

A beacon of home: *Struthio camelus* and the parameters of humanity in southern African hunter-gatherer lifeways

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Abstract

Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) eggshell (OES) beads are well documented as a medium of delayed exchange and social networking between hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa. For thousands of years, OES objects played a role in glossing social difference and establishing networks of reciprocal obligation. However, there is less clarity on the reasons for use of OES as the base material. While some sources consider the birds' spiritual power to be key, this contribution considers a complimentary perspective from within southern African |Xam idiom: that the normative associations of ostriches and ostrich eggs are significantly referenced through this material choice. In |Xam archival ethnography, ostriches appear as highly socialised resources, drought-resistant and responsive to careful population management, making it possible to call upon the species as a fallback resource in difficult times. Accordingly, just as humans call upon the birds in vulnerable moments, OES encodes notions of trust, care and interdependence into objects made from it.

Keywords

Ostrich eggshell beads, social networks, delayed exchange, reciprocity, relational ontology, |Xam hunter-gatherers, southern Africa

Introduction

Palimpsest is the essence of human creation. While we are not the only species to transform organic matter into artefact (Gowlett 2009), human material expression never fully sheds its formative processes nor escapes imagination of its origins. A powerful example of this is the mannered trade in ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) eggshell (OES) beads between southern African hunter-gatherer societies. Typically conceptualised with reference to *hxaro*, the practice of strategic gift-giving amongst the

Ju|'hoan of the Kalahari (Wiessner 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, 2002; *inter alia*), the beads act as a medium of delayed exchange, binding disparate individuals through the assurance of future reciprocity (recent summary in Mitchell & Stewart 2024). OES beads are not the only medium, but epitomise these exchanges to the point that the Ju|'hoan term for beadwork is synonymous with the category of *hxaro* exchange goods in general (Wiessner 1986; in Stewart et al. 2020: 6453).

Hxaro-analogue exchange practices have been used to proxy cross-continental information transfer and population dynamics in prehistoric contexts. The local frequency of OES artefacts fluctuates according to seasonal patterns of group fusion and fission (Wadley 1987), while regional distributions are responsive to large scale climatic trends and the associated patterns of population coalescence and dispersal (Mackay et al. 2014; Miller & Wang 2022). The exchanges played a role in negotiating novel subsistence pressures and changing home territories, likely as just one expression of several multiscale, object-mediated, intergroup brokerage practices—all with quite significant precedents (~33 ka in Stewart et al. 2020; ~50 ka in Miller & Wang 2022). The distances over which (pre)historic peoples made these exchanges was similarly substantial, with Wiessner (1982) observing known trading partners 150-200 km apart. This accords with lower-bound observations by Stewart et al. (2020: 6460), made with the aid of OES strontium isotope provenances *vis à vis* the historic ranges of *Struthio camelus*, implying distances of as much as ~330 km (see discussion in Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 13-15).

Cautious ethnographic analogy (cf. Pargeter et al. 2016) from the 19th and 20th century Karoo and Kalahari elaborates on the mechanics, describing the use of *hxaro* objects in strategic placement of social contacts in disparate communities (Wiessner 1977, 1981, 2002; Cashdan 1985; Hitchcock 2012; *inter alia*; see extension to stone-age contexts in Wadley 1987; Mitchell 1996). At such large scales of time and space, individual exchanges underwrite an emergent phenomenon: "metapopulations" (*sensu* Migliano & Vinicius 2024: 3-4), integrated and collectively adaptive (Hamilton 2022), but to some degree abstract expressions of human interregional organisation (see "beyond the macroband"; Stewart et al. 2020: 6455). Indeed, it appears to be the very concept of survival partners far away, unaffected by acute environmental stressors but bound by reciprocal protocol, which is itself adaptive. This offers a

release both from parochial altruism (Migliano & Vinicius 2024: 11; pace Bernhard et al. 2006) and simple proximity (Stewart et al. 2020: 6453, after Gamble 1998). The engineering of metapopulations may also be something of a defining feature of our species: an intellectual adaptation which has allowed individual action to compound to collective benefit, allowing humanity to flourish despite diverse environmental stressors and sometimes acute disaster, as part of a complex suite of collective adaptations with origins tentatively as deep as ~180 kya (Migliano & Vinicius 2024: 2).

This contribution examines some of the cultural dimensions of OES artefact exchange. Specifically, it examines the material considerations informing the choice of OES as the medium. In regions where *Struthio camelus* is endemic, OES stands at one end of a foodwaste-to-artefact trajectory, although 'waste' here is both a subjective and uneven evaluation (Stewart et al. 2011), complicating assessment of them as a low cost, effectively incidental material expression. Conversely, they could also be viewed as a form of costly signalling (e.g. Kivisto 2016, citing Kuhn 2014), especially when worn in quantities requiring more significant time investment. The notion of a costly signal is itself unstable (see below), but it remains to ask, as Mitchell does (1996: 38; citing Wiessner 1982; Marshall 1976: 311), why would "people invest considerable amounts of time ... making items they will shortly give away, in many cases to receive back others they could easily make themselves?" I take this question as my point of departure, although not necessarily to imply a costly signal—rather, why do this indeed? Why does the institution manifest as it does, so centred on the products of this particular species? Drawing on Xam archival ethnography, I develop a complementary interpretation of OES exchange that highlights its normative dimensions. Specifically, how the social properties of ostriches as territorialised, managed resources came to be encoded in exchange objects, allowing OES to function as markers of care and social competence.

