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N/om, Change, and Social Work: A Recursive Frame Analysis of the Transformative Rituals of the Ju/'hoan Bushmen

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Abstract

The Ju/'hoan Bushman origin myth is depicted as a contextual frame for their healing and transformative ways. Using Recursive Frame Analysis, these performances are shown to be an enactment of the border crossing between First and Second Creation, that is, pre - linguistic and linguistic domains of experience. Here n/om, or the presumed creative life force, is infused into the community. As the Ju/'hoan Bushmen struggle to maintain their way of life in the face of economic and political change, they are likely to increasingly come into contact with social service and other aid programs. Any future for social work with the Bushmen is served by an understanding of how they relate to n/om. In particular, supporting Bushman communities requires highlighting the importance of the way changing forms arise in their recurrent mythological border crossings, the heart of Bushman transformative experience.

Keywords

Ju/'hoan Bushmen, Recursive Frame Analysis, Puberty Rites, Storytelling, Healing, Transformative Experience, Social Work

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N/om, Change, and Social Work: A Recursive Frame Analysis of the Transformative Rituals of the Ju/'hoan Bushmen

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The Ju/'hoan Bushman origin myth is depicted as a contextual frame for their healing and transformative ways. Using Recursive Frame Analysis, these performances are shown to be an enactment of the border crossing between First and Second Creation, that is, pre-linguistic and linguistic domains of experience. Here n/om, or the presumed creative life force, is infused into the community. As the Ju/'hoan Bushmen struggle to maintain their way of life in the face of economic and political change, they are likely to increasingly come into contact with social service and other aid programs. Any future for social work with the Bushmen is served by an understanding of how they relate to n/om. In particular, supporting Bushman communities requires highlighting the importance of the way changing forms arise in their recurrent mythological border crossings, the heart of Bushman transformative experience. Keywords: Ju/'hoan Bushmen, Recursive Frame Analysis, Puberty Rites, Storytelling, Healing, Transformative Experience, Social Work

The Ju/'hoan Bushmen, or San, of Namibia and Botswana are sometimes characterized as a culture that emphasizes ambiguity and contradiction. What they articulate about important matters – whether it involves healing, storytelling, ritual, or myths of origin – may on the surface appear to readily change with no apparent concern for alteration in either description or explanation. Guenther (1999, p. 246) proposes that this kind of thinking is “consistent with the mobility, openness, fluidity, flexibility, adaptability, and unpredictability of the forager's life.” While acknowledging the unique challenge of trying to understand Bushman experience, our fieldwork finds that the Ju/'hoansi host a consistent worldview that is often outside the conceptual radar of conventional social science theory and practice. Bushmen emphasize shifting ways of being in the world and this dynamic provides an overarching contextual frame that helps clarify Bushman discourse. As the Ju/'hoan Bushmen come into contact with social service programs, social workers and other NGO professionals need to cultivate an appreciation for how members of this culture construe their life experience in a unique way, especially in matters that involve healing and help.

In this paper we demonstrate that the Ju/'hoansi account of First and Second Creation is used to contextually frame important matters in their life. Using Recursive Frame Analysis (Keeney, 1991; Chenail, 1995), we will outline the ways in which shifting frames move back and forth between contextualizing experience as inside First or Second Creation. This oscillation between two phenomenological worlds underlies Bushman experience, discourse, understanding, and performance. Our work is informed by an examination of their puberty rites, which have been rarely observed by anthropologists.

We find that these rites provide an exemplary way of making sense of their healing dance. In addition, we explore the way Bushman storytelling can be understood as a performance that emphasizes creative improvisation rather than narrated meaning. We address

these experiential domains, demonstrating that they share the purpose of crossing the border between First and Second Creation, that is, the mythically connoted prelinguistic and linguistic ways of holding experience. In the shifting itself, what they regard as the changing or *N!o'an-kal'ae* that underlies life, is found *n/om* – the creative life force – which Bushmen value hunting in order to infuse their lives with vitality and inspired meaning. Following a brief discussion of First and Second Creation, a recursive frame analysis will map this border crossing so as to illuminate how previously assumed ambiguities actually are consistent and clear when seen as frame shifts rather than as static forms. We will propose that the Bushman way of utilizing narrative and ritual is arguably more complex and process oriented than the means through which social science narratives and descriptions are cast. We conclude with a brief discussion of some general implications for those offering mental health or social service programs with Ju'/hoan Bushman communities.

First and Second Creation: An Origin Myth that Inspires Bushman Performance

For two decades, we have conducted interviews with Bushman elders across Botswana and Namibia. Here we report the commentary of elders who reside at the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Namibia. Interviews were mostly conducted between 2000-2012 (see Keeney, 1999; Keeney, 2002). Following years of establishing close relations with numerous members of several Bushman communities (that included being adopted and receiving Ju'/hoan names), we were accepted as members of their healing tradition and even called *n/om-kxaosi*. With this inclusion in their ritualistic life, we had conversations with elder healers in multiple roles including colleagues inside a healing fraternity and as scholars trying to understand the way they conceptualize their practice. Most conversations were either audio recorded or filmed. Our senior translator (we used a team of translators over the years), Beesa Boo, provided correction of word choices and spellings in subsequent manuscript production, and all texts concerning Bushman discourse were read out loud to the elders in order to obtain any editorial correction and final approval. The Bushman communities formally gave a public blessing and signed a consent form for this work to be conveyed.

Our primary informant for the articulation of the ideas of First and Second Creation is /Kunta Boo, one of the primary informants for other anthropologists, especially Megan Biesele, an early member of the Harvard Kalahari Research Group. Along with elders N!yae Kxao, Tcoqa /Ui, N!ae G=kau, Ti!'ae =Oma, Kxao Boo, =Oma Dahm, /Xoan /Chu/kun, /ui N!a'an, and G/ao'o Kagece, he presents a story of origin learned from parents and grandparents, and regarded as the first story about the nature of the world (from Keeney, 2007, pp. 242-243):

In the beginning, before any time and place, there was the original force called *N!o'an-kal'ae*. It is the force that changes everything into good or bad. In the First Creation (=Ain=aing=ani), the original ancestors (*G//auan='angsi*) had a father (*G=koo N!a'an*) and mother (*Gauh-!o*). The father and mother gave birth to creatures that kept changing into different animals. Among these creatures were the eland-headed people (*N!ang-n/ais*) who had hooves that made the sound of clapping. They became the first dancing *n/om-kxaosi* or traditional doctors. There were various kinds of animal-headed people, and none of them ever became sick or died in First Creation.

