

## Song Texts by the Master of Tricks: Kalahari San Thumb Piano Music

by MEGAN BIESELE\*

### I

Terrible God deceives, torments.  
God's arms descend into my fingers.  
Yesterday God said 'Be my child and listen,  
Take what I say to the people.'

God's arms.  
God's arms.

A young soul lives in the western sky  
And is still learning.  
These are my tears:  
I mourn at death, for years and years —  
This is what I have to tell.  
God spoke, telling me to take up  
These metal bits and this scrap of wood  
And with them to sing.

Where will I hide from God's death?  
The day when God speaks where will I be?  
Where will I hide from terrible God who torments me?  
The year of my death is known.  
The day of my death is known.

Hoo, hoo!

Owner of tricks, yes, am I.  
Master of lying, hoo!  
One who can fool you, that's me.  
Master of tricks, yes.  
Owner of lies!

### The Thumb Piano: Perspective

This poem is part of the text of a song for the thumb piano recorded from a !Kung Bushman in Ngamiland, western Botswana, in 1971. !Kung is the name of one language group among many Bushmen language groups. The !Kung refer to themselves as *Zhū/twāsi* — 'regular people', 'real people', or 'just people' (as in 'it's just me'). Since the word bushman has become pejorative, I shall use the word *San*, a Hottentot (Khoikoi) term meaning 'food-gatherers' to refer in general to Bushman groups.

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The player of the little instrument, Jack, a man in his late twenties, is resident at /'ai/'ai, a San and Herero settlement on the border between Botswana and Namibia. Like other Ngamiland San, however, he is semi-nomadic and may travel widely in the course of the year. Much of the work for this paper was done with him, in fact, one hundred miles to the east of /'ai/'ai at Kauri, a San settlement near Tsau where he had gone to visit relatives and friends.

The thumb piano, widespread in Bantu Africa, has been only recently adopted by the Zhū/twāsi. Nicholas England has written of its entry into Bushman life in a doctoral thesis presented to the Harvard Department of Music.<sup>1</sup> This excellent and comprehensive study of Zhū/twāsi musical practices contains several telling dates for the thumb piano in Ngamiland and adjacent Namibian areas.

The Peabody-Harvard Kalahari Expedition of the 1950's, we are told, encountered no examples of this instrument in the Nyae Nyae region of Namibia adjacent to /'ai/'ai, where many !Kung were observable. It was first recorded there in 1961. At the time the Zhū/twāsi players said that it had come to them from the North and East, ultimately from speakers of Central Bushman languages.<sup>2</sup> Of course, a few of the instruments may have come into San settlements much earlier, perhaps directly from trade with Bantu. (This possibility has some corroboration in the personal account of Jack, whose own first contact with the instrument may have been around 1950.) Stow reports a thumb piano belonging to a Tswana from near Lake Ngami as early as 1905.<sup>3</sup> Other Bantu peoples encircling the Nyae Nyae — Ngamiland area were playing the instrument long before the 1960's. But although other Bantu instruments were eagerly adopted by San, the thumb piano appears not to have been taken up by them in any number along the northern half of the Namibia-Botswana border more than ten or 15 years ago.

The instrument was adopted so late because of the difficulty in obtaining the necessary materials for its construction. Heavy-gauge metal wire, nails, or bars were indispensable, and before they were available, no local material would serve their purpose. Though peoples in wetter parts of Africa have used certain reeds to make the sounding bars for thumb pianos, these were not available in the Kalahari. Even in the years when heavy-gauge metal items first became accessible to the Zhū/twāsi they would naturally have been used by hunting people for pounding into arrowheads. So it is only very recently that enough of this metal has been available to be incorporated into more than a very few musical instruments. But in 1958, a windfall occurred in the border area during an epidemic of foot and mouth disease. A team of South West African veterinarians came to /'ai/'ai to construct kraals and kill infected cattle, and they dumped their extra wire and nails there. Since then, apparently, thumb pianos have been gaining great popularity. When I left Botswana in June 1972, most Zhū/twāsi settlements had several of the instruments.

That the central San had adopted the thumb piano earlier than the northern groups seems to be corroborated by greater complexity of this music and larger repertoire of songs to be found at Ghanzi and among the Tsaukwe (*N/ai*) people between Ghanzi and Tsau. Zhū/twāsi at Kauri commonly use the *N/ai* Ghanzi tuning and say that many of their songs come from that area.

The thumb piano is at present played exclusively by the young in Ngamiland. Older people rarely even pick up the instrument, preferring to stick to the older musical hunting bow or to the pluriarcs, five- and four-stringed lute-like instruments known respectively as the //gwashī and the *daukashe*. Older people are more familiar with these traditional instruments, and the thumb piano is still felt to be very new. At /'ai/'ai the thumb piano, called *sitengena*, *dongu* or *goma*, is at

present the instrument of children and adolescents, some of whom play it incessantly for many hours in a day.