On Signalling

While it may be tempting to read OES as a costly signal, it risks misrepresenting underlying cultural logics. For objects to serve as costly signals, they need to indicate the bearer's investment as a marker of their fitness or status, but the temporal dynamics of *hxaro* exchange complicate simple cost-benefit

assessments. Exchange is delayed in *hxaro* and its analogues because immediate reciprocation "indicates a desire to balance a partnership so that no obligations remain and it can be cancelled" (Wiessner 1998: 515). Only one exchange partner would possess *hxaro* goods at a given moment, incurring relatively little in the way of meaningful cost until the obligation is called upon by the other. Accordingly, possession typically signals *displaced* costs—those incurred by the maker, and then by those travelling to make the exchange, rather than the one who ultimately bears the beads. This displacement of investment makes attribution of cost, and thus of any related advantage, ambiguous if not misleading.

It remains that the objects *do* have significant information density, although perhaps not for cost. While *Struthio camelus* is ubiquitous on the subcontinent, OES bead distributions sometimes significantly diverge from the species' historic range (as above; Stewart et al. 2020). Explicitly thought of as (informational) exchange media, they imply the existence of social others at a distance, underwriting a capacity for human societies to imagine an extended social world. This is underwritten in turn by dimensional standardisation. To standardise an artefact is to settle on its intended function or meaning (Stiner 2014: 61) with care for a recipient's knowledge limitations (cf. Saint-Gelais 2014: 81). This is borne out by studies which have identified that, during periods of population (and thus information) siloing, the dimensions of OES beads increasingly vary between regions (Miller 2019; Hatton et al. 2022). During periods where intergroup interactions re-establish, this trend instead favours interregional standardisation, reflecting an increasing dependence on reliable abstraction and messaging (Miller & Wang 2022: 238). Interregional standardisation of OES beads serves to downplay cultural differences (Stewart et al. 2020: 6461), allowing a wearer to "envelop[...] oneself in others" (Mitchell & Stewart 2024), across the diverse potential meanings of the phrase. In the process, one's expressed identity can take on the character of a mutually intelligible 'third thing'.

Interpersonal identity transfer and fluidity is well-established in southern African hunter-gatherer idiom (McGranaghan 2014a, 2015b; discussion in Challis & Skinner 2021; Skinner & Challis 2022). OES beads are a palimpsest of animal components changed by human touch, and then by the compounded touch of all who have traded it in ritualised fashion. Wearing them, one 'takes on' or

'takes *in*' characteristic aspects of the social contacts who previously gifted the beads, those who carried them before, and the journeys taken in the process. In addition, there are the 'homely' connotations of OES as foodwaste-turned-artefact, and the ostriches and ostrich-places which are the points of origin. In this way, and considering their sometimes lengthy transits, the beads appear to signify more than just one's capacity to invest time in making or trading in the objects themselves, but also a record of rich communication and social connectivity at a distance (Mitchell 1996: 35; see modelling in Hamilton 2022: 32-33).

As for what, precisely, is being communicated, there is a range of meaning-potentials. This includes animal potency, as Mitchell and Stewart identify (2024: 18-19; see also Sinclair Thomson 2022). Ostriches have both physical and mythological stature, reflected in the taboos which apply to their consumption and use (*ibid.*; citing Katz 1982; Biesele 1993; Marshall 1999). Accounts emphasising spiritual power have been influential in Kalahari contexts, bringing the extensive literature on San shamanism to bear (typically based, *inter alia*, on Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988). At the same time, other ethnographic contexts sometimes differ on the details. Subjects of particular concern are the taboos and energetics; not all restrictions map equally between source contexts, and animals can have 'power' even if they are not necessarily full of energy. Here I offer some further elaborations on these subjects, drawing from the |Xam source context both because interpretation is more rigorous when it proceeds from a broader analogical base (after Mitchell 2009), but also because I think it better supports the overall conclusions being drawn (*viz.* those in Stewart et al. 2020; Mitchell & Stewart 2024).

Specifically, I look to a southern arm of the San ethnographic corpus: the |Xam of the 19th century Orange River frontier, southern Africa, whose testimonies are recorded in the Bleek-Lloyd archive¹ (see Bleek 1874; Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Hollmann 2004; and, *inter alia*, Hewitt 2008; McGranaghan 2012).

¹ This article contains citations to original notebook material from the Bleek-Lloyd Ethnographic Archive. These citations are in the format LL.VIII.32.8808', or WB.XII.1171-1190. The first two letters indicate the ethnographer, with 'LL' being Lucy Lloyd and 'WB' being Wilhelm Bleek. The Roman numerals correspond to narrators, while the remaining Arabic numerals indicate notebook and page numbers respectively. A single apostrophe (') indicates a reverso note.

They speak ably to rock art interpretation alongside northern (viz. Kalahari) sources (Lewis-Williams 1992), and have much to offer considerations of OES exchange, precisely because of the divergences in interest and emphasis from the Kalahari materials. Most significant are the things the |Xam archives articulate explicitly—we can look to how other hunter-gatherer lineages imagined ostriches' tangible and intangible properties, and how these properties then inflected the objects which then became part of *interpersonal* human-animal palimpsests.