The force that changes everything is behind the creation of all things, including the Sky God (*!Xon!a'an*). Anything created must change over and over again.

This is the nature of First Creation. Even the Sky God, who lives in the eastern sky, has changing forms, each available for only a moment and quickly replaced by another form, behavior, feeling, and purpose. The changing forms are the way Trickster (*/Xuri Kxaosi*), who lives in the western sky, is revealed.

In Second Creation (*G!xoa*), when the animals were named, called “the great turning around” or *Manisi n!a’an-na’an*, the people and animals became separated from one another. The changing forms stopped changing because everything was given a stable name. Second Creation did not mean the end of First Creation. In a way, Second Creation is another example of the changing force of First Creation; this time, the whole changing world was changed into a non-changing world. *N!o’an-kal’ae* is still present today, and can interpenetrate Second Creation through the entry of the trickster forms of God. In Second Creation, people and animals get sick and die. To restore health and to ensure good relations, First Creation must breathe change and transformation into Second Creation.

Note that First Creation is a way of pointing to primary experience that is not yet framed or indicated by naming. Prior to language there is no distinction or digital communication – no “this” from “that” has been distinguished, or recognized that it has not been distinguished. Gregory Bateson (1972) used Jung’s Gnostic metaphor, “pleroma” to refer to this undifferentiated wholeness that precedes the arrival of specified knowing. The latter, achieved by indications of difference, Bateson referred to as “creatura”, the world of communication, ideas, and elaborated schemes of understanding. For the Bushmen, this signals the arrival of trickster who utilizes language to invent all kinds of distinctions that may be subsequently spun into an infinitude of imagined accounts. When the latter seduces one to idly narrate rather than embody the ongoing change of creation, the resultant stasis contributes to bringing forth sickness and death.

The Bushmen, without knowing it, foreshadow the insights of Lewis Carroll, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Spencer-Brown, Bateson, Varela, and Derrida, among others, in their implicit understanding that distinction first creates the distinction between a world absent of distinction and a subsequent world that indicates this awareness. Everyday praxis, rituals, use of discourse, and healing practices serve freeing distinction-bounded experience in favor of the freedom of change found inside movement that is not distracted by preformed naming and understanding. The Bushmen dance in order to feel the changing that re-enters First Creation, an experience marked by a trembling body that sings felt truth rather than speaks interpretive discourse. Stories are told to host an unexpected change that again, results in speaker and audience being shaken by surprise, instilled with uncertainty, and unready for what may happen next. The entrance to an initiation ritual is an opportunity for the whole community to re-enter First Creation, providing a re-telling of the first story and the changing that renews their capacity for healing and life transformation.

Bushman ritual does more than pay homage to a mythological meaning; it recirculates the original action that inspired the ritualistic performance¹. Each round of performance provides both an entry and an exit from First and Second Creation. It neither rests in one or the other, but continues moving across the border crossing – the circulating re-entry from one into the other – that revitalizes past and present while crossing and re-crossing both. The latter is not a mere back and forth oscillation, but a re-entry into a circularity that never stops turning. The present becomes the past, as the past becomes the present, and in these crossings, creation comes to life.

¹ As Chenail has suggested (personal communication, 2012), the Bushmen arguably avoid any problems associated with “cross-media” reflection, such as “writing about music” or “dancing about architecture.” They perform in interaction with mythological performance, and in so doing, cross the border and dissolve the separation of historical time from present time, enabling an experiential re-entry into First Creation.

Recursive Frame Analysis of First and Second Creation Crossing

Recursive Frame Analysis (Keeney, 1991; Chenail, 1995) is an extension of Gregory Bateson's (1972) and Erving Goffman's (1974) use of "frame," an indication of how human beings punctuate their streams of performed action, thereby prescribing specified meanings and orchestrating further action². For instance, a behavioral description of someone throwing a stick does not give us any contextual information – there is no framing that specifies how the action fits inside a flow of social interaction. If the thrown stick takes place inside an argument between two men over the sharing of meat, it may be framed as problematic, whereas it would be resourceful if appropriately performed by children playing. Of course, if the stick is suddenly thrown by a child in a moment of provoked anger, we are back to having a problem. Words that specify contexts – such as play, fighting, curiosity, learning, exploration, love, sickness, health, crime, and so forth – define how simple actions are to be understood and dealt with. This naming of context enables us to punctuate, frame, and form the world with prescribed choreographies of action along with their narrated meanings, helping organize what happens in a scenario. How we frame our experience locks us into a particular way of being, until an alternative framing comes along and gives us more choice for how to perform in the next round of performance.

We can map how frames are presented and discern how they remain the same or are altered in any number of ways. Most simply sketched, the Bushman creation myth indicates the following progression of frames:

1st Creation (changing forms) ----> 2nd Creation (named forms stop the changing)

However, since Second Creation arises out of First Creation – a change of changing forms – it is actually not distinct from its frame of origin. Rather than depict the process as a lineal progression, we can show it as an example of change operating on itself, thereby generating a different order of change. Here Second Creation is First Creation performing change on its whole frame.

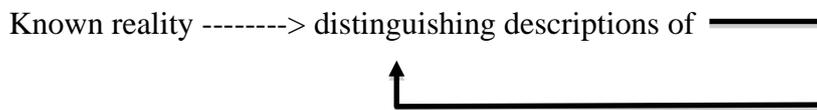
Similar to Spencer-Brown's (1969) calculus of indications, distinction arises inside the unmarked state. There must be absence of distinction (emptiness) in order for distinction to distinguish itself from the undistinguished. The more we distinguish, the more we remain distinguishing. Once we open the Pandora's box of casting a distinction, there is no closing it. One distinction is followed by another, which may be the recalling of the same order of distinction or the introduction of another order of distinction that distinguishes itself enough from the former one to enable a change in frame/context/whole to be achieved. This includes not speaking at all, though to do so after a distinction has been first drawn, is to set up another possibility for distinction – the said versus the unsaid.

