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# Therianthropes in a Cartesian and an Animistic Cosmology: Beyond-the-Pale Monsters versus Being-in-the World Others

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**ABSTRACT:** The nature of human-animal hybrid beings (or therianthropes) is examined in an Animistic (traditional San Bushman) and a Cartesian (Early Modern Western) cosmology. In each ontological ambiguity is imagined and conceptualized in different terms. One of them is through monstrosity, which, in the Western schema, is equated with human-animal hybridity. This equivalence threatens the boundaries and categories that buttress western cosmology, through a being – the human-animal hybrid – deemed a conceptual and epistemological abomination. It elicits a category crisis that is as much cerebral as it is visceral as the were-beings it conceives are feared and demonized. No such valences attach to therianthropes in the cosmology described in this paper. It is an “entangled” cosmology shot through with ambiguity and fluidity in which human-animal hybridity is neither abominable nor feared. Instead, as a pervasive and salient theme of San world view and lifeways, especially its expressive and ritual spheres, along with hunting, ontological mutability becomes an integral component of people’s thoughts and lives and thereby normalized and naturalized. Beings partaking of this state are deemed another species of being with whom humans engage as other-than-humans, on shared social terms. Monsters are beings who negate or transgress the moral foundation of the social order. San monstrosity, conceptually and phenomenologically, becomes thereby a matter of deviation from social (moral) pre/proscriptions rather than from classificatory (ontological) ones. This basic conceptual difference notwithstanding, we also find a fundamental commonality: the inversion, through monsters and monstrosity, of each cosmology’s underlying epistemic matrices, of structure and ambiguity, respectively.

**KEYWORDS:** monster studies, San cosmology, comparative mythology, relational ontology, modes of thought, new animism

In summary, monstrousness is marked through monstrous bodies, which do not fit into the classificatory schema of the respective people they haunt [...]. Monsters are ontological puzzles that demand solutions. They are things that should not be, but nevertheless are – and their existence therefore raises vexing questions about humanity’s understanding of and place in the universe (Weinstock 2014: 1; cited in Musharbash, Presterudstuen 2014: 11).

I am not a mere Hare, but am a Bushman Hare, and am /Xue [!Kung trickster-divinity]; for thou alone art not /Xue, for we two are /Xue, and are Bushmen (Tamme, !Kung story teller; Bleek 1934/35: 263).

The two epigraphs above convey human-animal hybridity in epistemological, ontological and phenomenological terms that are conceptually distinct. One is beset with cerebral concern over classification and separation elicited by this instance of ontological ambiguity. The “vexing questions” over the fuzziness of the human-animal boundary and the factuality of the human-animal divide culminate in the demonization of beings that confound these divides as monsters. The questions in the Southern model, more visceral in tone, are about identity and conjoining, and such concern over ontological ambiguity as may be felt is balanced by awareness and acceptance of the fictiveness of the human-animal divide and the porousness of its boundary.

The difference between the two paradigms on the human-animal divide/nexus derives from the two cosmologies in which they are embedded, which are both conceptually distinct and, as recently argued by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015), geographically removed and separated, by a hegemonic intellectual “Abyssal Line”. To reflect their conceptual remove, he dubs these two epistemologies “Northern” and “Southern” (somewhat misleadingly as epistemologies of such northern people as the Siberian Yukagir, the Arctic Iglulik and Subarctic Ojibwa have “Southern” contours; see Brightman et al. 2012; Guenther 2020: 114–32). The “Northern epistemology” is dualistic, positing an ontological dichotomy between culture and nature, which Philippe Descola, in *Beyond Nature and Culture* – a global comparative “grammar” of four global ontological “schemas” and the cosmologies in which they are embedded – refers to as Western intellectual history’s “the Great Divide” (Descola 2013: 57–88). Its roots are in ancient Greece and subsequent intellectual, religious and scientific developments led to its anthropocentric crystallization in the Enlightenment, especially through some of the writings of René Descartes, one of the founders of the Age of Reason and arguably that age’s most influential *spiritus rector*. While not unopposed by contrarian “theriophilic” (Preece 2005: 233–70) views from philosophical, literary and theo-

logical quarters<sup>1</sup> – and without impact on the popular imagination throughout the ages in different regions of Europe that retained animistic and shamanistic elements from the hoary pagan past (Ginzburg, Lincoln 2020; Mencej 2019) – “Cartesianism” fueled Western scholarly thought during the four subsequent centuries. Throughout these centuries of burgeoning Modernism, this ontological and epistemological worldview, notes Descola (2013: 87), “played a directive role in the organization of the sciences”, implanting itself, with deep roots and pervasive rhizomes, within Western cosmology.

The second – “Southern” – cosmology is “connective”, positing an overlap between, and a partial merger of, these two ontological domains, especially humans and animals (as well as plants and certain features of the landscape), which/who are deemed parts/members of the same moral community and assigned thereby social and mental personhood (and, by extension, also “soul”). Revisiting and “restoring” an old and somewhat discredited term from the anthropology of religion that resonates with this schema, Descola labels it “Animistic” (2013: 129–39). His label for the Western schema is “Naturalistic”.

Descola’s rationale for designating the Western schema as he did is both conceptual and critical. In line with the “New Animism” generally, as well as with the post-colonial critique of Western intellectual hegemony regarding southern modes of thought (and of sociality)<sup>2</sup>, Descola points to the term’s implicit assumption of universalism. “Naturalism’s supreme cunning ploy”, he writes, “and the purpose of the term I use for it is to make it seem to be natural” (2013: 199). Convinced by the “certainties” of the ontological schema the term refers to and culturally conditioned by its underlying mechanist-materialist premises, the subscribers to the Naturalist paradigm deem self-evident both the “physical heterogeneity” of the entities of nature and nature’s innate givenness and law-based universality (2013: 199–200). In this it trumps – indeed “disqualifies” – the other, more culturally contingent and geographically confined “rival ontologies”. Especially so the “animistic formula”, of which naturalism, *pace* Descola, “turns out to be a total inversion” (2013: 199).

This essay concerns one of those “rival” cosmologies, namely that of the San, a people inhabiting southern Africa, focusing specifically on its respective notions of monstrosity that are part and parcel of a people’s wider ideas on humans and animals, on ontology and cosmology, the here-and-now and the beyond. These notions, along with the epistemic matrix they are embedded in, are juxtaposed with their Cartesian counterparts, in an exercise of intercultural exposition, translation and comparison that seeks to elucidate, relativize and valorize the less familiar, minoritarian and marginalized Animistic cosmology.

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1 In a *tour de force* of critical scholarship the late Rodney Preece (2002, 2005; see also Ritvo 2007), a Canadian political scientist and historian of ideas, reviews in detail these counter-currents to Cartesianism throughout Western history.

2 One of them by the above-mentioned de Sousa Santos (2015), whose “Abyssal Line” hegemonically defines, inscribes and safeguards the two epistemologies’ respective positions of privilege (northern) and marginalization (southern).

While concerned primarily with difference of substantive and conceptual aspects of the two cosmologies, this exercise reveals also a basic similarity, at the deeper level of epistemology: inversion, and through it oblique assertion, of the fundamental epistemic premise of each of the cosmologies. Notwithstanding their profound oppositeness and the deep “abyssal line” that separates them, the two notions of monstrosity and the cosmologies and epistemologies within which each is embedded, are thus seen also to be apposite. The two modes of thinking and imagining converge on epistemological ground common to both cosmologies, rendering the abyss between them less bottomless and more fathomable, as well as fordable.

