderly female relatives of the girl's mother), helped her mother to gather the selected roots the girl was allowed to eat. They helped to ensure that the girl observed the rules they had taught her through stories. The restriction of water, according to Lewis-Williams, was to show respect to !Khwa, so that her people's waterhole did not dry up (Lewis-Williams 1981:50).

Upon her emergence from the hut, Hewitt (1986:281) says:

She had to treat all the members of her household with buchu and give the women of the band red haematite with which they were to paint their cheeks and decorate their karosses. She was also expected to paint haematite stripes 'like a zebra' on the young men of the band to protect them from lightning caused by !Khwa ... Apart from the treatment of members of the band, the water source in current use also had to be thoroughly sprinkled with powdered haematite to appease !Khwa who, it was believed, might cause the pool to dry up completely.

In their anthropological study of menstruation, *Blood Magic*, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988:3) point out that:

The symbolic potency so often attributed to menstrual blood and the exotic-seeming stringency of rules for the conduct of menstruating women have

placed menstruation in the foreground of anthropological studies of 'taboo' ... Menstrual taboos have been seen by turn as evidence of primitive irrationality and of the supposed universal dominance of men over women in society.

They go on to say that ethnographers have so often reported menstrual blood and menstruating women as 'dangerous' or 'contaminant' in societies which wish to oppress women that their findings have become truisms (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988:6). It is essential to note, however, that not all taboos surrounding menstruation are aimed at the women themselves; in many societies the behaviour of surrounding people is restricted:

Some taboos restrict the behaviour of menstruating women themselves, whereas others restrict the behaviour of other people in relation to such women. The threats that are culturally attributed to menstruation must likewise be analytically separated. We need to ask ... if a taboo is violated, will the menstruating woman harm someone else or herself (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988:10)?

In /Xam society, as depicted in the recorded narratives, menstruating women were simultaneously a positive and negative source of energy. They were potentially creative as well as destructive, and were therefore 'dangerous' to themselves and others. Narratives in this paper are categorised according to these distinctions.

The power of women during menstruation was both confined and enhanced. The isolation of women can be likened to the isolation of the hunter who had shot an animal; the individuals concerned were treated with great respect. Their isolation did not indicate inferior status. Neither were women restricted from handling men's hunting equipment because they were deemed inferior; men were discouraged from contact with menstrual blood, as it was regarded as extremely potent, thus some rites enhanced the power of women and the hunter.

## **Women Who Endanger Themselves and Others**

'The Girl's Story; the Frog's Story' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:198-205) told by Kweiten-ta-ken, who heard it from her mother #Kamme-an, is a narrative in which a girl does not obey menstrual observances.

A girl lay 'ill' in her hut, not eating the food her mothers gave her. Instead she killed and ate the 'children of the water' (there is no clear explanation of the 'children of the water'). The women went out to look for Bushman rice (ant's eggs); they instructed a child to stay at home and observe her elder sister to see what she was eating.

Again the girl went to the spring and killed a water-child, which she cooked and ate. The little girl observed her and told the mothers when they returned. They went out again seeking food, without saying anything to the girl. The clouds came up and her mother said, 'Something is not right at home; for a whirlwind is bringing (things) to the spring' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:201).

The girl was the first to be taken to the spring, where she became a frog; afterwards, the *xoakengu* and her father also became frogs. All the family's possessions were taken to the spring and became again what they originally were; so their mats again became the reeds from which they had been made.

The account examines the repercussions of disobeying menstrual observances: the girl does not stay in her hut, secluded, as she should; she does not eat the food her mothers give her, and she kills the 'water's children'. The 'water's children' may be fish, frogs or tortoises, but there is no definitive information on this, either from the informants themselves or other researchers. The events have disastrous consequences. Everything associated with the girl is affected by her behaviour; when she breaks the isolation rule, she has extreme potential to do harm which involves not only herself but others too.