As Spencer-Brown (1969) suggested, we may distinguish in order to recall (name again), or to withdraw or erase an indication (and to ready the ground for a different order of distinction). Unfortunately, most people – including scholars and social workers– are caught inside the distinction of one side of a distinction versus the other side. This trap of duality has no exit: while on one side, one becomes obsessed with the other side, thinking it either must be destroyed or exalted, whether fueled by the assumption that the other side is a foreign

² Here recursive frame analysis (RFA) will be used as a simple means of sketching the contextual frames that orchestrate Bushman performance. Whereas most previous RFA analyses outline the structure of discourse in a conversation, here we are using it to keep track of the main contexts that organize Bushman meaning and action. We also show how these frames either move along a trajectory, one evolving into another, or re-enter their previous context so as to generate a circularity of shifting forms. A more detailed analysis that sketches the discourses of Bushman performance domains is work that remains for future research.

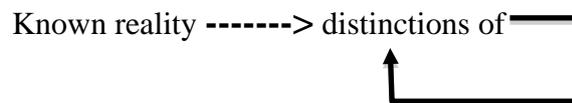
threat with the capacity for harm or that it exudes greener grass and brighter prospects. The pathologies of individual and collective action reside inside these interactively maintained dualities.

The escape from the paralysis of dualistic paralysis includes a third operation, something that is more than the distinction and its implied separation of differentiation versus relation. Here we find re-entry. Already proposed by Spencer-Brown (1969), and more formally elaborated by Varela (1979), this notion brings circularity or recursion into the picture. Actually it already was part of the action of distinguishing; the marking of the re-entrant form simply makes this circularity more transparent. Now the distinction is more clearly seen as operating on itself, and this includes the distinguisher who makes the distinction. The Ouroborean recycling of distinguisher, along with the distinguished difference and relationship, never stop re-circulating. In this cybernetics of self reference, interactive inclusion, and autonomy through changing difference, we find the paradoxes of higher order realization, including the operations of construction, deconstruction, and regeneration. Following Heinz von Foerster (1973), known reality becomes:

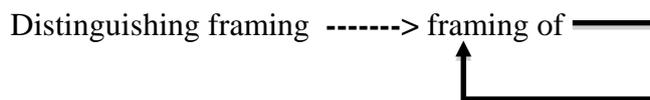


where we find that reality - as we know it, that is, how we distinguish it - is an infinite recursion of descriptions of descriptions.

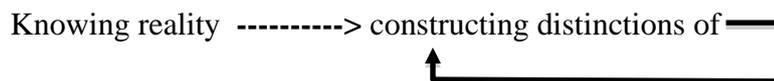
We face this recursive reality generator:



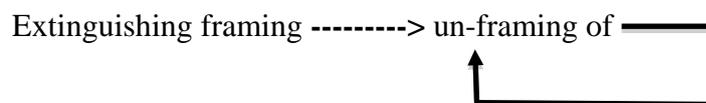
All of this epistemological know-how is implicit inside the Bushmen's handling of the difference between First and Second Creation. They do so inside embodied practices of transformative living. When we, as scholars, remain inside narrated knowing, we get caught in the circularly organized dilemmas of framing frames:



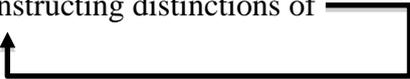
Once again, returning us to:



And its counterpoint:



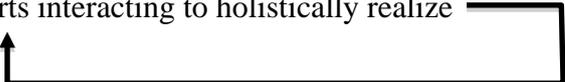
Or its more basic form:

Unknowing reality -----> deconstructing distinctions of 

where framing indicates invention and construction and un-framing is meant to suggest dissolution and deconstruction, doing so while caught in the vicious trap that un-framing is only specifiable through operations of framing un-framing. Once a circularity of distinguishing is entered, subsequent actions of distinction and indication can never stop. We must persistently reframe in order to be freed from a former frame and continue doing so to avoid entrapment and the various symptoms that are evoked by an unchanging life. For the Bushmen, the border between First and Second Creation is crossed inside performance, rather than conceptual manipulation or what they would call “trickster talk”. The false presumption of a reified either-or trips us into a suffering that is fed by blindness to the ways different orders of constructed and deconstructed distinctions arise through re-entrant forms of circular interaction. The alternative is to bring mind inside the changes which gave it indication, doing so in a manner that embraces rather than disgraces either:

Healing -----> distinctions that never stop recursively generating and embodying changing distinctions, including presence and absence of any distinction and whatever distinguished it.

Or more simply:

Whole -----> parts interacting to holistically realize 

More poetically rendered, healing is whole-making that requires parts always playing their part in being a changing part of the whole. Here all distinctions, including the one distinguishing, become whole through participation as an always changing part, even when momentarily presumed to be a stable, distinct whole. In the changing, we are inseparable from the whole that creates us.

Recursive Frame Analysis, as a method of analysis, first identifies the primary frames that contextualize experience and its discourse. The sequential presentation of their emergence in time represents a one-dimensional plot line, akin to the playwright’s storyboard which minimally consists of beginning, middle, and final acts. For the Bushmen, we have this form of drama that lies behind their making sense of the world:

Beginning: 1st creation -----> Middle: naming -----> End: 2nd creation

However, life is more complex than a simple plot line that represents a straightforward ongoing movement. We find that false starts, reversals, back and forth interactions, and circularities result in all kinds of structural configurations that may include beginnings that presuppose endings, endings that hold new beginnings, as well as middles that can move backwards or forwards, or perhaps both at the same time. Frames, in other words, are typically dynamic rather than fixed. They can interpenetrate, cross into one another, be nested, or behave like Chinese boxes where any frame can shift between being a part or whole for other frames. This latter movement underscores frame recursivity, and indicates that our simple plot lines are static outlines of what at a process level involves more interactional circularity (see Keeney & Keeney, 2012a). Hence, our three-part structure, similar to the acts of a theatrical play, masks an underlying re-entrant form where change, rather than any

identified stage of development, is at play. (Not to mention the recursive movement embodied by the creation of these indications, maps, and scores that include the exposition of this paper.)

