

## 26. Hunter-gatherers, archaeology and the emergence of symbolic culture

### 16225 - Revisiting Bushmen pigment use in relation to human origins

Presentation type: Oral presentation

**Author(s):** *Watts, Ian (Independent Researcher, Athens, Greece / Griechenland)*

Twenty years ago, as our species' recent African origin became consensual, we presented an abstract model of the evolution of symbolic culture, now dubbed the Female Cosmetic Coalitions hypothesis (Knight et al. 1995). Non-contentious premises were that Middle Pleistocene brain-size increase placed maternal energy budgets under great stress, requiring unprecedented levels of male investment, and that sexual signals would have been a prime mechanism by which females could manipulate group composition and male behaviour. A more contentious premise was that menstruation, in providing would-be philanderer males with fertility status information, posed a potential threat to pregnant and nursing females (standing to lose male attention). The proposed solution was for female kin to close ranks around any menstruant, sharing her blood around and using blood substitutes, signalling to males 'you don't get to pick and choose, sexual access will be on our collective terms' (effectively, no meat – no sex). The hypothesis outlined two-stages in the evolution of collective ritual, generating a tightly specified initial situation for symbolic culture, in effect a transformational template to the mobilization of ritual power. Predictions derived from the model were of two kinds – evolutionary predictions (e.g. the nature of the archaeological pigment record and its relationship to brain-size increase and behavioural developments such as campsites), and symbolic predictions concerning an underlying syntax that should be evident in myth and ritual. The 1995 paper reviewed the southern African pigment record and aspects of Bushmen ethnography in the light of these predictions. It also noted remarkable congruities with the model which were not necessary predictions of extant hunter-gatherers (notably concerning the centrality of menarcheal ritual, the role of red pigments therein, lunar phase-locking of these rituals, and the role of lunar periodicity in hunting).

Here, I consider how matters have developed in the subsequent two decades. The major developments have been in our understanding of the pigment record, but some relevant new insights on Bushman cosmology have also been obtained. I conclude that the case for an ideology of blood as the hallmark of the earliest symbolic culture is considerably stronger than in 1995, and that the eminently refutable FCC hypothesis remains the only game in town specifying the nature of such an ideology.

## 16119 - Mbuti & Baka Feminist Mythology and Female Ritual Coalitions

Presentation type: Oral presentation

**Author(s):** *Townsend, Cathryn (University College London, London, Un. Kingdom / Ver Königr.)*

This paper will explore some evidence for Camilla Power's Female Cosmetic Coalition model in Mbuti and Baka ritual and storytelling. In particular, it will explore symbolic motifs that relate to female coalitions, and the type of women's rights that might be expected in such coalitions. According to Power (2009), symbolic culture first arose out of the need for collective resistance to the sexual strategy of would-be philanderer males, in order to minimize female reproductive stress. This would involve a fertile female's natal group securing the long-term labour of outsider males in the form of bride service. She argues that female coalitions drawing on male kin support would have had to deter males who might have been inclined to mate-guard or abduct fertile females with "louder, clearer signals of resistance". The Female Cosmetic Coalition model predicts that evidence for female coalitions "reverse signalling" wrong species, wrong sex and wrong time will be found in the symbolic structures of extant hunter-gatherers. During a short stay with Mbuti hunter-gatherers during 2009, I collected a number of stories that emphasize a woman's right to control her own reproductive capacity, and to resist unwanted sexual attention.

Using a case study from subsequent research with Baka former hunter-gatherers, I have also argued that the "rebellion" capacity of ritual first identified by Max Gluckman favours explorations of equality in hierarchical societies, however in relatively equal societies it explores inequality. In situations of rapid social transformation these ritual potentials can be consolidated into the social order by means of a positive feedback loop between quotidian social change and ritual change (Townsend 2015). With this hypothesis in mind, I examine differences between Mbuti and Baka mythology with regard to female coalitions and women's sexual rights, arguing that the similarities and differences in these two storytelling traditions correspond with the two contrasting ritual rebellion potentials, assuming a close symbolic relationship between ritual and mythology. The relative absence of "feminist" stories in the current-day Baka storytelling repertoire results from the emergence of entrenched gender inequality in Baka social organization.

