

Economic Fables

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Structure, Meaning & Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San. By Roger Hewitt. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008, 254 pp. Second edition. First edition 1986. ISBN 978 186814 4709.

When the aura of primitive communities involves closeness to nature and egalitarianism it is time to reflect upon the source of this interpretation. What story is being told, and what socio-political moral is being drawn from the image of the /Xam garnered from the Bleek and Lloyd archive? What values are being naturalised in an interpretation that foregrounds sympathy as integral to the process of interpretation? What kind of community are author, reader and subject founding?

Roger Hewitt's groundbreaking study retells the fate of the successful /Xam hunter subjected to rites of isolation and avoidance. The belief was that the hunter could serve as a medium 'through which messages might be transmitted to the game. Sympathy was a force which had to be controlled by a careful ordering and limiting of the hunter's activities' (99). The trickster /Kaggen sets himself to exploit the sympathetic bond between hunter and eland, allowing the latter to escape the control of the hunters. On a number of levels, this parable touches upon the process of critically reading *Structure, Meaning & Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San*.

Hewitt's book is now part of the Khoisan Heritage Series edited by David Lewis-Williams. First published in 1986, and based on a doctoral thesis presented to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1976, this text is itself recovered by the post-apartheid interest in the San, and particularly the resource of the Bleek and Lloyd archive. This new edition of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San* is part of a genealogy that marks the rediscovery of an archival resource that had been consigned to dusty amnesia but is now the resource for reflection on the culture of a people subjected to a 'genocidal process' (2). Just as the Bleek and Lloyd archive is seen as foundational to the study of literature, in southern Africa and beyond, so too is Hewitt's text positioned as a core moment of research into an archive that he helped to recover from obscurity. As Pippa Skotnes states in the blurb to this edition, the book represents the first serious engagement with the archive of Bleek and Lloyd and is the inaugural scholarly introduction to it. Having thanked Pippa Skotnes, Hewitt in his introduction recalls that at the time of his initial research 'not only was the location or, indeed, the continued existence of Lucy Lloyd's /Xam transcriptions – the largest part of the collection – unknown, but the contents of Bleek's own note-

books also remained unexplored and the notebooks themselves barely catalogued' (1). Hewitt opened up the space of contemporary engagement with the Bleek and Lloyd archive.

This study is of interest because it covers material not included in Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1913), material partially published by Lucy Lloyd herself and Dorothea Bleek. Between 1936 and 1973 'they more or less disappeared from view' (3). Scholarly interest in the collection was rekindled from the 1980s onwards through the work of Janette Deacon and culminated in Skotnes's lavishly illustrated *Claim to the Country* (2007). These books testify to the canonical status of the /Xam folklore collected by Bleek and Lloyd, as well as by Dorothea Bleek (recently collected in Jeremy C. Hollmann, *Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushmen*, another title in the Khoisan Heritage Series). Indeed Hewitt's pioneering effort in tracking down and mapping the archive positions him as mediating benefactor to a generation of researchers. Now, thanks to Pippa Skotnes and her staff, the entire Bleek and Lloyd collection is available on the Web as well as on DVD. Apart from self-declared historical interest, then, what value might Hewitt's study have today? I would like to propose three initial areas of relevance.

Firstly, it provides an opportunity to reflect upon the ideological appropriation of the San.¹ Hewitt's book has been central to the literary-historical arm this enterprise. With the /Xam inscription of the South African national motto, and the prominence of the San on the coat-of-arms, it is time to ask to what degree this project has been successful, what anticipated and unexpected transmutations have arisen, and what forces have been confirmed or challenged in this process?

Secondly, Hewitt rejects the idea that sidereal narratives were a major part of the material collected by Bleek and Lloyd, that they represent evidence of astral worship, or even that they are examples of successful narratives (72). This is a challenge to Bleek's own valuation of these narratives and his attachment to a developmental schema that traces reason to its origins in personification. If Hewitt is correct, then Bleek's own project needs to be systematically analysed for further possible distortions, the reasons for such distortions uncovered, and awareness of the susceptibility of this material to manipulation carried over into a critical examination of recent representations of the San.²

Thirdly, knowledge of past debates can help to clarify current perspectives. The 'unabashed structuralism' (11) of the body of analysis is itself a relic of the 1970s. Not that structuralist modes of analysis have wholly vanished from the theoretical landscape; rather they have been assimilated into what is taken as critical common sense, forming part of a tradition of interpretation. Although, as Hewitt notes, 'the monological energy' (11) associated with structuralism's classificatory taxonomy has been tempered by a concern with the imperialism of rationalist constructivism, he still finds the results of this theoretical model persua-

1 See N. Masilela's consideration of Laurens van der Post, and the view of the San as the base and fundamental layer of our unified and multi-complex culture ('The White South African Writer in Our National Situation', *Matafu*, nos. 3/4 [1987]; available online at <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/general/essays/gordimer.htm> [20/6/09]); and the debate in *Critical Arts. A Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 1995.