Lineal progression marks the differences that arise in time for a circularity of change, the changing of change. For instance, if a rocket is sent to the moon, it appears to simply move from the beginning launch site to a midpoint distance and then finally arrives at the lunar target. Underlying this lineal trajectory is a circularity where at each moment the difference between where the rocket is and where it aims to be is utilized to make an adjustment that helps move it toward its final goal. Each adjusted change is subsequently changed, based on the difference it generates. The latter circularity, a cybernetic feedback, indicates that recursive re-entry underlies lineal progression in a goal seeking dynamic process. For a classic plot line in literature, there is more to a three-act story than enacting a beginning where some characters meet, followed by a conflict, and ending with a resolution. While a storyboard can outline such a progression, it obscures all the circular, back and forth progressions that underlie how complex interactions bring the plot forth. Recursive Frame Analysis outlines both the illusory lineal progression of frames (though it appears “real” in hindsight) and details the underlying circularities (typically less easily discerned) that complexly move them³.

Based on our previous work (Keeney & Keeney, in press), we will now look at three domains of experience where the interplay between First and Second Creation is performed inside Ju/'hoan culture. As will be seen, a renewal of life is found in reentering the border crossing of change, however specified or un-specified.

Puberty Initiation Rites

The puberty initiation rites for girls and boys have remained mysterious as few investigators, if any, have seen a whole ceremony and those who have seen anything at all are still left with uncertainty about aspects of its meaning. For the Ju/'hoan Bushmen, what remains consistent in the girls' puberty rite is that the first sign of bleeding signals a time for immediate community action. The girl is covered with a blanket and placed inside a small hut so no one can tactilely interact with her. Elder women bring her plates of food, but no one can look into her eyes nor can she touch people or the ground below.

Meanwhile, the community prepares for an enthusiastic eland dance. While some anthropologists have reported that a few elders dance naked, for the Bushmen we interviewed, practically all adult members of the community become naked in the dance. The old men hold eland horns over their heads while eland songs are sung. The young woman having her first menstruation is unquestionably regarded as strong enough to bring negative consequences to others should they make contact with her. She is especially seen as dangerous to men for their hunting could be negatively affected, including an animal becoming harmful.

Lorna Marshall (1999) never witnessed a menarcheal rite, but was told that while menstrual blood was not believed to be unclean, it was said to be strong, meaning that it has strong *n/om*, their word for the life force. She admitted that “I was left to think about the mystery of blood” (pp. 188-189). David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce (2004, p. 160), whose theory largely relies upon other ethnographic reports and 19th century interviews

³ As a methodological note, the procedure used to determine a final RFA product first involves both researchers making multiple RFA's, together and separately. This is followed by selecting the particular RFA that is most representative of the whole set of RFAs. At the same time, we delete any RFA that appears to have been an erroneous deviation from the others, given that it shows a mistake in either its choice of metaphor (e.g., it's not derivative from the subject's discourse or it's an interpretation not related to the action itself), or that it incorrectly identifies the most relevant middle stages of transition.

conducted by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd of imprisoned X/am Bushmen, hypothesized that the rites of “new maidens,” the early /Xam Bushman name of girls at puberty, did not necessarily involve altered states of consciousness. At the same time they note that the hut of the new maiden was described as “!kouken-ka//nein” (p. 162), where the first word both refers to “trembling” and to “be ill”. While assuming that “the association of !kouken with a girl at puberty does not mean that the /Xam believed new maidens to be in trance” (p. 163), they propose that a menstruating girl’s blood is related to the potency that is associated with the “magic power of rain.” When the old men dance like old eland bulls, they interpret this as an effort to attract a spirit eland to the dance. All of these confluences of myth and potentiated power, Lewis-Williams and Pearce conclude, result in a moment when the community believes that staring at the girl can, following a Lucy Lloyd interview excerpt, “turn a man into a tree” (p. 162).

Guenther (1999), on the other hand, conducted interviews with contemporary Bushmen in the Ghanzi District of Botswana, and heard that most of the eland dancers are old women with a few old men joining in. They expose bare buttocks and dance around the girl’s hut. According to his account, the dance includes mock male fighting, followed by the women teaching the girl womanly tasks and responsibilities. At the conclusion of the rite, she is formally introduced to each member of the community as if she is a new person.

Silberbauer (1963) worked with the G/wi Bushmen of the Central Kalahari of Botswana and found the same restrictions and fear associated with people coming into contact with the girl’s menstrual blood. He also found that both the woman and her husband were given tattoo incisions during this time, and their blood was mixed to unite them as man and wife, suggesting that the puberty rite was the final ceremony of marriage for a young couple who had earlier been chosen to try a trial marriage. Silberbauer reports that “rain” refers to the emotions of the community members as a symbolic “rain storm” and “getting wet” are indications of the excitement expressed through shouting and laughter.

Lewis-Williams (1981, pp. 51-52) has also interpreted early X/am Bushman interviews to mean that a new maiden is regarded as a source of n/om. Regarding her as metaphorically linked to hunting, he proposes that the girl’s status is paradoxical, that is, “she is spoken of as if she were a hunter and as if she were an eland.” Guenther (1999, p. 175) hypothesizes that this is less a metaphor than an association with the themes of “women as meat, meat eating as sex, and hunting as marriage.” For him, these themes suggest that the puberty rite is a symbol of Bushman cosmology. At the same time, he adds that the eland dance performance is so intense that they may experience a transformation of moving from human to antelope. Silberbauer (1963) also found that the eland hunting theme permeated a girl’s identity during the G/wi puberty rite, but there was no dance performed in the ritual he witnessed, though the girl was run “in a circle” (p. 21).

We learned that the most important contextual frame for the puberty rite is the distinction between First and Second Creation. The first appearance of the girl’s menstrual blood is interpreted as an opening to First Creation. During this time she is regarded as existing inside First Creation. There she is capable of constantly changing her form and this changing is what fills her with strong n/om. It is her presence inside First Creation that makes the situation highly charged, not her blood per se.

The girl’s first menstruation (and often the next couple of menstruation periods as well), opens the door to First Creation for all members of the community. They dance naked because this is a sign of being in First Creation, a time when people did not wear clothes. The men do not dance like an eland in order to simply attract a spirit eland. They dance like an eland because they feel they are being transformed into the eland people, the form of the original ancestors. At the same time, they expect the ancestors to return because First Creation is eternal, bringing past, present, and future into simultaneous participation. In this situation,

all members of the community can change at any time. The young girl can experience herself being an old woman. She can also transform gender and become a boy or man, as well as become an animal or hybrid form. The same is true for all other villagers who are inside the dance.

