

ETHNOPOETICS AND ALLEGORY

In the early 1870s, the German linguist W.H. Bleek, having come to South Africa some twenty years earlier at the bequest of Bishop Colenso of Natal to produce an ethnographic work on the Zulu language, began with his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd the work of transcribing and translating thousands of oral records produced by several /Xam bushmen that Bleek himself had brought into his service. The bushmen, all of whom had been relocated to Cape Town to work as convict-laborers, related numerous /Xam legends, myths, fables, and narratives, resulting in a wealth of ethnographic and linguistic information and analysis, producing a cultural archive of an ethnic group that by the late 19th century had been all but exterminated by systemic genocidal policies and practices in colonial South Africa.

In 2001, South African poet and scholar Alan James published a series of poems using Bleek's transcriptions of his interviews with the /Xam bushmen. "The Backbone of the Moon" is attributed to the /Xam narrator //Kabbo, as translated by Bleek himself:

the bushes are not kind to us when the night is black because the moon
has died for we stumble over them as we walk back in the dark along
paths that the moon has not made white and we therefore long for the
moon to return so that we might follow our footprints home:

(said //Kabbo, as he told of the moon having been cut by the sun):

and at last it returns, the moon's backbone returns:

It comes back alive and it grows, it thinks that it will grow:

it comes out lying in the evening dawn and it really grows:

the backbone of the moon gives a little light as it comes:

it feels that the sun which has cut away at its flesh has left some flesh on
one side of its bone and it therefore comes back alive and it grows for it
thinks that it will now put on a stomach and as it comes it gives out light
but it gives out only a very little light because it is but the side of the bone
and it is still turning red:

[...] and when it had grown its great stomach it again comes forth and it is
fully red and it glides along and it shines so strongly that the ground itself
shines and the path is made white and the night is as light as noon and we
walk along well as we carry the meat back home.

(James 2001: 12-13)

How might contemporary readers read this text? At one level it appears to be an oral narrative, retelling a myth or legend presumably central to /Xam cosmology. This then would be an ethnographic text, or a contemporary example

of ethnopoetics, archiving a now lost and irretrievable storytelling tradition belonging to a premodern (and pre-literate) African tribe. It would thus be read as exemplary of both /Xam poetics *and* cultural history, there being no clear way for a (contemporary, Western) reader to categorize or distinguish "creative" stories from anthropological *evidence* (i.e., this tells us something about /Xam religion and cosmology; the individual's storytelling can be taken as representative of /Xam culture as a whole, etc.). Further, the content of the narrative would be read—*regardless of its formal presentation*—as representing a broader cultural tradition, the unity of which is, according to the logic of this kind of ethnographic hermeneutics, ceases to exist once contact has been made with modern, colonial society. In other words, it is presumed that prior to colonialism there was a single, cohesive set of /Xam traditions, myths, legends, etc., which the ethnographic project congratulates itself for having captured before the onset of modernity had sullied (if not fully erased) it¹.

Of course, there are other approaches to //Kabbo's narrative, as well as James's "re-translation" of it. It is crucial to attend to the overdetermined conditions by which this particular account emerges, which problematize any transparent reading of content by virtue of such mediations. In the James version, one is confronted with a text that is a contemporary re-inscription (and re-framing)—itself one of several such re-inscriptions within South African literature²—of a primary ethnographic text (Bleek and Lloyd's) that is in turn, a multi-decades-long, heavily edited version³ of transcribed and translated interviews of /Xam convicts who themselves had been displaced, forced into labor, and ultimately dependent on their interviewers for their physical and economic well-being. Without even needing to interrogate Bleek's own methodological approaches to ethnography and translation, or invoke the broader critiques of the ethnographic project in general⁴, one can see the pitfalls of attempting to rescue any firm sense of unmediated, authentic /Xam culture from this narrative (and others like it). Similarly, one might focus instead on the poetics at work in James' version, published in a South African poetry journal, within a context of post-apartheid discourses of non-racialism and neo-liberal multiculturalism.

Nonetheless, and for the purposes of my project crucially, such questions do not absolve one from the responsibilities of one's own reading strategies and interpretive practices. Any cultural text carries within it (and emerges within) numerous overlapping and overdetermined mediations, disciplinary and institutional frames, as well as the relations of its production, transmission, and reception. That interpretive readings of literary texts become all the more complex upon recognition of such contextual problematics is only to say that they become richer and more dynamic, and once more compel the reader to take

¹ Bleek and Lloyd's publication was entitled *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (emphasis added), as if to emphasize the disciplinary branches of natural history and the anthropological museum.

² cf. Watson (1991), for instance.

