

‘A Springbok which is White, People Do Not Kill It’ - Contrasting attitudes of colonizer and colonized towards mammal anomalies



South Africa's indigenous /Xam people entertained superstitions surrounding the white springbok they encountered periodically, which were in sharp contrast to those of the colonizing European settlers.

Springbok and other animals occasionally produce white individuals. Although these animals are sometimes true albinos, for the most part they are more correctly referred to as leucistic, a condition of paleness that results from a recessive gene¹. Such anomalies of course draw attention and even today such individuals of various species are acclaimed² and even selectively bred. This attention to anomaly is no different from the past and the differing attitudes of the colonizers and the colonized towards white springbok perhaps best place the attitudes of the /Xam [San] towards nature in context.

European colonizers, for example, most often viewed white springbok as *een groote rariteit*³ [a great rarity] and immediately upon discovery sought either to capture and display the creature at centres such as Kimberley⁴ or Johannesburg, or to kill it and present the skin to the nearest museum⁵. Whether or not either course was followed, the discovery of a white springbok or the procurement of its skin was always reported with some pride and excitement⁶. This is not to say there was only academic or

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commercial interest bestowed on springbok by the white community.

On the contrary, white springbok also evoked considerable superstition in some communities. In Beaufort West in the mid-19th Century, for example, a white springbok which moved between this district and that of Prince Albert was continually harassed by all the local hunters, who believed that shooting the animal would ensure the success of all future hunting efforts. The fact that the animal survived for two years despite this unwelcome attention only served to fuel the belief. Several decades later, a white springbok in the western Orange Free State survived “thousands of cartridges” over a similar period of time before eventually succumbing to hunters’ bullets, this animal being the subject of a local myth that held it was “a phantom-shape assumed by the evil spirit himself to delude people from the chase of other game.”

In contrast to these attitudes, the /Xam held a completely different belief with regard to white springbok. The following well-known extract from one of /Han...kass’o’s narrations encapsulates this attitude:

A springbok which is white, people do not kill it, for the people look at it, while the people feel that the springbok are wont altogether to disappear. The springbok will not come to a place where a white springbok has lain dead. All the springbok altogether go away. Therefore, the people look at a springbok which is white, even if it be near to them⁷.

In other words, while the /Xam also entertained superstitions surrounding the unusual white springbok which they would have encountered periodically, these are in sharp contrast to those of their white counterparts. Instead of seeking to shoot white springbok to increase hunting prowess and success, the /Xam fastidiously avoided such practices in order to avoid chasing the springbok herds from their lands. The reliance of the /Xam on springbok was profound, and a core difference between the two cultures of course was the contrast [between] subsistence hunting and sport hunting⁸. In another of /Han...kasso’s narrations, he makes it clear that the presence of the white springbok, which the /Xam called !Guara-!Guara, was valued because it was associated with large herds of springbok and the ensuing abundance of protein:

The people say that the springbok resemble the Milky Way when a white springbok is there. Therefore, the people say, Thi-gusa to it. They also say that the number of springbok resembles the stars. Also [they] say !guara-!guara to it. ... The springbok are not numerous when a white springbok is not there, for the springbok are in small troops when a white springbok is not among the springbok⁹.

This general attitude prevailed even among those Khoi who had been co-opted as goatherds in the Graaff-Reinet district in the early part of the 20th Century, further indicating the extent of the difference between colonizer and colonized:

An instance has recently occurred at Shirlands, where the presence of a white springbuck has become the centre of a veritable romance. The goat herds declare that a miraculous halo surrounds the animal, she is the ‘Queen of the Bucks’ and has been endowed with perpetual youth. If a dozen bullets pierced her body, she would rise phoenix-like from the bushes, with wound healed and with a double measure of

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vitality. Consequently, when their 'baas' (Mr. John E. Hobson) announced his intention of calling a few friends together in order to hunt the animal and secure the skin and horns for the Port Elizabeth Museum, his swarthy retainer started aghast, and prophesied dire disaster! Mr Hobson shot the animal with no consequences ... skin can now be inspected at the Direct Supply Store in Graaff Reinet.

The value in understanding this dichotomy is the added emphasis it places on the differing dependence and relationship with nature held by /Xam hunter-gatherers and European agri-pastoralists. The /Xam ethnography is not limited to this aspect of environmental history, however, and a close reading thereof can play a significant role in the understanding of long extinct natural phenomena such as springbok treks.

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