The girl causes her family to be turned into frogs, rather than saving them, as the young woman in 'A Woman of the Early Race and the Rainbull' does. Not only the individual is punished; she brings about metamorphosis from human form into animal form onto her entire family. This reflects the importance of the puberty rites as an event for the entire community. The transformation of the family into frogs once again connects menstrual observances directly with the water, and therefore *!Khwa*. The transformation of their mats back to reeds in the spring (reducing manufactured objects back into their natural substances) is a common phenomenon in the ritual accounts where supernatural powers are shown to be operative. The removal to the spring of the family and their possessions illustrates the role of *!Khwa* or water in */Xam* imagination, having retributive qualities at the transgression of menstrual taboos.

One is led to ask why the girl's mother did not speak to her daughter when she was told that the water's children were being killed and eaten. Immediately she sees the whirlwind she knows that something is wrong. She is thus also at fault, with her neglect serving in the narrative to emphasise the duty of parents to instruct their children. This is a strong and recurrent theme throughout the stories analysed in this study.

'The Story of the Leopard Tortoise' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:38-41), told by Kweiten-ta-ken, who heard it from her mother, #Kamme-an, also pertains to instruction by parents and 'xoakengu', but the subtext addresses sexual

taboos in conjunction with puberty rites<sup>2</sup>.

A girl lay 'ill' while her people had gone hunting. She saw a man approaching her secluded hut. She asked him to rub her neck as it was aching. The man obliged and she immediately withdrew her head, taking in his hands and causing them to decay, leaving only the bones.

Another man approached, upon which the first man hid his hands behind his back and suggested the newcomer also rub the girl's neck. When the girl withdrew her neck, the man attempted to get free by dashing the girl, referred to now as the Leopard Tortoise, on the ground 'that he should ... break the Leopard Tortoise' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:39). At this point, the first man revealed his own hands and said, 'Feel (thou) that which I did also feel!' and then returned home, leaving the second man with his hands still caught. When his people asked him where he had been, the man showed them his hands and told them the story. They asked,

Art thou a fool? Did not (thy) parents instruct thee? The Leopard Tortoise always seems as if it would die, while she is deceiving us (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:38-41).

Menstrual observances, and the dire consequences of not heeding them, appear as a subtle subtext in this story. The men approach the girl's hut while she is in seclusion. Physical contact takes place between the isolated female character and the men, with the result that their hands are eaten away. (The Leopard Tortoise and the girl are a single entity.) It is an unusual account, as the men are punished rather than the girl, although she is harmed by the second victim, who dashes her on the ground.

Hewitt (1986:282) notes that after a girl's confinement in the hut, and up until her marriage,

Certain foods continued to be forbidden to her. These included certain kinds of veldkos as well as reptiles such as the cobra, the puffadder, the tortoise and the water tortoise ... while she was allowed to gather tortoise for others she could not touch one with her hands but had to put any that she found into her bag with the use of a stick and this probably applied to any of the other creatures believed to be put aside as !Khwa's meat.

The tortoise is therefore closely associated with !Khwa, identifying the narrative of the Leopard Tortoise as one dealing with menstrual formalities.

The first 'victim' deliberately tells the second man to rub the girl's neck, knowing the consequences, rather than cautioning him, so a tension is set up between the two men, rather than a grouping together against the girl, suggesting sexual rivalry. Thus there are two distinct incidents of deceit in

---

<sup>2</sup> The Leopard Tortoise, or *Testudo pardalis*, is a large spotted African land tortoise.

the narrative, firstly by the Leopard Tortoise (or girl), pretending that her neck aches and so trapping her first 'victim', and secondly by the first man, encouraging the newcomer to approach the girl. The two men respond differently to the situation however, with the first man wanting to see someone else suffer as he did, and the second attempting to kill the Leopard Tortoise. It seems as if the Leopard Tortoise is teaching the men a harsh lesson against breaking a taboo. The title of the story refers to the Leopard Tortoise, and by inference to a girl, which places her at the centre of events. The interchange in references from animal to human, (in this story from Leopard Tortoise to girl), is common in the stories of the people of the Early Race, as these narratives are set in the time before some of the people became animals. The stories illustrate the animal characteristics of these people, and are therefore explanations of the origins of particular animals.