### **Demon, Devil, Dog-head: The Trilogy of Western Therianthropes**

It is verily a horrid thing to be spoke that man, the Prince of all Creatures, and which is more, created in the Image of God, should flagitiously mingle with a Brutish Copulation. So that a Biformed breed, halfe men and halfe beasts are ingendered by the confusion of seed of diverse species, of which there have come abominable and promiscuous creatures, to the horrible abasement and confusion of the human form (Bulwer 1653: 445).

The tumultuous admixture of what was supposed to be held separate is frequently the work of the medieval monster, a defiantly intermixed figure that is in the end simply the most startling incarnation of hybridity made flesh (Cohen 2006: 2).

While there are many ways in which monstrosity is perceived in the Western imagination – conveyed through folklore and literature, popular culture and Hollywood and Hammer Production Films in the US and UK, respectively, through figures that range from demons and witches, through giants and dragons, freaks and mutants, torturers, terrorists and psychopaths to robots and post-human cyborgs<sup>3</sup> – the prototypal Western monster is a being who confounds ontological categories.

Such hybrid creatures are “ontological puzzles that demand solutions” from humans who encounter them, who find them “vexing” mentally and unsettling emotionally. Using Freud’s terminology, from a classic essay on “the uncanny”, they are that – “*unheimlich*” – because they are beings that combine within them what is alien and other with what is *heimlich*<sup>4</sup> – “known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1955: 219). As such, they are wont to elicit a double-barrelled “crisis”, notes English literary critic Nicholas Royle in his Freud-informed criti-

3 This rogues’ gallery of Western monsters is from Stephen Asma’s comprehensive scholarly “unnatural history” on monsters in the Western imaginary (2009; see also Weinstock 2014 for an encyclopedic and even more comprehensive scholarly treatment of the same topic).

4 Freud uses the adjectives *heimich* and *heimlich* seemingly – if questionably – as synonyms of one another.

cal study *The Uncanny* (2003), the “crisis of the proper” and “crisis of the natural”, the latter “touching upon everything that one might have thought of was ‘part of nature’” (2003: 2), the former pertaining to social norms and symbolic categories. Each is a “critical disturbance”, eliciting “an experience of strangeness or alienation”, through a “peculiar commingling of the familiar with the unfamiliar” (2003: 2). Engaging with Royle (and Freud) on this phenomenological aspect of the uncanny, Danish anthropologist Nils Bubandt refers to this experience as “a certain *frisson* – an emotional shiver that is at once existential and epistemological” (2018: 4).

Human-animal hybridity is a case *par excellence* of such critically disturbing commingling in Western cosmology. As discrete entities, each with its own, distinctive human and animalian form and being, each is indeed both proper and natural (as well as, in the case of the human, divinely cast). Animals, notes French cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber – in terms of the culinary metaphor so popular with Gallic symbolic anthropologists – “make good food for symbolic thought”, as opposed to anomalous humanimals, who, *au contraire*, “make bad food for taxonomic thought” (1996: 150). Sperber’s analytical framework here is Mary Douglas’s classic essay on the abominations of Leviticus (1966) that draws hybrid/monster beings into the symbolic and ontological sphere of the abominable (one of whom, from Christian hagiography, we will meet below). Undermining species identity and integrity, such were-beings as Wolf- and Dog-Men threateningly manifest both “monstrous humanity” and “hominid monstrosity” (White 1991: 15). This species of monster places animals outside our Cartesian comfort zone, from the “comforting guise of absolute difference”, as noted by feminist scholar of embodiment Margit Shildrick in her study of the physically disabled or deformed – “monstrous” – human body, “into an ambivalent relationship to our humanity” (2002: 20).

As to humans’ relationship to God – a concern of scholars of an earlier age such as John Bulwer, cited in the epigraph opening this section – this relationship, too, became clouded with ambiguity, ambivalence and confusion when imagining or encountering a human-animal monster. “Flagitiously mingled with a Brutish Copulation [...] to the horrible abasement and confusion of the human form”, such beings challenge the divinely decreed and created exceptionalism of “man, the Prince of all Creatures”. Marshalling scriptures, Bulwer expands:

For there is one flesh (saith Paul) of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, another of birds, and therefore is absolutely against the ordinance of God (who hath made me a man) that I should become an Asse in shape: insomuch as if God would give me leave I cannot do it; for it were contrary to his own order and decree, and to the constitution of any body which he hath made (Bulwer 1653: 525).



Concordant with the distinctive flesh-ness of men and each species of beast, God also “hath endured every man and everything with its proper nature, substance, forme, qualities and gifts, and directeth their waies”, notes Bulwer (1653: 525). With one exception, the “humane soule [...] which cannot receive any other than a human body, nor yet can light into a body that wanteth reason of mind” (1653: 525).

“Neither wholly self nor wholly other” (Shildrick 2002: 3), “halfe men and halfe beasts” (Bulwer 1653: 445), monstrous human-animal hybrids thus evoke, *sui generis*, mental and existential unease over a sensed yet “unthinkable” “category crisis” of which monsters are the “harbingers” (Cohen 1996:6). And they may also trigger a spiritual crisis in some individuals, when that unease escalates to a crisis of faith over doubts about their own kind’s unique kindredness with God.

But, in addition, and topping all this intellectual and spiritual disquiet, this breed of monsters evoke in Westerners also visceral fear, nightmarish, unreasoning, which may climax into terror when demonical – and, by extension, diabolical – aspects become part of such “halfe beasts” ontological makeup.



Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Source: Wikimedia Commons

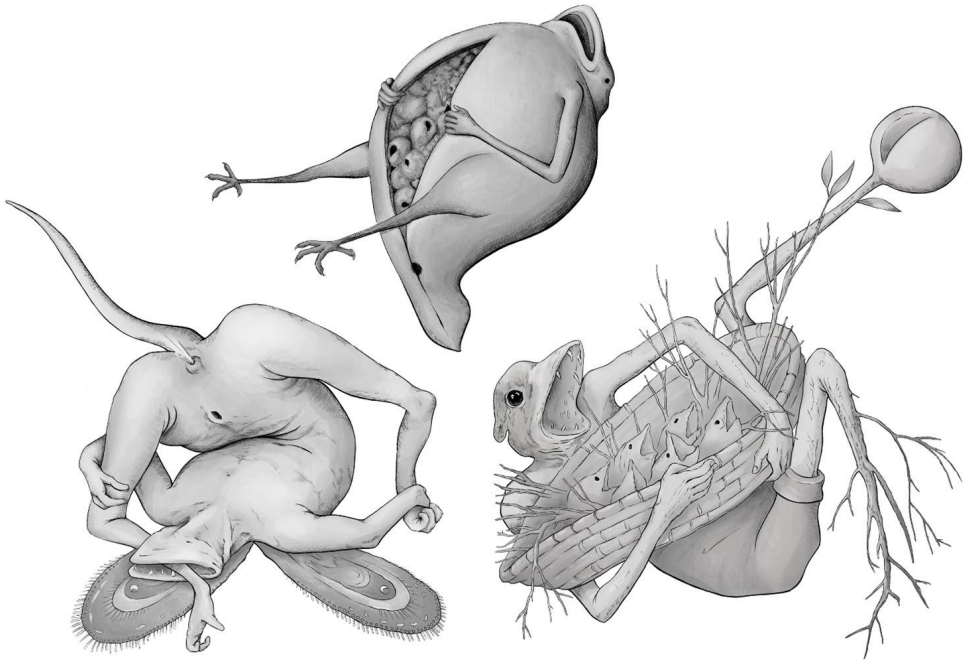


Figure 2. Demon chimeras: human-toad-bird, human-serpent-moth (?), human-animal-plant. Source: details from Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, drawing by Sophia Moffat (with permission)

This was the case in medieval Europe, an age whose collective imagination spawned zoomorphic demons by the hundreds of thousands, if not millions (Russell 1984: 72). Fallen angels, whose incorporeal bodies became, during their free-fall from their celestial sphere, grossly embodied “condensations out of the air or from some grosser matter” (Davidson 2012: 40, quoting the 16<sup>th</sup>-century French demonologist and theologian Nicolas Remy), were believed to “swarm in the air like flies” (Russell 1984: 7) (figs. 1–3)<sup>5</sup> as well as populate hell and torment its resident sinners (fig. 3). This can be seen in the painting by the Northern Renaissance artist Hieronymus Bosch, depicting one of the dozens of human-animalian demons inflicting torture and retribution in ways that are as heinous as they are obscene (*viz.* the so-called “Prince of Hell” seated on his commode-throne while devouring one of the sinners and defecating two others into a pit of offal below his seat).

