

Tshxum

There will come a time perhaps not too far off when the San or Ju/wasi will have lost their history. In the words of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas,

To live in the old way is to live with the sky. On the flat savannah, the sky is the spectacle, always with you, telling you where you are heading, how much more darkness or daylight you can expect, and what will happen next in terms of heat or cold, wind, or rain. All living things are alert for its signals. If the Ju/wasi knew the things of the earth for their qualities and their details, they knew the things of the sky for their power, their mystery, and their enormity and, as was true of the rest of their knowledge, they had known these things for a very long time.

According to Thomas, the Ju/wasi observed the constellations in much the same way as the so-called “civilized” world. Stories of Orion matched those of more familiar narratives in some respects, but there was one constellation that the Ju/wasi alone could identify, and whose brief turn in the sky presages the rainy season. An old stargazer named Gau, who had been instructing Thomas’ mother about the heavens, ran to her tent, awakening her well before dawn to show her, deep against the northeastern horizon, a star he called Tshxum, the Green Leaf Horn, identified by Thomas as Capella. She quotes her mother,

For a moment of breathtaking beauty, in a seeming arc soaring over the sunrise glow, Capella and Canopus were paired, matched in brilliance and color, marking the north and south. An arc drawn between them would bracket the earth. With the Pleiades they formed a great embracing triangle.

But of all the earth’s people only the Ju/wasi can actually detect this constellation because the sky has shifted slightly since their historic memory began sometime in the Paleolithic, some 60,000 years ago. That remarkable fact marks how old and unique the Ju/wasi are as a people.

But the time will come when the Ju/wasi will no longer recognize Tshxum in the night skies. And on the blackboard of our own nights strange figures will appear. What will they tell those who come eons after we are gone? Will they bear witness to our hubris? To the gods of our science that presumed to know everything while taking nothing from the wisdom of those who husbanded the landscape, giving and taking what they had to share with it in mutual agreement? Will we leave behind us warnings other than pitiful Barbie-doll figures of naked Caucasian male and female bodies etched on spacecraft and set adrift in the limitless expanse of space? Where will life, new life, begin? Will it elaborate itself from the strange white substance even now spreading on the floors of the ruptured reactors at Fukushima? What will it consist of? Will it answer to its own intelligence? Will it become a better keeper of the planet than we were? or will it multiply as mindlessly as we did?