The composer of the text that appears at the beginning of this paper is among the oldest thumb piano players. He is probably, however, no older than thirty. His name is !Kaha, but almost no one besides his mother calls him that. In his younger days he worked as a herd boy for Batswana and received the name 'Jack'. Jack's name is known all over Ngamiland and among the Namibian !Kung as the best Zhū/twāsi thumb piano player. Zhū/twāsi for hundreds of miles around play songs he has composed, and all can name him as the composer. People say he is the only person who uses the thumb piano music as other San use dance music, as a vehicle for trance and a medium for speaking to God.

Jack is one of the very few players who sing or chant words along with their thumb piano songs. His songs certainly contain the most extensive texts of any that have yet been recorded. I think we must see him, then, as one of the innovators of an entirely new tradition in San musical life. The thumb piano itself is recent; extensive texts to be sung with it are perhaps even more recent. Dr England was able to state in 1968 from work carried out in the early 1960's that 'in contrast to their other instrumental songs, Žu (Zhū/twāsi) players never sing along with thumb piano compositions ... these tunes are purely instrumental'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we can see Jack's achievement as a very recent creative innovation. It is exciting to be in on the start of something like this, to see what will develop in his work and in that of others.

In this paper I try to render something of the flavour of Jack's creation. I am nearly discouraged from the effort, however, because of the impossibility of presenting in print the purely *musical* aspects of his creation as well as the poetry. San Thumb piano music, in general, is extraordinarily affecting: I am not a musicologist and can only describe it impressionistically as other-worldly, impossibly sad and sweet, the music of souls in suspension. In Jack's music there is something else too, a demonic note. Often his phrases are harsh and full of ingenious, clanging discords. The music is entirely his, and it works. It gives the impression of using diabolical materials to build a *new* kind of sweetness, one unheard before on the earth. I shall have to content myself in this paper with exploring the metaphorical world of Jack's poetry, but I implore the reader not to forget that this is only a fraction of the whole story.

Keeping the music in mind, then, we can now turn to the task of building up context for the understanding of Jack's verbal artistry.

### Jack's Uniqueness

Jack is regarded as a very special person. Other San consider him to have a great deal of power because of the uniqueness of his relationship to God. He is different from other men, even from other *shamans*. Other men (and some women, as well) go into trance at dances and do battle in that context with the spirits of the dead who are sent by God to bring misfortune and sickness. San medicine is almost exclusively of a psychological nature: the great *shamans* or *n/um k'xausi* ('medicine owners') are those who can use trance to contact God and plead with him for the health of individuals and the community. As Lorna Marshall has described in '!Kung Bushman Religious Beliefs', these men and women attempt to drive away bad luck by reviling the spirits of the dead and their captain, //Gaūwa, the lesser god. They also draw out the invisible arrows of illness that //Gaūwa and the spirits have shot into the bodies of the sick.

Jack, however, does not trance primarily in dancing as do many others. He trances most often while playing the thumb piano. He believes himself to be a

special medium for the transmission to the human community of the word and the power of God.

His songs have the triple function of praying to God, relating to other people what God has replied, and lamenting his own outcast state among humanity. He is an outcast, in some very important sense. Though he is respected for his power and his art, he is extremely hard to get along with. His exterior is thorny — and this among a people celebrated for their ability to maintain smooth relations with one another. He often lives somewhat apart from other people, thus making a choice that would be unthinkable to most of the highly sociable San. His songs reveal a considerable degree of paranoia:

...The owners of the east are after me  
The owners of the west are after me...

I myself, though I liked him and cared for him a great deal, was rather frightened of him. I felt he could make me do things I didn't want to do, like giving him things, taking him places, just by the power of his personality. Jack is definitely atypical among the San, a living example of the old saying that art is close to madness. He refers to himself often, and is called by others, 'Jack Diasi', Crazy Jack.

Trying to get at the influences which have made him what he is, Marjorie Shostak conducted an extensive interview with Jack on the events of his life. She has very generously made available to me the entire contents of this interview. For what I have included here, all gratitude must go to her.<sup>5</sup>

Jack told Marjorie that when he was about eight years old (perhaps 1950?), he became very sick, that a sickness entered his entire body. He was ill from one rainy season to the next. All the Zhū/twāsi medicine men tried to cure him but nothing helped. Then a Bantu medicine man tried, but he remained as sick as before. Finally he had a dream that the great God came to him and told him to pick up the *sitengena*, the thumb piano, and play it. He had never played it before, but now he just picked it up and played it and the sickness went away.

Then once when he was seventeen he was sheltering from a storm during *bara*, the season of the big rains. There came a clap of thunder so loud it picked him up and threw him against the back of his house. The same clap of thunder made the tree behind his house crack and fall and killed four cows nearby. (/''xashe ʔdengasi, now of Kauri, who had also been there in the house at the same time gave me this same account, separately, of the lightning that struck Jack. So this is no metaphor.)

Because of the thunderclap, Jack said, another sickness entered his body. It centered around his lower back and his chest (he had ribs broken in many different places), and it lasted for eight months. His older sister had to carry him everywhere, although the sickness was not in his legs, only in his torso. He stayed in the house this whole time and did not sit with any women except his mother. At the end of the eighth month, he started feeling things again slowly; by the ninth month it was much better.