To help make everyone more like the girl, small cuts on the ear are made on each person. An elder *n/om-kxao* administers these cuts and it is regarded as a sacred act. This results in blood dropping to the ground and deepening their entry and identity with the girl who has entered First Creation. Everyone bleeds during the ceremony and the situation is dangerous because the girl may suddenly become a strong male hunter, while a man can become an eland, resulting in the possibility that she will hunt and kill him. Similarly, a male *Ju/'hoan* will not hunt when his wife menstruates because he might get hunted by carnivores.

In the girl's initiation rite, she may be symbolically or literally given a bow and arrow, as elders prepare to say that "she has shot an eland". In the changing forms of First Creation, the young maiden shape-shifts between being a hunter and the hunted animal. All the ritualistic conduct that govern a girl's relations to the eland during the puberty rite are done to respect the girl's shifting identity with the eland. For example, she isn't allowed to eat eland meat and the design painted on her cheeks and forehead often resemble the eland's red tufted forelock. More importantly, she cannot utter the name of the eland, but can only use the respect word "dabba", while concurrently, she is smeared with eland fat. In First Creation, she moves back and forth between being the eland and the hunter of the eland. Her own fat is seen as comparable to the eland bull's fat (the eland bull is believed to have the most fat of all antelopes). Again, a gender shift takes place as she crosses into identifying with the fat of the bull. Biesele (1993, p. 86) suggests that eating fat is a *Ju/'hoan* euphemism for sex. It may more generally refer to the transformation that sex implies, both in the act of creation as well as the birthing of another form. In Bushman epistemology, polyphony and transmutation are always valued and implicit in their discourse and ritualistic performance.

/Kunta Boo informed us that everyone must bleed in order to be assured of full entry into First Creation. When they bleed like the girl, they have no fear because they, too, are like her and the changing makes them as strong with *n/om*. The danger is being stuck in the form of the hunted animal, for then you may attract a hunter and his arrow. The Bushman elders also make the point that *n/om* is the feeling for the changing that takes place in First Creation. Creation is literally "changing" or *N/o'an-kal'a*. When you step inside First Creation, you viscerally feel this changing and it makes you tremble (*thara*). *N/om* both refers to the changing, and one's experience of feeling it, as well as the creator god's love that inspires creation. It inspires an enhanced or altered state of consciousness.

The boy's initiation rite is seen as similar to that of the girl's. When the men see that a boy is starting to behave like a man and is ready to hunt, they begin an initiation. Here they must arrange for the boy to bleed so that there is entry to First Creation, similar to what happens with a menstruating girl. They make cuts on the forehead of the boy. When he bleeds, the people are also forbidden to look at him. He enters First Creation and all the dangers found in the girl's initiation also apply to what happens to the boy. For both initiation rites, the *n/om-kxaosi* will wait for a sacred dream, what is called a *kabi*, or visitation with the ancestors. When this takes place, it is announced that the ancestors have joined the community, another sign that they are inside First Creation.

In terms of framing the girl's initiation rite, we find that blood marks an entry to First Creation, with the resultant plot line:

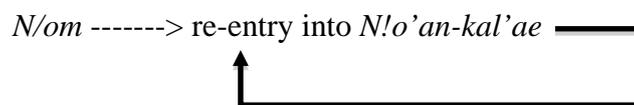
| | | |
|---|---|--|
| First menstrual blood -----> | Community entry -----> into 1 st Creation | Re-entry into 2 nd Creation |
| A time of danger as the girl has entered 1st creation, while others remain in 2nd creation. Protective taboos are prescribed. | Eland dance commences, accompanied by nudity and cuts that make everyone bleed. | Girl is introduced to community. |

In the beginning act of the performed ritual, those not bleeding remain outside First Creation and are vulnerable to being harmed. However, when they bleed and “catch the feeling for the changing”, Second creation enters inside First creation, becoming a subset of it – the second act of the ritual. Note that the lineal plot progression from act one to act two is actually a re-entry where Second Creation is brought back inside of First Creation. Here Second Creation is not a depiction of a second distinct world, but a second return to First Creation, a second coming or re-emergence of the original form.

In the re-entry into First Creation, identification with animals, shifting forms, nudity, presence and identity with ancestral eland people are felt. The songs and dance maintain the intensity of this contextual shift. When the bleeding of the people stops, there is re-entry back into Second Creation, the final act. This is why naming is reenacted, as the girl is introduced to every community member and given her name as if she is meeting them for the very first time.

The subsequent re-entry into Second Creation, following an immersion inside the changing of First Creation and its felt n/om, results in a revitalization, healing, and rebirth of the entire community. Not only are everyone’s weapons recharged for more successful hunting, the doctor’s capacity for healing is fine tuned and amplified. The ritual helps the entire community, soothing previous relation tensions and giving new hope for the future. It also is believed to give new life to the surroundings, including the soil and the sky where rain may be attracted.

The cycle of renewal includes both a re-entry into First Creation, followed by a re-entry into Second Creation. Bushman epistemology carries the implicit recognition that it is neither First nor Second Creation that is preferred, but the never ending re-entry or border crossing from one to the other. N/om is found in this movement of passage and every girl or boy who becomes an adult helps the entire community re-enter the circularities of change that infuse n/om into their everyday. Here they embody the changing that underlies all of creation:



Inside the *N!o’an-kal’ae* or changing is found re-entry into the next changing. While giving the appearance of another chapter or developmental stage in life, it actually is only replaying the circularity of the changing of creation.

The N/om of Storytelling

The art of Ju’hoansi storytelling emphasizes “great latitude for individual artistry” (Biesele, 1993, p. 66) and is often characterized by perplexing richness and even apparent contradiction. !Unn/obe told Biesele that stories are always changing because “people use different words and names for the same things” and that “there are different ways to talk” as well as “different people have different minds” (pp. 66-67). Going further into their

relationship with a god of creation, the Bushman people believe that “a direct channel may open at any time between them and this great god through inspirations” (Bieseles, 1993, p. 68). Here storytellers serve as interlocutors for the divine and help in the “transfer of new meaning from the other world into this one” (Bieseles, 1993, p. 70).

