

THE SACRED POWER OF FAT AND HONEY IN SAN AND ANCIENT GREEK MYTH AND RITUAL¹

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In this paper, I attempt a comparison between the sacred significance of fat and honey in the myths and rituals of the San peoples of southern Africa and the ancient Greeks. As Biesele (1993) and Lewis-Williams (2015) have convincingly demonstrated, the creation narratives of the diverse linguistic groups which constitute the /Xam (San) peoples of southern Africa, arguably the first peoples to call this country 'home', reveal strong links between the gathering and possession of animal fat and honey, and access to spiritual power. In ancient Greek mythology, as is well known from Callimachus and many later texts (*e.g.*, Apollodorus and Nonnus), the infant Zeus was fed on honey by the bee-woman, Melissa. Many fundamental rites in ancient Greek religion, as reflected in texts from Homer onwards—libations, some sacrifices, ritual offerings such as the 'panspermia', and funerary rites—all provide evidence of the Greek belief in the spiritual potency of fat and honey. I thus analyse the similarities and differences between the significance of the fat-honey nexus in these two religious traditions and reflect on cross-cultural comparisons, their history, and their purpose in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: Creations myths, fat, honey, sacred power, rituals, San peoples, ancient Greeks, comparative methodologies

Introduction: Comparisons and colonialism

The comparison of aspects of the cultural and religious systems of the indigenous peoples of South Africa with those of ancient Greece and Rome began in the colonial period (18th century) and is mired in the very ideological baggage the decolonization movement in our universities wants to jettison.

Missionary ethnographies, racy travelogues, learned treatises on our many languages, all of these were shaped by two major preoccupations in the Victorian period: the sliding scale narrative, essential to the stadial theory of human development which attempted to locate the peoples of the British Empire somewhere on the scale from savagery to civilization, and the relentless quest for origins, exemplified by influential works such as Darwin's *Descent of man* and

¹ An earlier version of this article was read at the 33rd Biennial Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa, Stellenbosch, November 2019.

Tylor's *Primitive cultures*, both published in 1871.² As many of the colonial administrators, researchers, and ethnographers were classically educated, comparative studies were deployed in a number of interesting ways. Some used comparisons with the Greeks and Romans to enhance the reputations of the Zulu or Xhosa peoples in the eyes of racist white settlers, who were not so well versed in the Classics, but could be impressed by startling analogies; others, who held firm diffusionist beliefs, wondered patronisingly whether, for instance, the Zulus had been Roman gladiators and had thus brought back from a former imperial centre impressive religious notions to the barbarous periphery;³ yet others, imbued with a heady tolerance after the freeing of slaves throughout the British Empire, combined their Christianity with the sliding scale narrative and, accepting the humanity of all, believed fervently that a Zulu youth could flower into a Pericles or a Xhosa maiden into a prim Octavia.⁴

If the many missionaries to our country wanted to succeed (and at first they did not), they had to learn the indigenous languages to evangelize, unless they were German-speaking Catholic Trappists, who at first chose to evangelize in silence. More seriously, many of them, inspired by the comparative work of Max Müller, believed that a study of language structures and systems was the key to understanding indigenous religious systems.⁵

Dr. Bleek's 'fieldwork'

One of Müller's ardent fans, who had come out to the colony of Natal in 1855, not as a missionary, but as Bishop Colenso's Zulu translator, was Dr. Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek (1827–1875), who believed that in the Zulu language he had found the language which was the key to the original religion of humankind, uncontaminated by any other.⁶ Once he moved to Cape Town to become the curator of Governor Sir George Grey's library in 1870, he furthered his research into the language, mythology, and ritual of the San peoples (Bleek's 'Bushmen').⁷

Bleek, a polymath of note, was well prepared for the task. Educated in Berlin and Bonn, he had studied Egyptology (and hieroglyphics) under the

² See Lambert 2011:87–90, 2021:179–185.

³ Lambert 1990:46; 2011:83–90.

⁴ Lambert 2021:179–185.

⁵ *Ibid.*:188–192. Müller's *Comparative mythology* (1856) was the 'bible' of Victorian comparativists.

⁶ Chidester 1996:144–147.

⁷ The term 'Bushman/Bushmen' is in no way intended to be offensive. Where historically appropriate, I have retained the use of 'Bushman' as used in the sources.

magisterial Karl Richard Lepsius,⁸ and his doctoral thesis in 1851 was '[a] comparative study of Hottentot grammar'.⁹ If the Zulu were 'living fossils' of the original ancestor religion of humankind,¹⁰ the 'Hottentots and Bushmen' also provided evidence for the primitive origins of language, religion, and thus, importantly, the evolution of the human mind. Shaped too by the Victorian search for origins and by the sliding scale narrative, Bleek's researches eventually led him to conclude that the European present is dependent on a Zulu and African past, which was a version of the sliding scale narrative not especially appealing to the colonizing powers.¹¹