He was healthy for two months. His father died during those two months, but he did not see him die. His mother had taken Jack away from /''ai/'ai before he was weaned and had gone to live with him at //xhe.

Then //Gaūwa sickness (sickness sent by //Gaūwa or God) entered his body again. He was drawing water at Mawhoawhe and God turned his feet and he fell into the well. He fell in head first, but God saw him and saved him by turning him around so his feet hit the water first. (I collected dreams from the Zhū/twāsi throughout my fieldwork: an astonishing number of these concerned falling into wells head first. Thus it must have been a true horror for this to actually happen to

Jack and an incredible relief, proof of God's great concern for him, that he was somehow turned around in mid-air. For one thing, few San swim.)

'I was flying down the well, very far...' he said. Jack's feet hit the bottom, but his 'mind left him' as did his heart, he says, and he floated on top of the water until other people threw down a bucket and a chain. He put his feet on the cross branch and was hauled up. At the top he lay on the sand very sick. As he lay there, God came to him and told him to play the *sitengena*.

And he played it well. As he played he heard someone talking, and it was God. God was telling him that he himself had given Jack birth, that he was not a child of the Zhū/twāsi, that the Zhū/twāsi hated him, that he was hated even by his older sister: though she carried him when he was sick, she left him in Mawhoawhe when he was still not well. He stayed with his mother's younger sister. 'She is the only one who likes me ... yes, people like me if I play, but they don't give me things, and if I live with them too long, they don't like me at all'.

His present wife likes him a little, he said. He had married his first wife when he was about twenty (perhaps 1960), and they lived together for a year until a new sickness came to Jack. God told him that someone was sleeping with his wife, and he discovered them sleeping together. Before he found out, the man had put 'Goba' medicine (Bantu) on Jack's blankets, but only a little sickness entered him. Then he found them together and went to the Tswana headman's court, and the man had to give him seven goats. But he was still sleeping with Jack's wife, and the two of them planned to kill Jack. 'One night while I was sleeping, the man poured medicine through the grass of the hut and it fell on my shoulder — that was the beginning of another long sickness...' This sickness entered his legs and feet but his upper body was fine. He sent his younger brother to a 'Goba' doctor for help. He had played the thumb piano and found out from it, while in trance, that it was his wife's lover who was making him sick. When the 'Goba' doctor came, he threw oracle disks of his own and God told him the same thing. He doctored Jack and the sickness left him in one month. Three days later his wife said her head hurt her and she was sick and died during the night. (While Jack had had the sickness in his legs, his wife had given birth to a baby by her lover. Before the baby was born, God had told Jack it wasn't his baby. The baby had lived three days and then died.)

After his wife's death, Jack took his thumb piano and went to Ghanzi and to many different places. Now he has a new wife and a little daughter. The new wife likes him a little, he told Marjorie at the end of the interview.

Now his wife has learned the thumb piano too. Sometimes she will play duets with him. These duets, too, appear to be an innovation: most people play solos only. Jack tunes both instruments so they will sound well together. Sometimes other people, too, hum along with Jack's music. People love to hear him play and often crowd around when he does. Sometimes they even dance to his songs, though dancing is not a usual response to a single instrumentalist in !Kung culture. Occasionally, Jack dances to his own music while he is playing. But as Dr England has brought out, like other San music, it is primarily 'self-delectative' in character. something Jack does for himself because he feels like it rather than a performance for others. One has the impression that he wants and needs to brood in this way upon the strange experiences he has been through.

#### Jack as a Shaman

Even given that Jack's 'paranoia' may lead him to exaggerate sometimes, it is extraordinary that he visualises his life in the terms in which he related it to Majorie. Hearing the account, one is reminded immediately of Eliade's discussion of the

effects of lightning, accidents and other sicknesses in the lives of Siberian and North American shamans. Certainly. Jack's progress toward his present powerful status re-enacted several times the initiatory pattern of suffering, symbolic death, and resurrection.

Further, the motif of receiving instructions, information, and aid through dreams from God is very strong. Zhû/twâsi generally speak of premonitions and intuition this way, but Jack seems to have experienced them more often than most. He has impressed on me his conviction that his life is ruled not by himself but by these utterances from God. Though he laments it and questions it in his music, he seems basically accepting (and even proud) of his fate as a special instrument of God's will.

Creative inspiration is also described by the Zhû/twâsi as God's directions, which are sometimes experienced through dreams. Both men and women say that they receive individual medicine songs and other songs from God, sometimes when they are awake, sometimes in sleep. Even the *shared* medicine songs are thought to have come to the group originally through the medium of a single individual inspired by God.

A similar concept of inspiration was found among the Mohave by George Devereaux.<sup>6</sup> These people believe magical powers, and their attendant myths, skills and songs, to be acquired in dream. Much of this material may be 'learned' in waking life, but it is only 'potentiated' for the individual when it is also experienced in dreams. Devereux also makes the point that cultural materials may be available to many sorts of people in primitive societies. The shaman, however, is a person who will make extraordinary uses of it. In cultures whose concept of shamanism is sufficiently wide, neurotics, who might be classed as 'sick' in other societies, can shelter in this socially-sanctioned niche.

