

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND CONCEPTUAL REALITY: THE TRANCE EXPERIENCE OF THE !KUNG BUSHMEN

Anita F. Newman

PREFACE

This paper was originally submitted as my contribution to a panel discussion about the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in a course, "Dance Cultures of the World: Africa," (Dance 140A), 1979. Stretching across a great inland table of southern Africa, the Kalahari Desert is the home for the nomadic Bushmen, one of the last peoples of the world to maintain a hunting and gathering way of life. The land is dry with sparse vegetation and little water: scarce rains, water roots, and the insides of animals provide the only available water supply. Keenly knowledgeable about its land, each band settles temporarily where it finds edible roots and berries and a waterhole. There are no crops to cultivate nor cattle or sheep to herd: the desert is too dry to maintain those needs. The desert makes other demands: every bush, stone, root, and convolution of the ground within a given territory is recognized, memorized, and named by members of the group, and bands delineate and respect each other's territorial boundaries. [Thomas, p. 10]

Sheltered by grass scherms (huts), or sometimes just by an animal-skin cape, a few families live together in groups numbering around twenty people led by a headman who in function is indistinguishable from other elders. Each group contains hunters, gatherers, collectors, and trappers. Women gather all available roots, berries, nuts, and melons. Men, using only poisoned arrows, are in charge of hunting. Most animals indigenous to the Kalahari are fair game: springbok, wildebeest, gemsbok, tortoise, giraffe, elephant, ostrich, baboon, porcupine, squirrel, rabbit, lizard, snake, and even ants (a sweet delicacy).

In keeping with its closeness to the land, this culture focuses on life on earth rather than life after death. Explanations regarding physical life and metaphysical life are given through stories, myths and legends, and accounts of experience gained in trance states.

I became fascinated with the trance state's potential for explaining the unexplainable and for gaining knowledge and wisdom through unfamiliar channels. Unlike many other peoples who experience altered states of consciousness, the Bushmen are able to recall and describe their states in a highly poetic fashion. Other members of the group learn from this information in various ways. As my research and interest in this culture grew, I decided

to compile my notes into a paper and dedicate it to these people.

From my "western" point of view, the trance experience of the Bushmen is a multifaceted process and product of Bushman life. The dance ceremony, when *!kia*,* or trance, takes place, provides the integration of medicine, religion, and recreation, supported, anticipated, and promoted by the whole band. Men, and occasionally women, expect to go into trance at the appropriate time during the course of the all-night dances occurring from once a week to once a month.

How often do we, indeed, do we ever, see or know about such an experience in our culture in the United States? When we go dancing we may experience a heightened state of pleasure, joy, or delirium, induced by desire, drugs, or drink, but how isolated this event appears to be when compared with the comprehensiveness of the Bushman ceremony. We are so limited by our timed schedules that we are not allowed to reach beyond the exigencies of our projected futures. Even in such life-affirming activities as dancing, running, or yoga where physical, psychological, and mental release, cleansing, and reinforcement can take place, the therapeutic benefits focus on the individual. As a formalized ritual, the *n/um tchai*, or medicinal dance ceremony, requires the presence of everyone in the band, for fear that a solitary person may be kidnapped by evil spirits. What in our society ensures this kind of adventure with protection, and how often can we count on it?

THE TRANCE EXPERIENCE OF THE !KUNG BUSHMEN

WHAT is trance? How is it related in the cultural context?

Trance is an altered or heightened state of consciousness; an experience of transcendence. According to some observations it is a psychobiological term whereas in this study, it is not limited to this definition; rather it is used in a more amplified cultural context. It is a patterned and institutionalized event rather than an individual, private, deviant (exclusive), profane or secular phenomenon. [Bourguignon, *R.A.S.*, p. 13] Positively evaluated and desired, it is a kinesthetic reaffirmation of the group, belongingness, and the primacy of group over individual while still being an individual, intimate experience which is a shared effort with others in a group setting. [Bourguignon, *D.P.*, p. 21]

!Kia, the !Kung Bushman translation for trance, is a learned process after which recall is possible and often important. (This factor contrasts with possession where amnesia often follows.) Involved with death and rebirth, the unique *!kia* cannot be compared to any other psychological state no matter how intense because of its religious, medicinal, ritualistic context. [Katz, p. 283] Activated by the powerful energy, *n/um*, *!kia* healing is harmonious or synergistic with maintenance and growth on both individual and cultural levels. [Katz, p. 285]

*The marks attached to !Kung Bushman words refer to the click sounds characteristic of that language. The four clicks are symbolized as follows: the dental click, /, the alveolar, ʘ, the alveolar palatal, ǀ, the lateral, // . The rendering of Bushman words is only approximate.

WHO takes part?

The whole society is able to absorb and utilize this high spiritual energy which is put into the bodies of the *n/um kausi*, or medicine men. They are usually men who can become trancers, although evidently some women are also initiated. According to Katz, a high percentage of !Kung adults are able to enter trance; among them, one-half of the older adult males and one-third of the adult women learn to *!kia*. [Katz, p. 272]

WHAT is the preparation? When? How?