Before we get transported by Bleek's subversion of the sliding scale, we should note that he was the cousin of Ernst Haeckel, who wrote in the preface to Bleek's *On the origins of language* (1869) that Bleek's linguistic studies 'proved' that the 'languages of the lower races of men' were closer to those of the 'gorilla and the chimpanzee' than to those of 'Kant or Goethe'.¹²

Anxious to preserve San languages and myths before they died out, Bleek sought and gained permission to have six of the San convicts, who were working on the construction of a new breakwater at Cape Town harbour, transferred into his custody.¹³ Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd (1834–1914), painstakingly transcribed and translated songs and myths from these convict informants, two of whom chose to stay on in the Bleek household when they had served their time. What is significant about this process is the fact that Bleek believed that Müller

⁸ In Berlin, he was 'initiated into the intricacies of extinct languages by Karl Richard Lepsius, the celebrated Berlin philologist and Egyptologist. Bleek adapted Lepsius' orthography so that he could record the clicks and other complex sounds of San languages' (Lewis Williams 2015:34–35).

⁹ Bleek supported the 'discovery' of Baron Christian von Bunsen that the Cape Hottentots could be traced back to a North African origin because of the perceived similarity in grammatical structure between the Khoikhoi and the Coptic, Berber, and Galla languages. The Hottentots, however, were believed to be not the descendants but the ancestors of the Egyptian, Coptic and Semitic languages of North Africa. (Chidester 1996:141–142, 149–150). For the use of the term 'Hottentot' see Laband 2020:27–28; 312; Khoikhoi is now the preferred term for the proper noun; Khoikoi for the adjective.

¹⁰ See Chidester's account of Victorian constructs of the stadiad development of 'religion', from ancestor worship to the overlay of 'mythological personifications of sidereal worship', with ancestor religion persisting 'in the concept of personal immortality, hero worship and even in the Christian theological doctrine of atonement' (1996:151).

¹¹ Lambert 2021; cf. Chidester 1996:152.

¹² Cited in Harries 2007:186 n.21.

¹³ Brown 1998:42. One of Bleek and Lloyd's main informants was //Kabbo, arrested for stealing a sheep; all the informants with one exception, were from two families in the Katkop mountain area and Strontbergen, 100 miles to the east; //Kabbo, the shaman who controlled rain, remained with the Bleeks from 1871–1873, 'enticed to some degree by Bleek's promise of a gun' (Lewis-Williams 2015:98).

had been wrong to base his arguments about indigenous religious systems and language structures on the textual tradition only and had not taken the oral tradition and the quotidian use of the languages seriously.¹⁴ When Bleek died in 1875, Lloyd continued this research until 1884 and went on to gather material from two !Kung informants. This collection, now available in a definitive edition edited by Pippa Skotnes (2007), constitutes our major source for San myth, art, song and ritual.¹⁵

The problems, however, presented by this kind of fieldwork are immediately apparent: the hierarchical power dynamic (white foreign colonials and black indigenous convicts), antithetical to people used to the telling of tales in an egalitarian social group,¹⁶ the collection of mythological material from illiterate people, sundered from the performative power of the original context in which the tales were told or sung, the laborious process of writing down the San words and then attempting translations into very literal English,¹⁷ which punctured the continuity of the narratives. All these problems, which were faced by missionaries as well, make one question the reliability of the source material. Furthermore there were no Xam speakers still alive who could check the accuracy of these transcriptions and translations.¹⁸ In addition, Dorothea Bleek (1873–1948), Wilhelm’s daughter, described the convict informants as ‘colonial Bushmen’; all had Dutch names, wore Western clothing and many passed on stories which they had heard from their parents.¹⁹ How these ‘stories’ may well have been structured

¹⁴ Chidester 1996:151.

¹⁵ The digital Bleek and Lloyd collection at the Centre for Curating the Archive, University of Cape Town, incorporates LLAREC (the Lucy Lloyd Archive, Resource and Exhibition Centre). The digital collection consists of scanned material physically housed in a number of South African institutions, such as *Iziko*, the South African Museum, the National Library of South Africa, Unisa, and the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town. Although the Jagger Library was destroyed by fire in April 2021, the collection, bequeathed to UCT in Bleek’s will, has survived. Earlier published sources include *Specimens of Bushman folklore*, collected by Bleek and Lloyd, but edited by Lloyd and published in 1911; Dorothea Bleek’s publications (1923, 1928); Guenther 1989 and Biesele 1993. For further details, see Brown 1998, Skotnes 2007, and, more recently, Lewis-Williams’ comprehensive bibliography (2015:217–232).

¹⁶ Ideologically, but not necessarily in practice (Lewis-Williams 2015:204–206); cf. Guenther’s discussion of the ‘foraging ethos’ and the ‘egalitarianism’ which mediates ‘between individualism and communalism’ (1999:41–55).

¹⁷ Brown 1998:44; cf. Biesele (1993:xii, cited by Brown) on Bleek and Lloyd’s literal translations which ‘misrepresent the verbal reality of performance by chopping it up into alien linguistic categories’.