San concepts of the wide variety of relationships possible between man and God are broad enough to allow a person like Jack to be as important as a traditional San trance-curer. Different musical instruments, different styles of dancing and trancing, and different medicine songs are used by individual San medicine men and women (*n/umk'' xausi*). The remarkable variety permissible in these individuals' ways of arriving at confrontation with God will be documented in a forthcoming book on the San trance by Richard Katz, which is to be called *Boiling Medicine*.

### Concepts in the Texts

After this introduction of context, I want to discuss some of the specific religious concepts we encounter in the texts of Jack's songs. The words to the songs are often extremely elliptical and could be very puzzling for someone unfamiliar with Zhû/twâsi language and culture. As we get closer to the cultural concepts referred to by the sparse texts, however, it becomes obvious that a rich world of meanings is invoked for a !Kung listener by these allusions. In order for us to experience the songs in anything approaching such meaningfulness, we need a great deal of background.

Even for those of us familiar with the language, it is extremely hard to understand what is going on in the singing. As Dr England demonstrates for the other instruments and for vocal music, words in Zhû/twâ songs are often altered by phonemic transformation and by syllable ellision.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the beginning of a phrase may be uttered and broken off, but the entire phrase must nevertheless be inferred from context. An example is Jack's *Atshesi ba ku kwe...*? which implies *Atshesi ba ku kwe guni mi?* (What things thus (hound me)?), a phrase commonly heard as a complaint in daily life. *Atshesi* itself is metaphorical. 'What things?' it asks: its referent is not an open question but specifically the //gaûwasi, the ghosts or spirits of the dead. It is safer, in general, not to name them. Thus the sentence

functions for a member of the culture as a rhetorical question so obvious that no answer is required.

I will be quoting through the rest of this paper from two of Jack's performances, each of about an hour in length. The texts were not spoken continuously as they appear here: often there were long periods of *dongu* playing in between the spoken lines. Jack's chronology has, however, not been altered.

It is interesting that in spite of the fact that the two performances presented here were separated by some six months, many phrases recur verbatim in both. These are oral formulae with which Jack improvises freely, creating of each performance a new entity which is, nevertheless, part of the seamless whole of his work. Some of these formulae are used with other instruments and in the vocal music. Most, though, are Jack's very own. It will be interesting to observe in the coming years whether some of them enter general !Kung tradition.

## II

What is my blame that you seek me to torment me?

Why am I always ill?

Yesterday we sat together and spoke.

You said that I was your child.

This piece of wood you gave and said it might  
be mine.

Why have you changed your mind and now you  
wish to kill me?

God's son am I,

I am God's son,

God, come down to me.

Master of tricks, yes, am I,

God's son I am.

I speak to God in his own speech, asking

'Are you so foul as to give a child to people

and then bring misery upon that same child'?

The references to biographical details are obvious here. The recurring sicknesses, God giving him the *dongu* (which he 'respects' by calling it a *!gei* or 'piece of wood'), God calling Jack his child but appearing later to have retracted this benevolent promise...

'Master of tricks' is more a complex idea. The word *zhi* in !Kung has the meanings of lying, joking, fooling, tricking. A *zhi-xau* is an 'owner' or 'master' of these activities, an expert at them. *Zhi* is not as grave a word as *chwa*, to deceive, or *n/!ho*, to deceive or betray. To call a person a *zhi-k'xau* in fun is almost as much compliment as derogation. Sometimes *A o zhi!* is used rather as is 'you're kidding!' in English.

But Jack has taken this word a good bit beyond its ordinary meanings. When he talks about *zhi*, he implies magical or religious trickery. In his poetry, the word is connected with transformation of shape and with transference of the word and power of mysterious God to a human community waiting for them in ignorance. He himself as the *zhi-k'xau* stands between the earthly and the heavenly worlds as their meditation.

As Jack sees it, one of the *zhi-k' xau's* functions is to translate the unknowable speech of God so people can understand it, and to speak on their behalf to him in return. When Jack is singing, this speech of God comes out of him in a burst of strange words whose fluency reminds one forcibly of glossolalia. All I can say about the language is that it does not seem to have clicks in it. When I asked Jack to listen to tapes of himself, he translated this speech into !Kung for me. I have included his translations at the points where these speeches occur in the text, prefacing them with 'I speak to God in his speech.' or 'God speaks to me in his language'.

In the section of the text at the very beginning of the paper, the phrase 'God's arms' occurs. Jack explained to me that his fingers had in them the power that descended from God's arms, and that when he played the dongu it was really God playing. A strong idea, but simple enough. For a Zhū/twā listener, however, this phrase 'God's arms' is an extremely powerful one in and of itself. (One is reminded here of early English swearing.) For the !Kung it is an oath of such potency that people enjoin each other from ever saying it.<sup>8</sup>

Now for the word //gaūwa or //Gaūwa which recurs in Jack's texts. One of the names for the great God is //Gaūwa. !Kung believe this deity brings both bad and good fortune to men, but good predominates in their ideas about him. He is the creator. He created not just the earth but also the lesser god. He gave his god, who is much more closely associated with evil, his names, one of which is also //Gaūwa. The third use of the term for the //gaūwasi, (small 'g') the ghosts or spirits of the dead who go to live in the sky after death and do the bidding of God. Jack refers to himself as a //gaūwama !o, a young //gaūwa or spirit who lives in the western sky (where the lesser god resides) and learns his trade.