Bushman stories emphasize transformation and shape-shifting, where a man can become a lion, an eland can turn into rain, a feather dropped into water can suddenly become a whole ostrich, or a leather sandal can suddenly leap into becoming an antelope. /Kunta Boo is regarded as one of the great Bushman storytellers and he states that the primary purpose of telling a story is to awaken and transmit n/om. In other words, it is one of the mediums in which a doctor or n/om-kxao can perform the activity of “shooting an arrow of n/om” (or life force) into others. As such, it is a specific way of doctoring and revitalizing the community.

The dramatic enactment of a story and the exaggerated ways in which the voice is modulated in its telling are ways of helping set up the delivery of n/om. As /Kunta Boo (Keeney & Keeney interview, in press) explains:

I must enter First Creation to tell a story. Here the story will change and this changing is charged with n/om. If you feel it, you can be brought inside First Creation. There you will get an arrow of n/om if your heart is open. The stories, like our songs, are the ways we send n/om into each other. If the story is not told by a storyteller who is full of n/om, it will be dead. It must be spoken with n/om and this takes us inside First Creation. It is like the puberty rites and our healing dance. All are entrances to First Creation where n/om is alive and ready to cook you!

This view suggests that alterations and contradictions offered by a storyteller are more than stylistic variations. They are the very purpose of the story itself. In other words, the story is a vehicle for holding a change or transformation that aims to surprise and catch the reader, helping trip them to fall inside First Creation, the domain of creative changing. As /Kunta Boo articulates, “Our stories shake. The old stories, which tell about First Creation, in which everything changes, must be altered with each telling. The stories themselves shake and are capable of sending arrows of n/om to the listeners.” The key to understanding a Bushman story is to be aware of how much change and transformation is instilled in their words and scenes.

Bushman elders believe that a written story can easily kill a relationship with n/om, for it will be stuck in the same form. For the story to be alive and serve as a deliverer of n/om, a storyteller must change it and express awakened feelings with a voice that transmits n/om with its tonal shifts, rhythm alterations, dynamics, and musicality. An analysis of Bushman storytelling would be better served by studying how the same story is changed in different performances, doing so by noting the specifics of its contexts, and the nature of the unique interactivity between storyteller and audience.

A search for the correct interpretation of Bushman stories misses the point. As Bieseles has argued (1993), Bushmen give no particular significance to holding any fixed meaning or narrative. There is not a singular fixed story or explanation that is important in their scheme of things. More dramatically, a hermeneutic search is essentially regarded as a seductive dead end offered by trickster. Bushmen hunt for n/om, entry to First Creation, and any form of communication, story, or explanation offers a resource only to the extent that it interactionally evokes change, the kind of change that awakens relationality and inspired emotion, especially when it brings them inside the whirling of change.

Bushman stories are not ambiguous in any trivial way. Their expression is unambiguously about transformational change and its embodiment. This is not interpreted or

conceptualized change; it is evoked change, brought about by situational improvisation with little concern over whether meaning is being construed or reproduced. Noting ambiguity is as much a comment on the anthropologist, psychologist, sociologist, or folklorist with respect to how they try to categorize and systematize what they behold. Unless an outsider steps inside the domain of feeling that inspires a Bushman to dance or to laugh at a story, or shake during a puberty rite, there is little hope that a published professional narration and commentary will have any relationship to the integrity of Bushman experience.

When a Bushman story mentions a body organ, it will typically emphasize the organ that embodies the most transformation. The best example is the intestine, an organ the Bushmen regard as having the most n/om. One n/om-kxao was regarded as a strong doctor because he had a vision of the Sky God throwing him up a giraffe's anus, where he danced in the animal's intestines.

One classic form of a Bushman story involves a hungry wife telling her lazy husband to go on a hunt. When he returns with some eland meat, she is so hungry that she eats her husband. Later in the story, she finds herself shitting out her husband who, in turn, eats her. Although the story dances across many levels that include sexual hunger and exchanges of who is hunting whom, the most important aspect of the story is to deliver the kind of change that helps the listener feel the n/om that underlies all changing forms.

Bushman storytelling asks a storyteller to both deliver the story with n/om and to use the story as a way of receiving n/om. The latter is as true for the teller of the story as it is for the listener. As a story is told, the speaker's emotions become amplified and the story starts to come alive. It seems to have a mind of its own and is improvised outside any previously designed expectations and control of the performer. It is the surprise of improvisation and the way it feeds emotional awakening that helps the storyteller feel n/om. As n/om continues to embrace both story and performer, the context is invigorated and the electricity of a soulful performance is experienced by all. In this climate of energized immediacy and creative possibility, everyone is given an opportunity to feel more alive and to be transformed at any moment by a sudden unexpected change that is delivered by a voice moved by the situational truth of its own spontaneity. We can map this sequence of performance as follows:

Story is told in a changed way -----> N/om is awakened -----> Entry into 1st Creation

As seen, we begin with a story that is recognized by all. The emotional delivery of the story helps make its delivery be more than mere repetition. It brings life to the story, which in turn, inspires the story to become improvised and changed in the telling. Of course, a storyteller may already come to the story full of n/om. In which case, the story immediately starts inside n/om and First Creation. Furthermore, as the audience becomes emotionally excited, this also fires up the performance. Story, storyteller, and audience all interact in ways that help bring forth awakened emotions that serve the deliverance of n/om. In this theatre, everyone aims to enter First Creation, the source of renewal and healing. We move from a changing story to a charged storyteller and transformed audience.

Perhaps we could say that a story must be cut, a new distinction drawn on it, so that it can bleed, marking entry into First Creation. When the story re-enters life, it gives revitalization to the story-teller who now is feeling the n/om associated with all this changing. The community, captivated by his performance and the sounds of n/om which deliver it, are also recharged as they enter the creation of a changing story and altered story-teller, doing so while traversing a border crossing into the life of a newly emerged world.

The Healing Dance

All Bushman healing involves entry into First Creation where the changing or *N!o'an-kal'ae* is embodied by a trembling ecstatic healer. Bushman healers first feel an emotional intensity that amplifies until they experience the world whirling, a passage across the border between Second and First Creation. As their bodies start to shake, they are more inclined to sing rather than speak, for the emotional intensity encourages more emotive forms of expression. Their singing is inspired improvisation that triggers even more body automatisms, the effortless trembling that feels like the mind has less conscious control over one's performance. Narrating and evaluating mind give way to improvised spontaneous movements, rhythm, and music. In other words, creation in the moment is itself an enactment of First Creation performance. Finally, more holistic and aesthetic engagement with others is fostered, resulting in interactions that aim to inspire healing and transformation.