2 See M. Wessels, 'Religion and the Interpretation of the /Xam Narratives', *Current Writing. Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 20(2), 2008, 44-65, for a critical consideration of David Lewis-Williams's interpretations.

sive: 'analysing the ways in which the organization of narrative materials (plots, themes, motifs, etc.), together with the values and norms expressed through them, was frequently influenced by conceptual templates traceable in other aspects of the culture, including belief and ritual' (9). The procedure is to analyse how narrative elements are 'elucidated within a very specific ethnographic context' '[b]y situating individual narratives within their narrative tradition, and that tradition within a cultural context extending from the material world to the conceptual frameworks evinced in custom and belief' (9-10). I propose to take up this last area of interest as a point of departure.

Structuralism here does not refer to the topography of structuralist poetics or narratology, although one can suspect that ethnographic or cultural context functions as the story or underlying structure to each plot. There is no interest in the nature of plot, theme, motif, and character; the historically sedimented concept of narrative, with all that it carries of temporality and causality, and the metaphysics implicit in names, subjects, and actions and attributes, are simply presumed. Plot is understood as a pattern of events in a temporal sequence and in terms of Propp's functions or fundamental components: 'In both structures the final functions tend to become an affirmation of social cohesion either through ceremonial inclusion or the expression of socially binding norms' (149).³ Rather than the comparative mythology of Lévi-Strauss, the functional anthropology of Evans-Pritchard, which stressed the centrality of language and symbolism to the task of seeing and understanding a people's thought by thinking in their symbols, is the methodological inspiration. The homeostatic social system and the overall goal of social integration guide interpretation.⁴ How, according to *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*, is this equilibrium maintained in the case of the /Xam?

/Xam society appears to have been relatively egalitarian: 'Except in times of warfare, the San had no leaders of any kind ... Membership was not based on descent traced exclusively through either the male or the female line ... There is no evidence that bride service existed' (17). A complex system of exchange and reciprocity assured the balance of society's resources and privileges. Honey, exclusively the province of men, is the 'property of the man who discovered it' and would be 'marked by a small pile of stones or other sign to make ownership explicit' (23). 'Trade was carried on both with other groups and with other races.' (25) The claim to property (rather than customary use rights) was acknowledged, and this internal economy was part of an inter-group and inter-racial exchange of goods for use and consumption.

Hewitt concludes that 'such fastidiousness in distribution may eliminate the development of economic elites'; 'The significance of sharing, therefore, is inevitably greater than it is in clearly stratified societies' (91); '/Xam, like all other San

3 See M. Wessels, 'Reading the Hartebeest: A Critical Appraisal of Roger Hewitt's Interpretation of the /Xam Narratives', *Research in African Literatures*, 40(2), 2009, 88-108, for a detailed discussion of Hewitt's analysis of the various narratives.

4 According to Robert Ulin, functional anthropology, informed by instrumental rationality, produced knowledge that was technically utilisable. It worked together with the goal of indirect rule as the application of Durkheimian sociology to the requirements of colonial administration (*Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Sociology* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2001, Second edition), 44-45). Hewitt remarks that /Xam narratives are less amenable to Lévi-Strauss's procedure of analysing myth by tracing binary oppositions; rather they are best interpreted as linked to a social institution, such as marriage (*Structure, Meaning & Ritual*, 81).

groups, are famous for their lack of social stratification' (125); 'thus the family is always seen to be equated with social values and knowledge, and in opposition to non-social behaviour' (140). There were material, practical reasons why imagination and moderation dominated the primal scene: '[T]he /Xam had a great amount of leisure time at their disposal'; 'the whole group were in more or less continual contact with each other, secrets were practically impossible and most grievances would be endlessly discussed by the members' (27). In such a 'highly verbal culture' (33) story-telling was apparently something which everyone could practise, a common possession, although stories were particularly aimed at instruction of the young. Lessons were drawn from them and explanations for customs and beliefs, but it is very rarely the case that a moral was drawn from a narrative by a narrator himself.