This incarnation is another symbol of the status he sees for himself of mediator between two worlds. The //gaūwasi too are mediators since they bring to men the fruits of God's will toward them and can be influenced by the wills of men at trance dances. At these dances, men in trance shout at the //gaūwasi and seek to drive them, and the sickness they bring, far away from the earthly community. 'Filthy face!' people scream. 'Take away the sickness you have brought'. 'Uncovered penis! You are bad. You want to kill us. Go away'.<sup>9</sup>

Though the *n/um k' xausi* are strong and respected, there is a belief that in spite of human efforts, God's will towards the world is predestined to be accomplished. This conviction is expressed in Jack's lines:

The year of my death is known  
the day of my death is known

Actually he sang 'My year is one' and later explained to me that he meant the year of his death. The 'one' implies that it can be no other year, that it has been thus planned and is known to God. These lines are not sung hopelessly but instead with a kind of triumphant finality.

### III

Here is another section of the performance:

I am the son of !Xo.  
Yesterday you spoke and said this piece of  
wood was mine.  
Why have you changed your mind about  
that gift?  
You said I should sing what we two own  
between us, our song.



You gave me the work of making sounds with  
my fingers:  
That same work I am doing now, today.

I am God's son,  
I am !Xo's son,  
Where will I hide?  
A young //gaūwa who is learning to do things,  
Learning to torment,  
When and where will a young soul hide?  
I am Huwe's son,  
I am Huwe's son,  
I am the one whom death visits first,  
Then it passes by me and goes to all people.

Sickness comes down from the sky and presses  
me to the ground, then passes on.  
Where will a young //gaūwa hide?

In this section, the work of the //gaūwasi, that Jack as a young //gaūwa learns, is to 'khaia' a word meaning to torment, bring misery, persecute. I was not able to discover why he sees himself doing this work. It may be that his music, though beautiful, is a thorn in the side to the Zhū/twāsi. He never lets them forget about death.

God is referred to in this section by two other names besides //Gaūwa. He is called both !Xo and Huwe, two of his many names. Jack thinks of himself as God's son. He also feels he is the first among his group to receive not only intelligences from God but also sicknesses sent to earth by him. He is a kind of lightning rod through which sickness and misfortune are conducted from heaven to earth.

#### IV

#### Death Year

The next section Jack gave a title:

Trickery.  
Master of tricks, yes, am I.  
Where will I be safe?  
Death Year is upon me.  
Death Year thus hounds me.  
A sickness year begins this way,  
This year that is setting in...  
Mother! ... oh...  
The year of my death is known.  
The day of my death is known.  
What are these things that hound me so?  
Where will I die?  
Will I die in the west?  
Where will I die?

A man with bad medicines deceives you and you die.  
Owner of tricks, yes,  
I am crying for myself.

Will I be buried in the east?  
Will I be buried in the east?  
Will I be buried in the east?  
Where will I hide?  
I am a ghost.  
God torments me, yes  
God torments me, yes  
God torments me, yes  
God torments me  
God torments me  
What year will I be buried and go to my rest?  
Where will I be safe?  
Where will I hide?  
Where will I hide?

I speak to God in his speech.  
I cry with God.  
I tell him to lift me from the earth.  
God deceives me, yes,  
Great !Xo betrays me.

Me, me I mean me,  
God, leave me alone!  
Stop tormenting me!

I asked Jack what a *!hi kuria*, a death year, meant to him. He said 'a year that starts with death and stays with death'.

In the middle of the song he wails 'mother'. This interjection is common in San singing of all kinds: men often sing 'Aiye gu me', 'mother take me up (rescue me)' to their medicine songs. But its commonness should not obscure the fact that Jack has had an unusually close relationship with his mother. His sicknesses necessitated his staying with her past the age when young Zhū/twā men usually leave their mothers. 'I am a young */ibi*, a little bird living in its mother's house ...' he sings. His father was effectively out of his life since before he was weaned, and Jack's main memory of him was that people said he used to beat his wife, Jack's mother. At present, one of Jack's major preoccupations is how to provide for his mother and her people in their old age. He is planning to dig a well by hand, hoping to hit water so that they may live by it and raise some goats. Life has grown harder for the traditionally hunting and gathering !Kung during Jack's lifetime. Game animals must compete with cattle for the range, and waterholes are being encroached upon by outsiders.

Jack's mind runs on gloomy themes of personal and collective misfortune. But there are times also when he is ecstatic, times when he seems satisfied. The seriousness with which he takes life is rather atypical for the Zhū/twāsi, however. Other thumb piano players I encountered in eastern Ngamiland had serious, grave songs as well, but none were marked by such constant pensiveness as was Jack. During the singing of this last-quoted section, he cried freely. That was part of the prayer. He sang, 'I am crying for myself'.