They were also active in the world, for instance, wasteland hermitages to taunt, tempt and torment saintly anchorites. Especially so Saint Anthony – “of the Desert” – off in his hermitage in eastern Egypt. Figure four depicts this most sorely tried of saintly hermits in the clutches of a posse of demon chimeras of exceptional anatomical and ontological heterogeneity.

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5 I acknowledge with thanks Sophia Moffat’s drawings of the details from Bruegel’s painting (fig. 2).





Figure 3. The Prince of Hell and other demons. Details from Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (right panel, c. 1490–1510), Museo del Prado in Madrid. Source: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 4. Martin Schongauer, *The Temptations of St. Anthony* (engraving, c. 1470–1475). Source: Wikimedia Commons



Both motifs, those of sinful and of saintly humans being tormented by hybrid demons in hell and on earth, were especially prominent in the Bosch-inspired Flemish Renaissance (Russell 1984: 67, 130–32, 209–12; see also Davidson 2012: 190).

Another worldly venue for demons was sleepers' bedrooms at night, which succubi or incubi would visit to seduce and copulate with their sleeping human male or female counterparts. They were a species of Western therianthrope – human-animal hybrid – that was deemed especially gross and heinous because, while demonic to the core of its being, in appearance each was human<sup>6</sup>.

Adding yet further to the abominable nature of these two demon species was that they were capable, through their nocturnal copulations with humans, of producing over the generations ever more anatomically, ontologically and spiritually aberrant offspring, “altered and deformed in its Humane Fabrick” (Bulwer 1653: 513). John Bulwer, a seventeenth-century English medical doctor-scholar and Baconian natural philosopher with far-ranging interests that ranged from theology to ethnography, describes the “nefarious Issue” that can be spawned by these “demoniacall Succubusses” (Bulwer 1653: 513). The topic receives extensive treatment in Bulwer's magisterial *Anthropometamorphosis*, an early popular encyclopaedic treatise on the origin and nature of monstrosity and transformation that bridges Middle Age and Early Modern modes of thought and discourse and that drew extensively on more or less recent or contemporaneous travel accounts. One is from Brazil, where reportedly

from the copulation of a barbarous woman with an Incubus, there was a horrid monster procreated, which grew in height to sixteen Palmes, his back covered with the skin of a Lizzard, with swolne Breasts, Lions Armes, staring and rigid Eyes, and sparkling like fire, with the other members very deformed and of an ugly aspect (Bulwer 1653: 512).

The demonic nature, *sui generis*, of these and all the other demons was underscored by their close association with the devil, who, *qua* “Enemy and Deformer”, with a “will of disturbing mankind and the order of this world [...] [with] utter confusion of all things and speciesses [*sic*]” (Bulwer 1653: 515), was the demons' centre-fold exemplar. Horned, bird- or bat-winged, tailed and cloven-hooved, the devil was that Age's most prominent, terror-inducing therianthrope. Along with Baltic werewolves and Balkan vampires<sup>7</sup>, the devil can be seen as the main instrument for the demonization of beings of their

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6 More or less so: female succubi sometimes had animal appendages such as avian claws “or perhaps a serpent's tail hanging out from under her skirt” (Davidson 2012: 40; see also Milne 2008: 179–80, 2017: 93–4).

7 These two were-beings were conflated in some folkloric traditions (adding thereby another ontological component to their entangled being-state, that of “the restless dead”). Such was the case with werewolf lore in some Balkan countries (Mencej 2019: 106; see also Ginzburg, Lincoln 2020: 77–80, 133–35, 262; Hertz 1862: 88–89). And still is: “werewolf beliefs”, notes the Slovenian folklorist Mirjam Mencej (2019: 106) in a recent ethnographic study, “are by no means a matter of the past among Croats”!

kind in the Western collective imagination, therianthropically depicted and reaffirmed in countless images throughout the Middle Ages<sup>8</sup>. These were frequently exorbitantly entangled in their ontological-anatomical details, such as the being seen in figure five, from a fifteenth-century painting by the Austrian artist Michael Pacher, which conjoins in the subject's humanoid body such diverse animal features as goat's horns, bat's wings, deer's ears, boar's tusks. And a stubby dog's tail which, in also doubling as the nose on his human buttock-face, constitutes an obscene anatomical inversion that further confounds the depicted therianthrope's ontological hybridity.



Figure 5. Michael Pacher, *Saint Wolfgang and the Devil* (detail, c. 1471–1475), Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Source: Wikimedia Commons

8 Unbounded in their imaginative force and scope, the devil becomes an ontological chimera in these depictions, blending in his being traits not only from the three animal species he was most frequently associated with in medieval folk-religion and lore, bird (or bat), goat and dog (or wolf), but with a multiplicity of other species. Fifty-seven of them are listed – alphabetically, from “adder” to “worm” – by Jeffrey Burton Russell (1984: 67) in his scholarly study of the devil in medieval folklore, religion, art and literature!

Another Middle Age species of therianthrope – cousins to the above-noted Wolf-man – were the Cynocephali (i.e. dog-heads). They were less variegated ontologically and more linked to the world and human affairs than the ontologically *über*-monstrous devil and his retinue of demons who were tied to, or were themselves, residents of hell and thus entirely beyond the human moral and spiritual pale. Notwithstanding this reduced degree of flashy Otherness, the Dog-Men were medieval “Christianity’s favorite fairyland monster” (White 1991: 30) who shared center-stage with the devil/demon in the collective imagination of the medieval folk<sup>9</sup>. While their ghastly appearance and “bestial nature” (Friedman 2000: 70) – dog-headed, barking, snarling, ferocious, cannibalistic – raised the fear quotient of this breed of monsters, there was also discussion in scholarly and ecclesiastical circles on whether these were-beings, their monstrousness notwithstanding, were not at some basic physical – “protoplastic” – as well as psycho-spiritual level of their being redeemable and deserving of admission to the human fold (fig. 6)<sup>10</sup>.

