

## REVIEW

Guenther, Mathias, *Tricksters and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society*.  
Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999, ix +  
289 pp., 0 253 21344 4 (paper).

This book presents the author's insights, gathered during his three decades of research, on the religions of the San, or Bushman. Unlike most other studies of San religions, Guenther's never focused only, or mainly, on the few remaining foraging San, who still roamed the *veld*—the vast grasslands of the Kalahari semi-desert—in small nomadic bands in the 1950s and 1960s. His research started on the Nharo farm Bushmen of the Ghanzi district living near a Christian mission. Moreover, it included not only the farm and *veld* San of the 1950s and 1960s, but also their past, as well as developments since the 1960s when they began to live in government settlements (20-23). In addition, Guenther developed a solid grasp of the wider fields of Khoisan and hunter-gatherer studies.

The book consists of an introduction, nine chapters, and a conclusion. It has a bibliography of nineteen pages, in itself a fine instrument for the study of Khoisan societies and religions. In chapter 1, Bushman society is analysed, diachronically and synchronically. Its diachronic part (14-23) focuses on the Nharo San of the Ghanzi District of modern Botswana. In the 18th and 19th centuries, their small, egalitarian bands of foragers changed into large, well-armed, politically well-organised, predatory societies of up to 350 hunter-warriors, who fostered a bellicose, territorial ethos and were able to conduct hit-and-run, lightning attacks and ambushes on the whites encroaching on them. They were short-lived. By 1900, these 'proud Lords of the Desert' had been defeated, expropriated and reduced to serfdom on paternalistic, exploitative white farms, where they suffered malnutrition, a high infant mortality and disease. Only a few returned to foraging in what remained of the *veld*. After the 1970s, many farm Nharo went to live in government settlements of four to five hundred people with boreholes, paddocks, schools, stores, etc, which offered scope for private enterprise. Guenther concludes from Nharo history that San societies had a structural capacity

for developing forms of social organisation other than that of the small, acephalous, egalitarian hunter-gatherer band. The paradigmatic traits of the loose, fluid, flexible, egalitarian, politically unorganised bands of foraging San are discussed in the synchronic part of chapter 1 (23-38). Guenther shows that they forage not only for food, but also for relatives (29).

Chapter 2 is devoted to three key values of San societies: equality, sharing, and the autonomy of the assertive individual. These are contradictory values, at once communalist and individualist (57), and therefore beset with ambiguities (42). Ambiguity is also the main feature of Bushman religious belief and cosmology, discussed in chapter 3. Their religions are 'a confusing tangle of ideas and beliefs, marked by contradiction, inconsistencies, vagueness and lack of culture-wide standardization' (58), 'a wonderful muddle' (59), and 'beset with uncertainty, confusion and discrepancy' (61). They are very diverse in respect of the one or two divinities, and their manifestations in the mantis and the moon, and in their cosmogony and cosmology. The first relates the present order to a primal time, in which the animal world displayed therianthropic traits, and of which the present world is both an (incomplete) inversion and a continuation. The second refers to the prominent symbolic nexus between humans and animals that continued to characterise the post-primal order of existence. It is marked by an ontological ambiguity between humans and animals, particularly the lion and the eland, in, for example, hunting, storytelling, ritual, and rock painting.

The ambiguity of San religions is structurally consistent, says Guenther, with the fluidity and flexibility of their social organisation, as is their cognitive style, and their constant foraging for ideas from other San, Khoekhoe, Bantu and whites. But just as San societies showed structural capacities for very different forms of social organisation, e.g. in the face of violence, so did their religions. The religion of the farm Nharo became more rational, consistent and pragmatic in the face of their stressful life on the white farms. Its range of belief variation was markedly reduced, its myths served explanation instead of entertainment, and its ritual specialisation increased. The anti-structural tendencies of foraging religion were curbed and reduced in the stressful life on the farms.

Chapters 4 to 6 deal with three core anti-structural forces in the San mental culture: the trickster, story telling, and gender. Chapter 4 presents the trickster's many faces as the very embodiment of ambiguity. He may be God, a San transformation of Jesus Christ, as well as

their inversion, the trickster-God, who is the very 'embodiment of anti-structure' (145) and the most important persona in San stories. The dazzling number and range of San stories (127) is due to their foraging for them. In chapter 5, Guenther exemplifies their variation by an analysis of the myth of the moon and the hare, which 'explains' why humans die. So, San not only forage for food and relatives but also have a foraging mind. They collect ideas, beliefs and stories in order, pragmatically and opportunistically, to use, turn and twist them for their individual ends in a society of sharing. Their pervasive 'foraging ethos' allows for both individuation and integration (137, 138, 141).