Story-telling appears to have been 'part of sociability' (36), a practical and symbolic topology, and the /Xam (like other San groups) were well known for their great capacity for imitation and an 'attunement to their environment which reached almost mythical proportions' (37). From news, where language functions on the basis of nomination, ostension and description, to narrative, which functions on the basis of plot, theme and motif, from testimony to story-telling, from personal experience to communal significance, from presentation to representation, from first to third person, from deictics to characters, from temporal present to story-time, from fragment to whole. What force or need drives this transformation? '[V]itality and imitative powers' (39) facilitate a 'social education that is continuous with the lives of people living together' (41). 'However, while individual human heroes are not celebrated, bravery, independent thinking and social responsibility often are' (50). The narratives stress the importance of 'communal safety' (53); 'the social message of these narratives is clear' (67). Does this mean that the function of narrative here is determined through and through by social utility, a demand that saturates the field of production and reception? Purely imaginative elements are also part of tradition and do not owe their survival purely to their place in the matrix of social value 'though this may often be an important factor' (54).

Let us try to put the contours of this portrait into perspective. Clearly social utility is a retrospective attribution that treats the stories of a group as mechanisms of its survival. Hewitt is careful to delineate imaginative elements alongside '[t]he range of socially motivated fictional accretions' (57). Otherwise the demand of utility would threaten to become vacuous: a rule (you must contribute to survival) that cannot but be obeyed is no rule at all. This in turn requires that a boundary must be maintained if the purely imaginative must not be allowed to threaten the priority of functionality. 'However, the very subject matter of these [imaginative traditional] legends is frequently didactic and recurring motifs, such as the vindication scenes, do generally function to recommend types of behaviour' (54). Commenting that an examination of the narratives collected from an extinct society must deal with texts at several levels, *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* surveys an intricate infrastructure:

Below the formal level of the text there is the simple level of ethnographic detail which may or may not have been preserved in materials

outside of the narrative. Beyond this there is the social function and weight of motifs or whole narratives, and occasionally shaping not only narratives but also rituals, beliefs and superstition – basic ways of conceiving of the world which declare themselves in narrative form (74).

This methodological delimitation of a conceptual territory is itself a leitmotif of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*, and it raises a number of concerns.

Whatever the simplicity of ethnographic detail may be, it is to be found in other texts and discourses which also need to be contextualised and interpreted, other (written) narratives that require interrogation. *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* passes unconcerned over this need for self-reflection. That the formal level of the text is the surface to this ethnographic detail suggests that formal here refers to the typology of narratives and motifs identified and gathered together, the ‘various layers of order’ (203). It is to be distinguished from the ‘verbal surface’ (191) of the texts, which refers to the appeal of the style of the narrator’s performance, ‘the expressive capacity of individual narrators’ (190-91) (difficult to gauge from the transcribed materials), which may have nothing to do with ‘producing performances with strong cultural resonances’ (191 note 6). The spatial metaphoric, moving between surface and depth via resonances, images an area that is already ordered. As the familiar criticism of structuralism has it: what is found is what is being looked for. The need to disaggregate the effect of inscription and writing on the conceptualisation of narrative and performance has a bearing on the question of innovation, the element of contingency, and also freedom and individuality.

We can speculate that these concerns prompt Hewitt to argue that while we can only speculate as to the ‘aesthetic evaluation’ of these narratives by their native audience, and although there is ‘no *a priori* reason why cultural depth and complexity should coincide with aesthetic enjoyment’ (even if this does seem to be the case with the written literatures of ‘advanced industrial societies’), the total collection of the /Kaggen narratives, for example, does seem to point to ‘a line of enquiry into the relationship between aesthetic evaluations and the cultural density of narratives’ (190). Cultural density is identified by the presence of ‘a culturally dense image clustered with diverse significance’ (171). While the collected texts undoubtedly lack a full sense of the individuality of the narrators, they emphasise the source of their performances: ‘What is clear is the thread which leads from such individuating characteristics, through the equally personal selection and use of whole narratives, motifs and symbols owned by the culture, and which ramifies into that culture at many levels of significance’ (203).⁵

So, although aesthetic evaluation is not synonymous with cultural density, the umbilical thread linking the personal selection of individual performance and the narrative reserve ensures a healthy balance. The invisible hand of necessity circulates an economy of meaning between the collective property of the group, what is ‘owned by the culture’, and the productive individual. Social needs intersect with

5 According to Alan James, ‘there appears to have been no concept of intellectual property among the /Xam, no narrator could easily claim to be the owner (as opposed to the originator) of a story’ (*The First Bushman’s Path: Stories, Songs and Testimonies of the /Xam of the Northern Cape* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001), 22).

the necessities of nature and with economic needs. In Cicero's expression, *ubi societas, ibi jus* (where there's society, there's law).⁶

Before considering the area of culture in more detail, let us return to the stress on the /Xam balance between individual and society.

