

Egalitarianism and Nonviolence: Gifts of the Khoe-San

By Bernedette Muthien

Anthropologists have written for at least a hundred years of the so-called “Bushman.” I am descended of these First Nations people in Southern Africa, arguably the first peoples of the world, through my mother line. In efforts to unify diverse first peoples across the borders of several countries, who speak languages so different that they do not understand each other, I refer to my people collectively as the KhoeSan, or “people’s people”. I reclaim these terms, Khoe and San together, and its people collectively, in similar ways people reclaim the terms “queer” or “nerd,” some of which I also identify with from time to time.

Khoe!na ~ ubuntu ~ gift

South Africa, and Desmond Tutu in particular, is known for promoting an African Renaissance through reclaiming the ancient African concept of *ubuntu*: I am because I belong; my humanity is inextricably connected to yours; I cannot be happy unless we are all happy. The concept of *ubuntu* exists, arguably, in all societies, and a deep examination of all societies will evince at least one word for it, if not many words, to describe it from society to society, including *unhu* in Zimbabwe (“I am well if you are all right too”¹), *Khoe!na* in the Kalahari, among Native Americans², and even in the 16th-17th century (metaphysical!) poetry of John Donne.

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were: *any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee* [Meditation XVII, emphasis added].

In the context of *Khoe!na* or *ubuntu*, the gift is less an economy or even a philosophy, and more a lifestyle, a way of being, a way of seeing and acting. The gift is life itself, and at the root of each society, especially the KhoeSan. It is also at the root of feminist indigenous activisms, including the solidarity networks between feminist indigenous activist scholars (e.g. the Gender Egalitarian or African Solidarity listservs where knowledge is shared freely). The gift or *ubuntu* forms the foundations of global South-directed transnational feminist solidarity, where resources are shared freely, and sometimes even redistributively. Some of these networks include DAWN (global South-led, Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) and Amanitare (African-led pan-African gender network).

Mis/Representation

Who gets to ring the bell, or to speak, on behalf of whom? The Harvard “school of Bushman studies” from the 1960’s nurtured several gifted scholars, including Megan Biesele (Kalahari People’s Fund) and the late Marjorie Shostak. Shostak made her name, and her fortune, off a San woman she named Nisa. Pippa Skotnes, South African of European descent,

¹ Tsitsi Dangaremba’s novel, *The Book of Not*, 2006.

² “Such a word (ubuntu) in Iroquoian is Royaner in Mohawk and Hoyane in Seneca”, Philip Henhawk, email 17 August 2007.

has fared similarly well. In her work Skotnes pays tribute to 18th century colonial settlers Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd who documented KhoeSan cosmology and culture in English for the first time, something many of us continue to appreciate.

While Shostak and Skotnes, on two different continents, profited well from receiving the abundant gifts of KhoeSan wisdoms, they have not necessarily chosen to practice the gift in relation to their *subjects*. Scholars mirror practices of pharmaceutical companies who patent indigenous medicines such as *hoodia*, with little or no investment in the communities from which they mined their original information or other resources.

In both books about Nisa, Shostak complains routinely of being accused by the San of being stingy. Shostak, with her driver, off-road 4X4 vehicle and other expensive equipment, brings along tea, tobacco and some beads to offer as gifts to the Kalahari people whose ancient wisdoms she mines. In the second *Nisa* book, Shostak, terminally ill with breast cancer, returns to the Kalahari to seek a cure from Nisa, who has now fulfilled her destiny and become a shaman or healer. Between the two books, Shostak sent some money via a fellow Harvard Bushman studies scholar so Nisa could buy a few cows. During research for *Nisa II*, Shostak returns to the Kalahari equipped with generous funding from a major pharmaceutical company, for information on indigenous medicines. She employs a full-time driver, rents an off-road vehicle and much equipment, and seems well-endowed materially, especially in comparison with the impoverished San in the Kalahari. Despite Shostak's material wealth, she appears spiritually impoverished, since she continues to be stingy as described by the locals (*i.e.* she does not share her wealth easily or at all with those she stays with in the desert) while simultaneously mining the Kalahari people for information for her book and information for her pharmaceutical sponsor. At the same time she desperately wishes Nisa, and the Kalahari and its people, to cure her of cancer. She refuses to pay (financially gift) the drummer for a healing ritual ("trance dance") in her honour, even as he complains that she is so rich and should share.

