

## THE SOURCE LIBRARY: MYTHS FROM THE PAST



### The Spirit in the Tree

There was once a girl whose mother had died and whose stepmother was very cruel to her. One day, when she was crying at her mother's grave, she saw that the earth of the grave parted and a stalk came out, which grew into a sapling and soon into a tree. The wind rustled its leaves and the tree whispered to the girl, telling her that her mother was near and that she should eat the fruits of the tree. The girl did and the fruits were very tasty and made her feel much better.

This happened every day from then on, but as soon as the cruel step-mother discovered what was happening, she went to her husband, the girl's father, and insisted that he had the tree cut down. The tree lay withering and the girl wept on its maimed trunk for a long time, until she heard a whisper and saw a lump growing up from the trunk. It grew and grew until it was a pumpkin. There was a hole in it, from which leaked a trickle of juice. The girl licked up a few drops and found them very nourishing, but again her stepmother soon found out and, one dark night, cut the pumpkin off and threw it on the dung heap.

Next day the girl wept and wept until she heard a trickling sound and saw a little stream, which whispered, 'Drink me, drink me!' She did, and felt much refreshed, but now the step-mother made the girl's father throw sand in the stream and bury it.

The girl went back to the grave where she cried and cried. She had been sitting there a long time when a man appeared from the bush. He saw the dead tree and decided it was just what he needed to make a bow and arrows, for he was a hunter.

He talked to the girl, who told him that the tree had once grown on her mother's grave. He liked her and decided to go to her father and ask for her hand in marriage. The father consented on condition that the hunter killed a dozen buffalo for the wedding feast.

The hunter had never killed more than one buffalo at a time - that was difficult enough. But this time, taking his new bow and arrows, he had not been in the bush long when he saw a herd of a dozen buffalo resting in the shade.

Setting one of his new arrows to his bow, he let fly. The first buffalo sank down dead. And the second, and the third. An hour later the hunter came back to tell the father to send men to bring the meat to the village.

There was a big feast when the hunter married the poor girl who had lost her mother.



## The Mantis Family

Although Mantis is a type of 'super-being', the Bushmen do not regard him as a god like the moon and sun. Indeed, he is all too human and in many ways personifies the Bushman himself. He is a kind of dream Bushman, and resembles the real mantis, with his small wedge-shaped face and intelligent look. The figures which primitive artists painted on the walls of their rock shelters prance along like Mantis himself.

Mantis is very much a family man and likes to have his folk around him. His wife is Dassie, the rock hyrax. His son is young Mantis, very like his resourceful father. Porcupine is an adopted daughter whose real father is a weird monster called the All-Devourer, with whom she is too frightened to live.

Porcupine is married to a being that is neither human nor animal but a part of the rainbow, called Kwammanga. They have two sons, one called Kwammanga after his father, and the other Mongoose or, as he is sometimes known, Ichneumon. The latter is a bossy young character who is always putting his grandfather Mantis in his place. Mantis also has a sister, a lovely lady called Blue Crane, of whom he is most fond.

## Mantis, Ostrich and Fire

In addition to life, Mantis also brought the first fire to the people. Before this, they ate their food raw, just as they killed it, like the leopard and the lion, and they slept in their shelters at night, with no cheering light to brighten the long dark hours. Mantis had noticed that whenever Ostrich went to eat, his food smelt different and delicious. So one day he crept close to Ostrich to observe him as he ate. He saw Ostrich furtively take some fire from beneath his wing, and dip his food into it. When he had finished eating, he carefully tucked the fire back under his wing, and walked off.

Mantis knew that Ostrich would not give him any fire, so he decided to make a plan. One day he went to visit Ostrich. 'Come,' he called, 'I have found a tree with delicious yellow plums on it.' Ostrich was delighted. He began to eat the plums that were easiest to reach. 'No, higher, higher! The best ones are right at the top,' Mantis urged him. As Ostrich stood up on tiptoe and spread his wings to balance himself, Mantis snatched some of the fire from beneath his wing and ran off with it. This was how he brought fire to the Bushmen. Since then, Ostrich, terribly ashamed, has never flown and keeps his wings pressed to his sides, to preserve the little fire he has left.

