

Specimens of Bushman Folklore

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Publisher: *One More Voice*

Date: 2023

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File Description:

This file collects plot summaries and relevant keywords for selected stories in *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911) by W. H. I. Bleek, L. C. Lloyd, and various San coauthors/co-creators. Indu Ohri's students developed these materials for an introductory survey course on literature and the visual arts from Romanticism to the modern day during summer 2022 at Boston University.

As part of a class assignment, students created these materials about the folklore collections on the *One More Voice* (OMV) website. Each student read one folktale and devised a short plot summary of important events and characters and 3-5 keywords indicating the folktale's major concepts, themes, or Indigenous terms. In addition, some students contributed extra materials such as keyword definitions, long plot summaries, and an essay that contextualizes the folktale "How Kimyera became King of Uganda" more fully in terms of social hierarchy.

These collections were frequently the first vehicles for sharing people of color's voices with western readers because colonial administrators would gather folklore from local coauthors/co-creators who they often failed to acknowledge. The materials are meant to guide a general scholarly audience of educators, graduate students, and college students who may be unfamiliar with these folktales as well as to enrich the public's knowledge about Indigenous folklore.

Cite (MLA):

Bleek, Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel, and Lucy Catherine Lloyd. *Specimens of Bushman*

Folklore. London: George Allen & Company, Ltd., 1911.

<http://archive.org/details/specimensofbush00blee>.

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“The Mantis Assumes the Form of a Hartebeest”

Plot Summary:

The main character, the mantis, takes on the form of a hartebeest hoping to trick young girls. The children see him lying dead on the ground, and cheer in excitement, thinking that they have found their dinner and “shall eat great meat.” They cut the beast into pieces. As they embark on their journey home, the head winks and whispers into the ear of the youngest child. The child calls for the eldest sister, who looks on in disbelief until she sees the beast’s head speak as it reattaches to the body. The children run back home and tell their fathers about this terrifying experience. They describe the flesh quivering and pulling away from their hands. The parents tell the children about the old man, the mantis, who feigns his death at the river to deceive girls. The children, tired from running away, decide to not hunt and stay home.

Keywords: Deception, Death, Hunting, and Animals

Keyword Definitions:

Deception: The young girls are fooled by the old man (a.k.a. the mantis).

Death: The hartebeest is lying on the ground. Although there are no wounds from any hunters, the hartebeest is assumed to be dead, especially after being cut into small sections for easy transportation.

Hunting: The girls are busy hunting for their meal and wind up finding the dead hartebeest.

Animals: The old man is referred to as “the mantis”; he takes on the form of another animal called a hartebeest.

“The Children Are Sent to Throw the Sleeping Sun Into the Sky”

Plot Summary:

In this folktale, a man who used to live on earth is known for shining light within the comfort of his own home. What is so surprising about his blazing sunlight is that it shines from his armpit. In the country of South Africa resides a tribe called the Flat Bushmen and their children. The children gather together with an elderly woman of the tribe and listen to her tell the story of the man. She explains to them that if they want light for the entire earth, they must go to him and throw him into the sky. The five children do as she says, and while he is sleeping and hot, they all work together to throw him up into the sky. The man now lives up in the sky; no longer is he a man, but, instead, a round figure that shines brightly over earth.

Keywords: First Bushmen, The Children, Sun, and Sun-armpit

Keyword Definitions:

First Bushmen: The men of the early race (tribe) in South Africa.

The Children: The children of the flat bushmen. There are five of them. There is a boy with two younger brothers, and he has a friend who also has a younger brother. They all work together to lift the man and throw him in the sky.

Sun: The Sun is a man who used to live on earth. This man only gives light to the space around his house. The Children throw him into the sky, where he brings light to all of earth.

Sun-armpit: The location where the light that the man shed comes from. Whenever he raises his arms, the light shines from his armpit, shining brightly down onto Earth. However, when he puts his arm down, the sunlight goes away and the sky becomes gloomy.

“The Origin of Death; Preceded by a Prayer Addressed to the Young Moon”

Plot Summary:

This folktale tells the story of a hare, the moon, and how death came to be permanent. The folklore is told by Dia!kwain, of the San people of southern Africa, who spoke the Xam language. As the tale goes, a male hare was once lamenting the death of his mother. The moon sees the grieving hare and reprimands him, saying that he should be silent, as his mother would come back to life. Unbelieving, the hare contradicts him by saying the moon is wrong. Angered, the moon hits the hare and splits his lip—this is why all hares now have a split lip. Furthermore, he curses the hare, and all people, stating that everyone will now die and never come back to life. The tale touches on the themes of contradiction, death, and the life cycle.