Shostak remains stingy in the eyes of the Kalahari, by not sharing her abundant material resources, and also greedy, by wanting more than she needs. She epitomizes, tragically and poignantly, the materialism and spiritual death of the global North, which leads to its peoples' attempts to cannibalise other peoples' cultures, others' knowledge, and even faiths.

This is similar to the ways, Vaughan says, that the Exchange economy parasites off the Gift economy, that the global North's wealth is built on the impoverishment of the global South, that scholars (including I in some irredeemable ways) profit off the communities we (do) research (with), scholarship which can become a gift to communities by employing what Linda Tuhiwai Smith terms "decolonizing methodologies," especially participatory research.

Answering Back

Barbara Alice Mann speaks of "euro-forming data", in ways that 1960's and 1970's feminists spoke of phallogocentrism:³

There is a fair amount of narcissism in his code, bred, I suspect, by the casual assumption that western culture is properly measured and understood.

Mann speaks of "euro-forming" as to

³ Phallogocentrism refers to a "condensation of [phallogocentrism](#) and [logocentrism](#) coined by [Derrida](#) to describe how [Lacan](#) perpetuates the traditional [philosophical](#) view that the [word](#) or [logos](#) is the site of [truth](#) by making the [phallus](#) the key [signifier](#) that both governs access to the [symbolic](#), or [language](#), and determines [sexual difference](#)" (<http://nosubject.com/Phallogocentrism>).

Force-fit Native concepts into artificial conformity with western logical systems, at once inserting and disguising massive Euro-Christian interpolations, which then pass for Native content. Euro-forming rests on a cavalier monoculturalism, which often goes unchallenged in the academy because of two ensconced caveats:

1. That Indians are to be seen (preferably, in regalia) but not heard, and
2. That all Indians look alike, leaving archaeologists free to mix and match quite foreign traditions with breath-taking impunity (2003: 169).

Ifi Amadiume (1997) speaks of the Igbo notion of *Nzagwalu*, or “answering back”: when you have been insulted, you answer back. She builds her confidence on Cheikh Anta Diop, who drew inspiration from the ancient Egyptian pyramids, ancient knowledge which he reclaimed as African, rather than European. Both made their names reclaiming ancient African matriarchies. Both spoke against overwhelming odds during postcolonial times when data was not only euro-formed, but also decidedly phallogocentric. Vaughan’s work speaks of this critical intersection (and interdependence) between patriarchy and capitalism, and hence the fact that one cannot be transformed without changing the other, e.g. liberal feminisms tinkering with legislation to enhance gender equality has not resulted in an end to gender violence in Europe or North America (where men continue to commit gender-based violence against at least 30 percent of women), nor an end to the feminization of poverty across the world and especially in the global South.

In a KhoeKhoe form of answering back, Yvette Abrahams published a “non-review” of Rachel Holmes’ recent book on Sarah Bartmann, in which Abrahams lambasts Holmes for citing her, Abrahams, the internationally acknowledged ‘expert’ on our ancestor, only *once*, and that in a *footnote*. In this “non-review”, Abrahams cites a long list of black feminist scholars, local and international, who have done conceptual work about Sarah Bartmann, *all of whom* Holmes ignored in her book: from Pumla Gqola to bell hooks. Abrahams concludes her “non-review”:

Nowadays, it has become unfashionable to use the r-word. To call Holmes an unreconstructed racist who refuses to engage with Black scholarship because she is incapable of dealing with our ideas may be unjust, and who knows? May even hurt book sales. So I shall refrain from doing so.