I describe below how the |Xam emphasise the territorialised nature of ostriches as resources, and how this fits into the defining fields of the landscape; how ostriches' connections to human communities translate to a duty of care from those humans whose lives intersect with theirs, and how this frames the habitual role of ostriches and ostrich eggs as highly socialised fallback resources; how the transit of bodily properties is not primarily one of tangible characteristics but rather metaphorical ones, descended from the social significance of ostriches; and how these manifest notions of origin, home, social responsibility and the characteristics of humanity. OES beads contribute to one's 'embodied capital' (Stutz 2020: 15), the social cache held by one's physical form, identity, and ontological composition.

To trade in OES is to reference 'home' as the foundation of stable social interaction. OES is a domestic material, part of the register of objects and behaviours that are part of *making* home what it is. On shifting, fluid hunter-gatherer landscapes (see Skinner 2023), the world is "contextually delimited" (Ingold 2000: 47); that is, space is defined less by fixed locations than by the types of relationships and activities that are routine within them. We could say, simply, that space is "what people do, not where they are" (Corsín Jiménez 2003: 140). In this context, home becomes a quality of social interaction rather than a set of coordinates. It is created wherever people engage in the reciprocal relationships that are characteristic of domestic life.

In such a world, OES beads act as a beacon. They are a standardised indicator of home which communicates the corresponding notions even if the bearer walks in unfamiliar, *unhomely* places. Rather than viewing OES beads "as assurances of access to resources" (Stewart et al. 2020: 6453) per se,

they additionally act as powerful assurances of *conduct*. They indicate that one has been trusted before, presumably by a third party who thought it in their interest to draw such a person into a web of mutual obligation. To see OES described as a maker of 'human-ness', as Dowson does (1989; see Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 17), we can understand them as a kind of surety, even to a hitherto stranger, that the bearer would hold to the standards of humanity.

On kin

The strength of *bxaro*-analogue exchange is in its capacity to selectively invoke a predetermined relationship, and this discussion deals at length with the mechanics of relation. It is however hard to deal with relation without touching on the notion's own conceptual relative: kinship, a baggage-laden topic in anthropology. As the (in)famous quote goes, "kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject" (Fox 1967: 10; cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1941; Levi-Strauss 1965). Like any pivotal concept, it has subsequently been subject to extensive contestation and redefinition (e.g. Kuper 2018), although its legacies are persistent (Godelier 2011). Relevant here is how patterns of exchange, sharing and gifting are typically contoured by kinship (Ingold 1999).

For example, in the |Xam archive there are explicit contrasts drawn between *kwai:i* ("to distribute" to *other people*; Bleek 1956: 110) and *|ken* ("to share" with 'mates'/family; Bleek 1956: 309; discussion in McGranaghan 2012: 258). Taking this at face value, there is risk in apprehending kin relationships in primarily consanguineal or affinal terms, as may be the anthropological prerogative. While genealogical kinship structures *do* regulate sharing of subsistence yields (McGranaghan 2012: 184-188, 192-193), these structures come with some significant fluidity.

A woman calls her father's parents her 'real' grandparents, and her mother's parents her "lent" ones, while a man reverses the process; his mother's parents are his "real" grandparents"; "the mother's brother is called 'son' [but] to their mother's sister, they say they 'grandmother' to her", [while] a man say his 'daughter' to her. Then the man's aunt says her 'father' to him, for they

(the mother and aunt) feel that they are women who are one.

(Bleek 1923: 59)

These are amongst numerous other overlapping systems of kin classification (e.g. Bleek 1923; see also Wiessner 1998: 515), typically composed of invoked or volitional partnerships, although these are in several respects practically equivalent to genealogical ones. This includes the 'name relationship', binding like-named individuals in both kinship and the corresponding exchange/sharing obligations. More well known in the Kalahari (Lee 1986), there are parallels in the |Xam archive (the 'old name-young-name' relationship; Bleek 1923: 57-701; cf. Lee 1986: 77; 'name-sake relationships'; McGranaghan 2015b: 271). However, appellative practices also open the door for even more abstract, affective connection, and/or connections made in recognition of shared history (see *gen*, 'to give a name'; Bleek 1956: 46; glossed as nicknaming; LL.VIII.32.8808'; McGranaghan 2012: 395). Amongst one's names, one might count a number of names received from others, or arrived at through defining moments in one's life, each offering novel forms of connection to their namers. These translate to diverse kinship possibilities, which are "obviously of great benefit in tying society together by making close kin out of distant strangers" (Lee 1986: 90), while at the same time greatly complicating the number and variety of obligations one may be called upon to address.

This range of obligations notably extends to nonhumans as well, best seen in the regulation of hunting. As a practice, hunting marks a significant and somewhat risky moment of human/animal, interpersonal relation. The hunter takes on a predatory role relative to the prey animal (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998), risking the negative connotations and ontological consequences of assuming a 'monstrous' identity relative to a social other (sensu McGranaghan 2014a: 12). This may be mitigated by recognising, and more specifically invoking, their mutual obligations under the institution of *!nanna-se* ('respect practices'; Hollmann 2004: 66-75; to show respect, to avoid; Bleek 1956: 473). *!nanna-se* practices involve approaching an animal with 'understanding', a defined capacity for interpreting their demeanours, gained through immersion in their lifeways and empathy for their conditions (see McGranaghan & Challis 2016). Done correctly, the hunter's conduct imposes a

reciprocal understanding on the animal's part, compelling the animal to recognise the hunter's need, and thus to give of itself in a manner analogous to 'correct' sharing of resources amongst humans (McGranaghan 2012: 188-191, 2014a: 12-13; McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 588-590; cf. Willerslev 2007). In a striking parallel to *hxaro*, this sometimes assumes delay. "These respect rules all centred on the same principle: by behaving in a particular manner toward a certain creature, a person set up obligations that require it to behave in a certain way in its future relationships with people" (McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 587).