Toward the end of the section his fear of death startles us by showing another

face. 'What year will I be buried and go to my rest?' For an instant, death is openly desired. Then Jack returns to his old refrain, 'Where will I hide from God's death? But then in the next section of his performance he returns to a plea for release from suffering through death. He begs God in his mysterious language to lift him from the earth.

V

Terrible things,  
Strange things, ghosts,  
You are strange and I am Jack Crazyiness,  
A good-for-nothing,  
A young /ibi am I,  
A little bird living in its mother's house.  
Still learning:  
A young /ibi, I am learning to torment,  
A young /ibi, yes, brings misery,  
A young /ibi cries, 'hoo, hoo'!  
I am learning, yes.  
Ima, imaima, imaima  
A young /ibi torments,  
Ima, imaima, imaima  
Imaima, imaima.  
All of you people sing Jack's song,  
Everybody sing Jack.

Trickery  
Craz — crazyiness  
The chombosi  
The people who slit you open  
Craz — craz — crazyiness  
The crazy, crazy Tswanas!  
Crazy Jack!  
Ima, imaima

Owner of tricks, hoo, hoo!

You, God, said  
These bits of metal,  
These scraps of wood.  
Would give me life.  
But it was a trick:  
My people are dying  
And I will die.

I am God's son,  
I am like the lightning bird  
Who just flies on,  
Doesn't know where he's going  
Even goes to stranger's homes  
And is not afraid.

'Terrible thing, strange thing, is a conventional way of referring to God. Medicine men use it in their songs. It is a way of avoiding the use of one of God's names, which are dangerous. In this section, Jack sees himself as two different birds. One is the /ibi bird which cries 'hoo,hoo!' in a tormenting manner. The other is the *da'a ts'ama* or 'lightning bird,' identified as the hammerkop, *Scopus umbretta*. Schapera tells us that this bird is a harbinger of death for some San peoples, who refuse to kill one or rob its nest. If a person is struck by lightning, he is supposed to have gotten in the way of the lightning bird when trying to rob its nest. We remember Jack's early experience with lightning. Now he is himself the lightning bird who carries the news of death and is not afraid even when he goes on his errand of doom among strangers. For most !Kung, going to a stranger's home would be frightening indeed. Traditionally, the San have lived in a world of known faces only, linked by kinship and the conventions of their namesake relationship. But Jack's sense of ineluctable mission, his drivenness, seems to propel him into a region of mind that is beyond such ordinary fears.

In the eastern Kalahari, San are greatly afraid of storms and cry out 'Khauna ka rue ie ie,' 'Khauna (the eastern San lesser god) leave us alone.'<sup>11</sup> The Zhū/twāsi too cry out similar things at the storm, which is closely identified with the lesser god. Jack sings '//Gaūwa n//a mi o,' '//Gaūwa leave me alone.'

The lightning bird links death by lightning to the treacherous lesser god and is in a sense one of this god's familiars. It passes from the world of the gods bringing death by storm and news of death to the world of men. Jack identifies himself with this bird as a messenger of death. But he has also been the storm's victim. He conducts lightning now. He sings that through his mediumship he has brought calamity to other people.

'I am the one whom death visits first,  
Then it passes by me and goes to all  
the people'.

He is crazy, Jack Diasi, but he is not the only crazy one in this unbalanced world. The Tswanas too are crazy, he says. Jack sings about the *chombosi*, the people who slit you open. These are Tswana believed by San to desire the vital organs and genitals of San for planting in their fields to insure fertility. (Interestingly, these figures too are mediators of a kind, standing at the interface between the world of the hunting and gathering, politically powerless San and that of the Tswana ruling majority of Botswana, who are agriculturists and pastoralists. The enmity, fear, and envy the San feel for the Tswana are personified in these *chombosi*, visualised as black men larger than life with red, staring eyes. The are thought to try to kill San if they catch them alone, and to butcher them for their vital parts.)

Section VI I have presented with the original !Kung transcription opposite.

## VI

Everyone sing Champion,  
Everyone sing Jack,  
Stop tormenting me,  
Must you bring me misery?  
Everyone stop tormenting me.  
Stop bringing me misery.  
Don't bring me more pain.

I ge Champion,  
I ge Jack,  
N//a mi khaā  
I ba kurike ko khaā mi?  
I n//a khaā mi — o.  
I n//a khaā mi — o.  
I n//a khaā mi — o.

Ima, imaima,  
Everyone sing Champion,  
Everyone sing Jack.  
Hoo, hoo!  
Owner of lying,  
Master of tricks.  
Hoo, hoo!  
I put my dongu on 'start',  
So it rings softly.  
People come here and all  
sit down,  
To hear the word of God:  
Let me trick - tell you  
what he says.

Ima, imaima,  
I ge Champion,  
I ge Jack.  
Hoo, hoo!  
Zhi - k' xau  
Zhi - k' xau.  
Hoo, hoo!  
Mi n! a ko starter kwea,  
Ka a ku !gei cha ts'ema.  
Zhu kowa n/n !o,

N/n tsa //eha o kxwoie:  
N/n mi zhi - !kwa zhu.