¹⁸ See //Kabbo’s very revealing remark recorded by Lloyd in 1873: ‘they do not talk my language’ (cited in Lewis-Williams 2015:208).

¹⁹ *E.g.*, //Kabbo’s Dutch name was Jantje Toorn. Despite these markers of a colonial identity, the Bleek and Lloyd informants still, according to Lewis-Williams (cited in Brown 1998:48)

and transmogrified into Western versions of ‘myths’ by those Victorians and Edwardians listening and recording was the creative contribution of the late Michael Wessels (1958–2018) to San studies.²⁰ Perhaps the positive points about this contested process were that Bleek and Lloyd were meticulous recorders of what they thought was a living oral tradition, even to the marking of narrative repetitions and omissions, and were not trying to convert the San to another religious system, thus perpetrating what Spivak has called ‘epistemic violence’.²¹

San creation myths and honey

With source problems of this kind, it is no surprise to discover that San creation myths involving honey are not reified and vary bewilderingly from performance to performance.²² Scholars attempt to make sense of them for analysis by isolating common elements in the myths of the San of the Cape and those of the Maloti mountains and the Kalahari. In the following brief account, which I have concocted from various sources, I am primarily dependent on the various versions recorded by Dorothea Bleek and Matthias Guenther, and the stimulating interpretations of David Lewis-Williams.

In the Primal Time, in which almost all myths are set, in the mythical time of the Early Race, today’s people were animals and today’s animals people.²³ The cosmos was and is bi-axial: on the horizontal axis is the camp of the San family group (the hunter gatherers) in lived time, near waterholes, ambivalent places of plenty and danger, where threatening carnivores and human strangers lurk.

On the vertical axis stretches the spiritual realms above and below; above, the creator god or gods whose nature is, as Guenther describes it, ‘schizoid’;²⁴ below, the world of the dead; both realms can be accessed by shamans (male and female), at times through a hole in the ground, in their dance-induced trances (*e.g.*,

‘lived in nomadic groups, survived for the most part by hunting and collecting, and defined themselves in terms of traditional belief systems and aesthetic forms’.

²⁰ See Wessels 2010.

²¹ Cited in Lambert 2021:208.

²² For the incoherence and inconsistency of their beliefs, see Guenther 1999:60–61; 70; for the relationship between these beliefs and the fluid social matrix in which they are ‘embedded’, the lack of political organization and the ‘disengagement’ of their religion from ‘social and political reality’, *ibid.* 80, 83–84.

²³ *Ibid.* 66–69.

²⁴ For the moral ambiguity of this ‘schizoid’ and, in some groups, androgynous divinity, see Guenther 1999:61–63; for Bleek’s ‘Mullerian portrayal’ and resultant misinterpretation of cardinal elements of /Xam religion, *ibid.* 64–68.

healing dances) or dreams.²⁵ The cosmic axes intersect at waterholes; water, symbolic of this intersection, falls from above and wells up from below.

Honey is integral to the Eland creation myth—the Eland is the largest African antelope and the fattiest, the buck most frequently depicted in San paintings and rock engravings, often the result of trance dances, and the most potent prize for any San hunting party.²⁶

In illo tempore, the Mantis, who is the trickster, /Kaggen, and the original shaman,²⁷ creates the Eland by placing a shoe or sandal made out of eland hide in a waterhole.²⁸ As the Mantis should be bringing home honey, the people wonder what he is plotting. What the Mantis is doing is feeding honey to the Eland and rubbing its hide with honey mixed with water; the Mantis leaves the Eland in a waterhole for three days, during which time it grows as large as an ox.²⁹

From the family of troublesome in-laws, /Kwammang-a tells his son (Ichneumon) to perform the role of a whistleblower on the Trumpan Mantis. The meerkats surround the nascent Eland and kill it without the Mantis' permission. The Mantis, in search of honey, finds that the honey is 'dry', which is a bad omen presaging tragedy for his family. He finds traces of blood, realises that his honey-rubbed 'child' has been killed and follows his tracks, weeping.

The Mantis encounters the villainous Meerkats, shoots arrows at them which bounce back (as mythical arrows can) and informs the gall of the Eland, which has been placed on a bush, that he wants to pierce it. The gall agrees and

²⁵ For a very accessible and engaging discussion of this shamanism, and the trances in which the spirit leaves from a hole in the head and the shamans 'die', becoming like the eland, see Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989:30–32, 50–51; for the various stages of altered consciousness, the visions of San shamans and their translation into art, *ibid.* 60–91; for rain-making as an important task of the shaman and for rain animals in art, *ibid.* 92–99.

²⁶ Lewis-Williams and Dowson suggest that some shamans tried to make sense of the 'entoptic' shapes as a honeycomb, encouraged by buzzing in the ears during their 'altered states', and that Kalahari San still like to dance when bees are swarming so that their potency can be harnessed for a dance (1989:63–64). For the likelihood that all San art is shamanistic, communicating visions to the people (visions recollected in tranquillity) and that painted sites were 'storehouses of the potency that made contact with the spiritual world possible', *ibid.* 35–36.