In such a complex social environment, one could expect to be bound by obligations to a large variety of relations, both genealogical and invoked, human and nonhuman, with these categories largely equivalent to each other. Simply navigating the world would involve a near-constant process of actively relating *to* others with this in mind, assessing first the signals of identity that structure encounters between social agents, and then the concomitant obligations each contact imposed (discussion in Skinner 2023; see also Challis & Skinner 2021). Exchange goods have a powerful impact in this context, first by externalising a marker of obligation and standardising it. This makes it possible to read certain patterns of obligation simply by seeing the bodies, and discerning the embodied capital of those bound by it. Second, as these objects are physical mnemonics of (temporarily) abstract obligation, they permit one to greatly simplify their social surroundings, specifying "which of this myriad of relations one is responsible for, whom one 'holds'" (Wiessner 1998: 515), by strategically placing the objects which themselves specify terms of obligation. In some ways, exchange stands in and perhaps supersedes less controllable forms of relation, affording a flexible, volitional path to kinship.

Struthio camelus

With some clarity on the structures of signalling and relation into which it falls, we can assess the implications of making exchange objects from – and making objects *with* – parts of *Struthio camelus*. "An object never ceases to be the material from which it was made" (Parkington 2002: 44), and this remains true here. The human adorned with animal components is a palimpsest of their own physical properties and the "animal envelope" around them, still infused with the qualities of the being it once

was (Guenther 2020: 376; see also Lewis-Williams 2015: 121, 2016: 56-57; Skinner & Challis 2022: 122). There is an immutable "link between the artefact and its origin[s]" (Parkington 2002: 44) that retains even as the artefact becomes more abstracted from its source. To relate so intimately to an animal that one wears its body against theirs is to take on its status and associations, and one comes to be determined by many of the social characteristics as the animal is/was. In effect, what we can assess is how ostrich 'gets into the skin'. This is largely regulated by *!nanna-se*, just as other interpersonal entanglements are (McGranaghan 2012: 140). One negotiates physical changes or connections through their social implications (cf. McGranaghan 2014a).

A familiar account emphasises the spiritual potency of ostriches, and how this carries into objects made of them. There are reasons to consider this quite seriously. For example, it can be argued that the birds are associated with notions of rebirth or resurrection (e.g. Low 2009: 82; Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 16; citing Bleek & Lloyd 2011: 139; see WB.XII.1171-1190; Hewitt 2008: 182; "with the exception of the moon and the Male Ostrich, all other things mortal are said to die outright and not to come to life again"; Bleek 1875: 13-14). Similarly, some prominent avoidances apply to ostrich products at inflection points in people's lives (e.g. with respect to young women's puberty rituals; Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 18, citing Marshall 1999; see also Wessels 2007; Hewitt 2008: 205-211), further implying that the energetics are significant.

There is a question to ask at this juncture: what does ostrich potency do in the context of OES exchange objects? What motivates the choice of something powerful for this application? It could be that an object's energetic profile imbues the bearer with a capacity to draw out and achieve 'things of consequence' from the cosmos (Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 17, citing Low 2011: 300). It is also reasonable to say that taboos imply energetics; things of power are consequential precisely because of their capacity to change the world, and thus avoidance of powerful influences – especially at formative or important moments in one's life – safeguards the process.

However, there are (a) a variety of reasons for these avoidances which are not necessarily connected to their energetics, and (b) specific consequences for agents or objects being 'charged' with

energy/potency which would complicate the common, domestic use of OES artefacts. For example, some notable avoidances worked to guide new adults in navigating their changing, often performatively gendered relationships to other members of their home range (McGranaghan 2014a: 4). A good example of this is the use of a *xabbu*, an OES drinking flask, by new maidens amongst the |Xam (LL.V.2.3879'), starkly contrasting the "most stringent" prohibition on use or even contact between young women and OES objects during menarche in the Kalahari (Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 18, citing Marshall 1999). In the |Xam example, the *xabbu* flask works by way of a small aperture and thin reed straw to constrain a young woman's consumption of water, a material metaphor for appropriate patterns of consumption as she transitions into adulthood. This is part of a wider complex of 'modest', restrictive material culture which helped frame her increasingly "contestable definitions of femininity, fertility and moderation" (see McGranaghan 2012: 155-156), particularly as those expressions played out amidst male kin (e.g. LL.V.6.4394'-4397').