It is all so last-century. This being the case, I must insist on asking the same questions I have asked of white scholarship on Sarah Bartmann for over a decade now:

1. If you cannot treat her descendants with respect, how can you claim to respect Sarah Bartmann?
2. How can you write history without respect?

Feminine Divine

Beyond all the theory and scholarship on and with the KhoeSan, over some three hundred years, by colonizers and more latterly by descendants ourselves, I have gone directly to source: asked women elders across the Northern Cape especially, of the !Xun and Khwe in Platfontein (near Kimberley), and of the Khomani San in Upington and the Kalahari, as well as in Riemvasmaak, and a good many other places too. Each *ouma* (grandmother) recounted stories of women’s strength and power, of goddesses (feminine deities), of sacred femininity that is so powerful it moves mountains.

Each *ouma* acknowledged that women have the potential to create life, that life creation is sacred, and hence women are sacred (creators).

Each *ouma* asserted that women and men are equal, and each must respect the other; that no one should rule over the other.

Each *ouma* spoke of inter-generational respect, beyond nuclear families, especially of youth for elders (the idea that *all* children are governed by *all* elders in a community).

Each *ouma* referred to the KhoeSan's ancient principles of nonviolence as norm.

Each *ouma* spoke of *Khoe!na*, of interconnectedness, of interdependence, of sharing and caring and gifting.

As //Kabbo said to Lucy Lloyd during the 19th century: "I am the one who knows that the women are the rich ones and the wise ones"⁴.

Reclaiming Ancient Values

Three centuries of European colonization, preceded by a few centuries of Nguni colonization, followed by fifty years of Apartheid, led to the genocide of Southern Africa's First Nations people, and the militarization of many of its men, to increased gender inequity and gender violence, as well as large-scale land dispossession and poverty. Yet the ancient knowledge of women's strength and power, of gender egalitarianism and normative nonviolence, is routinely recounted by these women elders, and still practiced in various ways, especially in deep rural areas, as well as among homeless people in urban areas (Oevernes, 2004).

It is these values that need to be strengthened against the onslaughts of patriarchal neo-liberalisms; it is these values that need to be reclaimed in the face of anthropological and pharmaceutical mining expeditions. It is these values that may ultimately save humankind from extinction.

As //Kabbo said to Lucy Lloyd during the 19th century, "I am heaven's thing", reflecting that he is connected to the heavens (and the cosmos), and that each is a reflection of the other, referring to the modern scientific notion of fractals (and the religious notion of humans created in god's image, or the ancient indigenous adage "as above so below").

//Kabbo reflects the KhoeSan's intimate awareness of the cosmos and human's role in the scheme of things. The cosmos itself is structured as a gift system, with the stars, moon and sun, existing through dying, and gifting planet Earth with divine light and life through the very act of their dying. In similar ways that a body dies and becomes compost for plants, which gives oxygen to humans, which provides the cosmos with energy, *ad infinitum*.

Conclusion

Capitalisms and Hetero-Patriarchy will only be transformed with a united consciousness among all oppressed peoples, and their allies, and among women in particular. In similar ways that Black Consciousness was employed by activists including Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko during anti-colonial struggles.

When all is said and done, when we have "answered back" to "euro-forming" and phallogocentrism, when we have reclaimed ancient beliefs, then we are confronted with a profound truth: that all humans are interconnected, interdependent—the principle of *ubuntu*. If one person is harmed, we are all harmed. Nelson Mandela spoke of this in his autobiography,

⁴ In Skotnes, 2007.

Long Walk to Freedom, how each person's liberation is inextricably tied up with every other person's freedoms.

The ancient principles of respect and gifting, of gender and social egalitarianism and normative nonviolence, of the fluidities of genders and sexualities, especially of the KhoeSan, are critical for activists to construct alternatives to dominant hegemonies as new forms of political practice. At the centre of all these practices will be *ubuntu*: our humanities and freedoms are inextricably connected.

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