In this diorama the multiplicity of social and symbolic relations – law, duty, and rights – is overlaid by a conceptual unity that is the essence of the purpose of those relations: survival. We have noted that the relative equality between members and internal self-governance (*universitas*) cement the bonds of solidarity: 'Xam, like all other San groups, are famous for their lack of social stratification' (125); 'thus the family is always seen to be equated with social values and knowledge, and in opposition to non-social behaviour' (140). In this form of life characterised by transparency and a complex system of 'sharing ... governed by a network of obligations' (26), 'complex distribution obligations' (206), there is modulated distribution within the group. The instinct of communal life has as conscious end the conservation of life and property. They are so natural that they don't even have natural leaders.

Let us try to look at this miniature of society from a few angles. The accumulated wisdom of our ancestors, the wholeness and unity of their life (seen in retrospect) that predates written *lex*, their example of a possible unity of life (with oneself, others, and nature), stand in contrast with modern life. The implicit analogy is between them and us. In their being at home in the world, the /Xam, like the Greeks for the German Romantics, lived in harmony with himself, with others and with nature, and was able to express his humanity. Although far from the topos of pastoral or bucolic idyll, /Xam life, 'fraught with conflicting responsibilities' (206), was characterised by the attempt to maintain balance. The final cause of /Xam society, self-preservation, dictates its ethos: harmony, unity, sustainable relation with nature accomplished by the union of man and nature, the realised naturalism of man. They only took what they needed.⁷ Action and reaction, position and opposition, pressure and counter-pressure, coercing and being coerced, all serve the greater good of survival. In this normative idea individual freedom is subservient to the needs of the group as a whole; as the most perfect mineral displays the nature of the whole in each part that is broken from a lump.⁸ The private will is supervised by the general will for the sake of the health of society. To interpolate the San into the field of the Hegelian narrative: in a harsh natural environment the individual /Xam proves his unity with the people unmistakably through the danger of death.⁹

What are the conceptual building blocks and operative analogies set in place to form this model community? Property, possession, acquisition, exchange, jeal-

6 In the words of John Locke, 'the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it' (*Two Treatises of Government*, edited by Mark Goldie (London: Everyman, 1993), 117).

7 See Walt Disney's *Sacred Planet* (2004) for a popular version of this representation of indigenous peoples.

8 See G.W.F. Hegel, *Natural Law. The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 109. It is perhaps worth recalling that as Hegel looked back to the ideal of the Greek polis, he also saw in the disintegration of civil society a force of integration that could lead to the actualisation of a higher organic community in a modern state.

9 Hegel, *Natural Law*, 92. Hegel criticises the romanticisation of communal society on the grounds that in custom and habit self-consciousness is lacking; what is most obvious is also most obscure: 'things are done this way because things are done this way'. This lack of transparency is what reason must push beyond.

ously, inequality – the abrasive edges at the heart of the social zone – all are ultimately subsumed in organic ethical life. This foil to civil society with its abstract laws, individualist competition and lost social substance, in which every individual pursues private interests at the expense of others, is the model of a healthy community. Priority is given to public good over self-interest, devotion to the common welfare rather than individual rights. Communitarian rather than liberal, the governing concern is the welfare of the whole society. Unified but differentiated, education bound the individual to the community.