## **16111 - Striking similarities in KhoeSan and Hadza mythology: some preliminary remarks**

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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Linguists and geneticists are agreed that the Bushmen have been separated from the Hadza for at least 40,000 years. Despite this, we suggest that there are close similarities in the field of belief that call for explanation. Drawing on fieldwork in 2004/5 and published materials, we focus on three elements of Hadza mythology that bear striking resemblances to the much better known Bushmen corpus of mythology. Both Hadza and Bushmen ascribe transformative powers to the mantis (Hadza- !oo!oko). Similarities include a role in protecting game animals from the hunter's arrows, and an ability to cast the world into darkness. Differences are that the !o!oko may be a lecherous old woman, and that he/she tries to prevent Haine (God) from instructing men how to have sex. Hadza and Bushmen have similar conceptions of First Creation, where the very first people - (Hadza - Ikanawangube'e kenebe'e) had no knees, and thus could not sit around a fire, instead eating food raw. Both cultures give prominence to eland as animals of potency. What is surprising, however, is that both speak of small carnivores - meerkats or mongooses - playing a critical role in the distribution/consumption of eland meat. We propose that these correspondences are not coincidental and are not trivial. They hint at a deep sub-structure of belief concerning relationships between sex, meat-distribution, and cooking.

## 15960 - The World's First Metaphor

Presentation type: Oral presentation

**Author(s):** Knight, Chris (University College London, London, Un. Kingdom / Ver Königr.)

In categorical perception, stimuli which vary along a continuum are perceived as instances of discrete categories, while stimuli within a given category are treated as identical: A = A Humans, like other animals, routinely engage in fast and efficient sensory processing of this kind (Harnad 1987). But a radically different and uniquely human cognitive strategy is metaphor, whose principle is the unity of opposites: A = B Here, perceptually opposed categories are brought into alignment in order to highlight an otherwise imperceptible conceptual similarity:

'John is a real pig'

When freshly coined, a metaphor blocks quick and dirty cognition, forcing the brain to think. According to one school of thought (Smith and Höfler 2014), metaphor is the underlying principle driving the emergence in our species of both symbols and grammar.

Conceptualisation through metaphor need not necessarily involve words or grammatical rules. A simple gesture may suffice. However, metaphor does presuppose a social disposition which nonhuman primates lack – a readiness to trust and discern common ground in overt expressions which are patently untrue.

In his classic work on the origins of religion, Émile Durkheim argued that Australian Aboriginal totemic ritual embodies all that is distinctive about human language and thought:

Man = Kangaroo

Focusing on African hunter-gatherer traditions, this paper re-evaluates Durkheim's striking argument that core metaphorical equations linking humans with game animals stem from a deeper perceived connection between female reproductive blood and the blood shed by men in the hunt (cf. Lewis 2008, Testart 1986).

### References

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## 15938 - Reconstructing a source cosmology for African hunter-gatherers

Presentation type: Oral presentation

**Author(s):** Power, Camilla (University of East London, London, Un. Kingdom / Ver Königr.)

This paper draws on the rich ethnography of ritual and myth for populations of African hunter-gatherers (Khoisan, Western and Eastern Pygmies, and Hadza). These groups on genetic evidence conserve the most ancient human lineages with the highest phylogenetic diversity. They show a potential time-depth of separation in the range of 50-100,000 years, equal to or greater than the first movement of modern humans out of Africa (Pickrell et al. 2012, Rito et al 2013). In terms of shared cultural roots, what is the implication of the ancient common ancestry, with deep-time subsequent separation of populations? Each of these African hunter-gatherer populations bears a cultural heritage independent of the others over long time periods. If significant shared features of magico-religious systems were demonstrated, these could be of considerable antiquity, tracing back to source cosmologies contemporary with the emergence of modern human symbolic behaviour. The most conservative aspects of cultural continuity, including archaic structures of ritual and cosmology, could therefore stem from the Middle Stone Age. Using Grauer's 'triangulation' method (2011: 44), I propose a number of key features likely to belong to a 'hypothetical baseline culture' which could correspond to the first symbol-using modern humans. These features include healing dances; return to first creation at initiation; a lunar framework of ritual; species facilitating earth-sky movements and transformation; respect rules of game; and an ideology of blood. From this perspective, a comparative ethnography of African hunter-gatherer ritual and myth could illuminate the archaeological record of early symbolism. Can we pursue a kind of cultural cladistics, identifying shared derived characteristics likely to have belonged to ancestor populations? At the very least, can we constrain the possible models for the emergence of symbolism by attention to such ethnographic detail? Grauer, V. 2011 *Sounding the Depths*. Pittsburgh: CreateSpace. See <http://soundingthedepts.blogspot.co.uk/> Pickrell JK, Patterson N, Barbieri C, Berthold F, Gerlach L et al. 2012. The genetic prehistory of southern Africa. *Nat Commun* 3: 1143. doi: 10.1038/ncomms2140. PubMed: 23072811 Rito T, Richards MB, Fernandes V, Alshamali F, Cerny V, et al. 2013. The First Modern Human Dispersals across Africa. *PLoS ONE* 8(11):e80031. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0080031