We propose that a highly important frame for contextualizing Bushman life, especially its most sacred events, is found in how First Creation re-entry is utilized as a means of accessing n/om. All dance conduct serves this border crossing and contributes to maintaining presence inside First Creation once it has been reached. Songs are sung to move bodies, while dancing brings forth more spirited singing, as doctors and community try to get outside the bounded frames that habituated distinctions prescribe. When a n/om-kxao is full of nom, or fully cooked, he loses the capacity for speech and can only sing musical like tones or make improvised sounds. This is when healing interactions are most potent. As the n/om-kxao places his trembling hands and body onto another person and sings in a spirited way, it is contagious. The other person, if ready (or "soft"), will then catch the trembling, interpreted as receiving an arrow of n/om. In this way, the awakening of one person functions to share an exhilarated performance with others. Healers are lighting rods that first catch n/om, but do so to spread it into the whole community.

Bushmen live to "hunt n/om", as elders often phrase it. Puberty rites, storytelling, and healing dances all serve to nurture this hunt. Each is an opportunity to cross the border from Second to First Creation and then to return again. Bleeding together is transformed into dancing and singing together. Laughing together in a story helps awaken the body trembling that encourages entry into the changing. All provide open doors to First Creation where transformation resides as it changes stuck forms and provides new alternatives. It is like a reset – the stress and stuckness a person, relationship, or community experience is deleted as one's whole being is reset by the trembling change felt in First Creation.

The Bushman dance is a paradigm for Bushman culture:

Inspired expression -----> Entry to 1st Creation -----> Renewed return to 2nd Creation

The singing, dancing, laughing, and trembling of Bushman performers are all variations of the enactment of change, inspired by feelings that capture their hearts. If a giraffe suddenly runs across the horizon and a Bushman "catches the feeling for it", as it did for Beh (Bieseke, 1993; personal communication with /Kunta Boo, 2009) she may receive an inspired song, which in turn is shared with the people. Hearing the story and singing the song bring forth imitated movements of the giraffe, and the emergence of a giraffe dance. All serve entry into First Creation, where one may become a giraffe if one's heart is inspired by the latter's movement and presence. This is done to help bring the whole community into First Creation, where their relations with giraffes also participate in the inspired healing of one another.

The Bushmen sometimes say that they “own n/om.” This translates to “own the feeling for n/om.” Similarly they may own god or a giraffe, that is, they own the feeling for them. Such ownership requires a song that expresses the felt relationship with the other. In that relationship is found a bridge that carries one to becoming the other, whether experienced as a sympathetic resonance or as a fantasized morphing of identity. Though Second Creation always sits inside First Creation, we do not always go past a conceptualization and actually feel this inclusion. Similarly we do not always feel an identity with a giraffe, eland, or god. The entry to First Creation is perhaps more accurately portrayed as an entry into sung relationship with the other, and in so doing we may awaken our emotions to feel a oneness which linguistic distinctions previously distanced.

The Bushman’s hunt for n/om is always the journey of carrying a song to the other. When a hunter goes looking for a kudu, they sing a vision-given kudu song. It helps them feel a relationship with the animal, and for a strong hunter, the relationship is actually dreamed and later regarded as a rope connecting them to the animal. Like other spiritual traditions of the African Diaspora, ropes and lines refer to the song lines that connect all living forms. Inside these lines is relationality, connectivity, oneness, and the potential experience of becoming the other. First Creation, in other words, is a way of pointing to the sanctification of ecological relations. Here indigenous wisdom keepers value sacred songs over technology, knowing that only inspired song and dance can keep the lines of relationship strong. In First Creation, all relations are strong and the song lines connecting all living forms enables heartfelt transport to ownership of any and all possible identities. Here we transcend culture, gender, and species, in favor of being a transient, changing participant who finds life inside the acts of recursive creative change, the way god expresses creation.

Implications for Social Work

Both RFA and the Bushman framework of First and Second Creation invite social workers to first and foremost become aware of the primary distinctions and contextual frames they construct and impose. More important than a desire to be “open” to diversity and respect Bushman ways of knowing, is the capacity to acknowledge how one’s actions serve maintaining particular ways of framing and construing experience. Typically social workers are trained to mediate experience through discourse, whether in the form of psychological or sociological assessments, clinical conversation, or the presumed handling of narratives (e.g., narrative therapy or “collective” narrative practice). This includes macro-level diagnosis, or ways of identifying community problems and constructing plans of systemic action. As the Bushmen place greater value and emphasis on changing and shifting forms rather than static interpretation – the “trickster talk” that breeds dualisms – they do not think in terms of diagnostic assessments or categorical ways of framing experience. Social workers who come in with assessment tools, whether intended to measure or deduce “trauma”, “needs”, or even “strengths” and “resources”, are already imposing a foreign way of framing so-called problems and solutions, change, and healing⁴. Even well-intentioned social workers who have

⁴ McCall and Resick (2003), for example, conducted a study in which they assessed PTSD symptoms among the Ju/’hoan Bushmen. Their expressed goal was to determine whether or not PTSD could be found and measured across cultures, and they chose the Bushmen due to their being a hunger-gatherer, “radically non-Western” (p. 444) society. Relying on a Bushman translator to conduct all interviews using a PTSD assessment tool they had translated from English into the Bushman language, the study indeed found PTSD symptoms among the Bushmen interviewed. What the authors fail to account for, however, is that any questions asked during any kind of interview already construct the primary distinctions and frames that set the content of a given interaction in motion (Keeney & Keeney, 2012a, 2012b). When someone is asked about a traumatic event and to discuss their relationship to it, the contextual frame of “relating to a traumatic event” is, at least inside that conversational exchange, made primary. In other words, build the frame and the necessary distinctions that fit the frame will

been taught to respect cultural diversity and first listen to the needs and desires of a community before intervening will likely find, as did anthropologists (Keeney, 1999; 2002), that Bushman explanations of even their most important experiences are often contradictory and changing. The use of assessments as a way of entering into interaction with a community brings its own way of framing; it assumes that a correct understanding of an issue precedes correct action. The Bushmen, in contrast, emphasize performance and action over discourse, where particular narratives or understanding arise uniquely for the situation that brought them forth (Keeney, 2009). Bushmen are aware of the trap of giving too much importance to interpretive talk, where the production of dichotomies and dualisms inhibits the flow of ongoing change. Any social worker emphasizing the handling of narrative (whether defined as individual or collective), for example, is imposing a way of helping that fails to join with or respect traditional Bushman culture.