According to the Bushmen, the ostrich has always been a rather odd fellow. When the female makes her nest in a hollow in the warm sand, she lays 20 to 30 round, creamy eggs, but invariably leaves one outside. Why? Because she and her husband are so busy brooding on the theft of his fire that they can be very absentminded. She is even liable to forget she is sitting on a clutch of eggs, and so she puts one outside, just to remind herself and her husband that they are there.



### Murilé and the Moon Chief -

Once there was an African youth named Murilé, whose mother incessantly nagged at him, criticizing him. Nothing he did was ever right, it seemed. Even his best efforts brought snide remarks from her.

Growing tired of this, Murilé borrowed his father's stool, which had been in the family for countless generations. He sat on the stool and recited every magic incantation he knew. Suddenly the stool began to fly up off the earth in the direction of the moon.

When he landed on the moon, he came to a village and asked for directions to the home of the Moon chief. The villagers asked Murilé to work for them in exchange for the information. They came to like him and they told him how to get to his destination, and he went on his way.

Upon arriving at the village of the Moon chief, Murilé was appalled at how backward the people there were. They knew nothing of fire; they ate their meat raw, had no pottery, and shivered at night from the cold. So Murilé took sticks and built a fire, which made him a great hero to the moon people and a favorite of the Moon chief. He was hailed as the greatest magician the people had ever known. In recognition of his services, Murilé was showered with gifts and honors. The Moon chief and his subjects could not give Murilé enough cattle and wives. Every father wanted Murilé to marry his daughters. Soon a very rich man with many cattle and wives.

Murilé prepared to return to earth in triumph: Now his mother would see that her son had amounted to something. So he sent his friend, the mockingbird, to announce his imminent return to earth. However, Murilé's family did not even believe their son was alive; they had given him up for dead long ago.

When the mockingbird flew back to the moon with his report, Murilé could not believe that the mockingbird had spoken to his family. So the mockingbird went back to Murilé's earthly village and brought back his father's walking stick as proof of the visit. Finally convinced, Murilé prepared to return to earth.

He dressed his wives and many children in their finest clothing and covered them with jewels. He had so much wealth to show off that his mother was sure to be impressed. With this great entourage to bring with him, Murilé could hardly travel back on the magic stool, so the entire party left on foot.

Murilé became exhausted. One of his finest bulls told Murilé that he, the bull, would carry his master back to earth in exchange for a promise: that Murilé would never kill him and eat him. Murilé gladly consented. The family of Murilé on earth were thrilled to see him and marveled at his wealth and fine new family. Even his mother rejoiced to have him home. Consistent with her character, she went about bragging to everyone of her rich and powerful son.

Murilé made his parents swear never to harm the bull that had brought him home, and they agreed. However, as time passed, the parents forgot their promise. After all, Murilé had so many cattle that they probably forgot which bull was which. So his parents killed the bull and Murilé's mother prepared a dish seasoned with its fat and broth. As Murilé sat down to eat, the

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meat spoke to him, reminding him of the promise. As Murié took the first taste of the bull's meat, the earth swallowed him up.



## Rain and Her Son

It is told that Rain was once a beautiful woman who once lived in the sky and wore a rainbow around her waist.

Rain was married to the man who created the earth- Flame, and they had three beautiful daughters.

The eldest daughter wished to leave home when she grew up and visit the earth below. Her parents let her go and once there she fell in love and married a handsome hunter.

While the eldest daughter of Rain & Flame was away, Rain bore another child, a son, whom she named Son-eib.

When Son-eib was old enough, his sisters begged their parents to let them also travel to see the world. Rain, however, was afraid she would lose them all, so she refused.

An acquaintance- Wolf, had looked upon the two daughters and found them fair. Disguising his wicked heart, he said to Flame "Let them go, it will be good for their education, and I myself will go with them to look after them." So Flame gave them permission in spite of Rain's grief: and off they went, full of happiness.