³ Actually, multiple versions, as Lloyd continued researching and editing long after Bleek's death, suggesting an interesting relationship between education (Bleek was trained as a linguist, while Lloyd initially was only given transcription duties), gender, and authorship. (cf. Bleek and Lloyd 1911, Watson 1991)

⁴ cf. Clifford (1988), among others.

responsibility for her own situated positionings, as well as her reading and interpretive strategies.

From my own position, reading across several cultural, geopolitical, temporal, and education gaps (as well as against several grains), I find it crucial to undo the kinds of interpretive frames that the kind of "ethnopoetic reading" suggested above might entail. To rid oneself of the presumption that such oral narratives must reflect a cohesive conception of ethnic identity and cultural practice is to begin to see them (and hear them) performing the work that such narratives actually do—provide an imaginary and aesthetic construction of events from within a particular cultural and historical context that continues to function in new and fluid ways (and is often put to different uses), as such narratives travel through different historical and social contexts and registers. In the case of //Kabbo's narrative, as James presents it, the "original" context is not necessarily some prehistorical (and thus pre-contact and ahistorical) tribal archive of /Xam cosmology, but rather (as I wish to argue) 1870s colonial South Africa, after the gradual extermination of the /Xam (by colonial policy as well as genocidal "sport-hunting" by white settlers) was well underway. Thus, rather than read the cosmology of sun and moon as a kind of agrarian or hunter-gatherer mythopoetics of cyclical time and seasonal renewal (i.e., the discourse of pre-historical—pre-capitalist in the Marxist lexicon—societies), I'd like to propose an allegorical reading that sees the colonial forces of brutality, enslavement, and primitive accumulation, and the potential resistance of the /Xam, as being re-articulated as a dynamic struggle in the heavens. The sun is cast as a violent force, literally hacking away the flesh of the moon, providing not light but greater darkness (at night, "when the night is black because the moon has died"). And yet the moon returns, its "backbone" being the first sign of renewal, it grows a stomach (a sign of health) and once again "gives out light." A return—to homeland and health, to where the "ground itself shines"—becomes possible for the /Xam, to where "night is as light as noon and we walk along well as we carry the meat back home."

Could this narrative be read, then, as at one level an allegory of colonialism, an aesthetic rendering of that first stage of capitalist globalization? By staging an epic struggle for life and death, light and darkness, in the heavens, the tale provides a way to re-articulate the violent ruptures of colonialism within a much broader historical frame, wherein a "return" is both called forth and promised. James' parenthetical framing device ("said //Kabbo, as he told of the moon having been cut by the sun"), foregrounding the mediated relation between the tale and the circumstances of its telling (and its transcription, retelling, etc.), also grants //Kabbo the status of a witness, of someone narrating actual historical events. Given that in /Xam mythology, the moon is said to have been a shoe of the Mantis, thrown into the sky in order to light the path homeward for Mantis and his people⁵, one thus senses the allegorical intensity of sentiments such as: "we therefore long for the moon to return so that we might follow our footprints

⁵ Indeed, the moon is said to be red due to the dust from Mantis's shoe, the "dust of his walking on earth." (Watson 1991: 18)

home." In Stephen Watson's 1991 version of the tale, the moon is granted even more agency, confronting the sun and its knife:

"Sun, leave my children, leave them alone!
Your knife is murdering my unborn moon-children.
The blade of your light stabs our light to death.
Let them still live! Let me, the moon, shine!"

[...] She calls out with a cry, a cry so piercing
that it almost breaks the blade of first light.

(Watson, "The Sun, the Moon, and the Knife," Watson 1991: 12)

The narrative (and its various reframings and reinscriptions) presents a rearticulation of the historical forces of colonialism in such a way to create a space of agency and possibility, for resistance and return, for hope and home. Indeed, //Kabbo elsewhere specifically draws a connection between himself (and his position vis-à-vis colonialism) and the moon: "Thou knowest that I sit waiting for the moon to turn back for me, that I may return to my place" ("//Kabbo's Intended Return Home," Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 299).

That James (and Watson) would re-present (in both senses of the word) //Kabbo's narrative (along with several other of "Bleek's" /Xam narratives) in the contemporary context could then be seen as an attempt not only to contribute to an ongoing project of treating such ethnographic texts as specifically aesthetic constructions, but also to recognize, after the historical setting of apartheid's sun, the traveling that //Kabbo's narrative has undertaken, at the level of both form and content. It would also provide a cautionary tale for a South Africa facing the realities of the postcolonial stage of globalization, in which contesting claims to visions of the nation's past *and* future are fundamental to the struggle over South Africa's engagement with the uneven terrains of transnational capitalism and neoliberalism. //Kabbo's tale thus returns (through all its fractured mediations), like the moon of his narrative, to claim its own stake in such struggles, moving from the clouds of cosmology (and an ethnopoetics of "tradition") to the ground of the post-contact, post-colonial, post-apartheid present (and, through its various retellings, a poetics of articulation).

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