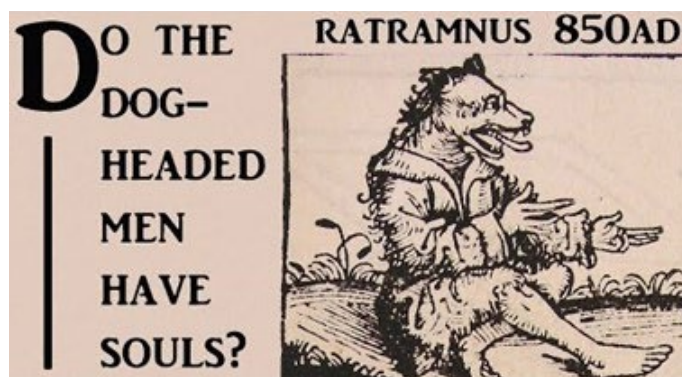


Figure 6. Cynocephalus, illustration from the *Nuremberg Chronicles* (1493).  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

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- 9 As documented by the religious scholar David Gordon White in his comprehensive study of cynocephali, this mythic being, whose geographic center in Indo-European mythology was central Asia, is “a truly cosmopolitan myth motif” that is traceable “back to the dawn of human culture” (1991: 26). Moreover, the folklore surrounding this being is richer and more varied than that around “their lycanthropic cousins” (1991: 15) whose mythic profile in myth, legend and cult practices is more regionally confined (as well as overblown in Euro-America, in recent times, by Hollywood and video games).
- 10 This sort of notion resonates with the ancient pagan European folkloric idea – the roots of which Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg traces back to Eurasian shamanism – that persisted in parts of Europe as an element of the period’s “peasant counterculture” until the Enlightenment, namely that werewolves were not a bane to their fellow humans but a boon: banded together in packs – as “hounds of God” – they mounted periodic raids on hell to retrieve from the devil’s clutches seed and stock animals for next year’s harvest and herds (Ginzburg, Lincoln 2020: 10). Subsequently, as Christianity spread and became more and more entrenched and hegemonic, werewolves became progressively demonized, morphing from “God’s friends and hunting dogs, whom he used against the devil and the sorcerers” and whose souls, after their death, “come to heaven” (2020: 27, 18) into “accursed men who are turned into wolves [...] with Satan’s help [and] out of pure bloodthirstiness [...] to inflict harm” (2020: 3, 35).

That notion was based on a determination, a thousand years earlier, by the scholar-saint Augustine in his *De civitate Dei*, a section of which (in Book XVI, chapter 8) deals with “human and quasi-human races” (Augustine 1957: 315). Drawing on Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, Augustine briefly lists the Ancient’s classic account of “monstrous races” – hirsute or tail-endowed, one-eyed, one-legged, or double-sexed, without either mouths or heads and the like. Some were therianthropic, tailed or horned, horse-footed or dog-headed people such as the Gorgades, Hippopodes and Cynocephalia, respectively (Friedman 2000: 15–17).

Augustine rounds up his review of “Pliny’s people” with the last specimen:

What shall I say of Cynocephali, whose dog-like head and bark proclaim the beasts rather than men? But we are not bound to believe all we hear of these monstrosities. But whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from one protoplast. We can distinguish the common human nature from that which is peculiar, and therefore wonderful (Augustine 1958: 315).

Augustine then turns to “monstrous birth”, the chapter’s main topic, stating that “the same account” can be given to birth-deformed Christian individuals as was given to monstrous races. All are included within “God’s great design” as it is only “God, the Creator of all, [who] knows where and when each thing ought to be, or to have been created, because he sees similarities and diversities which contribute to the beauty of the whole” (Augustine 1958: 315; see also White 1991: 30).

As for the “monstrous races”, outside the Christian fold and world, Augustine placed them in the “inheritor’s of Cain’s curse” category of *humans*, who, as descendants of Ham and his sons, were included “within the economy of salvation, albeit a fallen and exiled part” (White 1991: 30).

Included as well within these salvageable “barbarous races” were the Cynocephali, by virtue of their human traits, with respect to both their physical – “protoplastic” – makeup and their possession of soul, rationality and morality, respectively, albeit all of it on a sliding scale of humanness (White 1991: 16). The ensuing debate in theological, philosophical and, later on, scientific quarters on this point, whether the animalian component of hybrid beings warrants inclusion within or exclusion from the human fold, has remained one of the key issues of contention in Western thought since Augustine’s ruminations and pronouncements on the matter. It has remained such to this day, ever since 1859 when Charles Darwin implied – and twelve years later made explicit – a phylogenetic affinity between humans and animals, specifically apes.

From the fifth century onward the redemption of barbarous races – “widely allegorized and moralized as a quarrelsome, morally dumb, or even demonic race” (White 1991: 16) – became an active enterprise for missionaries whose



travels and travails amongst them make up some of the more legendized accounts of early Christian hagiography.

Two of these were fifth-century Bartholomew and Andrew, of the Nestorian and Coptic creed, respectively. The two apostles were afoot for years spreading the Gospel in the far reaches of Asia, including in the land of the Cynocephali in Parthia on the north shore of the Black Sea. Their main convert was a local Cynocephalus named Hasûm (“i.e. the Abominable”), whose bestiality so terrorized the missionaries and their disciples at their first encounters that one of the latter fell into a dead faint and another hid under a rock, while the two missionaries – “who trembled at his appearance” – fled in terror (Budge 1901: 206–207).

This is what made them tremble and flee:

Now his appearance was exceedingly terrible. He was four cubits<sup>11</sup> in height and his face was like unto that of a great dog, and his eyes were like unto lamps of fire which burned brightly, and his teeth were like unto the tusks of a wild boar, or the teeth of a lion, and the nails of his hands were like unto curved reaping hooks, and the nails of his toes were like unto the claws of a lion, and the hair had come down over his arms to look like the mane of a lion, and his whole appearance was awful and terrifying [...] (Budge 1901: 206).

As it turned out, the missionaries and their disciples had nothing to fear from the approaching dog-headed monster-giant who, as he related to them reassuringly, had just been visited by an Angel from God and blessed with the sign of the cross, with the invocation to “restrain in thee the nature of the beasts”. While for a time being Hasûm was rendered “gentle as a lamb” through this blessing, and helping the missionaries in their endeavours, this restraint on his moral being did not hold, however. A ferocious relapse to bestiality was triggered at the end of the story, which was checked and reversed by Bartholomew: invoking, in the name Jesus the Christ, to “let the nature of wild beasts leave thee, and return to the nature of man”; this is what came about forthwith (Smith Lewis 1904: 24). Moreover, underscoring this ontological transformation spiritually, Andrew changed his convert’s name from Hasûm/Abominable to “Christianus” (Friedman 2000: 71). In terms of both his spirituality and ontology, through conversion and transformation, respectively, this were-creature was now securely ensconced within the human fold.

While less heinous as well as less real and immanent in people’s lives and affairs than in medieval times, were-beings are still astir in our imagination today, with varying degrees of dread. As numerous, diverse and ontologically variegated than ever – thanks in part to the magnifying effect of Hollywood and video games – they have remained a hard-worked motif in literature, both

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11 Depending on which of the half-dozen or so standards for cubit that is applied by the hagiographer, our human-dog protagonist may be as tall as eight feet!

for children and grown-ups. A case in point are the “Beast Folk” that inhabit vivisectionist Dr. Moreau’s island, in H. G. Wells’s novel with the same title. A dozen-odd in number, they include not only such run-of-the-mill were-fare as Dog-Man and Ape-Man, but also such multi-species and gender-ambiguous ontological assemblages as “Hyena-Swine”, “Mare-Rhinoceros-Man” and “Half-Finished Puma-Woman”. Topping the list, as the doctor’s “most elaborately made of all creatures” and “complex trophy of Moreau’s skills” is his chimerical servant M’ling concocted from bear, dog and ox components. As they did for Wells’s narrator-protagonist, such beings may evoke stark horror and terror in other Western grown-ups, their reactions’ intensity commensurate with the acuteness of a reader’s negative capability. For their children, they stand as the bogey-men through whose dreams and bedrooms such monsters may parade (or lurk, under the bed) – and which their parents may either use to scare and bring in line unruly youngsters.