Soon after the children had come down to earth, they came to a village where both good and bad people lived. A woman passing by stared hard at Son-eib and said "How can this be? This boy has my mother's eyebrows." She offered them food, but Wolf did not allow Son-eib to have any, saying, "He is not a person, he is just a thing." Son-eib was angered by this, but the daughters ate despite it all.

While sitting by himself in the long grass, Son-eib caught a beautiful red bird which fluttered past him, and concealed it under his coat.

That night the woman offered the shelter of her house to the children of Rain & Flame.

"For you cannot lie in the dark, beautiful girls...and boy with my mother's eyebrows."

However, Wolf would not let the boy into the house. He made him lie by himself in a little hut. After dark, Wolf went and fetched some of the bad people from the village and they set fire to the hut and burned it down with the boy inside. As the roof fell in, a lovely red bird flew up into the night, straight to the boy's mother, Rain.

"Son-eib is dead! He perished in a fire and his sisters did not know him," sang the bird.

"Do you hear what the bird sings," asked Rain of her husband.

"What will you do now that they have killed our son?"

A little while later, the good and bad people in the village observed a great black storm cloud approaching fast and around its middle was a rainbow. Suddenly, lightning flashed wildly from the cloud, striking everywhere. It singled out Wolf and all the bad people and struck them dead. A mighty voice roared out of the cloud: "Do not kill the Children of the Sky." And ever since then, the Bushman has feared the rainbow.

Many Bushmen see the beautiful arch of the rainbow in the rain-washed air and they will beat two sticks together loudly and shout, 'Go away! Go away and do not burn us!' This is because of the story of Rain and her son.



### The First Bushman

Water is the ancient symbol of life to the Bushman. It is so precious to them that it can assume divine properties. In it, the San Bushman can revitalize himself and make a fresh start, cleansing the spirit.

The legendary hero of the Bushman- Mantis, appears at the beginning of the world when the face of the earth was covered completely with water.

Mantis was carried over the tumult of the dark and turbulent waters by a bee. As bees are honey-makers, they are an image of wisdom to the San people.

The bee, however, became weary and cold as he searched for solid ground, and Mantis felt heavier and heavier. He flew slower and sank down towards the water. At last, while floating on the water, the bee saw a great white flower, half-open, awaiting the sun's first rays.

The bee laid Mantis in the heart of the flower and planted within him the seed of the first human being. Then the bee died.

But as the sun rose and warmed the flower, Mantis awoke, and there, from the seed left by the bee, the first Bushman was born.



### How Death Came to Mankind

The Bushmen (The San tribe: First people of Africa) share a story with the Hottentots and several other African races about the sending of the message of death to man.

The Bushmen say that the moon sent an insect to man with the following message: 'As I die, and dying live, so ye shall also die, and dying live.' Off went the insect with his message, but his legs were rather short and, unable to see very well, he lost his way many times.

Soon he was overtaken by an inquisitive hare, who found out the purpose of the insect's errand, and thought to himself, 'I will carry this message myself, and as it is an important one, it will bring me fame and glory.' He left the insect trailing along and bounded away.

But the hare, being naturally hare-brained, soon garbled the message as he repeated it to himself over and over as he ran. He arrived at his destination and had his version of the message from the moon proclaimed to all men on earth: 'As I die and dying perish, in the same manner ye shall also die and come wholly to an end.'

The moon, when she heard of this miscarriage of messages, took a stick and angrily hit the hare, striking a cleft in his nose and lip which remains to this day.

He, in retaliation, scratched the moon, inflicting bruises and blotches on her face. Some, however, say that the hare let the end of his keros fall in the fire until it was scorched and hot, then hit the moon in the face with it, causing the dark 'burn' marks which are still visible today.

The Hottentots also believe this story. They despise the hare, and will rarely eat its flesh. They say that it was the chameleon, however, and not the insect which first carried the message, and they mock its slow gait.

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The Bushmen also mistrust the chameleon and if they find a dead one in their path they cover it with twigs to avert misfortune.



## SNAKE'S TALE

Long ago, little Mantis crawled across the dry earth, his throat parched, his eyes bulging. He was not alone; the other animals were thirsty too. Rain had stopped falling. It had been so long since they had seen showers, the youngest creatures did not even know what rain was, and when their parents spoke of rain clouds and storms, the young looked bewildered.