In chapter 6, gender relations are examined in San society and San myths. In society, the balance tips in favour of the males. The myths display 'a fairly strong dose of gender antagonism' (151), but depict females as 'consistently . . . show[ing] more resourcefulness and subtlety than men' (150-151), and as having sexual power over them. It would, therefore, make 'structural sense' to hold that San myths serve as 'a . . . mechanism for counteracting the male bias inherent in . . . social reality' (156). That, however, would overemphasise the 'impact stories have on Bushman tellers and listeners' (161) and cloud over the much more fundamental problem of the Western academic mind which is unable to conceptualise ambiguity (162).

Chapter 7 deals with San rites of initiation. Those for men have virtually disappeared, and those for girls have faded in social significance (167, 182). The latter are for individual girls and are fairly uniform. They have the eland dance as their liminal phase. It is a dance of courtship in which the human and animal categories are inverted and become fluid (179). The former varied greatly, but were of two kinds: the ceremony for a young hunter who had killed his first large buck, and the bush-camp in which a group of young men were initiated. Guenther regards the first as hunting magic rather than initiation, and the latter as an alien borrowing from Bantu neighbours, especially when they included stern old men issuing harsh orders and beating the young initiands with sticks.

In chapter 8, Guenther analyses 'the central ritual of Bushman religion and its defining religious institution' (181): the trance curing dance. Guenther focuses on trance as the experience of 'transcendence'; and on 'curing' as a 'synergic' process, producing an intense sensation of fellowship, which also served for a brief period as vehicle for cultural revitalisation among the oppressed farm Bushmen. Guenther's trance analysis focuses on its visionary part, in which the trancer 'enters the

spirit world and obtains from it the wherewithal to restore the health of sick fellow humans' (186).

In chapter 9, Guenther examines the reasons for the failure of Christian mission to make an impact on the San in colonial and contemporary times. These are many, but a basic one is the fundamental ideological and metaphysical incongruity between Christianity as a settler's religion, based on sedentism (222), which requires like-mindedness from its members, and the religions of San nomads, in which 'belief is highly flexible and variable . . . and devoid of orthodoxy' (223). The incompatibility of these two fundamentally opposed religious worlds explains why the San 'were unlikely ever to take to Christianity, unless their religion and society were to change in a number of fundamental ways' (223). Other than on most other ethnic groups of southern Africa, Christian mission left no deep or lasting impact on the San (200). Their minds remained uncolonised (201).

In his conclusion, Guenther reviews the theoretical approaches that have been applied to San societies and religions. He is critical of them, because academics have no tolerance for their ambiguity (228), have edited it out, and presented elegant, but misleading impressions of their coherence. Only Victor Turner's theory of liminality, anti-structure and *communitas* can explain adequately 'the mobility, openness, fluidity, flexibility, adaptability and unpredictability of the foragers' life' (246), and make (some) sense of their 'ambiguous', 'diverse, heterogeneous, surreal, and contradictory' religions.

Guenther's book is a milestone, not only for Khoisan studies and anthropology of religions, but also for the comparative study of religions, of Africa and worldwide. Ambiguity, diversity, heterogeneity, openness and flexibility, which San religions possess to a paradigmatic degree, are found also as pervasive traits in all preliterate, adoptive and adaptive, non-doctrinal religions, and even to some degree in folk piety within doctrinal religions. It is slowly beginning to dawn upon scholars of religions that our inability as academics to cope with ambiguity has made us present the community religions of humankind in much too systematic and coherent fashion, and therefore in fundamentally misleading ways. I welcome Guenther's revision of Turner's theory of anti-structure and community (237 ff.). It should be seriously explored and tested as at least another promising tool for a more adequate analysis of 'foraging religions'. Guenther's book is, therefore, important for a better grasp of the full range of the diversity of human religions. So is his analysis of the failure of the two centuries of Christian missions

to convert the San, as compared with their remarkable success among all the other indigenous peoples of South and Southern Africa. My only reservation is his narrow use of the concept of trance, which he restricts to the shamanic visions experienced in extra-body travel (186).

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