There is emphasis on the duty of parents to instruct their children. The first man is asked by his people if his parents did not instruct him about the Leopard Tortoise, namely about puberty rites and menstrual taboos. This is reminiscent of the duty of the 'xoakengu' (the mothers) of the group to instruct the young girls.

Moreover, the narrative has sexual implications. The context of the events is important; puberty rites indicate the entrance of the girl into womanhood, with marriage, and thus sexual relations, allowed after the first menstruation. The tortoise is physically evocative of both male and female sexual organs, with the neck and head being phallic and the withdrawn head and neck suggesting the containment of the female genitals, while the trapping of the hands may be a metaphor for the sexual act itself. The narrative seems then to also be a warning against illicit sexual relations. It depicts great harm coming to men who disobey menstrual observances; the fate of the Leopard Tortoise remains unknown, although it is obvious that her second victim intends to do anything he can to escape from her, including breaking her.

## **Women Who Harm Others**

Among the vast amounts of narrative recorded by Bleek and Lloyd but unpublished, are two stories which take a somewhat different route. They depict people being transformed into stars and trees by menstruating girls, who do not seem to suffer themselves. The first story, 'Corona Australis', was told by //Kabbo, who heard it from his mother, who had heard it from her mother (Bleek and Lloyd Collection, unpublished L II:3333-3343). The title refers to the stars into which the people are transformed.



A girl saw a group of people eating a rock-rabbit. She looked at them and they and the house in which they were seated became transfixed, that is, frozen into position. (The girl is referred to as a 'new girl', that is, a girl who is undergoing her first menstruation.) She walked among the people and they and the house became stars, known as Corona Australis (Bleek & Lloyd Collection, unpublished L II:3333).

The story includes a diagram illustrating the position of the people as they sat around the fire with the pot of food on it. The semi-circle position of the people is that of the stars into which they were transformed, as seen from the earth. (Corona Australis is said here to be opposite Sagittarius.)

In the second story, (Bleek and Lloyd Collection, unpublished L II:295-305), a menstruating girl looks at men and transfixes them, upon which they become trees which have the ability to talk. The first man was climbing a mountain, playing the goura, when a girl looked at him and transfixed him. The narrative goes into some detail concerning the way in which the man was transformed: 'his legs are those of a man, he is a tree, his arms are those of a man, he is tree, he holds the goura with his mouth, he is a tree' (Bleek & Lloyd Collection, unpublished L II:297). Although he seems to be a man, he has been transformed into a tree and cannot move. The narrative continues to describe the transfixing of a number of other men in much the same way. Unfortunately, there do not seem to be details regarding the narrator of the story, nor the date.

These are examples of narratives where a girl brings harm to others without harming herself. The narratives focus on the effects of the girls on others, rather than on the girls themselves. In the first story, the 'victims' are referred to as people, not men or women, while in the second story it is particularly men who are changed into talking trees. The processes of transformation and the events leading up to the transformation are narrated in minute detail, repeated numerous times with only slight changes in the wording.

The function of these narratives differs from that of the others in that it instructs people in the dangers of being looked upon by a menstruating girl. In these cases, the activities of others are imposed upon by a girl who has obviously left her isolation hut. Although there is no instruction to counteract the given events, the story functions as a warning to people in the group, who form the locus for transformation.

## The Wise Woman as Saviour

Another narrative which has menstrual observances as its basis, yet which stands in contrast to the stories where young girls cause harm, is 'A Woman

of the Early Race and the Rain Bull' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:193-199), told by /Han#kasso, who heard it from his mother, Xabbi-an.

