

Myth, Magic & Folklore. Semester B: *An Intensive Study of Mythology*

Reading, week 1: Megan Biesele 1993. *Women Like Meat. The folklore and foraging ideology of the Kalahari Ju'hoan*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 124-138.

Chapter 6, Selected tales and analyses. Part II, Origins and Initiations

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD *VERSION I*

The kori bustard refused the jackal and married the python instead. The kori bustard said, 'All right now, everybody, I'm the kori bustard and I'm going to marry this girl, the python.' So the kori bustard married the python. They lived together for a very long time. But the jackal was saying to herself all this while, 'Oh. Here's this man with such a wonderful headfeather. I wish my older sister would die so I could marry her fine husband.' Then one day all the women went gathering. But the jackal refused to accompany them, saying to the python, 'Sister, let's go draw water from the spring. Your husband is away, so let's go fetch water and bring it home.' So the two of them walked to the spring. A big *n=ah* tree stood near it. Its broad shadow fell over the well, and one of its branches was stretched out above the water.

This was the branch that broke and fell into the spring that day, carrying the python along with it. The jackal and her older sister arrived at the spring. The jackal said, 'Climb that tree and knock down the fruit. If you fall, I'll catch you.'

But the python said, 'You're a strong girl, climb the tree yourself and knock down the *n=ah* so we can eat. You're a young girl, a child – go on, climb the *n=ah* tree and shake down its fruit so we can eat.'

'No!' said the jackal, 'you're the one to do it; you're soft and slippery, and you can slide along the *n=ah* branches as well. Go on, you climb it. Do you think so badly of me as to imagine that if you climb and fall I won't catch you? I'll watch you and run back and forth beneath you as you climb and then jump to catch you as you come down.'

At last the python agreed. She slithered, and climbed, and slithered beautifully up the tree. When she came to the branch lying over the spring she went out on it to knock the fruit down. She shook the branch, and the *n=ah* fell down on the ground.

The python ate some of the fruit up in the tree, and the jackal ate the rest down on the ground. Then the python began to move out upon the branch so that she could reach another branch. But she lost her grip! Her smooth body slipped off the branch and she fell into the spring; '*G!o-ae!*' was the sound she made.

Her sister the jackal ran home to their camp. She went to her sister's husband and said, 'Come and see! My older sister has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree.'

At that, everyone wailed, 'If she has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree, what will we do?' When night fell, everyone just went to bed. The python's husband went to his house, and there was the jackal, pretending to be his wife. The kori bustard told her to spread out their sleeping-skins for the night. Secretly he stood bone arrows upright in the sand beneath her sleeping-place. She lay down on top of them, and began to complain that the place was thorny. But her sister used to sleep in the same place, so she had to be content. An arrow pricked her and she died in her sleep. Her anus protruded from her and stood out from her back. The kori bustard said, 'Hey, everybody, what's happened to the good wife I married recently? Why is it that today so many *n=ah* seeds are sticking in her arse?'

He stood beside the dead jackal crying for his lost wife. He mourned for her loud and long. The people said, 'Get together, everyone. Let's go and pull his wife out of the spring for him and bring her home. What makes you think we won't be able to get her out?'

The kori bustard said, 'How can she possibly get out? I'm just never going to see her again.'

But the others said to him, 'Gather lots of people together, tell everyone to come together and help you get her out. Call the wildebeests, call all the animals, whatever their names are. Gather them all together so they can work on trying to get her out.'

The kori bustard said, 'How can they help? Who will be able to reach her? All of us are too short: everyone's legs are too short to reach her, since she's so far down. Who will be able to get to her? If you go down that far, you'll never see the sky again. You'll go right down to the bottom and never come up again. A person might never see daylight again! That's how far down the

python is.’ But the next morning the kori bustard got up and went to the spring. He gathered all the animals together: the giraffes, the wildebeests, the springhares, the gemsbok – all the many animals, all the animals there are. He called them together, and told them to come to the spring. He called the female animals and he called the male animals. He told them that yesterday the python had sunk to the bottom of the water. He gathered them together and called and gathered them, and there were female animals and male animals who collected at the spring. As many as there are animals came, and they spread as far as the eye could see. The sight of them was something to behold.