²⁷ For the Mantis as 'unpredictable trickster' and for the role of shamans in resolving the tensions between contending binaries (*e.g.*, danger and safety, life and death, conflict and harmony, nature and supernature), see Lewis-Williams 2015:148. Cf. Guenther 1999:4 for the ambiguous trickster (in myth) and the trance dancer (in ritual) as key figures of San religion, in which the trance dancer enters the world of myth.

²⁸ Thus linking the physical and supernatural worlds. Twisted Eland gut was said to be the best string for a bow and the /Xam used eland bone for the 'link' in their composite arrows (Lewis-Williams 2015:144).

²⁹ An adult bull eland can weigh up to 940 kg.

orders him to leap into the blackness.³⁰ In the blackness, the Mantis creates the Moon from either a shoe or an ostrich feather he sucked and with which he wiped the Eland's gall from his eyes. This enables him to see in the darkness and find his way home, together with the Eland meat and the honey which his powers have caused to fly back with him.

Like divine families in many mythological systems, the San divine family is a microcosm of a human extended family with, in the case of the San, the power hierarchies and generational tensions which often arise in a San camp. The divine family is associated with essential San foods, fat and honey; both can be eaten and drunk; the Eland carries huge amounts of fat, especially around the heart; porcupines and dassies are also sources of fat; furthermore dassies live in rocky cliffs associated with bees and honey.³¹ The affines (the quarrelsome in-laws) are carnivores, the meerkats insectivores. The trickster-creator Mantis is male; men's tasks are hunting and finding honey—vitaly important, even though women provide most of the group's daily food. Family tensions over access to food and spiritual potency are resolved; the Mantis triumphs because of his greater spiritual potency (his shamanic power) and order is restored.

What this composite account of the myth lacks is of course its ritual and performative context, or indeed point of origin—the trance dance.³² There are songs too which may accompany the ritual dancing—the Eland's Song, for example, which is sung at girls' puberty rites and at boy's first-kill rituals. To use Lewis-Williams' coinage, the Eland is truly an 'animal de passage', a transitional creature from a waterhole (the entrance to the subterranean realm), the androgynous male (which carries more fat than a female) admirably suited to the liminality of rites of passage.³³

In fact, metaphors of fat and honey permeate San shamanic activities and their myths; Bieseles' fieldwork amongst the Ju/'hoan people has demonstrated

³⁰ For examples of the belief that gall is associated with the spirit or essence of a person and that piercing the gall may suggest the release of a 'deep reservoir of potency', represented by the blackness, see Lewis-Williams 2015:108–109.

³¹ The Ju/'hoan Great God's wife is known as Mother of the Bees and the Dassie is said to live with the bees (Lewis-Williams 2015:95).

³² Bieseles (1993:76–77) has clearly connected the narration of myths with narratives of trance experiences; both reveal similarities in 'values and images' (cf. Lewis-Williams 2015:155).

³³ Rites of passage involving the Eland include the boys' first kill; the girls' onset of puberty, marriage, and the trance dance (Lewis-Williams 1992:14–15). During the marriage rituals of the !Kung, a young man hunts an eland and gives the fat of the antelope's heart to the bride's mother (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989:118–119); for the Eland's androgyny, *ibid.* 122 (wrongly 'bisexuality').

that ‘to eat or drink honey or fat’ is one of their metaphors for sexual intercourse.³⁴ As Lewis-Williams notes, ‘in San thought and idiom, hunting and mating are symbolically equivalent’;³⁵ sexual energy, the creation of the Eland, human creativity, the satisfaction of food, sex and conquest come together in a fluid metaphor in which honey and its scent predominate. Contest over the possession of the Eland (his fat especially) and honey is consequently often, in Lewis Williams’ words, ‘dispute over the possession of potency and, consequently, rivalry for access to the supernatural’.³⁶

Ancient Greek creation myths, rituals and honey

For comparative purposes, it is always advisable to limit variables and, in this case, keep as constants, in both the San and ancient Greek traditions, an oral tradition: in the case of the Greeks, we do have an orally derived text which had a performative aspect and in which there is some reference to a ritual which connects animal fat and honey, linked to spiritual potency of some kind.

At the funerary rites of Patroclus in Book 23 of the *Iliad*, great-hearted Achilles wraps the body of his beloved Patroclus from head to toe in the fat (*dēmos*) of slaughtered sheep and cattle (not eland), piles the carcasses on top of the body and leans, against the pyre, amphorae of honey and oil (lines 167–171), before the blood sacrifices of four horses, two dogs and twelve Trojans. All night long Achilles pours libations of wine on the ground, calling on the shade of Patroclus (220–221); the flames of the pyre are extinguished with wine (237–238, 250–251).³⁷ The practical purpose of the honey in funerary ritual is alluded to in the last book of the *Odyssey* in which the shade of Agamemnon informs Achilles of his own funeral—burnt in the clothing of the gods with lavish unguents and sweet honey (24.67–68).