A young woman lay 'ill' in her hut. The Rain smelled her and came seeking her through the mist. The woman, lying with her child, smelled the Rain in turn, as it trotted up to her hut in the form of a Rain Bull, lowering its tail. He resembled a bull although 'he felt that (he) was the Rain's body' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:193). The young woman asked, 'Who can this man be who comes to me?'. She threw buchu on his forehead and pushed him away, putting on her kaross. She put aside her child 'for her husband; while she felt that she was not going to live ... she would go to become a frog' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:195). She mounted the Rain Bull and told him to take her to a certain tree and set her down there 'for I ache'. She then rubbed his neck with buchu which caused him to fall asleep, upon which she quickly returned home. The Rain Bull awakened and, not knowing the woman was no longer with him, walked to the middle of the spring from which he had come. The young woman, meanwhile, burnt buchu to take the smell of the rain away. The old women burnt horns so that the rain should not be angry. Footnote: '(The young woman's) intelligence was that with which she acted wisely towards the Rain; hence all the people lived; they would (otherwise) have been killed; all (of them) would have become frogs' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:193-199).

Once again, the narrative is linked directly to menstrual observances and has an educative as well as an entertainment purpose. The woman in the story is of the Early Race, so she is essentially setting an example for future women. The story is an extended warning, illustrating the dangers presented by !Khwa, and thus the powers of women, both during and directly after menstruation. The uses of buchu and the burning of horns are illustrated. In this case, the woman uses her intelligence to the advantage of her people.

Instead of viewing her actions as merely preventative, I suggest that she has influence over !Khwa in this instance. She is not breaking any rules when he seeks her out; rather, by observing the rules and heeding her mothers' advice to use buchu, she saves the entire group from being turned into frogs. She uses customs to her advantage. Hence the narrative is not only a way of teaching people about observances, but also an acknowledgement of women's power and the potential to use it wisely. However, as I pointed out earlier, women in these narratives generally have the ability to save or destroy, therefore their power is not autonomous and they are limited to specific actions. (The last story discussed in this chapter gives an example of a girl who neither destroys nor saves, but creates; however, it is the only example of its kind to my knowledge.)

The focus of /Xam narratives was on characteristics such as bravery and independence, rather than on individual heroes. The woman in this story

is not referred to by her name; neither are any other mythological characters. It is only in the animal narratives that particular animals are attributed with particular characteristics, and known for these. These characteristics are not necessarily heroic, however.

The story of the woman and the Rain is sensual and suggestive, with an emphasis on the olfactory senses, those of the Rain, the woman, the buchu and the burning horns. She uses buchu to make the Rain Bull sleep, that is, to dissipate his strength, and to disguise her scent once she has escaped. She then uses it to get rid of the smell of the Rain, and the older women burn horns to appease the Rain Bull<sup>3</sup>. Her power lies in observing the rules and making use of the advice her mothers have given her.

The Rain and the woman are associated by their scent, and can easily smell each other. There is a distinct link here between Rain, or !Khwa, and menstruating women. Both are powerful and have the ability to be creative or destructive. Water is central to the narrative; if the woman had not acted wisely her entire family would have been thrown into the spring and turned into frogs, which live in the water. Water is thus both a positive and a negative element; it could be both beneficial and used to punish, as it may have been if the woman had not used her intelligence.

Although the Rainbull is a common figure in the Bushmen mythology, it is particularly powerful as an image in the narratives concerning puberty rites. The bull in this narrative 'courts' the young woman, she 'mounts' the bull, and she rubs its neck with pleasant-smelling buchu. These images are highly evocative of courtship rituals. Her reference to the Rain Bull as a man at the beginning of the narrative places the events firmly in the context of human interaction. Her status as a menstruating woman, with a child, distinguishes her as fertile. Sensuality, sexuality and fertility are intimately bound up in the ritual narratives about young women. Rain is central to the creation of new life in nature and to survival, as is procreation and thus the continuation of human life.

The link between water and punishment or death is not only present in the stories, but also in /Xam accounts of death. Bert Woodhouse (1992:89) quotes the informant Han/Kasso as saying,

---

<sup>3</sup> Between the time a girl emerges from her hut and her marriage, cooking for her parents is regarded as a dangerous activity. The food had to be sprinkled with buchu so that it would have the scent of the plant. Not doing so allegedly incurred the wrath of !Khwa. When looking after children, the girl also rubbed them with buchu to avert the danger to the child if her perspiration rubbed off onto the child. Hewitt (1986:282) observes that these practices probably only applied when the girl was menstruating. The use of buchu was widespread during this time, for example, if a young woman played games with a young man during her menstrual period she first rubbed him with buchu to protect him from danger.