Then one by one they came forward to try their luck. Each one would stick in his leg and reach down into the spring. But each one failed to go all the way to the bottom, and they all drew back their legs about half-way down. Each one said, ‘I can’t figure out a way to do it.’ The gemsbok stepped forward and put in his leg. It went down, down, down – and he almost fell in. So he pulled back his leg and stepped aside. Then the wildebeest stepped up and tried it.

But he, too, nearly fell into the water. So he drew his leg out too. The kudu tried next. He put his foot in and nearly tumbled in himself, so he pulled it back out again. As many as there were animals, as many animals as have names, that’s how many tried and failed.

All this while the giraffe just stood there, and so did the ostrich. The ostrich came forward then, and put in his legs. He sat down at the edge of the well and stretched his legs down and down and down. With the very tip of one claw he was able to scratch the python.

‘Mm,’ he said, ‘I got pretty close to her. It felt to me as if my fingertip was touching something. Why doesn’t that long fellow over there come forward and find out if it’s really the python I’m feeling?’ At this the giraffe drew himself up very tall. ‘If that guy tries it,’ said the ostrich, ‘he’s bound to get the woman out. That woman will get out if the giraffe reaches down for her!’ Then the kori bustard said, ‘Mm, the rest of us will go back to camp to look for things to spread out on the ground to receive her. We’ll spread mats from the well to the village.’

So he and the others went to do that. Many of the animals said, ‘Aah, this will never come true.’

But others replied, ‘Don’t talk like that. Just be silent. They’ve gone to fetch mats and they’ll come back and spread them out. Then you’ll see what the giraffe can do.’

No! The kori bustard didn’t call for mats to be spread first. *First* the giraffe stuck his foot into the spring. Down, down, down, down, it went. At the bottom it reached the python. The giraffe took hold of her and felt her all over. Then he withdrew his leg and said to the others, ‘I’ve put my leg all the way down and it feels like there’s more than one python down there.’ The python had given birth in the bottom of the spring. ‘Now go to the camp,’ said the giraffe, ‘and find something to spread out on the ground. Then bring them back here and fix them nicely.’

When they heard the giraffe’s words, everybody laughed and grabbed each other in delight and fell to the ground. ‘How has this fellow managed to do it?’ they asked each other.

Then they ran back to the camp and began to spread mats from the camp to the spring. Then the giraffe stepped out of the crowd again. He rocked backwards and forwards on his long legs as he approached the spring. He reached in with his leg, and reached and stretched right down to the bottom. He grasped the python and shook the mud off her while she was still down there. Then he opened his mouth and laughed! He began bringing her up and up and up toward the surface. It was a very deep spring! It was a fearsome spring, and a deep waterhole. As the python came near the surface, the other animals saw her and hugged each other. They fell to the ground laughing. The giraffe brought her up, and lifted her to the surface. At last he laid her on the ground. She lay there and vomited up water. Then the giraffe pulled a baby python out of the spring and laid it beside its mother.

The animals were so delighted that they embraced each other and rolled on their backs on the ground. ‘Here’s our beautiful girl again,’ they said, ‘What the jackal did was a terrible thing.’

Then they brought a whisk to wipe her face. ‘*G/a!*’ it went across her brow, and they said, ‘Yes, isn’t this the woman we were looking for the other day? And today she’s come up out of the spring, and here she is.’

Then they greeted her and embraced her and exclaimed over her. ‘Yes, this is a very good thing the giraffe has done for us.’ Then the python walked on the trail of mats with her child back to the camp. She walked beautifully and gracefully back home to her own house.

‘Yes. It’s our own daughter again,’ said the people of the camp. ‘Here she is, and that jackal over there is dead, and good riddance.’ The kori bustard greeted his wife and said, ‘Oh my good wife, today you’ve come home to me!’ She glided regally and smoothly like she always had, and she sat down before her house and looked around at everyone.

Later she took her child to bed and they both slept well for a long time. The people said, ‘Mm. This is the right woman. This is

the daughter of our camp for sure. She fits in with the camp so well, and she's so very beautiful.'