Immediately too, as we plunge into Homeric *exempla* of the fat-honey nexus, we are struck by one of the essential differences between San and ancient Greek myth and rituals: San myths regularly explore conflicts over the possession

³⁴ 1993:87; cf. Lewis-Williams 2015:105 (hunting and mating); Guenther 1999:69–74.

³⁵ 2015:105.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 96.

³⁷ For milk and honey as Golden Age markers and for the different kinds of libations (honey, milk, water and oil with or without unmixed wine) used in death rites and oaths, see Graf 1980:209–220; cf. West 1978:215; see also Frankopan 2015:74 for rivers of wine and honey in Muhammad’s paradise. Graf, noting the use of libations in rites both normal and extraordinary (*e.g.*, libations to the Eumenides in Athens or the offerings of oil and honey before incubation in the Pergamene Asklepieion) argues that the nature of the libation used was determined not by the deity or the dead, ‘sondern die innere Logik des Rituals’ (1980:200).

of the precious substance as food, drink, and access to spiritual potency. Inconceivable would be the pouring out of honey in *choai* or *spondai* as drink offerings to the dead,³⁸ who are to be kept away by the power of shamans as they enter their trance-journeys, not appeased by such flagrant wastage of a precious food in an environment where hunger and want are encountered daily.³⁹

Yet this is precisely why, according to Burkert, such a liquid is poured onto the mound or grave or alongside the tomb in the offering pits or trenches. In his exploration of the possible origins of sacrifice, Burkert argues that essential elements of funerary rituals, especially their structure, derive from hunting and sacrificial rituals: the threefold structure, preparation, the death/kill, the restoration—the gathering of the bones of the cremated loved one, then the funeral feast in which the social order, ruptured by death, is restored.⁴⁰

Burkert hypothesises that, more so than in sacrifice, funerary rituals reveal a pattern of ‘renunciation’: libations to the dead ‘signal a recognition of the power of the dead. What distinguishes the outpouring from other gifts of food is its irretrievability; what is spilled cannot be brought back. The libation is therefore the purest and highest form of renunciation’.⁴¹

The function of these acts of ‘serene wastefulness’ (in Burkert’s words) is to inspire hope in the mourners that life will continue: in short, the mourners play out the disruption of the social order, by defiling themselves and wasting what is precious to them, precisely in order to heal the social rupture.⁴² In situations where familial conflicts may arise over inheritance, these acts of generosity, of pouring out one’s precious resources, may contribute, symbolically, to the defusing of social tensions. After all, the Greek word for libations (*spondai*) also connotes a

³⁸ For the attempts to differentiate between a *choē* and *spondē* from as early as Eustathios on ‘*Odyssey*’ 10.518 (‘a *choē* is offered to the dead, a *spondē* is not’) see the discussion in Garland 1985:168–169, 114–115; Burkert associates the distinction with the different kind of vessel used for pouring the libation: the *spondē*, a controlled pouring from a hand-held jug or bowl; the *choē*, the uncontrolled emptying of a larger vessel. The distinction often breaks down: the *choē* is a libation for the dead and chthonic gods, yet ‘one can also speak of *spondai* for the *chthonioi*. The *spondē* is performed whenever wine is drunk’ (1985:70). Burkert here avoids a sociological analysis of the origins of religious ritual which would interpret libations as the kind of ritual behaviour associated with a rich and wasteful aristocratic class.

³⁹ However, Guenther notes that a Bushman group in North-eastern Namibia offers prayers and libations of food and tobacco, perhaps due to the influence of the religious practices of Mbukushu and Tawana peoples (1999:88).

⁴⁰ 1983:48–58. For critiques of Burkert’s hunting hypothesis, see Lambert 1993:293–318; Bremmer 1994:40–43.

⁴¹ 1985:72.

⁴² 1983:54–55.

peace-treaty at the end of hostilities, thus connoting what Seaford refers to as the ‘integrative power’ of death ritual.⁴³

No such ‘serene wastefulness’ for the San, whose culture is a non-sacrificing one. If I were a Victorian ethnographer I would add, ‘not yet’, as clearly (if we were to apply Burkert’s hunting hypothesis to a culture outside Greece) the San are nomadic hunter-gatherers, who have not settled in fixed camps, domesticated cattle as in a polis culture, and ritualized the hunt in sacrifice. What is clear is that for the San peoples honey is associated with creation, spiritual potency, and resolving conflicts: in the myth the Mantis feeds honey to the Eland and rubs his hide with it. The conflict between the Mantis’ quarrelsome in-laws (the ‘meerkats’) is caused by restricting the wider community’s access to the healing power of honey.