Dead people who come out of the ground are those of whom my parents used to say, that they rode the rain, because the thongs with which they held it were like the horse's reins, they bound the rain. Thus they rode the rain because they owned it.

Other references are made linking death and the rain; a person's hair is said to look like clouds when they die. This is given as an explanation for the formation of clouds. The trance experience is described as a feeling of being underwater by some, while others refer to it as being 'dead'. The connection between death or punishment, and rain or water is thus firmly established in the mythology and ritual practices of the /Xam. Girls with whom the rain is angry are taken to the water and turned into frogs, often with their entire family; or, according to another account, they are turned into flowers which grow in the water (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:395). A footnote says that young girls were told that they would become water flowers if they did not fear the Rain. Kweiten-ta-ken's grandmother told her daughter this, who then told Kweiten-ta-ken. The account also says that people who did not know that the flowers were once girls could not understand why they disappear under the water when one goes to pick them. Therefore, people should not go to pick them, as the Rain may take those people away.

Furthermore, unmarried young women, said Kweiten-ta-ken, are not encouraged to walk about in the Rain in case lightning kills them. The lightning smells the scent of the woman and strikes in that place. If a woman was walking through the Rain and she saw the lightning, she was supposed to quickly go to that place and look. Her shining eyes could turn back the 'thunderbolts', that is, lightning striking the ground<sup>4</sup>. It would then pass quickly because it respected the eyes shining on it, and would not kill people. Here again, the power of women in relation to rain, water and lightning is illustrated. Women can also turn a man into a star or a tree after transfixing him, as illustrated in the two narratives discussed earlier. Conversely, they can protect men from lightning, by painting them with haematite when they emerge from their hut. When it rained, young girls sat in their huts with one of the 'xoakengu', waiting for the rain to pass. The xoakengu probably told stories to the girls of the consequences of not observing menstrual rituals. The girl was referred to as '!Kwi/a//ka:n', which means 'new maiden' in Bleek's translation. 'New rain' is that which has just fallen, and is deemed extremely potent (Lewis-Williams 1981:50). A girl approaching such water sprinkles buchu on it. The connection between

---

<sup>4</sup> The snapping of a girl's fingers at someone during her confinement was regarded as extremely dangerous; it was identified with the 'rainbolts' spoken of here. These 'rainbolts', according to Hewitt, (1986:284) 'were black pebbles found on the ground and believed to be thrown by !Khwā in his anger'.

women and water is thus a strong one, and necessitates great care be taken.

Rain played a central role in the lives of the /Xam; because the /Xam were hunter-gatherers, their survival depended on it. Its recurrent appearance in their mythology is therefore hardly surprising. The /Xam distinguished between male and female rain, male rain being a hard, destructive rain, and female rain being a gentle, soaking rain. In *The Rain and its Creatures*, Bert Woodhouse (1992:19) explains that female rain is depicted in rock paintings being 'squirted from the teats of a multi-breasted 'she-rain' animal'. He also speaks of rain snakes:

The Bushmen recognised a close association between some snakes and water, e.g. the puffadder whose green and yellow colours were compared with those of the rainbow (Barnard 1992:11).

Snakes in mythology have long been associated with temptation, and persist as phallic symbols. Also apparent in the rock art of the Bushmen are rain animals, rain elephants, rain birds, rain lions, and the rain bulls which appear as !Khwa in disguise.

## The Creative Woman

The following narrative is unusual in that it depicts a girl who does not fail to observe menstrual rites but is clearly dissatisfied with her confinement and food deprivation. Out of her anger comes creativity however, rather than the usual punishment. 'The Girl Who Made Stars' was related by //Kabbo, and he says in a footnote that,

This girl is said to have been one of the people of the Early Race and the "first" girl; and to have acted ill. She was finally shot by her husband. These people are said to have been stupid, and not to have understood things well (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:73-79).