Although I emphasise the |Xam account, these normative and social capacities of OES ornaments have strong parallels in the Kalahari. When families assessed marriage partners for their children, attention would be paid to how generous potential parents-in-law had previously been with distributing OES beads (Marshall 1959: 349). When establishing the terms of a betrothal, attention would be paid to the size of the strings of beads offered in parallel exchanges (Marshall 1959: 352; "the only thing they do not like about beads ... is the shortness of the string"; Marshall 1961: 242). When the terms of betrothal were contested, or the betrothals themselves surfaced other points of tension (notably, when adjacent exchanges had not been adequately reciprocated), OES beads could be used to balance outstanding obligations. Marshall's (1976) recounting of the 'affair about a knife' is an illustrative example, in which the inappropriate diversion of a delayed gift held up a proposed marriage. When the 'correct' recipient did not receive a knife that was previously "making its way to him in the ever-flowing currents of gift-giving", he used an objection to his step-daughter's betrothal to highlight the breach of protocol, an affair ultimately settled with a gift of OES beads and a blanket (Marshall 1976: 272-273). Using beads as conflict mediators appears prominent enough a pattern that there is evidence of European travellers and missionaries offering trade beads to San polities in the upper Seacow Valley, with a

(relatively small) fluorescence of oyster-white trade beads suggesting cognate use to that of OES-mediated brokerage between indigenous communities (Saitowitz & Sampson 1992: 100-101).

The implications of OES as power-full run somewhat contrary to these applications. What is *n/um* in the Kalahari ('magic power', Marshall 1969: 350; see McGranaghan 2012: 415) is *!gi:* in the |Xam frame of reference (Bleek 1956: 382; *cf.* |ko:ξoξ-de, "magic things, magic doings, magic power"; Bleek 1956: 320; see McGranaghan 2012: 408-409). *!gi:* was "the primary means by which *!gi:tan* [ritual specialists/shamans] 'worked' their abilities to assist ... or to harm others" (McGranaghan 2012: 414-415, citing LL.V.4.4179-4180; LL.V.10.4753; LL.V.20.5544-5545; LL.V.22.5758). Paralleling the occasional use of the term 'fight' for this energy (Marshall 1969: 351-352), the |Xam recognised the power itself as being potentially dangerous, to the point that it was characteristic of certain capricious/predatory identities on the landscape (discussion in Skinner 2017: 74-86). Where ritual specialists called upon these energies, they risked transgression in a process comparable to that of hunting—specifically, through the euphemism of (negative) energy transfer through arrows (Snow 2020: 37-38), potentially entangling themselves with problematic identities (e.g. McGranaghan 2012: 207-208). While *!gi:* usage certainly had positive applications, the corresponding mitigations required that the handling of *!gi:* be a domain of skilled, cautious behaviour, which had to be taught (LL.V.10.4744'; LL.V.22.5759).

This gives some context to Dowson's (1989: 90) statement that "the Kalahari Bushmen do not consider ostrich eggshell beads to contain *n/um*", particularly as it comes *pers. comm.* from Marshall, Biesele and Wiessner, doyennes of Kalahari anthropology. Just like (poisoned) arrows, which could be used to acquire game by the same turns that they could murder, spiritual potency required caution and responsible handling. The widespread use of OES water flasks, described in fairly pragmatic terms without further observances (e.g. LL.II.6.629), and the conventional gifting of OES ornaments to children (Marshall 1959: 349) does not fully accord with something brimming with power, potential danger, and the attendant ontological complications. Rather, it seems that this would jeopardise the

everyday use of otherwise straightforwardly domestic objects, to say nothing of the social implications of gifting something characterised by dangerous potential.

Returning to the notion of beads as communicative media, I believe it is useful to ground our interpretation based on what we can understand to be communicated in an exchange. What do the extended implications of trade in OES objects suggest about their significance? What would we expect if an object were defined more by its spiritual powers, than perhaps by its normative powers? Does the mother of a bride-to-be barter with an increasing density of spiritual charge? I argue that it is apt to see social commentary and negotiation as being where the 'power' lies here, and indeed, it seems that an emphasis on spiritual potency too-narrowly frames the reasons something might be 'of consequence' (cf. Low 2011: 300). Power exists as the capacity to influence (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), but this has several forms. There is that which is notionally and sometimes phenomenologically (after Katz 1982) equivalent to the boiling, buzzing energy of shamanistic practice, and then there is 'power' as a capacity for important interventions in the world. There are naturally some overlaps, but I urge caution when using potency – or 'magical status' (Low 2009: 82) – as the sole or primary explanation for the use of OES as reciprocal exchange media.

A thing of (social) consequence

From the above, it appears that |Xam material theory does not hold potency or energetic capacity as a defining characteristic of OES objects. Put another way, we can say with some confidence that spiritual power was not always the characteristic being invoked in exchange and, indeed, that it seems that an emphasis on spiritual potency risks too-narrowly framing the reasons something might be of consequence. As we have seen, OES does have significant normative power, inasmuch as it is used to frame and condition 'correct' modes of behaviour. Aside from its role as the restricting/moderating *xabbu* flask, however, this does not speak to which properties of ostriches are invoked through the use of OES as the chosen material. However, given that OES exchange is a performative, highly socialised activity, we can ask: what are the social properties of ostriches?