Yet the sacred Eland is precisely the animal most desired by the hunters to kill: from its skinned carcass arises the sweet scent of honey. That fundamental ambivalence about human existence which Burkert frequently reiterates in his hunting-sacrifice hypothesis, that death is necessary for the life of the community to continue, may well be confirmed in the hunting of the sacred Eland.⁴⁴ The ‘people of the Eland’ (the Maloti San)⁴⁵ should not hunt the Eland without first asking its permission. The Ju/’hoansi of the Kalahari like to dance alongside the carcass of a freshly-killed Eland to inhale its scent and spiritual potency released in the kill: after eating the meat, the Eland is praised by a trance-dance.⁴⁶ Furthermore, many rock art images show the Eland in the process of dying; from such images the people harnessed spiritual power, one reason being that Eland paintings were *ideally* made with Eland blood.⁴⁷

It is this ambivalence of which honey, both food and drink, healer and poisoner,⁴⁸ is a marker. We have explored the role of honey in funerary rites; let us

⁴³ Seaford (1995:186–190) perceptively examines the magnificent heroic funerals in the *Iliad* in the context of the writing down of the Homeric texts in the early polis period when, instead of funerals for individuals on the heroic scale, the more limited public death ritual (in, for instance, hero cult) developed. For Seaford, Patroclus’ funerary rites, which are in some ways also those of the fated Achilles, reintegrate the ‘powerful individual’ into the community which has borne the brunt of his destructive anger, thus marking in the early polis the victory of the ‘integrative over the disruptive power of death ritual’ (187).

⁴⁴ An ambivalence noted by Guenther (1999:70–76) with relation to the San hunting and eating an animal which is ‘a significant other and an other’ (71).

⁴⁵ Lewis-Williams 2015:178. Patricia Vinnicombe’s ground-breaking study of the rock paintings of the San peoples of the Drakensberg is entitled *People of the Eland* (1976).

⁴⁶ Lewis-Williams 2015:107.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 2015:152, 154, 167 (the italics are Lewis-Williams’).

⁴⁸ See Sallares’ entry in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1999:723, s.v. ‘honey’. Thyme honey from Mt. Hymettus was famous for its pale colour and sweet flavour; in contrast,

conclude by briefly exploring the role of honey in life-giving creation and transformation.

San shamans have, as a result of their trance dances, the Protean ability to change into animals (*e.g.*, lions, jackals, birds), perceived by other shamans, but not by other members of the social group, or in fact into honey itself.⁴⁹ In the *Odyssey*, the connection between honey and transformation is evident in the trench offering made by Odysseus on the instructions of a rather wayward shaman with the power to transform men into pigs: Circe's instruction to Odysseus in Book 10 is to dig a trench and pour offerings (*choai*) to all of the dead, firstly with a mixture of the two primal liquids, honey and milk, then wine and water, and finally barley to be sprinkled over.⁵⁰ When Circe demonstrated her transformative power before this, she gave the living—Odysseus' gullible crew—a drink with almost the same ingredients, honey, wine, and barley, to which she added cheese and a mysterious drug.⁵¹ Thus there is no doubt that here honey is linked to some kind of transformative power or San-like spiritual potency.

The San and the ancient Greeks: the trail of honey

We have already discussed the San creation myth in which the primal Eland's first food, administered by the Mantis, is honey. Zeus' birth myth is well-known from Hesiod's *Theogony* and the later tradition: themes in common between the San creation myth and that of the Greeks are not difficult to find. Family tensions, the birth in secret, the concealment of the sacred child, underground, whether in the cave on Crete or the waterhole reaching down into the underworld, and fed by insects and animals—the Mantis, the goat (Amalthea), the bee (Melissa).⁵² The

Corsican honey was harsh and bitter and Pontic honey poisonous and inducing madness (Dioscorides' *De materia medica* 2.101–3).

⁴⁹ The San trickster-deity (/Kaggen) can transform, *inter alios*, into a bull eland, a hare, a louse, a snake, a vulture and, of course, a mantis (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989:13). Many painted snakes, especially those bleeding from the nose, could well be shamans in snake form (1989:131).

⁵⁰ Homer *Odyssey* 10.516–520 (repeated at 11.25–28). ἔνθα δ' ἔπειθ', ἦρωες, χριμφθεὶς πέλας, ὡς σε κελεύω/βόθρον ὀρύξαι ὅσον τε πυγούσιον ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα, / ἄμφ' αὐτῶ δὲ χοῖν χεῖσθαι πᾶσιν νεκέεσσιν/ πρῶτα μελικρήτῳ, μετέπειτα δὲ ἡδέϊ οἴνω,/ τὸ τρίτον αἰθ' ὕδατι

⁵¹ *Od.* 10. 233–236 εἶψεν δ' εἰσαγαγοῦσα κατὰ κλισμούς τε θρόνους τε, / ἐν δέ σφιν τυρόν τε καὶ ἄλφιστα καὶ μέλι γλωρόν/ οἴνω Πραμνείῳ ἐκύκα· ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτω/ φάρμακα λύγρ', ἴνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἰῆς.