Structure, Meaning & Ritual's formalism legitimates itself by appeal to fact (ethnological data), and the criterion for drawing the boundary between the necessary and the accidental is to be found in the real world. The abstraction of man in a state of nature (or as close to nature as it is possible to get and survive), revealing what is original and necessary, aims to explain reality by effectively smuggling in an element of that reality which is to be explained. In this ecological vision, morality combines with cosmic piety and accords with the romantic aspect of a tradition critical of possession and consumption, which invoked 'earlier forms of life', using 'words like "retrieval", "recovery", "recollection", "resurrection", "rebirth", "revival", and finding that which had been "lost" or "buried"'.¹⁰

While it is impossible ever to escape one's own tradition, it is possible and necessary to be aware of the imperious process of appropriation and the duplication of ideological tropes. The pathos of anamnesis resonates throughout dealings with the Bleek and Lloyd archive.¹¹ While more recent work drops the politico-ideological project of resurrection, rebirth and revival, it is amenable to incorporation by the motivational project of the African Renaissance. What is current is the aura of stoical belatedness, for we know the value of what we have lost. As we shall see, in the case of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*, this reminder of humane values lost in the stratification that has proliferated in modern society is shot through with the acknowledgement of the centrality of necessity and survival.

At its most immediate level the image of the non-stratified, egalitarian and eco-sensitive /Xam functions as a criticism of the existing system of alienating property, classes and laws, the disintegration and severance from the ethical whole.¹² The appeal to the ground of the law 'only in lost customs and a life that is dead, proves precisely that now in the living present the law lacks understanding and meaning'.¹³ But it is also clear that this imago is under the domination of the very system it forms a criticism of; it is subordinate to the existing system that produces it as its negative image. /Xam society is a social form that has passed away, has been superseded. *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*'s analysis endorses, even

10 D. Ely, 'Ernst Bloch: Between Neo-Aristotelian Political Thinking and Marxism', edited by David Macauley, *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology* (London: Guilford Press, 1996), 135.

11 See J. Deacon and C. Foster, *My Heart Stands in the Hill* (Cape Town: Struik, 2005), where we read of 'their spirituality in relation to the land that sustained them both physically and emotionally' (16). In this book of distressed, imposing images, where Tarkovsky's Zone is relocated to the Northern Cape, geo-piety combines with flagellant anti-modernism: 'Spend time in the wilderness (places where landscape and sky overwhelm you) and you start to change. In the city you're in a rat race and you're fighting to maintain ego. But in the wilderness you can lose your sense of self. You start realizing that you are a tiny cog in an enormously complex system. Your perspective changes and you identify less with your little ego and your little drama' (Preface). In the wilderness you can lose what you have already lost in the city, and acknowledge your insignificance.

12 Hegel, *Natural Law*, 130.

13 Hegel, *Natural Law*, 130.

as it mourns, the necessity of progress to modern forms of society. The complexity of this melancholia is constitutive of modernity distinguished by a need to revisit the idea of the primitive and the originary. *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*'s ethno-literary discourse is itself a dissimulated narrative.

We have noted the stress on the relatively non-stratified nature of /Xam society. The final words of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* concerning shamanism refine this picture to include parents forced to part with children, payment for services, and generalised fear of *!giten*. Such aspects 'plainly suggest the conditions for the creation of a power elite. Such elites may well have arisen in some bands and in some areas; there is also good evidence to suggest, however, that *!giten* by no means always had the upper hand' (223).¹⁴ The image of necessity and survival freed from acquisitive society and made pristine again within the frame of social stability is complicated by the contradictions within /Xam society. Indeed it would appear that the benign image of the /Xam also has a strong Hobbesian element since the dominating drive of human nature is seen as self-preservation. The threat of mutually assured destruction assures compliance and compromise; narratives, rituals and beliefs are mechanisms that reinforce socially binding norms and allow the controlled release of anti-social energy. Recognition of the need for social cohesion presumed to be the meaning of the narratives is prompted by fear and self-interest. Thus the social function of narratives can then be seen as the means to ensure (a beneficial) hegemony demanded by non-social behaviour, with the latter functioning (we can speculate) as both a threat to communal equilibrium and its enabling negative principle.

We can therefore say that the representation of /Xam society functions as a criticism of modern stratified society, and yet it also naturalises aspects of civil society within the critical ideal of organic community. /Xam society was also an arena of mutual self-interest where everyone satisfied their own self-interest only if they worked to satisfy the self-interest of others; we make ourselves useful to others to satisfy our own needs. This is a model of community without class interests, without enclaves of wealth and poverty, without privilege or coercive power – without politics – where each individual has a place and knows what is legitimate and honest conduct. *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* installs a highly significant miniature emblem or escutcheon within the main scene. The inset detail of property enables the endorsement of competitive society alongside the implicit criticism of its values. Amidst material conditions conducive to imaginative and spiritual development, the self-regulating system of economic relations remained at the level of barter which entailed that exchange was personalised and regulated by agreement and reciprocity. In this mixture of historical truth and mythologisation, the incipient institution of property and contract as bilateral and nominally consensual emerges as a relationship between a person (*persona*) and a thing (*res*).¹⁵ Stripped of its negative accretions, such as inequality and alienation, the fundamental right

14 See A. Solomon, 'Images, Words and Worlds: The /Xam Testimonies and the Rock Art of the Southern San' in P. Skotnes, ed., *Claim to the Country: The Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007), 149-59, for criticism of the application of shamanism to the San.