### **The Onto-epistemological Status of Monsters in a Connective Cosmos**

The story of Hasûm would likely have played itself out differently in the cosmological context of the non-Western people I have worked amongst, the San or Bushman, erstwhile hunter-gatherers of southern Africa. As I will show, people there are quite familiar – and more or less at ease – with creatures such as cynocephalous Hasûm/Abominable/Christianus of the Eastern Christian legend. In San myth, lore and cosmology this figure would not have to undergo this sort of anatomical, mental and spiritual remake, from partial to fully human, as a prerequisite for gaining human acceptance and appreciation. There would be no issues as to Hasûm’s spiritual affinity and integrity since humans and animals are not seen as different with respect to this component of their interiority: soul, spirituality, connectedness to spirits and divinities and to the mythic are the same qualitatively for both. Hasûm would not, in the San view of things, have to eschew the animal component of his being phenomenologically and move, conceptually, from ontological ambiguity and liminality to clarity and discreteness, to find “human understanding” and acceptance and a “place in the universe”.

The San take on “human understanding” is different from ours as they see the universe in ways that do not conform to the Western “standard – speak Cartesian – model”, of dichotomies and hierarchies, anthropocentric subject-object distinction, vitalism-mechanism differentiation and the like. Theirs is a “connective cosmos”, using the South African Sven Ouzman’s (2008) term, creating a “world view of inter-connectedness”, which the South African poet-novelist Antje Krog considers the defining trait of San symbolic culture (2009: 184; quoted in Wessels 2012: 187). Tracing the complex, mutually interactive and “not always predictable” strands of connectivity of all its domains in the context of a /Xam transformation myth, David Lewis-Williams (2020: 41) has recently substituted “connective” for “entangled” as the defining adjective for the San cosmos. Entanglement captures – even more than inter-connectedness – what

I have elsewhere referred to as “tolerance for ambiguity” and what I see as the defining quality of San society, ethos and cosmology, at a social-structural and conceptual level (Guenther 1999: 226–37), and phenomenologically, in the way being – especially being-in-the-world – is experienced, *vis à vis* the non-human animate and inanimate features of the dwelled-in land (Guenther 2020b).

Connectedness – more or less entangled – is something that applies especially to humans and animals, beings to whom, in this pre-industrial and pre-agricultural hunter-gatherer society, humans are especially close. Human-animal hybridity is thus much less disjunctive in the San cosmology and less likely to raise “vexing questions” – “about humanity’s understanding of and place in the universe”, along with crises of identity and faith. Animals provide food for both the stomach and the mind, to be processed not only by the alimentary canal to sustain the body but also by the imagination, in the context of cosmology, myth and ritual (Guenther 1988, 1999: 70–80, 2017: 12–13, 2019b: 160). Another such context is hunting: when a hunter tracks, stalks and kills a large antelope, slow to die of his poison arrow, he may engage with his prey in an inter-subjective manner. A bond of sympathy may become established between hunter and prey throughout the often protracted hunt that may last days. The bond’s intensity peaks at the animal’s dying moments at the end of the hunt, and may be so acutely felt – at times palpably – by the hunter as to amount to some sort of an ontological transformation. This is evident from the eloquent statement by !Xō hunter Karoha’s to anthropologist Louis Liebenberg, after a successful endurance hunt of a kudu in the central Kalahari:

What you will see is that you are now controlling its mind. You are getting its mind. The eyes are no longer wild. You have taken the kudu into your mind (Liebenberg 2006: 1024).

A similar process is undergone by the San shaman, who, as part of the trance state that he experiences when he carries out his healing ritual, may also transform into a lion (Guenther 2018). This experience may be “utterly real” to the shaman undergoing it, as well as to spectators who witness it, and, to a degree, experience it vicariously, as explained by the Ju/’hoan trance dancer to ethnographers Richard Katz and Megan Biesele:

When I turn into a lion, I can feel my lion hair growing and my lion-teeth forming. I’m inside that lion, no longer a person. Others to whom I appear see me just as another lion (Katz et al. 1997: 24).

Animal transformation is a strongly felt visionary experience also in the case of initiands at puberty rites of passage, especially girls – “maidens”, in /Xam parlance – at their menarcheal rite. During her transition from girl- to womanhood there may be moments when she feels herself to be an eland antelope, so much so that real antelope may approach the initiation site, to be hunted

by nearby hunters (or, in spirit, hunted by herself, compounding the maiden's transformation from human to antelope and hunter's prey, to human to man, and hunter of prey). So potent is her eland'ness that people around the menstrual hut – of her parents' and grand-parents' generation – may themselves “catch the feeling” of eland and perform a vigorous eland courtship dance, through which some dancers may come close to merging identities with the animal (Guenther 2015: 291–92). Most of the variety of ludic dances performed by the San, not only children but also adults, mimic animals, and animal hunts and encounters, at times with such intensity and absorption on the part of some adult dancers, as to result in instances of “the mimetic faculty taking us bodily into alterity”, using Michael Taussig's words (1993: 40).

The center-stage presence at male initiation, among the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi, is, once again, the eland, the premier antelope to San hunters, story tellers and painters (Vinnicombe 1976). A series of ritual practices bring about a palpable bond to the eland, such as, painting the initiand's forehead with the eland's distinctive forehead mark, rubbing “eland medicine” into cuts administered to his body or anointing him with eland fat (Lewis-Williams, Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 2020: 52). Such practices may be seen as a mystical, “contagious” process of “transfer of essences” from animal to human (Low 2009: 80) and as instrumental in effecting a degree of *Wesenswandel* (“being-change”) (Straube 1955: 197), that is, ontological transformation. All these actions occur at an impressionable age and turning point in the young hunter's life; they prepare him psychologically for the bond of sympathy that he might sense at times toward a prey animal at some future point in his life's career as a hunter.

These experiences, by shamans and initiands, dancers and hunters, of animal transformation are all psycho-somatic manifestations of ontological mutability which I see pervading San cosmology (Guenther 2015, 2017, 2020). San mythology and rock art<sup>12</sup> express this theme especially elaborately, through Ovid's stories of metamorphosis – of Myth Time maidens into frogs, a *goura* (musical bow) player and hunter into trees, an agama lizard into a hill, a lion into a human or antelope, a young mother into a boulder and her child into a guinea fowl and so on. The most transformation-prone Early Race figure is the trickster, who can shape-shift at will, into any kind of animal species, as well as into trees and plants, bodies of water and winds. Tricksters are themselves of hybrid ontological make-up, such as the /Xam /Kaggen “Mantis's Man” and the !Kung /Xue featured in the epigraph at the opening of this paper, in the process of engaging in a conversation with his “inner Hare”, sorting out his entangled and conflicted human-animal identity and identities.

Therianthropes like these trickster figures are San Myth-Time's most prominent denizens. They are the myth tellers' primary characters and the rock art creators' principal motif. Here the prototypal therianthrope is a human-headed antelope (fig. 7).

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12 For a cross-cultural examination of this prominent theme in hunter-gatherer rock art see Davidson (2017).



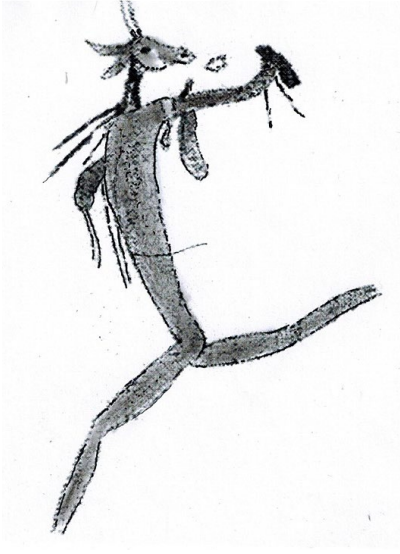


Figure 7. Prototypal San therianthrope.  
Source: redrawn from (Jolly 2002:86)

The figure's feet are frequently seen to be cloven and its head is either that of a generic "buck" or of an identifiable antelope species, most frequently of an eland. Figure eight depicts gemsbok-horned human figures, likely trance-dancing shamans undergoing antelope transformation, an incarnation of sorts, of therianthropes of the world of myth in the actual world.



