

Chokwe and the Praying Mantis

by Michael Ortiz Hill

When I was born, a little lion was born with me,” says my friend Augustine Kademwa, laughing. I’ve often been delighted while traveling with Augustine in the back country of Zimbabwe or Botswana to see the way African people rely on the animals to recognize kinship with one another. As a way of greeting, strangers will exchange their totemic affiliation. No matter that they are of another tribe far from Mashonaland; no matter that no common language is shared; those born of lion are kin.

It was a little praying mantis that made the bridge between Augustine, myself, and the San Bushmen of the Kalahari.

Bushmen have good reason not to trust the local Africans (whom they call blacks), much less white people. After centuries of marginalization as “primitives,” and three decades of being caught between Africans of both races making war on each other, the traditional Bushman way of hunting and gathering is profoundly endangered.

The day before we set out across the Kalahari, I give Augustine a ritual gift—raw wood from Yardenit in Israel where Christ was baptized by John the Baptist. I know the power of the gift for Augustine, a healer who works with the water spirits. As I hand it to him, I notice a praying mantis at the end of the stick. “*Zvakanaka ambuya!*” I say: “Welcome, Grandmother!” A good omen for our journey, for the insect is holy to the San.

Traveling for hundreds of kilometers through the desert, occasionally digging our car out of the sand, we arrive in the village of D’kar. Never have I felt so much the

stranger in a strange land. Augustine is not distracted in his quest, for the spirits have led him here. Myself, I enjoy the company of the children, who know one “English” word: “kung fu.” They are entertained by the mastery I’d acquired watching the TV show when I was a kid.

Eventually, we are told to seek Beauty, a Herrero woman. By now, night has fallen. A scant few campfires light the village. Beauty is nowhere to be found, but we are soon approached by an Iswane-speaking man who also speaks English. He knows of a cranky old shaman named Chokwe who probably will have nothing to do with us, but he agrees to take us to his hut and translate.

What an honor to sit in the dirt across from this elder of the oldest spiritual tradition on the planet. The planes of his flat face shift in the firelight. Cranky, I suppose. He does rather interrogate Augustine, who claims a dream called him to be initiated by a Bushman healer. Both testing and teasing us, not without warmth but certainly without naiveté, he tells us to return the following morning.

When we return with meat, bread, and sugar, Chokwe is a different man—hospitable and uninhibited in his humor. Augustine approaches Chokwe as a doctor. “When I am trance possessed by my ancestors, I am cut off from the crown of my head,” he complains. Chokwe throws the bone oracle to diagnose. He then describes with remarkable accuracy troubles between Augustine and his family that have long entangled him. “Very true,” said Augustine. Augustine is a formidable healer, and I am moved by his exquisite deference to this man so much our elder. Chokwe is clearly impressed by his sincerity.

“Grandfather,” I say, “We know that the San have no reason to trust a black or a white man. I want to thank your spirits for receiving us with such kindness.

“Before we left Zimbabwe, we performed a ritual, and this little one came to us. I think you know more about her than we do.”

Our Iswana friend doesn’t know the name for praying mantis. So I mime her, hands together and elbows out, her wide expressive eyes.

“Ah,” says Chokwe. And then to Augustine, “Now you are like a child learning to walk, but I will tell the elders about our visit. You are welcome here. We will initiate you, and soon you will stand strong on your two feet.”