'Champion' is a name Jack says he learned for himself from the *!gasi*, the metal pieces that form the teeth of the dongu. In this section, he speaks directly to the other people around him enjoining them to stop tormenting him and to join his endeavour. 'I put my *dongu* on 'start' is a direct analogy with a car engine: Jack has been in trucks and Land Rovers.

At the end of this section appears the most interesting extension yet of the concept of *zhi*. A compound verb, *zhi - !kwa*, trick - tell, is coined for the activity of translating God's mysterious speech for men! Here we can begin to see how far Jack's concept of the *zhi - k' xau* has gone beyond that of a folktale trickster. Past being a benefactor-buffoon who only serves incidentally along the road to satisfaction of his own desires, this *zhi-k' xau* is a conscious benefactor, aware of his role and the purpose of his life. In his poetry, Jack engages in magico-religious metaphoric transformations for the benefit of his group. Foretelling the future and making decisions by using the dongu to speak with God are further ways he is believed to be of aid to others. Another thing he claims to do is to travel outside his body to check up on the health of relatives who are far away. This last is another faculty believed to be possessed by many trancers in *Zhū/twā* culture. But it is said that only Jack can do it with the thumb piano. And when there was an eclipse of the moon in 1971, people sat around him, and he played ardently until it came back, easing the tension of a dangerous time. 'Why are senseless children playing with the moon and ruining it?' he sang, rolling his eyes dramatically and thrusting his head forward and back on his neck like a pigeon.

## VII

### Great, great God

God's arms  
God's arms  
A young //gaūwa, still learning to do things.  
He has no name yet, but his parents know his name.  
These days God's son is crying.  
He cries, he cries tears that will never end.  
Even if he dies, they will never end.

Where will I crouch away from death?  
Where can I stay?  
Where will I hide from people's dying?

Because I cry with it,  
This piece of wood is mine.  
Where will I hide myself?  
God's arms,  
God's wrists.

I pray to God in his language:  
A young //gaūwa walks abroad,  
Learns to do things,  
Learns to work.  
God, I pray you, Lord.

God speaks in his language. He tells me:  
'Yesterday I spoke, saying  
'This work I have given you,  
'You shall keep to!  
'I will speak with this person', said I,  
'Mi nailena.  
'I am I'.

One person, and another person, speak together.  
I am a child of God, come down to you,  
But I myself do not own the dongu:  
The dongu has its own master.  
God only lends it to me  
To make its teeth ring,  
He lets my fingers make its teeth ring.

Why do they seek me out  
And see I am alone  
And then torment me?

God, leave me alone,  
God, leave me alone,  
God, don't hound me,  
God, don't ignore me,  
God, don't pursue me,  
God, leave me alone.

Why do the Dobe people look at me with hate,  
And the "ai//ai people pursue me?  
The owners of the west want to kill me.  
Why do people seem to be after me?  
The owners of the west are after me.  
The owners of the east are after me.  
The !on!a people pursue me,  
The Dobe people persecute me.  
The !angwa people seek me out,  
The !goshe people hate me.

God's arms.  
God's arms.

God's arms, the arms of God.  
Thus they speak,  
God's arms yesterday...  
Long ago, yes, I was a ghost,  
And yesterday became a different ghost.

Where will I hide from God's death?

Here we find that Jack has only been given the loan of the dongu, that it is not his own, nor is even his skill really his own. This is a disclaimer of his own importance that is in keeping with the humility proper to a man in San society.

Jack next sketches the geography of his 'paranoia', from Dobe in the west to !on!a in the east, and from !angwa in the north to /'ai/'ai in the south. Perhaps significantly, he includes only places where he has close relatives. These may be the loci of his most tension-filled relationships. He has been much further south, to Ghanzi as well, but he would have no close relatives there, and it is not mentioned. *Poro Di* I have translated 'Lord.' The word is elaborately reverent and refers pointedly to the maleness of God. Its female counterpart is *!Kuru Di*, a gracious title for the wife of God and by extension for any highly-honoured lady. Finally, there is a dark reference to Jack's having made a mysterious past transformation from one ghost to another. I asked Jack about this strange line, but was able to elicit no further information. For now, it is one of his secrets.

#### Summation: Reality and Jack's Artifice

The reality of Jack's situation is that he feels himself to have been, like many shamans, selected to his unique calling by personal affliction. He thinks of himself as a person who has suffered bizarre accidents down a well and at the tip of a bolt of lightning. He connects his recovery from the effects of these calamities with his special facility with the thumb piano.

Of the lightning episode, we have independent confirmation, but as yet there is no corroboration that he actually fell down the well. Given the prevalence of this motif in !Kung dreams, we should not exclude the possibility this may have been a dream-experience Jack was describing. I am inclined to believe, however, that it really happened, as other !Kung informants were generally quite clear about which events they heard as myths, which events occurred to them in dream, which in trance, and which in waking life.

Nevertheless, there is evidence from other cultures that materials from any one of these realms of experience may sometimes be used in another. For instance, it is known that myth may sometime be used by individuals as dream-material.<sup>12</sup> Myths are powerful dramas with which the dreamer can identify, and thus ennoble, his own life experiences. I believe that the repeated dream of falling down a well may be connected with a key myth well known among the !Kung. Possibly Jack draws power from comparing his own experience at the well — or his dream-experience — to this myth.