Figure 8. Joseph Millerd Orpen's Drakensberg Bushman rock art copies.  
Source: The Digital Bleek and Lloyd, image file STOW\_015

Like the *ur-dog's* myriad breeds and infinite mongrel mixes, the therianthrope's basic antelope-human prototype appears in equally countless chimerical variations in San myths and on rock surfaces (Jolly 2002), as paintings or engravings, with traits drawn from such other animal species as baboon, elephant, lion, hippopotamus, rhinoceros, snakes, ostrich and wildebeest or, in San myth which features a more variegated cast of therianthropes, such unlikely human-animal beings as ticks, wasps and beetles.

While these were-beings of San myth and art are every bit as varied and extravagant in their hybridity as the monsters – “tumultuous admixtures”, *pace* Cohen – that inhabit the Western collective imagination, the emotions they evoke are quite different. While dread might have been elicited by one or another of these therianthrope images – those perhaps informed by spirits of the dead or by elements of altered state of consciousness and lion transformation that are part of the powerful trance curing dance of San shamans – it is dread fueled less by ominous terror *à la* Hieronymus Bosch and more by numinous portent *à la* Rudolf Otto. Other therianthropes, from San stories rather than paintings and engravings, are a vast array of protagonists and antagonists in widely and engagingly told myths and other tales performed by story tellers with consummate skill that includes enlivening impersonations of specific animal or human-animal characters, through special voices and special clicks (Guenther 2006).

They are, for the most part, stories about metamorphoses that “recall the lasting kinship between humans and animals”, derived from a “primal intimacy between humans and animals” that existed back in Myth Time, a time French poet, essayist and literary critic – and San rock art researcher – Renaud Ego refers to as “the era of ‘humanimality’ (*humanimalité*)” (2019: 28). The most salient “humanimal” of that era, which the San refer to as the “First Order of Creation” (Guenther 2020a: 42–44), was the ontologically fluid and morally ambivalent trickster (Guenther 2002). As noted above, this member of “the First Race” is the favorite protagonist for traditional San story tellers whose listeners’ appetite for antic-frantic stories about transformations and transgressions is insatiable.

What makes trickster tales all the more arresting is the shared cultural understanding of story tellers and listeners that the Trickster’s sphere of operation is not only the myth time’s First Order of Creation but also the Second Order, of the present world.

This brings us to another strand of ontological connectedness – and entanglement – that phenomenologically heightens the mytho-mystical salience of the “Early Race” of were-beings. It is the absence, in San cosmology, of any clear distinction between Myth-Time and historical Now-Time (Guenther 2020a: 37–44). A cosmologically consequential link between myth and actual time is the pan-San notion of “double creation”, whereby the beings of Myth-Time were ontologically reversed, so that today’s humans and animals contain within their being elements of the other, including, in some animals like the hare, quagga and elephant, in their flesh (Schmidt 1995: 149–52, Guenther 1999:

668–70). There are also mythic therianthropes who never became reversed and found their way, as were-beings, into the real world wherein they have a shadowy existence, such as the mystical Gemsbok People of the remote Kalahari (Marshall 1999: 245). Another member of the Early Race who makes an appearance in today’s veld or the hunting ground is, once again, the trickster. This is in his animal guise *qua* Animal Spirit Protector, out to misdirect hunters, transformed, perhaps, into a louse, to bite and torment the hunter, thereby distracting him from his quarry.

Linkages of this sort between these two worlds have the effect of reducing the extraordinariness of these mythological beings as human-animal hybrid creatures, when they are encountered in the real world, by shamans, initiands or dancers. Or hunters (as well as gatherers): myth and spirit beings are, or may be, actual or potential beings of the people’s hunting ground and gathering range. Given their presence, as another species – along with animals – of other-than-human in the San people’s dwelled-in world (Guenther 2020c), such unearthly, *unheimlich* eeriness as may surround such an encounter is held in check by *heimliche* familiarity (of the kind that breeds not contempt but regard). People’s composure here derives in part from their culture’s cosmological premise concerning the connectedness of the First and Second Orders of Creation and, thus, a lower negative capability threshold in such a mythic face-to-face situation. Its salience and remarkableness is further reduced through a certain quality that scholars of Western fairy tales see in the domain of Faerie. It is a quality of taken-for-grantedness that attaches to fantastical beings and happenings in the World of Myth and Story<sup>13</sup>. Miracles, magic, giants, speaking animals and the like are, writes Swiss *Märchen* scholar Max Lüthi, “accepted [by story protagonists and story listeners] as if they were matter of course [rather than] [...] a cause of wonderment” (1970: 46, 76). Much the same point about the myth-world and the were-creatures that inhabit it is made by Noël Carroll: that the latter are not unnatural, fearsome monsters, but that they form “part of the everyday furniture of the universe [...] that can be accommodated in the metaphysics of the cosmology that produced them” (1992: 16). Given the San cosmological premise concerning the connectedness of the First and Second Orders of Creation, it is conceivable that some of the same of matter-of-course givenness about preternatural matters might have surrounded some hunter’s or gatherer’s veld encounter with a being from the First Order – especially one especially “musical” mytho-mystically, with a raised predilection for suspension of disbelief.

Myth and experience, especially that of lion-transforming shamans, eland-transforming maidens, kudu-transforming hunters, state and restate, and there-

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13 As I have discussed elsewhere (Guenther 2014), the same quality can be found also in the mythology of the southern /Xam San. It is especially marked in stories in which /Kaggen-Mantis, the /Xam trickster, is placed within one of many dreams, in which the narrative weaves in and out of dream and reality. This oneiric element intensifies the “magic realism” quality of Myth Time, as well as valorizes the same experientially for the dreamer.

by reinforce and to some extent validate, the theme of ontological hybridity and mutability, in different modalities and with different effects on mind and body. These expressive and experiential iterations of being-animal are epistemologically linked to a cosmology of interconnectedness that renders the human-animal species divide porous, while the human and animal identity and alterity – ontologically indistinct.

A were-creature, or therianthrope, like Abominable or M'ling would thus, to the San, be not nearly as abominable as he was to our three Westerner spokesmen, the apostles Andrew and Bartholomew and H. G. Wells's narrator, when they first laid eyes on the creature in legendary Parthia and on Dr. Moreau's apocryphal island, respectively. Nor would this creature be seen as anomalous and unthinkable, awful and terrifying but, rather, as merely another variant – cyno-anthropic the one, cyno-ursi-bovine the other – of the many and varied therianthrope were-creatures and chimeras that populate the San's World of Myth and Story. And that one may encounter, not only in the imagination and dreams, story-mediated, but also experience, out in the veld on a hunting or gathering excursion. Or sense astir inside one's own body, either directly, through metamorphosis or, more incipiently, mimesis, or vicariously, by witnessing a shaman's lion transformation or a dancer's animal imitation. Or "dance out", on an experiential mimesis-metamorphosis spectrum (fig. 8).

Animalness in the animistic schema of San cosmology is a component of humanness – and *vice versa* as seen above in the mythological theme of double/reverse creation. Expanded into a basic postulate of the San world view, it is a concept through which personhood and sociality, agency and intentionality come to inform animals, in other-than-human terms. This further underscores the link between the two ontological orders and opens up space, conceptually and metaphysically, for human-animal hybrid beings. These are not deemed monstrous, horrendous abominations nor is the transformation, the process that brings them into being, deemed a hallucination or delusion. Nor are either of these manifestations of ontological mutability held to be epistemologically and phenomenologically aberrant and considered threats to rationality, sanity and the structural and moral order of the universe.