Keywords: Hare, Moon, Contradiction, Death, and Life Cycle

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“The Son of the Wind”

Plot Summary:

The short story “The Son of the Wind” tells of the friendship between Nakati (Na-ka-ti) and the son of the Wind, Érriten-kuañ-kuañ. After Nakati realizes he does not know the son of the Wind’s true name, he asks his mother, who only informs him of his name (Érriten-kuañ-kuañ) after their hut is strengthened. Once Nakati says his name, he runs back to their hut for protection, as the son of the Wind lies down and begins to kick violently, stirring up winds, which cause dust to rise everywhere and ultimately destroy the homes of the community. After Érriten-kuañ-kuañ’s mother places him upright, the winds lighten and things return to normal. The story concludes with the opinion of the Bushmen, as the author describes the winds they face and expresses their desires for the winds to blow them to a new territory.

Keywords: Wind, Bushmen, Son, Comrade, and Springbok

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“The Lion Jealous of the Voice of the Ostrich”

Plot Summary:

Grandfather tells a story about a lion's jealousy of an ostrich to his grandchildren. The story starts with the lion conspiring to deceive or get revenge on the ostrich. The reasoning behind this is that no woman would take an interest in the lions but would always compliment the ostrich for their sweet and lovely voice. The lions create a plan to take the ostrich's lung for themselves to get the attention of the woman. The grandfather then tells his grandkids to be like the lion and eat the ostrich's lungs. If the lungs are not eaten raw and swallowed whole, they will lack the voice of an ostrich. When the grandchildren tell him that they do not want to eat ostrich lungs, he says that they will be exactly like the lion, never getting a woman's attention and always getting angry over it.

Keywords: Jealousy, Love, Attention, and Revenge

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“The Resurrection of the Ostrich”

Plot Summary:

A male ostrich is killed by a male Bushman, and his wife picks out the feathers of the ostrich. A whirlwind brings the small feather with blood to the sky, which then turns into a little ostrich. Getting out of the water, the reborn ostrich grows up and becomes stronger in terms of his feathers and bones. With calling for partners, he marries wives and a wife lays eggs and the male ostrich protects the house. His major enemy is the jackal, who tries to steal the egg and hide it in the bush. Then, the grown ostrich stands against his enemies to protect his family and house.

Keywords: Spiritualization of Water, Tribal Protection, Rituals, Identity, Metaphor

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“The Vultures, Their Elder Sister, and Her Husband”

Plot Summary:

This folktale is about vultures who develop a relationship with a woman they consider their “older sister.” The vultures begin living in the home she shares with her husband. The husband is an avid hunter who brings meat for the couple to feast on. While the wife is preparing their meal, the vultures swing down and devour the skin. Over time, the husband grows quite angry. One morning, the husband insists that his wife join him on a hunt to enjoy a meal without being disturbed by the vultures. While alone, the vultures devise a plan to send two of their sisters to scope out the area for springbok. Upon finding a dead springbok, they all gather around and eat it quite quickly, keeping their eyes out for the husband. When they finish, the vultures make sure to leave the meat for their “older sister” to enjoy and fly away to find more.

Keywords: Carnivores, Springbok, and “Chosen Family”

Keyword Definitions:

Carnivore: An organism that primarily eats meat or the flesh of dead animals (Wynne).

Springbok: A member of the antelope family that is found primarily in Southern Africa and can be distinguished by a structure on its back that is present when it is excited (Estes).

“Chosen Family”: A relationship between individuals that share no blood or DNA but consider themselves family.

“The Young Man of the Ancient Race, Who was Carried off by a Lion, When Asleep in the Field”

Plot Summary:

A lion carries off a young man who feels tired and thus sleeps on the ground. The lion is thirsty and thinks he would be thirstier if he eats the man. Therefore, he decides to drink water first and then come back to enjoy his feast. After the lion checks several times that the man is not awake, he goes to the river and the man, who has pretended to be dead, runs back to the village. In order to protect him, people roll him in mats with hartebeest skins. When the lion comes, he insists on getting the young man, even though the people attempt to sacrifice children for the young man's life. They cannot kill the lion by either shooting at him or stabbing him. After they finally compromise and give the young man to the lion, the lion bites him to death and dies with him.

Keywords: Caution, Zigzag Directions, and Immortality

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

Works Cited

Estes, Richard. "Springbok." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2021.

<https://www.britannica.com/animal/springbok-mammal>.

Wynne, Nancy. "Carnivore." In *National Geographic Society*, 2022.

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