So the people lived there together. After a while they separated and travelled around to different places. The kori bustard's heart was so happy that he ran about tossing his head feather. He ran and tossed his head feather in praise of his wife. And the two of them went on living. Mm, yes, that's how it was. My friend, that's how it happened.

Told by Tci!xo N!a'an, G!oce, Botswana, 1972

[p. 129] *VERSION II*

The older sister, the python, was pregnant. She and her younger sister, the jackal, went one morning to fetch water. People were drinking at that time from a rock spring, and they went to draw water from it. In the well was a *n=ah* tree with ripe fruits on it.

The python said to her sister, 'Climb up and shake that *n=ah* branch, so we can have *n=ah* to eat.'

But the jackal refused. 'Uh-uh,' she said. 'Older sister, climb up yourself and shake down something for us to eat.'

So the python herself had to climb the tree. She was pregnant and heavy. When she was up in the tree, she reached for the branch she wanted to shake. But she missed her grasp, and fell into the water. She went down into the spring. She tried to climb out but the sides were too steep. She had to remain in the spring. She gave birth down there. The python's in-laws looked up and saw the jackal come running from the spring. She ran with a funny gait, wobbling from side to side. The in-laws sat and watched her come into the camp.

'*Yau!*' they said. 'Where's our beautiful daughter-in-law? The jackal has come back alone; we thought our daughter-in-law had gone with her to the spring. What has this jackal done with her older sister?'

When the jackal came up to where they were sitting, the in-laws took a whisk and drew it across her face. That was what they were accustomed to do to her older sister. They would draw a whisk loaded with fat across her face, so that her face would be smooth and shiny.

But the jackal misunderstood: 'Fat! Fat! There's fat dripping on my face,' she yelled, and she began to drink it. The people said, 'We were right, you are certainly not our daughter-in-law. What have you done with her? What do you think you're doing coming back without her and pretending to be the beautiful python?'

Now all this while the kori bustard, the husband of the python, had been off hunting. When he came home he saw the jackal and said, 'Where's my wife?' (The jackal had told the people nothing of how her sister had fallen into the spring. She just kept quiet.) As the jackal was still walking about from fire to fire, the kori bustard went to prepare their sleeping place. He took porcupine quills and stuck them upright in the sand beneath the jackal's sleeping-skins. When the jackal lay down to sleep, the quills stuck in her ribs. They pierced right through her skin.

'Hey!' she yelled. 'Get rid of all these spikes!' But the kori bustard pretended not to hear. Finally the jackal was quiet. The porcupine quills killed her. She died, and continued to lie inside the house.

In the morning the kori bustard got up and went off. The jackal's little sister was told by her grandmother, 'Go and see what's happening about your sister. Is she staying inside the house because she's menstruating? What is she doing sleeping so late?' The little girl ran to see. The jackal had died and the *n=ah* seeds were protruding from her anus. The little girl saw this and called to her grandmother. 'Granny! *N=ah* seeds have dried-dried in older sister's arse-arse.' The grandmother called back, 'Granddaughter! Did you say I should bring a pubic apron to tie on her?'

The granddaughter shook her head and called a little louder, 'Uh-uh. Older sister, for heaven's sake, died in the night and the *n=ah* has dried in her arse-arse!' 'Did you say I should bring a cloth pubic apron and tie it on her?'

Well, they shouted back and forth for a while. The little girl said again, '*N=ah* seeds-seeds have dried-dried in older sister's arse-arse!'

Finally the old lady came to see. By this time her granddaughter had broken off the *n=ah* that was protruding from her sister's anus. The grandmother came over and said, 'Oh, is your sister dead?' and then the two of them ate her. They roasted the jackal and ate her.

Meanwhile the kori bustard had gone off to gather all the animals together. He called the giraffe, the elephant, the gemsbok – all the animals. They all walked until they were together at the spring. One by one they stuck their legs into the spring. But their legs weren't long enough – they only reached half-way. The eland put in his leg. But it didn't reach. The gemsbok came up and put in his leg. But it didn't reach either. The wildebeest stuck his leg into the spring but failed to reach the bottom. All the animals – kudus, steenboks, duikers, tortoises, turtles – all gave it a try. Hartebeests, lions, everything – all tried to reach the python, but their legs weren't long enough.