When experienced by a hunter or shaman, or witnessed by attendees at the latter's lion trance-formation ritual performance, they can be handled (just as /Xue can sort out the existential and ontological anxiety-inducing human-hare disjuncture in his being)<sup>14</sup>. The animal part does not require exorcism, through baptism and the assumption of a Christian name, as it did for Hâsum Abominable, when he ceased to be a were-monster.

So, do the San have any monsters? And if so, what are they?

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14 This is the theme of a drawn-out tale in the /Xam archive that expands volubly on this article's opening epigraph and that is beyond the scope of this paper (see Bleek 1934/1935: 263–65; Guenther 2019b: 45–46).



## San Monstrosity<sup>15</sup>

The Porcupine said: ‘People do not live with that Man, he is alone; because people cannot hand him food, for his tongue is like fire. He burns people’s hands with it. You need not think that we can hand food to him, for we shall have to dodge away to the sheep opposite. The pots will be swallowed with the soup in them. Those sheep will be swallowed up in the same way, for yonder Man always does so. He does not often travel, because he feels the weight of his stomach which is heavy. See, I the Porcupine live with you, although he is my real father; because I think he might devour me [...] (//Kabbo, /Xam story teller; Bleek 1923: 35).

Monsters do indeed appear in San myth and lore (McGranaghan 2014); however, they are of an altogether different cast from their Northern counterparts. What makes them monstrous is not ontological ambiguity and fluidity, but moral and social transgressions. These are flagrant and vile, and unequivocally damnable in their crassness.

The two transgressions San moral culture deems most monstrous in such beings are excessive, unchecked food greed and lack of sharing, followed closely by social aggressiveness, directed especially at children, whom such a monster is inclined to eat (along with the parents), combining thereby the two transgressions, gluttony and rage, and maximizing the monster’s monstrosity.

Food greed, so unchecked that not only the contents of the demanded pot of food are devoured, but also the pot itself, and raging anger are monstrous failings that are exemplified most egregiously by //Kkhwai-hem (“He who is a Devourer of Things” – “sheep, people, everything”) of the /Xam First Order<sup>16</sup> (McGranaghan 2014). Huge in stature – “his shadow resembles a cloud” – and massively paunched – his other name is “Fat-Stomach” – he is so uncontrollable in his appetite that, when visiting his in-laws, he is wont, in a fit of rage, not only to eat the food they provide him – pot and all – but even some of the people themselves (such as /Kaggen, who has adopted the monster’s daughter Porcupine due to the worries that she herself might be “devoured” by her father). His irascibility – “he has blackness and darkness inside him”<sup>17</sup> – makes him unfit for human company. “People do not live with that man, he lives alone ... he does not often travel” living, instead, a hermit’s life, in remote mountainous terrain, days’ travel distance from any family group.

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15 I have dealt with this issue at some length elsewhere (Guenther 2020b: 20–28) and the following is a précis of my previous discussion.

16 Folklorist Sigrid Schmidt (2001: 277) has traced this monster figure, which she labels “ogre” (“the concept [...] of the sinister opposition to life”) – through Khoisan folklore, as well as through that of many Bantu-speakers (Schmidt 2001: 98–105, 277–80; see also Schmidt 2013: 171–76).

17 The cited passages are from /Han=kasso’s account of //Kkhwai-hem’ visit to his daughter’s people, as retold by Dorothea Bleek (Bleek et al 1923: 34–40) and derived from Lucy Lloyd’s translation of /Han=kasso’s text (Bleek and Lloyd Archive VIII – 20: 7812-16; 22: 7906-56; in The Digital Bleek and Lloyd this entry is listed as BC151\_A2\_1\_095 and as BC151\_A2\_1\_097, respectively).

As shown elsewhere (Guenther 2020b: 18–28), there were other such monsters in San myth and lore. One of them, named !nu !numma- !kuiten (“White Mouth”), was a meat-devouring ogre, much like //Kkhwai-hem. And, like the latter’s, it was unchecked gluttony that comprised this bogey man’s monstrosity, rather than any hideous body features, ontologically mixed and mismatched. In his bodily frame he was a man – “a man who eats great pieces of meat, he cuts them off, he puts them into his mouth, holds them in his mouth”, all the while salivating and dripping fat from his mouth (the trait that earned him his name) (Guenther 2020b: 22). This greedy meat eating is what defines his name: his white mouth was caused by excessive salivating for meat. Apart from defining this human bogey-man’s monstrosity, this trait also renders “White Mouth” “a beast of prey”, a generic category of animals San assign monstrosity to, because of their food greed – potentially and actually anthrophagous – and their volatile anger (McGranaghan 2014: 10–12). Two other monstrously voracious Early Race beings are !Ko and !Khau, the former a mongoose, the latter an agama lizard person, both of whose food greed is so extreme and unchecked that they will eat their own flesh, in obsessive feats – feasts – of self-immolation (Guenther 1989: 101–104, James 2001: 85–86).

A monster like “All-Devourer” and beings of that ilk can be conceptually linked to the First Order, as the social equivalent and counterpart to that Myth World’s state of ontological inchoateness. This state is manifested morally in monsters and ontologically in therianthropes, the former as grossly immoral rule-breakers beyond the pale of their as yet precarious social order, the latter as ontologically unstable human-animal hybrid beings in an as yet not fully formed world (Guenther 2017: 7). And it is this sort of being, the moral transgressor and social inverter, not the latter, the transformation-prone therianthrope and ontological hybrid that constitute monstrosity in the San – and arguably other hunter-gatherer (McGranaghan 2014: 5–6) scheme of things. In sum, what breeds monsters here is not so much ontological ambiguity and its threat to people’s sense of who and what they are and are not, and to their conceptual categories. Instead, it is moral deviation and social otherness, both threats to the social order, in both the mythical First Order and the actual Second Order of Existence.

The reason such moral deviations are deeply threatening to the Second Order are found in the inherent disorderliness that pervades its social makeup. This consists of loosely organized bilateral bands, structurally labile, lacking in authority figures, open and fluid in composition and membership made up of strongly “individuated” members (Gardner 1991) without “long-term binding commitments and dependencies” (Woodburn 1988). What holds people together is not any segmentary lineages or state institutions but precariously safeguarded prosocial values, such as sharing and reciprocity, sociability and affability, self-deprecation and humility. While in full force in the daily interaction of people, the looseness of San social organization also renders these moral values precarious. They are issues of contention and much of people’s interaction

consists in monitoring one-another's actions and imposing more or less subtle, face-saving sanctions on potential or actual transgressors (Marshall 1961; Lee 1982; Silberbauer 1982; Kent 1993; Guenther 1999: 39–57, 2006), some of them through routinized litanies of complaint by an aggrieved party sitting amidst her or his band members and addressed to some or all of them collectively (Rosenberg 1990). Their transgressions – irascibility, envy, self-advancement, avarice, food greed and its concomitant, failure to share – the last, sharing, San sociality's core value that defines its ethos (Guenther 1999: 46–47; see also Barnard 2019: 16, 50, 74, 143) – are a direct threat to the survival of San society (and of small-scale band societies generally). As among humans anywhere, among San, too, these anti-social traits are inherent components of personality and deportment of which people are very much aware, creating moral conundrums and contradictions. If not always actually, San social life – especially their interpersonal and exchange relations – is potentially marred by “a constant tug-of-war [...] between sharing, generosity and reciprocity on the one hand, and hoarding, stinginess and self-interest on the other” (Guenther 1999: 48; see also Gulbrandson 1991; Kent 1993). These matters preoccupy people day in and day out and make up much of the contents of their conversations.