The story is the deception of the beautiful python by her younger sister, the jackal. The jackal tricks her sister so that she falls into a very deep well and goes all the way down to the bottom. She lies there and cannot get out. Finally, the combined efforts of all the other animals succeed in bringing her up. She is discovered to have given birth while in the well. She and her child are laid on the sand, very sick, and they vomit up the water they have swallowed. Then they rise and proceed regally back to their camp where they are received with great rejoicing. The treacherous jackal is killed and eaten.

This myth is a journey to the world of death and a rebirth into life on a higher level than before. The python gives birth in the well, she also unites the animals in the common struggle for a new and more co-operative order. Antisocial deception is revealed and punished.

In Jack's case, light was shed for him upon the marginality of his own situation when he recapitulated this experience. He was placed more fully in contact with his own atypical reality. He had a chance to see himself through new eyes.

Other people hauled him up out of the well, yes. But as he lay gasping on the sand, God told him this sign of solidarity was ephemeral, that he was not a person like other Zhū/twāsi; about him there was something different, 'I myself gave you birth,' said God in Jack's ear, and to prove it, he gave Jack a thumb piano and the ability to play it instantly.

Jack's new life was born. He was afflicted, but now he had a justification for his sufferings: he was also selected. He became a singer. He needed to explore this sense of newly-perceived reality. Perhaps he could not do otherwise, feeling himself chosen.

Accidents, sickness, and strained social relationships, combined with other elements in Jack's psychology, have 'turned his feet' (in his words) onto an atypical path. He has made of his unusual experience what he can. He tries to weave the episodes of his life into the fabric of understanding his culture provides him about the dark avenues between God and man. They become intellegible and powerful for him, and through him for others. But how to express experiences that lie beyond the normal ken? Personal sincerity, says Northrop Frye, is inarticulate. Only artifice will do. So Jack seeks masks to reveal his enhanced self. He also seeks a world apart, a heightened plane of imaginary experience on which to set his stage. Here his many masks can, without incongruity, appear and reappear to complement each other. The masks may be drawn from images he has seen in dreams or in trance, heard about in myth, or known in reality. Cultural materials of many kinds drawn from these diverse levels combine to form an extraordinary realm with the potency Jack seeks. To express the vital connection he feels between this world and another one beyond, he requires suspension of mundane time and of the pacing off of earthly space. Because he has achieved this suspension, he can embody, in an instant of song, an eternity of human pain:

... God's son is crying  
He cries, he cries tears that will never end.  
Even if he dies, they will never end.

### Artistry: Mastery of Tricks

Jack has created a potent array of forms as messengers for his meanings. His trickery legislates the transformations these forms will undergo to communicate the many faces of man's suffering and final defeat by death. Within the frame of his poetry, *zhi* and *di* go hand in hand. *Zhi*, magical trickery, can only be accomplished in a state of *di*, craziness. The *chombosi* are crazy; they trick you and steal your testicles. Jack is crazy too. Because he is crazy, he has available to him many artifices, many changes of form. He pictures himself the lightning bird who transfers the destructive energy of storm and the news of death to the world of men. He calls himself the bothersome /ibi-bird, learning his trade of torment, annoying people with his endless hooting. He sings that he is a young dead spirit, servant of the gods and bringer of bad fortune to mankind.

In this last role, he is dead-in-life. He is also God's son, something a little divine in



the midst of a mundane world. He is an outcast still living in society — in his art as well as in reality. He fears death, but he also desires it. He is a dependent child, but he is also completely alone.

The personification of very strong contradictions of existence, Jack is powerful in that his art enables some of these oppositions to be resolved for Zhū/twā listeners. His very being, the fact he is not cleft in two by these conflicts, testifies to the possibility of resolution. The fact that in spite of the misery he embodies, he goes on singing ... Jack's art is an individual lament born of the specific complications of his own life. But his artistry transforms lamentation into social truth which can be meaningful on many levels to many people. It is effective for the Zhū/twāsi, of course, but perhaps as we educate ourselves in the associations that lie behind the words, we will find that his inevitable messages are fashioned for us as well. As he says,

I am like the lighting bird  
Who just flies on,  
Doesn't know where he is going.  
Even goes to strangers' homes  
And is not afraid.

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Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of the individuals discussed in this paper.

1. England, Nicholas, *Music among the Zǔ'/'wǎ-si of South West Africa and Botswana*, Ph.D. dissertation, (Harvard University, Department of Music, February, 1968).
2. *ibid.*, p. 221 (The pejorative word 'Bushman' is retained here only to avoid confusion. It is hoped that the linguists will adopt the word 'San' in their writings before long).
3. Stow, G. W., *Native Races of Southern Africa*, p. 558, cited in England, *ibid.*, p. 224.
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10. Schapera, I., *Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd, London, 1930), p. 194.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
12. See Eggan, Dorothy, The Personal Use of Myth in Dream, in T. Sebeok, ed., *Myth: A Symposium*, (American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, 1955).