'Who will I call to help me?' asked the kori bustard. 'Call the giraffe,' said someone.

'Yes, I'll call him.'

The giraffe came forward and put in his leg. Now the python had given birth down there in the bottom of the spring. She had her child with her and they were together at the bottom of the spring. The giraffe put in his leg and felt about. He said to the python's husband, 'She's carrying a baby. She has given birth and she's down there with her baby and I can feel both of them.'

So the kori bustard sent someone off to the camp to fetch mats to lay on the ground. They brought the mats and laid them all the way between the spring and the camp. Again the giraffe put in his leg. He pulled out the python and her child. The two of them went to sit on the mat. Then her in-laws came to take her home to their camp. They all embraced her and sat down on the ground together joyfully. Here's our dear daughter-in-law

we've been searching for, here she is, most certainly.' Then the kori bustard and his wife and child walked slowly and gracefully home along the line of mats.

These are things that were told to me by the old people. They told them and I listened. Would I be lying?

Told by /Asa N!a'an, Kauri, Botswana, 1971

[p. 132] *VERSION III*

G!kon//'amdima and her younger sister went to the spring.

G!kon//'amdima fell in and her sister left her there and ran home. When she got back to the camp, the kori bustard looked surprised and said, 'My wife ... where's my wife?' He saw that only one girl had returned from the spring. To test whether she was his wife he passed a whisk across her face. Where there should have been the smoothness of his wife's face he felt only hairy jowls, for the younger sister was a jackal.

Fat dripped from the whisk and the jackal licked it in glee. 'But if this were really G!kon//'amdima,' thought the kori bustard, 'she would have just let the fat slide over her smooth skin as she always does. This must be my wife's younger sister instead.'

Well, the jackal, trying to imitate her sister's walk, managed to slide sedately to their grandmother's fire. While she sat there, the kori bustard was arranging their sleeping place. He spread out skins and then took arrows and stuck them upright in the sand beneath the place where the jackal was going to sleep. Soon she came to join him. She tried to lie down but something stuck in her back. 'What the ... why do I have to sleep in a spot that feels like this? It's all thorny here.'

But the kori bustard replied, 'Oh, let's just go to sleep. My spot feels just as bad as yours, and I'm not complaining.'

In the night the jackal died from the arrow poison.

The next morning her little sister came to see about her: the sun rose higher and higher and hung in the sky but still she did not come out of her house.

'Granny,' called the little girl when she found the dead jackal. '*N=ah* seeds have dried in older sister's arse-arse.'

'Did you say that I should come and put a beaded pubic apron on her?'

'No! I said *n=ah* has dried in older sister's arse-arse.'

Finally the grandmother came to see for herself. She picked up the dead jackal and carried her out to the fire. Then she gathered wood and built up the fire to roast her. She spent the rest of the day eating the roasted jackal. She would eat, then rest a while, and eat again. Meanwhile everyone came out of the bush and gathered at the spring. Everyone – the gemsbok, the eland, the giraffe, the zebra. First one, and then the other of them would stick his foreleg into the opening and try to reach G!kon//'amdima.

The eland came forward and tried but he couldn't reach her. Then the gemsbok tried, but his leg wasn't long enough. One by one they came forward and stuck their legs into the spring.

But no one could reach her. At last the giraffe came up and put in his leg. And it reached right down to where she was.

So the kori bustard called for skin mats to be spread all the way from the spring to the camp. Then the giraffe drew G!kon//'amdima out of the spring and sat her down on a skin. She sat there and dried out. Then they brought her back into the camp and sat her down there.

That's the story of G!kon//'amdima. The jackal fooled her brother-in-law into whisking her face, but he discovered she wasn't his wife at all. G!kon//'amdima and the kori bustard were so happy to see each other, and all the people said, 'Yes, here's our niece at last: that other girl was the wrong one all along.'