⁵² Hesiod *Theogony* 453–491 (Kronos, threatened by the thought that one of his sons might replace him, devours his children; Rhea's parents, Ouranos and Gaia, send her to Crete to give birth to Zeus who is hidden in a cave on Mount Aegaeum); for Amalthea's role in feeding the infant Zeus, Callimachus *Hymns* 1.48–49; Pseudo-Apollodorus 1.5.6; Diodorus Siculus

dance of the Curetes, who dance loudly around the cave on Crete, banging their shields to drown out the cries of the baby Zeus, is reminiscent of San trance dancing, as is the bare-footed, headshaking movement to clapping and shrill music and singing, which we associate with Euripides' maenads.⁵³

But the Mantis is no mere insect, but the creator-shaman-seer, maker of the Eland. In the ancient Greek tradition, the bee is no mere insect either. *Melissai* (bee-women) become, notably, priestesses of Demeter; a frequent symbol of Artemis, Mistress of the Animals (*potnia therōn*), is a bee;⁵⁴ one of Zeus' cult-titles is Zeus Melissaios; if the 'kouros' in the Dictaeon Hymn (the Palekastro hymn) is to be identified with Zeus, there is no doubt that the pre-Hellenic lord of Olympus is associated both with dance and creative potency.⁵⁵ In San art, bees, honeycombs, and hives feature amongst the content of hallucinatory, shamanistic religious visions, induced by trance dancing.⁵⁶

Now at this point the reader could retort that the author has upended his methodology by straying far from the orally derived and performed traditions in Homer and Hesiod. Even the crucial details about Amalthea and Melissa are not in Hesiod, but are in later traditions, such as Callimachus' first Hymn (to Zeus) which is a highly wrought literary reworking of an Homeric Hymn, not intended for performance at a ritual as such, but mimetic of a hymn in which the narrative about the god's past, the myth, is discursively linked to the ritual, thus reminding us that what we know about Greek myth was, like San myth, constantly performed.⁵⁷

What does one do with the comparison at this point, apart from a tedious tabulation of similarities and differences between the two traditions, which, inevitably, leads one in the direction of 'origins'? Jonathan Smith is right: 'in comparison a magic dwells', but the 'magic' is dangerous and so he warns us that every comparison made is an intellectual 'game' which will be mired in some kind

5.70. 3. 1–4 (milk and honey); Ovid *Fasti* 5. 111–128; for Melissa, Pseudo-Apollodorus 1.5.4

⁵³ For the Curetes, see Callimachus *Hymns* 1. 52–54; Pseudo-Apollodorus 1.5.6–1.5.9; Diodorus Siculus 5.70. 4. 2–6 (Omphalos tradition). For the maenads and their rituals, see Bremmer 1994:79–80.

⁵⁴ Homer *Iliad* 21.470–471: ὄν δὲ κασιγνήτη μάλα νεΐκεσε πότνια θηρῶν/Ἄρτεμις ἀγροτέρη, καὶ ὀνειδέιον φάτο μῦθον.

⁵⁵ West 1965:155, 159.

⁵⁶ Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989:62–65, 99.

⁵⁷ For the singing of the hymn corresponding to a 'cult act' and for the recitation of the poem itself as a 'cult act', see Calame in Woodard 2007:266–267, 278: '...considered as religious practices, the stories that we identify and place under the rubric of "myth" thus reveal themselves to exist only in particular poetic forms' (281).

of ideology.⁵⁸ It is at this point in the comparison (the ‘so what?’ point) that the researcher must reveal his or her cards, agenda or ideology.

What South African classicists must avoid is re-inserting the comparative material into the ideology of Victorian missionary ethnographers.⁵⁹ Rehearsing the sliding scale narrative and its search for origins, tempting as it may be, simply unpacks our colonial baggage and resorts to crass and insensitive ‘othering’, especially if it is racialized.⁶⁰ How can this be avoided?

There have been interesting attempts in recent popular scientific (i.e. evolutionary) literature to avoid racial categorizing in comparative studies and the search for origins. Jared Diamond, using the kind of empirical evidence not available to the Victorian colonizers, hypothesizes that geographical position on a continent (on an east-west or north-south axis), and the influence of the resultant climatic zone on the kinds of plants and animals available for domestication, affected the social and cultural development of peoples.⁶¹ In Diamond’s words, ‘...the different historical trajectories of Africa and Europe stem ultimately from differences in real estate’.⁶² Using this hypothesis judiciously, one could argue that the similarities and differences revealed by a comparative study of the fat-honey nexus in the San and ancient Greek cultures could be interpreted in the light of this hypothesis, speculative as it must be.

Situated closer to the Fertile Crescent and the very origins of a polis culture in which plants and animals were first domesticated, precisely because they were domesticable, the ancient Greeks began to use honey and fat for libations and funerary rites, not because these were the practices of a wasteful and extravagant aristocratic class, but because the commerce of a polis culture had transformed

⁵⁸ Smith 1990:47–52; Lambert 2007:117–119.

⁵⁹ Ever eager to evangelize by noting similarities with traditions in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible: for the Promised Land of the Hebrews as a land overflowing with milk and honey, see *Deut.* 26. 9–10, mentioned in the context of a ritual (a first-fruits offering).

