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B U S H M A N C H A R M S

by

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In preparing these notes I have found it difficult to distinguish between charms and medicines; in the Bushman mind there is evidently no dividing line between the two.

There are many different Bushman tribes in South Africa with distinctive speech and varying customs. The tribe of which there is the best record is the /xam tribe, that is the Bushmen who lived over the whole north of the Cape Colony, south of the Orange River. In Miss Lloyd's collections of their lore I have found the following information about their charms.

A plant called Sho /oã is largely used by them both as a medicine and a charm. Little bits of the wood of the root are burnt, the charcoal is pounded fine, cuts are made on the Bushman's body, and the powdered charcoal mixed with fat is rubbed into them. If a person has a pain anywhere, such a cut is made at the place. If a man wants to hunt, he makes such cuts on his arms; people who want to shoot at other people cut the back of their left wrist and hand to give them a good aim; those who want to strike with the fist, cut the back of the right wrist and hand; those who want to kill springbok cut the hand between the thumb and the first finger, the place where the arrow lies, that the arrow may fly well at the springbok. They also sew a band and put plenty of sho /oã into it and fasten it to their bodies, usually across the right shoulder and under the left arm, but when running after springbok round the waist. They seem to wear this for two reasons, firstly that the game may smell the sho /oã and be foolishly afraid, and run in among the people acting foolishly; secondly that the hunters may have the sho /oã at hand to use against the game. For if a man finds that he is missing his aim, he quickly burns a stick of sho /oã, he points the burning stick at the springbok as they come, that they may run gently, then extinguishes

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the fire and makes a line between the eyebrows with the burnt wood, that is, he draws a line of burnt powder with his finger down the centre of his forehead and nose, then turns aside before he reaches the tip to the right cheek. Then the springbok will run nicely, not too fast, and the man will shoot well.

Baboons are believed to use the sho /oā root as a charm, keeping a piece of it in their cheek, whereby they are preserved from pain and illness, and made aware of approaching danger. Bushmen are keen to get hold of the sho /oā which they find in a baboon's cheek.

Women believed in the curative power of hair from a baboon's mane. If a child's head ached, the father was asked to shoot a baboon and bring some hair from its mane; the mother tied this up with sinew, making a charm for the child to wear.

An insect, the African Ground Weevil, is used to ward off convulsions in babies, and to cure children of colds. For the former purpose the insect is pressed into the baby's hands, which are held together against its chest by the grown-up's left hand; with the right hand the grown-up makes passes at the chest, then puts his hand to his mouth and pretends to drink; finally he strikes his left hand with his right and lets the baby's hands go. The baby, startled, parts its hands. To cure a cold, the very hard back of the insect is pierced by an old woman, then it is tied still living onto the child's neck, later taken off and put down at the side of the hut, as it is to take away the illness. The child recovers and plays about. If another child is ill, another weevil is used, not the same one.

Another charm used to cure a little child's cold is a necklace made of reed. The women burn off pieces of reed with fire, then twist sniew and thread it through the pieces, then put the necklace round the child's neck to make it get well, for reed cuts the cold.

The Mantis is believed by the /xam Bushmen to be a protector of game and to have magic powers. The hartebeest is under his special protection, as its horns turn

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back like the Mantis's feelers. Therefore a woman who has a little child must not eat the hartebeest's flesh, nor spring over its head, for if she did so, the Mantis would press down the hollow place on her child's head. She must cut out from the hartebeest's foot the bit that is above the hollow between its toes, thread this on a sinew, and make a charm of it to hang on the baby. The Mantis's scent is on these things and will ascend from them; the Mantis will smell it and not hurt the child in consequence.

If a man wishes another to miss his aim, he throws springbok bones at him to bewitch him and make him fail.

As you see, there are few regular charms worn by this tribe, though there is much magic used by them.

From other Bushman tribes no such comprehensive collections of lore have been obtained, so little is known about their charms. Among the Naron and Auen tribes living on the borders between S.W. and the Bechuanaland protectorates, I found a number of girls wearing spicy white roots tied to a sinew fastened round their necks. On my asking what these were, the girls said, that they were to bring good luck, but also that they were good to hibble at.

The men of these two tribes and the Angola !kun also make cuts in their skin to bring good luck in hunting, or rather get the old men to make them. The hunter brings an old man an offering of game, some titbit, and the biceps muscle of the buck's foreleg; a tiny bit of this muscle is burnt to ash and then rubbed into a cut on the hunter's body made by the old man. This, they think, will give them good luck on their next hunting expedition. By fostering this belief the old men, who are no longer able to hunt, ensure getting the best bits of game from the young men, not any old scraps thrown them for charity.

I do not know whether magic arrows used by sorcerors should be counted among charms. These are miniature sets of arrows about five or six inches long made of thorn tips set in grass shafts. They are not poisoned and have blunt tips. In spite of their apparently harmless character,

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the magic power they possess is so great, that if shot off in the direction of a person, that person dies.

I have not been able to find any more information about Bushman charms.

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