For this, the following passage from the |Xam informant †Kabbo is instructive:

we do talking sit in peace. While the women do drink here. Our fellows (the other men) drink here, while we do cool sit, we are tired. That the wind may blow cooling us; while we perspire as we sit; we did come in the sun, while the sun was warm, our flesh was warm; while we carrying came; while the sun was warm. We shall sitting talk to our fellows, when they are full they shall also hunt, they shall also hunting seek another ostrich, who seems to scratch (in) another place; that she may place eggs. She who scratches (in) another man's place. Therefore, we not angry with our fellows [reverso: from what [he] says, they don't appear to interfere with the ostriches on each other's grounds] that we might make a place's fight, when we hunting went before our fellows; we shall go take our place's ostriches; which they inhabit in quietness. Those (who) scratch (in) our place. The other man must hunt the other man's place he must go take his own ostriches, which scratch dwell (in) his own place. He must carrying bring them (the eggs) to his own house. He must come give to us eggs other, that we may drink with him. He says to us, that his ostriches are here. Those he who, did take care of them; that it may scratch for him. That it may place for him eggs, that he may do so, he go bring eggs; when he is hungry. Because, the springboks are gone. He 'can/does' not perceive the springbok; because the springbok went away to the springbok's place; he cannot perceive the springbok. Therefore, he must hunt, for he must eat food old. Which are nasty, they are not sweet. For, he did take care of the ostrich which here, that he may do so, he go to bring its eggs, when the children are hungry.

LL.II.22.2028-2035

The passage is long and dense, but we can draw out a few threads. The first is the evocative framing of the scene; a small group of people sit comfortably in the sun, grateful for the breeze on their skin. They share space and water, and talk 'in peace'. They are not above subsistence concerns, however, and will soon need to hunt. Here †Kabbo flags the appropriate course. They have no quarrel with their neighbours, and so should not interfere with the ostriches of others, but should rather "take our place's ostriches; which they inhabit in quietness". |Xam narratives frame quiet and stillness as markers of good temper, 'correct' upbringing and social maturity (McGranaghan 2012: 392, 398), both

synonymous with peacefulness (see definition of *ʔgou*; Bleek 1956: 648) and explicitly contrasted to antisocial/combatative tendencies (LL.II.22.1986; LL.II.25.2264'-6; see McGranaghan 2012: 452). Of interest is that quiet/stillness are also a characteristic property of 'tame' things, contrasted to 'wildness' (McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 585). While it may be tempting to understand 'tameness' here as a euphemism for agreeable tendencies, |Xam informants drew extensively on references to domesticated livestock to explain this and related notions (McGranaghan 2015a, particularly p. 534-537; McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 586, 590; King & McGranaghan 2020). Accordingly, this could be read as !Kabbo describing 'his' or 'our' ostriches just as a pastoralist may describe 'their' herd of domestic stock.

This is further reinforced by the reference to human interventions in these ostriches' lives. 'He says to us, that his ostriches are here. Those he who, did take care of them; that it may scratch [and lay eggs] for him'. Ostrich eggs "belonged' to the *!xoe* [place; Bleek 1956: 500], and created obligations to take of and treat 'nicely' these resources" (McGranaghan 2012: 439). This compares closely to Ju|'hoan *n!ore* territories (e.g. Lee 1972), typically associated with named individuals (see Deacon 1986) who had a say over their use. While ownership is implied here through controlled right-of-access to ostriches and ostrich-places, it comes with the obligation to manage both so as to ensure their future flourishing (McGranaghan 2015a: 537-538). Ostrich eggs are a resource which "with the application of "care" can be relied upon to regenerate themselves" (McGranaghan 2012: 357). This can be directly compared to the management of bee hives by hunter-gatherers (Russell & Lander 2015) and that of domestic bovids by pastoralists (McGranaghan 2015a: 538), which allow for the ongoing extraction of honey and milk, respectively. The Ju|'hoan made similar comparisons, although it is also of note that "sharing of milk [and other regenerating resources] rather than the animal itself can allow for the acquisition of stock without transgressing ethical limits" (McGranaghan 2012: 357, citing Smith 1990: 62). As one of Lee's informants described, "we are not of /ai'ai', where the interview was taking place; '/dwia is our earth. We just came here to drink the milk" (Lee 1972: 142).

Accordingly, while ownership is a strong thematic element here, the equally strong implication is a duty of care, and a capacity to share without compromising one's own subsistence position. This becomes relevant as the passage implies its seasonal context. "The springbok went away to the springbok's place [i.e. migrated]; he cannot perceive the springbok. Therefore, he must hunt, for he must eat old food" (above). Springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*) are an antelope species prominent in |Xam subsistence strategies, to the point that it was characteristic of |Xam identity to be 'people who kill springbok' (LL.II.36.3244'-3245'; McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 591). Informants recognised that springbok population sizes were heavily influenced by prevailing rainfall, and that their migration appearances corresponded to the wet season (Roche 2005). That the springbok had migrated away identifies !Kabbo's vignette as happening in the drier season. In this lean moment, however, ostriches – and specifically ostrich eggs – appear as a fallback resource; "for, he did take care of the ostrich which here, that he may do so, he go to bring its eggs, when the children are hungry." Archaeological records substantiate this characterisation. As ostriches are more resistant to drought, seasonal fluctuation, and latterly, European overhunting, than many other species, with their relative presence in archaeological contexts increasing as other faunal signatures decreased (e.g. Sampson 1994).