⁶⁰ Exemplified in an extreme form by Kurtz’s views in Joseph Conrad’s brilliant *Heart of Darkness* first published at the height of the ‘scramble for Africa’. In the words of the narrator, Marlowe, ‘All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance’ (1902:86).

⁶¹ Diamond devotes an entire chapter in *Guns, germs and steel* to Africa, provocatively entitled ‘How Africa became Black’, and refers to the ‘Khoisan’ in some detail (1998:376–401). This work has been prescribed reading for a Classical Civilization course at Rhodes University.

⁶² 1998:401.

bees, honey and animals into *products* for commercial exchange.⁶³ The transition from societies of hunter gatherers into the sophisticated Greek polis was a long and arduous process, perhaps partially remembered in the myths clustered around Aristaeus. We know from both Greek and Roman mythology that Aristaeus, as seer, hunter, shepherd, and bee-keeper, was associated with hunting, gathering, domesticated cattle, religious ritual, and honey, which he had first found on the island of Ceos.⁶⁴ In addition, fifth and fourth century authors such as Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle use the rich vocabulary for commercial bee-keeping derived from the Greek word for bee (*melissa*, *melitta*).⁶⁵ In a society in which bees and honey were commercialised and cattle skins sold to buy more cattle for temple pastures,⁶⁶ the relationship between humans, nature and the divine became objectified and transactional.

For the ancestors of the San, in contrast, as their geographical position in southern Africa to which they were confined by the southward expansion of invading African peoples, contained few wild plants or indigenous animals suitable for domestication, the hunting (of eland) and gathering (of honey) became essential for food and life, and were thus invested with a spiritual significance which inhibited, for instance, the pouring out of honey in libations or the use of fat and honey in funerary rites. This subjective interdependence of people, nature and the divine, reminiscent of Buber's I-Thou relationship, could never be categorised as 'lower' on an arbitrary sliding scale of stadial development.⁶⁷

An interpretation of this kind brings two interesting mythological systems into conversation, in which neither side is 'othered' or considered superior or 'more civilized'; in fact, the conversation, acknowledging the Victorian shades of Müller

⁶³ Similarly, Harari: 'Hence the first religious effect of the Agricultural Revolution was to turn plants and animals from equal members of a spiritual round table into property' (2015:236).

⁶⁴ For Aristaeus, son of Apollo and Cyrene, as 'hunter and herdsman', see Pindar *Pythian* 9. 65–66; for Aristaeus as a beekeeping *pastor* (shepherd) and the mystery of the *bougonia* (the birth of bees from the carcasses of oxen), see Vergil *Georgics* 4. 317–558. For his role as prophet (the son of Apollo) and 'discoverer' of oil and honey, see Burkert 1983:110–111.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., *LSJ* s.v. μελισσεύς (bee-keeper), μελιττουργέω (to be a bee-master), μελιττουργία (bee-keeping), μελιττοπωλέω (to sell honey). Solon apparently introduced regulations for the placement of beehives (...μελισσῶν σμήνη καθιστάμενον, ἀπέχειν τῶν ὑφ' ἑτέρου πρότερον ἰδρυμένων πόδας τριακοσίους Plut. *Solon* 23.8.3–5). For evidence of ancient Greek beehives made from terracotta, see Jones's article on bee-keeping in *OCD* 1996:237.

⁶⁶ Burkert 1983:7.

⁶⁷ Buber's *I and Thou* was first published in German in 1923. Harari, in another popular evolutionary history like Diamond's, warns against the romanticization of hunter gatherer societies, which were, in his opinion, both creative and highly destructive (2015:45–69).

and Bleek, raises questions about the nature of ‘religion’ and ‘myth’,⁶⁸ and about the relationships between myth and ritual, myth and art,⁶⁹ ritual and art, performance and text, ethnography and anthropology, and environment and cultural differences. It is, I hope, the kind of conversation we all could be having about our various pasts; after all, our country’s coat of arms in the post-apartheid era abandoned its Latin motto (*ex unitate vires*) for one in the more ancient San language: *!ke e:/xarra//ke* (‘people who are different come together’). *How* different people ‘come together’ lies at the very heart of comparative studies which can be engagingly creative, but, like many creative projects, can be fraught with discursive dangers.

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⁶⁸ See, for example, Lewis-Williams’ rejection of the distinctions made between ‘myth’, ‘legend’, ‘fable’, and ‘folktale’ in discussions of San narratives: ‘I find that these ‘universal’ categories...automatically impose Western expectations and, consequently, significances on the texts and so mask indigenous ones’ (2015:41). For similar views in relation to Greek mythology and its intellectual history, see Graf 1996:6–7. cf. Bremmer 2011:539–543.

⁶⁹ See Lewis-Williams 2015:200: ‘The link between myth and image lies in nuggets; both media draw on a common fund of concepts. They are linked by a network of interrelated beliefs and practices’ (Cf. Geertz’s ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun’, cited in Lewis-Williams 2015:171). Cf. Armstrong 2009:17: ‘If the historians are right about the function of the Lascaux caves, religion and art were inseparable from the beginning’.

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