Rather than assume the primacy of any particular narrative or interpretation, social workers can step into a more improvisational, situationally-driven relationship to offering any form of help or service that respects a more complex, holistic holding of experience. For example, had a social worker joined us on a recent visit to the Bushmen she would have discovered that one of the most pressing community issues at the time was the presence of a rogue elephant that had been bothering the village and destroying the bore holes where water is obtained. The elders informed us that the elephant was most likely a troubled ancestor, as evidenced in part by its enormous size and very long tail. Various reasons were given for its presence, including the suggestion that the situation was precipitated by someone dancing the wrong kind of healing dance. The specific cause is arguably less important than the fact that for the Bushmen, such an occurrence is contextually held inside a relationship to whatever else is happening in the life of the community at that time. It is conceivable, for example, that if a social worker had arrived in the village during this episode full of “trickster talk” and foreign ideas that she might be regarded as having been sent by the elephant to further disrupt the community. Though such an idea would likely seem absurd to the social worker, if we step inside the more relational knowing of the Bushmen we might see that, at least for that time, such an explanation holds as much truth about the relationship between a social worker and the community as any presumed more “rational” explanation of relational dissonance.

Social workers can ask themselves whether they are willing to subject their own ideas to the changing of First Creation and creatively interact with whatever metaphors and frames arise inside their ongoing interactions with a community. Here an emphasis on performed action and interaction with shifting metaphors, distinctions, and contextual frames replaces the emphasis on understanding, assessment, explanation, or definitive conclusion. To understand Bushman life requires looking at the way important events are contextualized inside the crossing between First and Second Creation, or the re-entry and renewal of everyday, distinguished reality into the always-changing whole. In other words, does a social worker participate in having her theories and narratives transformed and revitalized inside this border crossing? This includes having a relationship to *n/om*, the creative life force that underlies change. Social workers who desire to work with the Bushmen must themselves develop a relationship to *n/om*, and step inside the contextual frame where the presence of *n/om* and the cultivation of a relationship to it is primary. *N/om*, however, is experientially held in performance rather than explanatory discourse. In other words, participating in a

come. Here the researchers fail to note that their very survey questions, regardless of having been translated, construct and fulfill a particular way of punctuating experiential reality that belongs to the Western researcher, not necessarily the Bushmen interviewed. Such an interaction then can reveal almost nothing about the Bushman way of relating to so-called trauma. An RFA of the transcribed interviews would at most reveal something about the researcher's way of framing experience and construing reality, and the dynamics inside the particular conversational interactions that took place.

Bushman healing dance or experiencing a n/om-filled storytelling are more likely to bring a social worker into relationship to n/om than conducting interviews about it. There can never be a quantitative or qualitative assessment tool for n/om or a “n/om scale” crated for its measurement. Such approaches reify and freeze us inside the static naming of Second Creation, and lack any mechanism for awakening the n/om of creative, change-filled performance that marks re-entry into First Creation.

It is our view that there can be no effective or respectful helping relationship to Bushman communities without relationship to n/om-kxaosi (traditional doctors) and the healing dance. Consider that before there ever was social work, psychology, or the western concept of “trauma”, the Bushmen for centuries have practiced their own way of healing and transforming relationships, conflict, sickness, and traumatic experiences. No program or service ought to be offered in a Bushman community without the leadership of respected elders and n/om-kxaosi. This may mean (especially early on in one’s relationship to a Bushman community), that a social worker may be called to support that which she does not fully understand. Social workers can ask themselves whether their actions affirm the Bushman way of healing and supporting well-being, or whether they presume it is lacking or somehow less than what is offered by contemporary psychology, social justice theory, or therapeutic orientations. Here developing a definitive understanding of n/om and Bushman healing is less important than whether one’s actions bring forth a relationship to n/om and affirm the n/om-kxaosi as holders of wisdom and transformative know-how.

We invite scholars who study or reflect upon Bushman experience to reverse the way they have been framing them. Rather than explain Bushmen by contextualizing them as examples of psychological hallucination or western social theory, do the opposite. Place your own distinctions, discourse, and ways of expression inside their frames of reference. Ask yourself, does your presence and way of interacting serve n/om? To what extent are you caught in trickster discourse? Are your stories and explanations constantly changing, doing so to keep you alive? Do your ways of discussing Bushmen inspire you to sing and dance? Have your interactions with Bushmen or historical accounts about them, or the viewing of rock art images evoked an entry into First Creation where you tremble with ecstatic joy? Or have all your ways of investigating and reporting calmed you into a certainty about the primacy of narration and interpretation, especially that inspired by western epistemology? Do you know what it means to shake through the night and dream of the ancestors who infuse you with a longing for deep relationship? Or are you caught inside the bondage of trickster mind, bound to continue proving a certain explanation, hypothesis, or account of what is true about the Bushmen or you?

In the opening pages of his book on Bushman religion, Guenther (1999, p. 4) claims that “the conceptual fastening or holding devices at one’s disposal in the anthropological study of religion are unsuited for so variable, contradictory, and protean a cultural mass – or mess – as Bushman religion.” We suggest that the “mess” is more likely be found in the anthropologist’s tools and epistemology, rather than in the arguably more complex ways Bushmen choose to speak and not speak about religious matters.

The Bushmen invite us to find ropes that connect. If we are concerned with entering First Creation, doing so in order to assure that Second Creation is made new and vibrant, then we are in a circular rather than lineal (and hierarchical) relationship with a wisdom that uses discourse to free us from any and all frozen texts. We invite you to be framed by Bushmen frames rather than to stay stuck inside framing them in ways that have no relationship to anything they think, communicate, or feel. Consider a Bushman choreography of shifting frames, doing so to rediscover your way back to an ancestral home.

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