Ostriches are sedentary, and sometimes aggressively territorial (Lambrechts et al. 2000). The contrasting seasonality of resources like springbok is exactly the reason for 'care' towards ostrich resources; correct management involved controlling demand on resources which could otherwise be over-exploited (McGranaghan 2012: 234), which then allow emplaced resources to reliably stand in for more seasonal ones. This practical concern translates ably to social ones; meeting one duty of care (to the ostriches one 'owns') facilitates the meeting of others (to one's human obligation partners). While this is one passage, coherent logics can be found across the archive (see discussion of 'nice' behaviour in McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 587-560; contrast with monstrosity in McGranaghan 2014a: 12). It is not enough only to subsist, but to do so in the right way.

The doing of things 'the right way' was also what characterised home, with home being the place where social contracts 'ran thickest' (see discussion of the camp *vis a vis* the !*kau:xu*, 'hunting ground' in

Skinner 2017: 154-157). It is the realm of the correct kinds of relation – the 'nice' (see *twai:ĩ*; Bleek 1956: 243; cf. McGranaghan 2012: 40, 139-140, 169-171) or 'understanding' (*llkwakka*; Bleek 1956: 596; McGranaghan 2012: 169-170) kinds – particularly as they relate to food and consumption (McGranaghan 2014b: 676; see also *soxa* in the Kalahari; Vinnicombe 1972: 201). Following the socially instructive, moderating and framing effects of OES flasks discussed earlier, and in the way that ostrich eggs are critical to meeting collective subsistence needs in tough times, the social properties of the OES material substrates become very clear indeed. Through the territorial character of ostriches, and the innate connection between the ostriches' homes and the characteristic domains of responsibility of certain persons, the material evokes emplacement, responsibility and duties of care. From the principle that "the person who finds and takes the eggs in an ostrich nest owns the shells" (Marshall 1976: 77), we can assume that it is the owner's responsibilities and social relations being evoked when those shells become exchange artefacts. As those artefacts transit afield from the primary collection site/context, the hypothetical message becomes quite interesting:

In the ways that ostrich eggs have conditioned your social education in the past, I oblige you to condition yourself in future. Here comes this thing from an animal someone fostered, to whom they were connected in a place which was theirs; here is a piece of something someone called upon in a dire time, which they shared with their fellows. In the ways that others have previously met their responsibilities of care, in the ways that others have shared homes and relied upon others, and in the ways that others have relied upon ostriches in times of need, I desire to rely upon you.

Beautiful things

Aesthetic considerations remain—after all, OES beads are not simply stockpiled as exchange currency. Dress allows expressive modulation of the comparatively fixed properties of the body, making it a material metaphor for some combination of one's intended and encultured interpersonal relations (Viestad 2018). This is helpful at this juncture. As far as dress 'sustains social reality' (Hamilton & Hamilton 1989), its signals are readable to social others. Thus, in the readings insiders offer of OES

artefacts as dress, we can validate some of the implications of OES as the material substrate of those signals. This summary by Dowson offers an apt starting point:

People adorn themselves with ostrich eggshell beads to impress bystanders but, more importantly, to make themselves look strong and attractive to the spirits with whom they communicate when they enter the spirit world ... Further, a !Kung man visiting a painted shelter in the Brandberg ... refused to believe that the paintings were made by human beings until they had found an ostrich eggshell bead in the deposit below. Biesele believes that the making of beadwork is a !Kung criterion for 'humanness', for human handiwork, and by extension into the modern world, something 'we Bushmen' do as opposed to those who do not

Dowson 1989: 85; cf. Mitchell & Stewart 2024: 17-18

Like the earlier quote from !Kabbo above, this benefits from layered interpretation. While the notion of 'looking attractive' seems straightforward – people use adornments to achieve positive assessments of their appearance – the |Xam understanding of attractiveness was deeply moral. Monstrous identities had physical traits which evoked disgust, characterised as a "moral judgement *as well as* an offence to aesthetic sensibilities" (McGranaghan 2014a: 5-6, citing Mittman 2003: 8; emphasis added). The contrast was 'looking well' or 'looking nice', derived from concepts of *a:kən*. This is "to be nice, good, comfortable, handsome, beautiful; to do nicely, well; beauty" (Bleek 1956: 7). The notion strongly incorporates (social) competence alongside aesthetic value, and was "used to evaluate the attractiveness of traits, as when discussing physical appearance [while] less tangible traits, such as 'sweet' behaviour in personal relations, might also be described in these terms ... as were evaluations of expertise and skill: pots ... and karrosses ... were said to have been made or worked 'nicely'" (McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 588).

The equivalence between social competence and practical skill translates directly to ornamentation with OES artefacts. A good design should be subtle like a "person who walks softly through the bush back to camp" (Wiessner 1984: 201). This quiet- or still-ness is aligned to notions of domesticity, and in general, to the equivalence between signature minimisation and 'good sense' (discussion in Skinner

2023: 475-478). A loud, immodestly talkative person was also read as one with impaired morality, and violent/consumptive tendencies (McGranaghan & Challis 2016: 585-586), while the 'still' hunter was more successful (*ibid.*; LL.II.28.2531), and the 'quiet' listener able to hear the moral instruction contained in stories and talk. They were able to hear with *all* their ears (Rusch 2016: 884-884).