[p. 134] DISCUSSION: FEMALE VISIONS OF ORDER

The 'female' creation story centres around a lovely python girl who is sometimes called G!kon//'amdima, the name of the central Ju/'hoan heroine. The jackal character acts as a foil for the womanly grace of this python. In many versions of this episode great attention is given by the storytellers to colourful verbs differentiating the python's behaviour from that of the jackal. The python walks-and-shimmers, walks very slowly, sparkles like the sun, glides like a grand person, =xain=xani-n=haoh ha /'ae, undulates slowly along, =xani=xani-n/ang, sits down gracefully or undulates to a sitting position. The jackal on the other hand *kainkain*, wobbles, or bounces, making a sound like !khu !khu !khu! She laughs harshly, //ka //ka, //ka! and speaks in a rough voice, going wa wa wa! The whisk, which made a sound like g!an across the python's smooth face, instead goes //ae //ae (a rough sound) across the jackal's dry and hairy one.

The python is all a woman should be – slow and sedate of gait, acquiescent and helpful, beautiful, sophisticated, quiet, married, and pregnant. In some versions it is stressed that she smells sweet and has beautiful clothing and ornaments, and knows how to wear them. The jackal, in contrast, is contrary and treacherous, awkward and bouncing in her movements, ugly and hairy rather than smooth-skinned, easily excitable, naive, noisy – and single. She is an inverted creature who in some versions puts on her sister's clothing inside out and backwards: she laughs harshly, and she smells bad. Instead of giving birth to a child, she produces out of her body only the *n=ah* seeds that protrude from her anus.

The jackal is the opposite of a woman. She is not a man, though, but a *tci=xei=xei* (worthless, bad thing, barren or abnormal person). She does not have a husband of her own and so strives to get her sister's husband away from her by treachery. Her infertility is underscored by the questions put by her hard-of-hearing grandmother about her menstruation in the various other versions:

'Is she staying inside the house because she's menstruating?' 'Did you say I should bring a pubic apron to tie on her?'

'Did you say I should bring a cloth pubic apron to tie on her?'

'Should I bring a beaded pubic apron?'

There are clear indications that the jackal is going through the first menstrual ceremony. During and after this ceremony, the girl is not supposed to talk to other people 'even if people give her food or are laughing,' one old grandmother told me. The girl who is menstruating for the first time lies curled under a blanket. An old woman who may be her grandmother anoints her with fat and brings her food to eat. When she leaves the hut 'to urinate or defecate, she is carried on the back of a kinswoman' (L. Marshall 1959: 356).

The grandmother's questions, then, emphasise the ridiculous inappropriateness of the jackal as a substitute for her fecund sister. Not only has the python made the most of her time in the spring, lying there quietly and giving birth, but as one informant said, 'that was why her husband had gone off hunting in the first place, because his wife was pregnant and her heart wanted meat'. The jackal cannot even manage to menstruate: she is in the seclusion house after sunrise merely because she is dead.

While the python is going through a kind of birth-seclusion which brings about an augmented restoration of the social order, the jackal has a hollow mockery of a menarchal seclusion (L. Marshall 1959: 336) which culminates in her being eaten by her own grandmother and sister. This act of cannibalism is the opposite of the loving, protective relationship which should obtain between grandmother and granddaughter, especially during the granddaughter's first menstrual ceremony.

In the story, the jackal is not only raucously talkative but in some versions she makes an egregious mistake about the liquid fat with which her 'husband' greets her. When she lies curled under a blanket she does so not because she is menstruating but because she is dead. Far from carrying her out so that she will not foul the hut, her kinswoman discovers she has already defecated there, and proceeds in some versions to eat the faeces.

Though in some versions the grandmother is referred to as 'the old jackal lady', in a version collected by Richard Lee she is a dung beetle named //Uce who is glad to see that faeces have dried in her granddaughter's anus: 'Praise, praise, she did well to die,' she cries. The old lady builds a fire and roasts the jackal, eating her afterwards, as reported with great detail, for instance, in the tale told earlier in this book by the Old Ostrich Lady.

Besides the themes of correct and 'inverted' femininity, the 'female' creation story also contains allusions to male concerns. The jackal dies because she is pierced by bone arrows or by 'porcupine quills' (from which Ju/'hoan men make arrow shafts). It is clear the jackal's death is caused by the effects of arrow poison. Usually it is arrows which are stood in rows in the sand by the kori bustard and covered then with the jackal's blankets. In most versions of the story, in fact, it is quite specifically /omn//asi, bone arrows, which are used. Ju/'hoan hunters say that symptoms of arrow poisoning include feeling like one wants to defecate all the time but not being able to (Marjorie Shostak, personal communication, Dec. 1970). Furthermore, the way the arrows are stuck in the sand in the stories (usually pantomimed by the storytellers) corresponds exactly to the way arrowheads are stuck in the sand

at an angle by the hunters today to hold them upright while they are being poisoned.