Now as the sun set, Moon looked down on the poor animals and felt such pity, she decided she must caution them. And so she called down to little Mantis, who looked up at her call. "Go with your children and all the beasts to another land," Moon called. "But where?" Mantis asked, and the sound of his voice was scratchy, for his throat was parched, as dry as the ground at his feet.

"Walk toward me," Moon said. "As I set, I will lead the way. Tell all the others to gather their belongings, and we will depart before dawn."

Mantis quickly ran here and there, spreading the word to the birds and beasts and every single insect he could find. "Pack your things. Gather your husbands, your wives, sisters and brothers and all your children. Moon will lead us out of this land. Moon says that soon this land will be nothing but desert, and if we want to survive, we must depart."

The elephants, hearing the news, raised up their trunks, and their loud trumpeting sound shook the land, so that everyone came out of hiding places -- from hives and tree trunks, from beneath the ground, from caves and crevasses. "Where will we go?" they asked.

Mantis stood up proudly before everyone. "We shall follow Moon," he declared.

Everyone was ready, but suddenly Mantis noticed Snake. Now in those days Snake was just like other animals; he too had legs. And he had family, too, but he was not packing or gathering or preparing.

"What are you doing, Snake?" Mantis asked. "You have not gathered your family. You have not packed your things. You must hurry! Soon Moon will be leaving, and we must follow." Snake yawned. He was a lazy fellow, and the notion of moving far from his home did not appeal to him. Besides, he was confident soon all would be well. Why bother doing anything? Sooner or later, rain would come to the land again. Surely the drought would end and plants would grow.

"I'm too tired to bother with moving," Snake said grumpily.

"You must go with us," Mantis insisted, and his eyes bugged out even bigger and wider than they usually did. "Please, Snake, don't be foolish. You can't stay here. You'll die of thirst."

Snake yawned once more. "I'm staying, Mantis. It's late, and it's dark, and I need my sleep. Please don't make too much noise as you're leaving."

Mantis tried to persuade him to change his mind, and so did some of the other creatures of the veldt: the springbok and meerkats, the cheetahs and the lions, the elephants and



baboons, the giraffes and the ostriches. But Snake yawned in everyone's face, and then he curled up and fell asleep beneath a rock, and when he awoke, everyone was gone.

Now Snake looked around. It was true, the grass was shriveling, and soon it would be gone altogether, and he might not have a nice bed. And the fat little frogs had decided to leave with the others, so now what would he eat, he wondered. Then he thought, "I'll figure it out later."

But the days passed, and then the weeks, and still rain did not fall, and all the grass dried up and blew away in the dry dusty winds.

By now Snake was starving. He had never felt such sharp pains in his body, and he could not stop his children's cries. And so at long last he decided he must follow the others. He would move in their footsteps. Perhaps they were wise, after all. And so he packed up his family, and together they set off to find a land of water and friendship.

The drought had gone on for so long by this time, the land was only desert, and as they walked, Snake's feet, and his family's feet, too, sank into the footsteps left behind by the others. The hot sand scratched at their bellies, and every step felt like it might be their last.

That evening, as Moon rose over them, Snake looked up. "Oh Moon," he cried, "I am so sorry I did not listen to your wise words. I worshipped the sun, and now it is the sun that will be my destruction. Please help save me and my family!"

The Moon, always kind, looked down on poor Snake and his family, and felt such terrible pity for the miserable creatures that she had to do something. She said, "I will make you able to survive this world."

At that moment Snake looked down and saw his legs shriveling up; soon they disappeared altogether. Then he saw his body growing thinner and sleeker, shiny, too, and when he lay down upon the desert sand, he discovered he could slide across it without sinking. He turned and saw that his family had also been transformed, and so together they set off across the hot sands and found their way to the other animals.

Snake's body stayed this way forever, and he remained shy. He still hides from the others, for he feels shame for not believing in the Moon. But he has never stopped loving the sun, and no one knows if he has really changed his lazy ways.

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