15 See M.E. Tigar and M.R. Levy, *Law and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000, 2nd edition), particularly chapter 17.

of property is affirmed but without the attendant dissolution into isolated individuals and the anonymity of commerce.

Nature is a key feature of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual's* depiction of the relation between society and its other: 'For survival the band depended upon social stability and a consistent relationship with nature' (107). The culture–nature opposition is highly influential, and in 'The Story of the Dawn's Heart and His Wife the Lynx ... [t]he symbolism is quite blatant in all versions and requires no special knowledge to uncover it' (78). Indeed 'deviations from stable social life' are seen to cause disjunction in the bond of sympathy, and in turn 'a disruption of man's relationship with game animals inevitably found its corollary in a disruptive social event' (99). Evidence of 'the sympathy of nature' (98) is garnered from the famous passages from *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* concerning presentiment and 'The Bushman's letters are in their bodies'. Such indications of the 'concept of sympathetic causality' (98) testify to the power of imitation and an attunement to the environment.¹⁶

The idea of tradition is itself central to the conception of narrative formation and function. We read that stories begin as news or anecdotes and through successive retellings display 'several strands and motifs common to other narratives', becoming established as 'traditional elaborated narratives ... capable of contributing plot frameworks or motifs to the tradition' (52). The 'particles of plot construction' (96) are deciphered to reveal that 'traditional materials could be used to emphasise the social content of what was originally news' (57-58). Through 'socially motivated fictional accretions' (57) achieved through repetition and supplementary performance, which are social events, the social content of narratives is augmented; the social occasion of narration and reception (repetition and customary practice) ensures social motivation, just as the social content of narratives reinforces social motivation. The regulatory repertoire or reserve of traditional, familiar elements augments the new, appropriating the novel for the end of social unity and hence survival: 'As soon as news became distanced from its immediate source it was open to special emphases' (50). There is an isomorphism between the meaning of the various narratives and a way of life confronting the necessary contingency of survival. The social content of the narratives is emphasised because of the framework or scaffolding of themes and motifs, a deep structure or grammar, reflecting the pressing need for social cohesion, just as social cohesion produces the pressing need for narratives. This circularity, which threatens to become tautologous (social cohesion coheres society), entails social and inter-cultural distinction, and the indifference of stratification.

Tradition, as legacy and genealogy connecting past and present and uncovering the source of society and civilisation, of reciprocity and moral economy, also implies stratified traditions and stratified cultural-linguistic groups. Consider the privileged status of the San relative to the 'Bantu' (a linguistic category coined by W.H.I. Bleek, and so bound up with the problematic of his interpretation of the

16 See Tom Huhn's argument that '[t]he imagination's principle (of sympathy) is modeled on that of the reality of shared blood' (*Imitation and Society. The Persistence of Mimesis in the Aesthetics of Burke, Hogarth, and Kant* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 470). The power of mimesis resonates throughout various characterisations of the Bushmen.

Bushmen). In the /Xam repertoire ‘the influence of the narrative tradition of the Khoe-khoen’ is detectable, but there ‘are almost no signs of Bantu influence on /Xam kukummi’ (46).

Whereas Porcupine’s role in the narrative may well be linked to the woman who ‘escapes and gives birth to a son’ in the Bantu tradition, this substitute of a complementary male and female monster-defeating instrument for the Bantu son who kills the monster and becomes chief, is a peculiarly San feature. It not only rehabilitates the narrative in a non-stratified social context, but also makes an indirect point about the balanced constitution of San social forces. (186)

The narratives concerned with the trickster /Kaggen explore ‘the relationship between nature and society’ (106); the concept of potential transformation from the social, ordered world of humans to the purely natural one can be interpreted as a defensive reaction. The more social life was threatened, the more the natural world tended to be seen as beyond the powers of men to control. A ‘positive state associated with home, social normality and success’ and /Kaggen’s ‘social integration’ mark ‘[t]ransformation into the positive, socially normal state’ (164). The humour of the narratives serves ‘to entertain and to underline the expected order of social life’ (170):