San monstrosity stews in the cauldron of these moral conundrums and contradictions, inherent in every-day social life and embedded within an inherently unstable organizational and institutional framework.

### **Conclusion: Northern and Southern Monstrosity – Forging an Abyssal Line**

Some people may see what we take to be disturbingly contradictory as meaningfully ambivalent (Lewis-Williams 2020: 41).

The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – must not – be crossed (Cohen 1996: 13).

Transgressors of moral rules the one, confounder of ontological categories the other, these two monster templates are starkly opposite in terms of cosmological content and makeup. Yet, at a deeper epistemological level the Northern and the Southern brand of monstrosity – and, I would argue, monstrosity anywhere else in the human world – do actually converge. What makes them similar is that the monstrosity configured in each template inverts the basic epistemic premise of the cosmology, myths and beliefs within which it is embedded.

In the Northern case, the cosmos, nature and the world are structured and orderly, ever since having been created by a Grand Architect creator, in terms of binary categories the latter imposed on a hitherto chaotic universe from on up high, by divine decree (perhaps even by wielding a divine golden compass, as did Blake's iconic Urizon, “The Ancient of Days”). This cosmology of order was sustained in its basic outline and through multiple versions through the

ages – Pre-classical, Classical, Medieval, Modern – by its gate-keepers, the priests and princes, scholars and scientists, preachers and teachers, writers and painters.

Though not unanimously: one dissenting voice was, in fact, Blake, who deemed his above-noted fictional deity Urizon, the divine spirit of reason and law, a repressive force on the imagination. Moreover, elements of a pre-Cartesian and pre-Christian world view remained part of the “indigenous imaginary” of the peasantry in parts of Europe, including, as noted above, were-wolves which seventeenth-century Livonian folk belief dubbed “hounds of God” – “God’s friends and hunting dogs whom he used against the devil and witches [...]. The devil can’t stand them” (Ginzburg, Lincoln 2020: 27, 16). It is part of a suite of attributes of the werewolf that radically distance these beings from the diabolized portrayal they received from the Inquisition in the late Middle Ages. Historian Carlo Ginzburg traces these back to “an ancient Eurasian style of shamanic religiosity” (2020: 7).

Yet, notwithstanding such arguably “shamanistic” residues in western “Little Traditions”, monster and monstrosity in the cosmology of the “Great – speak Cartesian – Tradition” are the beings and state that invert this order and orderliness, through their thoroughly disorderly, form- and norm-defying makeup. This classificatory defiance is manifested through ontological hybridity, in bodies and souls that conflate human with animal, either constitutionally or through transformation.

The Southern cosmos is pervaded with ambiguity and fluidity, especially during the San First Order of Creation, which retained its primal state of chaos throughout myth time, manifested in a world of generative flux and inchoateness and inhabited by hybrid beings. Their exemplar, the trickster, was the prime creative agent in that world of flux (Guenther 1999: 108–109); his creations ranged from trivial, such as anatomical and behavioral traits of certain animals, through significant – river beds and waterholes in the Kalahari – to portentous, such as bringing fire, medicines and death to humankind and reversing ontological states. And more often than not they were carried out on a whim or haphazardly without clear intent, as opposed to the deliberate, orderly fashion whereby his Western creator counterpart, the Grand Architect, went about creating the cosmos from chaos<sup>18</sup>.

In the present, Second Order of Creation, beings and states, while less fluid and more set in their form and ways, are nevertheless still ontologically precarious. In part, this is because that primal state, of inchoateness, as seen above, has never quite left them (as evidenced by proneness for animal transformation of shamans, initiands, dancers and hunters). In part it is also because humans and animals continue to be connected to Myth Time, which they may on oc-

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18 Writing about the trickster in the context of Amerindian mythology, in a paper that also juxtaposes to Judaeo-Christian “Abrahamic Tradition”, the American folklorist Tok Thompson aptly summarizes this myth being’s creative *modus operandi*: “One is left with the distinct impression that this world, rather than being some clock-like heavenly plan, might instead be a bit of a mistake, a bit of a joke” (2019: 165).

casions visit, or from which they may receive visitors. A frequent one, as seen above, is the trickster who, as “spirit of disorder” and “enemy of boundaries” (Kerényi 1972:185), brings ontological and conceptual havoc – “topsey-turveydom” (Koepping 1985: 193) – to people and their world.

For all this ontological and temporal fluidity, reiterated on a social register through loose social institutions and social organization negotiated by autonomous individuals, there is something in that world that is fixed and set: its moral rules, the “sharing ethos” and its edicts, around egalitarianism – “fiercely”, even “staunchly” asserted by the Kalahari Ju/’hoansi (Lee 1979: 24) and Kutse San (Kent 1993: 480) – along with reciprocity, self-effacement and non-competitiveness, communalism and commensality (Guenther 1999: 39–57). What constitutes monstrosity is transgression of this ethos, the edicts of which are stark and unequivocal in their expectations and demands on individuals regarding their deportment and interaction with their fellows. The monster is a being who negates this moral code and does so unequivocally, in black-and-white terms – unlike the trickster, whose moral lapses, for all their frequency and outrageousness, are offset by the many positive traits that also attach to this ambiguous being, evoking ambivalence in people who come across him in stories, dreams or in ritual-liminal settings. Such terms – “unequivocal”, “black-and-white” – are profoundly incongruent with a cosmology and epistemology that rests on and is pervaded by ambiguity and flux, contravened and confounded by the monster-transgressor’s violation of prescriptions and proscriptions that are unambiguous and unequivocal.

As embodiments of negated moral edicts or of conflated ontological categories, Southern and Northern monsters invert *sui generis* the epistemic underpinnings of their respective cosmologies of ambiguity and clarity, anti-structure and structure. As a shared epistemological feature, or convergence, this inversion can be seen to bridge what is evidently an “abyssal” gap separating the Southern cosmology from its Northern counterpart. Even though expressed through different phenomenological registers – moral and affective the one, ontological and conceptual the other – and in relation to cosmologies with different epistemic foundations – dualistic and connective – each of these two diverse cosmologies is affected epistemologically in the same way by its respective monsters, through inversion.

The generalization by Jeffrey Cohen’s – who can be considered the dean of Western Monster Studies – about the “Northern” monster a being that “refuses to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’” (Cohen 1996: 6) can thus be seen to apply as well to this being’s “Southern” counterpart (albeit in reverse, as it were, as its refusal to participate epistemologically is in their – “things” – dis-order). As such, to continue with Cohen’s elegant phrasing, the monster, in both instances, becomes “a vehicle of prohibition” who is “continually linked to forbidden practices” (1996: 15, 17). As well as to norms, which, in the one instance are social and moral, in the other – conceptual and corporeal. In exemplifying these proscriptions in its being and actions, the monster, on the one



hand, undermines and, per Cohen, “defiantly intermixes” (2006: 2) – indeed, “threatens to smash” (1996: 6) – fundamental cosmological, conceptual and social categories, distinctions and norms. Yet, on the other hand, the monster – *qua* “monster of prohibition” – in each case and each in his or her own way and idiom, also undergirds the same, by calling, each in its own voice “horrid attention to the borders that cannot – must not – be crossed” (Cohen 1996: 13). This expresses one of Cohen’s “seven theses” about “monster culture”, discussed in a foundational essay with that title. While deserving of its acclaim and stature as a much cited “classic” in the field of Monster Studies, the essay, written by a scholar of English literature, is overly Eurocentric (as are the contributions to the anthology to which Cohen’s essay is the introduction). I present this comparative, inter-cultural essay as a complement to Cohen’s article and volume, to expand its insightful theses substantively and problematize them conceptually.

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