There are other indications of the relevance of hunting themes to this 'women's story.' For instance, Richard Lee's version is immediately preceded in his field notes by a statement that the main male characters 'were dancing Eland one night and the next morning they went out and killed eland.' The dance of the Eland Bulls is only performed at a girl's menarchal ceremony, and the girl is specifically to avoid eating eland meat. But when she is anointed by the old woman it is preferably eland fat that is used. In a story collected by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (17.1.53), men come home with eland meat just before the jackal tricks G!kon//'amdima into falling into the spring. The theme of the men's hunting and also what they are hunting thus bears a close relationship to the female themes of menarche and marriage. Men's activities are shown to be complementary and indispensable to those of women.

When it comes to retrieving the python girl from the spring, it is her husband who organises the rescue operation.

Only the tall, obliging giraffe can reach her with his long legs. The other animals try, and fail. The giraffe, portrayed as gracious and graceful like the python herself, 'comes forward undulating like something tall'.

In Lee's version he is named Zarudum or 'Pipe Gullet'. When he triumphantly brings up the beautiful G!kon//'amdima, the python girl, and her newborn child, all the animals and people are there to celebrate the occasion. Rightful order is restored. In one version, 'the kori bustard's heart was so happy that he ran about tossing his head feather. He ran and tossed his head feather in praise of his wife. And the two of them went on living.'

However, in the version of this story collected by Lee there is a sobering anticlimax; this world-ordering outcome is implied by the events of the story but is not enunciated by all the storytellers.

... But when they came back to the village, Python's father, Old Elephant, was grave.

'Oh, what has that trash Jackal done to my beautiful daughter, since she no longer sparkles as before?' He got all his medicines and washed her and cleansed her and blew in her eyes and blew in her ears to erase the awful memories of the evil that she suffered at the hands of Jackal in the cold darkness of the well.

After the cleansing, Father Elephant called everyone together and became very serious. 'This Jackal affair has spoiled my heart. You, Kori, I trusted my daughter to you and you let her get into this mess. Now go away and just be a bird who flies around and eats gum off the bark of trees. And you, my daughter Python, who used to be so beautiful, you will just be a snake and lie around coiled in the shadows. And I too, will just go away and be an elephant tearing up and throwing up trees looking for food to eat. Let this camp be split up forever. Let us all live separately. We are no longer related.'

And so they all split up, went their separate ways and became the animals they are today.

Lee's ending makes it clear that the import of this story as a fall from grace is similar to that in 'The Branding of the Animals'. From this day at the spring, paralleled by the day at the branding camp, animals are just animals and no longer have human characteristics. From then on they have gone their separate ways. The initiatory theme of the menstrual rite in this story is similarly echoed in the branding story: 'These pretty ones are the ones who will turn into meat animals.' The branding deals with the young boys' structural equivalent of the menstrual rite, their ceremony of the first kill. Both stories stress the themes of individuation and right relationship to the adult social world that are so important in the initiations for both sexes. Etymological connections between the words used in both contexts are evidence, further, that initiation, the process of becoming full human beings, is symbolised in both these stories?

Fully adult men thus have their origin in fire. Before they are branded with fire they are little boys. Afterwards, they are hunters, with all that this implies of adult social responsibilities. Women, on the other hand, originate in water. Their fecundity is connected with seclusion in a watery place, and as they emerge from this place as established childbearers the social world around them falls into its rightful order.

TEMPLATE for writing a short (1 – 2 page) commentary:

Course title. Your student number. Date of assignment.

Bibliographical details of this reading (author name, initials, year, title, place, publisher).

Summary of (a) the story and (b) the anthropologist's commentary.

Where does this story come from? Can you connect it with any other myths known to you?

How do you subjectively feel about the story? How do you think we should try to interpret tales of this kind?

Comment on (a) the specific motifs and (b) the overall message.