/Kaggen’s success in his conflicts with these adversaries is very mixed. Some of his distant kin manage to get the better of him and others are bested by him. The same applies to the creatures whom he meets while out hunting. However, when strangers are represented as groups rather than stray individuals, they are always shown as strong and very hostile, and are always bested in some way by /Kaggen. This may reflect something of the /Xam attitude toward their physically powerful neighbours, the Khoekhoen, the Europeans, and Bantu-speaking peoples. The Ticks in M8 [one of the stories], for example, are said to be black people who keep sheep and are very strong. Their contrasting with /Kaggen and, indeed, in one version, with the San who heard and told these stories, clearly points to an articulation of race conflict situations, and an attempt to preserve racial dignity in the face of physical superiority. Such an emphasis on conflict with other races might also be a reflection of the San’s long history of defeat, and may account for the dominance of strategic tricks in those narratives where groups of strangers are represented, for, in some ways, the power of such neighbours has affinities with the vertical power of strongly stratified societies. (128)

The privileging of the San over the Bantu and the attributive naturalisation of the idea of race and the need to preserve racial dignity signal the return of a *revenant* from the colonial intellectual tradition.

The homogeneity of /Xam society – without foreigners but respecting differences – is, according to *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*’s scenario, if not racially

exclusive, then at least committed to racial dignity. ‘Here the /Xam lived as hunter-gatherers, having little contact with other races ...’ (14) This empirico-genealogical sketch is open to the objection that it entails that the threat to racial dignity, as a threat from the outside to communal *dignitas*, must come in the form of invasive disruption attendant on (we can speculate) processes like mass migration or colonialism. So we end up with the intriguing corollary that colonialism – which gave rise to, and instrumentalised, racism – threatens racial identity, or, in Hewitt’s term, racism threatens racial dignity. Racial dignity, then, would be secure without racism. The response that this is an internally generated sense of identity rather than one imposed from outside takes us to the heart of current debates which replace the concept of race with that of ethnicity or culture. As regards *Structure, Meaning & Ritual*, historically delimitable ideological structures are being read into African subject matter, and so universalised, in the process of indicting or lamenting the effects of European expansion.

A more serious threat to the internal coherence of Hewitt’s argument arises from the departure from the primacy of self-preservation. If self-preservation determines culture and determines the value of culture, then how can one culture be valued over another? Surely any culture that *is*, thereby confirms its value. Whether or not it is structured by stratification is of secondary importance. Unless, that is, the value of non-stratification is the concealed determining value, a value that appears more arbitrary than that of self-preservation and so shelters within the apparent apodicticity of the latter and constitutes the efficacy of a foundation. Recall the account of the formation of narratives. Prior canonical narratives absorb and reshape grains of news, like a mesh or filter that absorbs and reshapes new particles in accordance with a sense of aesthetic density and social utility.

However, the reliance on ethnological detail which serves as empirical input, reliable information, can also be seen as news from the field of ethnology worked up by the scholarly community, and thereby formed by social accretions that reveal the importance of the social context. This is in addition to the circular nature of the ethnological information used to interpret the Bleek and Lloyd /Xam narratives since ‘the Bleek and Lloyd texts are the primary source of ethnographic information relating to the /Xam’ (14). The sparseness of knowledge of /Xam renders them particularly amenable to inventive interpretation; periods of happiness are the blank pages of history. All the signs upon which we are accustomed to base our distinctions tend to melt as we come nearer to the source.¹⁷

In so far as the deep structure uncovered in the /Xam narratives reflects the grand narrative of social development, Hewitt’s account of narrative formation accurately describes the organising principle of his own interpretation of those narratives. In this sense the goal or usefulness of *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* can be seen at one and the same time as a sombre warning against losing the basis of our humanity, and an acknowledgement of the necessity of superseding our origins.

17 S. Freud, ‘“A Child is Being Beaten”. A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion’, *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, authorised trans. under the supervision of Joan Rivière, 5 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), vol. 2, 182. The danger is that the personnel (that is, other, more socially stratified races) beating the /Xam into extinction come to appear inexorable and omnipotent; in Freud’s terms they become a node of identification and pleasure as much as the locus of guilt and aggression. An indigene is being beaten.