In the first part of the narrative, the girl creates the Milky Way by throwing wood ashes up into the sky, but it is the second part of the story which is relevant here. The girl lay 'ill' in her hut: 'She was angry with her mother because her mother had not given her many !huin roots, that she might eat abundantly; for she was in the hut'; that is, she was secluded in accordance with menstrual observances. The narrative states specifically at this point that the girl did not go out to get food for herself, for this was the duty of the 'xoakengu', and forbidden to the girl. In her anger, she threw up the '!huin' roots into the sky in order that they might become stars; the old roots became red stars, while the young roots became white stars.

The narrative goes on to explain that she did not eat young men's game because it would lead to their bows and arrows becoming 'cold', due to her saliva entering the meat and thus the bow. She only ate game killed by her father. She also 'treated her father's hands (with buchu) ... taking away her saliva (from them)' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:73-79).

These eating observances also extended to the 'xoakengu'; any animal killed by the girl's father for her to eat of was reserved for only the girl and the 'xoakengu', rather than being shared out amongst the other hunters. Hewitt (1986:280) says that some of the man's arrows 'were recognised as belonging to the girl'.

The narrative is an account aimed at instructing people, especially young girls, about puberty rites and the corresponding observances. It is concerned with the actual conditions of the girl's seclusion. A footnote to this narrative, related by //Kabbo, who heard it from his mother, explains these conditions in some detail. The narrative itself refers mostly to the seclusion in the hut and the rationing of food.

The footnote says that these people of the Early Race were very stupid, yet the girl performs a fantastical feat. Out of anger, a 'negative' state, comes tremendous power and creativity. The girl creates the Milky Way and then the stars, providing light for all, which is a highly positive action. The onset of menstruation signals the beginning of fertility and thus the ability to produce new life through procreation. The power a young girl had at this time could be creative or destructive. Thus the narrative is not merely a cautionary tale; rather, it indicates the belief in women's power during this time, their magical qualities and their courage. She is not punished in any way, as the young women in most of the other !Khoa orientated narratives are, even though she is not passively accepting the puberty ritual. However, the footnote records that she was later killed by her husband. No further information or explanation is given and we are not informed of the reason for her death. Her defiance in this story could point to defiance of her husband, resulting in her death. The last section of the narrative operates on a particularly educative level. The information is conveniently contained within the framework of the story, although it may simply have been an aside by //Kabbo.

Whether it is in relation to themselves or others, the power of women in a ritual context is well-communicated through these narratives. But their power is generally restricted to destruction or the counteraction of destruction. Menstrual rites create restrictions for both the young women concerned and the rest of the community. The stories obviously served as educative tools which reinforced particular customs and beliefs. These traditions were gender-specific and were warnings against breaking with tradition. The female characters are severely punished, and this punishment

is not limited to themselves but extends to the entire community. Hence the stories emphasise the responsibilities of young women at this time and depict the rites and regulations as a duty to be performed, because the community's well-being is at stake. The supernatural being !Khwa looms large over the events, an ominous figure acting as a catalyst for potential disaster, for which the young women are accountable.

The research carried out in connection with this paper is aimed at stimulating and facilitating discussion. It is thus not intended as a closed document which provides fixed answers and ends debate, but hopefully one which opens new areas for exchange, encouraging further research.

Department of English  
University of Natal (Durban)

### References

- Barnard, A 1992. *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa. A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bleek, W & LC Lloyd 1911. *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*. London: George Allen & Co.
- Buckley, T & A Gottlieb (eds) 1988. *Blood Magic*. London: University of California Press.
- Hewitt, RL 1986. *Structure, Meaning and Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.
- Lewis-Williams, D 1981. *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings*. London: Academic Press.
- Woodhouse, B 1992. *The Rain and its Creatures as the Bushmen Painted Them*. Cape Town: William Waterman.