In this respect, we can read OES beads as *a:kən* material culture. Simply, they made one look 'attractive' in the sense that they communicated positive social attributes. This derived from both their normative power (as with the *xabbu* flasks) and their origins in the eggs which were curated fallback resources, which were in turn intimately bound in notions of care and the meeting of obligations. The aesthetic usefulness of OES beads when approaching spirits is instructive. Spirits of the dead (*|nu-ka-!k'e*; Bleek 1956: 74, 350, 419) retain some residual human identity, but at once have a characteristic empathetic and moral myopia (McGranaghan 2014a: 10; see discussion on 'bad people' and the *|nu* complex/assessment in Skinner 2017: 80-86). Spirits have lost their capacity for understanding behaviour, and thus offer us the gaze of the prototypical social other. Both *|Xam* and Kalahari sources encode some variant of this: by describing the perspective of spirits, they detail how OES beads would read from the simulated perspective of someone who does not share a moral framework. OES evokes social moderation through an appeal to the combined moral/aesthetic judgement of doing things 'well'/'handsomely'. From its material origins, OES brings the closeness of home, duties of care and mutual aid. In sum, it tells an other that 'we are (good) people'.

This modelling of (human) personhood is strikingly echoed by Dowson and Bieseles' (above) observations. A Kalahari San man who looked for the presence of OES beads to confirm that a shelter was once inhabited by humans; *!Kung* informants indicated that OES beads were among the physical markers of humanity. From this we can determine that the properties they communicate – the signals they encode – are the characteristic parameters of humanity. On a landscape where humans are not the only class of person (see Challis & Skinner 2021) the "set of habits and processes that constitute bodies are ... the location from which identity and difference emerge" (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 480; Skinner & Challis 2022). In this case, human identity emerges from a characteristic tendency to exchange, to

share, and to meet one's obligations. This is embodied by a material which originates in the homely, care-ful relations between humans; and before that, in the tame, cared-for ostriches which could be depended upon in times of need.

Conclusion: a beacon of home

In a famous (and likely apocryphal; Lasco 2022) quote attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead, it is said that the earliest spark of civilization could be seen in a healed femur. As with much else, reality is likely more complicated than this, although the notion remains evocative. We can understand that human persistence and flourishing depends on collective adaptation, manifesting as delayed exchange and mutual aid. These principles reverberate through the *hxaro*-analogue trade in OES beads.

In this model, exchange is a defining characteristic of human communities. To intentionally engineer relationships within the respect conventions of |Xam ontology, and to meet the corresponding obligations is as well. Thus, to wear beads – which carry associations with domesticity, reciprocity and mutual aid in difficult times – is to show one's capacity for humanity. Dowson's observation of the beads as markers of 'humanness' borders on the entirely literal. The beads are standardised to enhance their communicative capacity, acting as a readable indicator that the bearer has persistent relations of care and trust. Even to social others – even to those not even notionally human – that much is understood to carry over. Even an ontological stranger can read the implications of the human-animal palimpsest that is a person wearing OES beads.

Zooming out to the scales of time and space that these artefacts were used for, the OES material metaphor also incorporates notions of long-distance travel. An artefact which has transited hundreds of kilometres, just as such artefacts have previously done for time beyond generational memory, evokes the journey as much as it does the properties of the bearer. Travel, in turn, involves a process of continuous relation. One will meet strangers, human or otherwise, with whom one likely does not share precedent (see Challis & Skinner 2021). This risks problematic or dangerous encounters that come about due to misunderstanding. In these moments, the beads imply the negotiations which

brought them about in the first place; intelligible expectations, and homely relations between people who understand each other at the level of kin. As one moves from places of established trust, they carry a sign that they have been trusted before and thus may be trusted again, expressing the parameters of a particular humanity.

For this purpose, ostrich eggshell is an efficient conceptual currency, able to power the infrastructure of intergroup cooperation. It is a medium which vouchsafes certain kinds of conduct, and as social currency, its basic unit communicates safety, trustworthiness and the capacity for positive social entanglement. The presence of OES beads in archaeological contexts can be read just as the !Kung man reading them in the archaeological deposit in the Brandberg did: they show where the humans are. While I think it is worth highlighting some cross-cultural differences in the taboos, and thus the implied energetics, of OES artefacts, I believe that the depiction of the beads as a gloss of social difference and tool for cooperation (Stewart et al. 2020; Mitchell & Stewart 2024) is ultimately better supported for it.

I conclude with another vignette; the death of one of the 'last Bushmen of the Maloti-Drakensberg' (Mitchell 2010: 155), a near-mythical figure called Soai. The leader of a group of Maloti San in the mid- to late-1800s, he was among a group who raided cattle and horses from a range of pastoralist and settler communities in southern Lesotho and what is now the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal provinces of South Africa. Although there are deviations in the exact sequence of events (Mitchell 2010: 155-157), Soai and his followers were subject to retaliatory raids, and eventually cornered in the Sehonghong rock shelter. What is less conjectural is his final appearance: the 'last Bushman chief' (Germond 1967: 425) was wearing heavy, 'beautifully worked' belt(s) of ostrich beads around his body (Dornan 1909: 450). The characterisation as the 'last chief of the bushmen' may seem ironic given the typical assumption of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, but it remains that he was remarkable in his way. Heavy with OES beads, he may have looked *powerfully* 'handsome', bearing the approval and normative power of engagements with a plurality of others, while 'home' for him was probably almost

anywhere he knew. Reading the social significance of his dress, we might say that Soai met his end enveloped in the record of all the people who had trusted him.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.