The depiction of the /Xam is a component of crisis management, woven from a discontinuous network of discourses (literary, ethnological, historical, philosophical, economic, etc.). The lesson to be drawn is that stratified societies obliterate more egalitarian ones and themselves come to lack the essentials of social stability based on face-to-face communication. Ironically or tragically, social development is a sacrifice of humanity. It is difficult to think of a more conventional, powerful and ritualised theme of genesis and fall embedded within our grand narrative.

I would suggest that the pathos that illuminates the representation of the !Xam, and suffuses dealings with the Bleek and Lloyd archive, can be brought into focus by relocating the narrative of development within the terms of primitive accumulation and the debate about the origin of capitalism. Whereas liberal economists saw the origins of exchange and stratification as a peaceful process, Bleek's contemporary, Marx, stressed the coercive dispossession that accompanied the division of labour.¹⁸ The naked violence of the colonies provides evidence that disproves the myth of the voluntary evolution of classes. Whatever side one takes on the issue of primitive accumulation, it is clear that the nature of primitive or pre-capitalist societies has an immense bearing on the nature of contemporary society. When the incorporation of the /Xam in the process of primitive accumulation is recoded as the result of contact with 'strongly stratified societies', 'other races', something more than balanced historical narrative is at stake. I have argued that the acknowledgement of the coercive process simultaneously conceals the identification of that same process. This sub-plot protects the naturalness of property and regulates any threat to the bedrock of modern society.¹⁹ The problem with this version of history is that the death knell of communal society is signalled here, for while property is a means to the satisfaction of needs and an expression of freedom, it is also a step on the way to the organisation of production for profit, the division of labour, and the network of stratification. It seems unwise, having aimed to register the destructive forces that consigned their language and culture to the archive, to dogmatically halt at the naturalisation of race and social organisation.

Structure, Meaning & Ritual is of interest because of what it shows about the customs at work in academic discourse concerned with the Bleek and Lloyd archive. There is no mention of 'First People' or the rhetorical paraphernalia of national symbolism that incorporates the San into the imagined community of post-apartheid South Africa. Free of the discursive tropes that characterise the recent representations of the San, *Structure, Meaning & Ritual* remains oblivious to the mechanics of appropriation. Oblivious, that is, to the nineteenth-century construction of the Bushmen and the legacy of subsequent scholarship. Given the linguistic origins of structuralism and the focus on language (narratives), failure to locate Bleek's researches within his overarching preoccupation with the origin of language is surprising. On the positive side, Hewitt is able to avoid indulging in the contortions attendant on the post-colonial impulse to reflective self-criticism. As an artefact of an earlier, more innocent scholarly moment, *Structure, Meaning &*

18 See Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume I. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: Random House, Inc, 1906), 823.

19 See A.J. Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushmen* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), for an account of 'The Kalahari Debate' that raged in the 1990s and centred on the chronology of the proletarianisation of the San.

Ritual escapes the unenviable fate of recent literary dealings with the Bleek and Lloyd materials: the hypocritical critique of hypocrisy that participates in the very commodification of the San it criticises.

With this in mind, I would like to propose another emblematic image of the San, recasting the sympathetic hunter in no less fabulous surroundings. Consider the following from James Bryce's *Impressions of South Africa* (1897):

The most striking sight at Kimberley, and one unique in the world, is furnished by the two so-called 'compounds' in which the natives who work in the mines are housed and confined. They are huge inclosures [*sic*], unroofed, but covered with a wire netting to prevent anything from being thrown out of them over the walls, and with a subterranean entrance to the adjoining mine. The mine is worked on the system of three eight-hour shifts, so that the workman is never more than eight hours together underground. Round the interior of the wall are built sheds or huts in which the natives live and sleep when not working. A hospital is also provided within the inclosure [*sic*], as well as a school where the work-people can spend their leisure in learning to read and write. No spirits are sold ...

Every entrance is strictly guarded, and no visitors, white or native, are permitted, all supplies being obtained from the store within, kept by the company. The De Beers mine compound contained at the time of my visit 2,600 natives, belonging to a great variety of tribes, so that here one could see specimens of the different native types from Natal and Pondoland, in the south, to the shores of Lake Tanganyika in the far north ... Even Bushmen, or at least natives with some Bushman blood in them, are not wanting. They live peaceably together, and amuse themselves in their several ways during their leisure hours ... A very few were reading or writing letters, the rest busy with their cooking or talking to one another.²⁰

When history becomes second nature, every exit as well as every entrance is strictly guarded.

20 Quoted in Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwartzschild (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 344, note 10.