The preparation for these highly charged occasions comes about in the normal process of !Kung socialization. Working with a teacher and with the band's support, a man tries to become a master of *n/um*. As a small child playing, he will imitate what he has seen: the *!kia* dance structure, movements, gestures, falls, etc. Thus he learns experientially as well as conceptually (from the accounts of his teacher and other masters) about *!kia* throughout his developing years until he is ready to experience it himself; an awesome, fearful yet positive, liberating phenomenon. This education/socialization prepares him to have or better accept transcendence, because unless a !Kung is prepared to accept the experience, it either does not come or comes in a form which he cannot experience, understand, or use. [Katz, p. 282]

The structure is the dance, *n/um tchai*, lasting from dusk to dawn, occurring once or twice a week, with perhaps fifteen men dancing. The singing, dancing, handclapping, expectant and participatory audience, campfire, particular place and time are all ideally suited to produce the dissociative state and therapeutic results of the ritual. [Bourguignon, *D.P.*, p. 14] The atmosphere of expectation and suggestion are very important as is the fact that all members are included: the sick, very old, and very young must be present, not off alone and risking capture by a greedy spirit. The music with its increasing frequency and intensity facilitates rhythmical movement and psychologically helps release the dancer of part of his responsibility for his movements and actions; physiologically, it affects the brain also (perhaps the subcortical area). The movement during the dance influences the breathing patterns such that hyperventilation and varying states of exhaustion result, with balance and equilibrium altered.

The actual entrance into trance can be gradual or it can come suddenly: dancers and non-dancers are sensitive to the various stages of the trancer. They watch for the following physical manifestations: eyes glazed and cast downward, body tense and rigid, footfalls heavy, chest heaving, veins standing out on neck and forehead, profuse sweating. [Lee, p. 31] If the trancer is staggering and losing his balance, other men, not yet in the transcendent state, may lead him around in tandem, bring him back into the dance, or take him to the outlying area until he shouts and falls down in a comatose state—called "half-death" by this culture. The sudden entrance is characterized by a violent leap or somersault and an instant collapse into the "half-death." According to Katz, when a master senses that his student needs help, he, along with the more experienced *n/um* trancers, give their physical as well as spiritual help, by holding back their transcendence and carrying him to his. Generally, two or three members go into *!kia* at one time.

WHAT does trance do to the individual (physical sensations)?

Attaining the *!kia* state, one can activate *n/um*, a non-physical substance which inflicts pain and fear, yet cures and protects the owner of it and all those he physically contacts. The elements of fire and water stand out as pervasive metaphors in describing the experience:

You dance, dance, dance. Then *n/um* lifts you in your belly and lifts you in your back, and then you start to shiver. *N/um* makes you tremble; it's hot. Your eyes are open but you don't look around; you hold your eyes still and look straight ahead. But when you get into *!kia*, you're looking around because you see everything, because you see what's troubling everybody. . . . Rapid shallow breathing, that's what draws *n/um* up . . . then *n/um* enters every part of your body, right to the tip of your feet and even your hair. [Marshall & Biese, p. 3]

The quantity and temperature of *n/um* must be just right: hot enough to evoke *!kia* but not so hot that it provokes debilitating fear. Then the *n/um kausi* can transmit its potent protection and cure:

N/um is put into the body through the backbone. It boils in my belly and boils up to my head. . . . When the women start singing and I start dancing, at first I feel quite all right. Then in the middle, the *n/um* begins to rise from my stomach. After that, I see all the people like very small birds. The whole place will be spinning around, and that is why we run around. The trees will be inclining also. You feel your blood become very hot, just like blood boiling on a fire, and then you start healing. When I am like this (that is, telling this story), I am just a person. The thing comes up after a dance, then when I lay hands on a sick person, the medicine in me will go into him and cure him. [Marshall & Biese, p. 3]

WHAT does trance do to the group?

Although the *!Kung* God can give *n/um* directly to a person in a dream or vision, the transfer of curing power usually takes place during trance. Thus *n/um* is increased and more available to the whole community. The following is Tsau's account of this transference:

You must do the (student's spleen area) properly. You've got to fire arrows into that area; fire them in and fire them in and fire them in until these arrows of *n/um*, which are a lot like thorns, long thorns, are sticking out in all directions. So you see why we rub (the person's body) like we do, because the arrows are popping out of his body, and we're rubbing them back into his body. And that's why we take our sweat, and then we try to work the arrows around to the back. When we do that, his breath and soul return properly to his body; but if we don't do that, then he might die, he might die if we just left those things sticking out. . . . [Katz, p. 292]

Touching each encircling member, the trancer draws out sickness (potential or acknowledged) by fluttering his fingers over a member's stomach and back; takes it into his own body, then expels it through his upper back into the air and cries out *kowhididi*. If there is a sick person present at the dance, each trance performer will make a special effort, often giving them ten or fifteen minutes worth of treatment to this one individual. [Lee, p. 32]

WHAT does it do for the individual? for the group?

In the *!Kung* society, the trance experience fulfills many purposes: medicinal, religious, psychological, emotional, physical. They believe to be cured of illness and protected from spirits who might want to kill them. Whether they actually confront the *Gao* and

gauwa-si (spirits of the dead), or are told about them, the people know they are in the presence of the supernatural. They witness the potency and potential of human existence: death and rebirth in the transcendent state. This can be nothing less than an exhilarating, frightening, reassuring/reaffirming, ecstatic, moving, and physically exhausting experience. And they're all in it together, no matter what: hostility, anger, fatigue, hunger, thirst, illness, depression, anticipation, enthusiasm, happiness.

The individual trancer manifests a personality transformation that is considered unusual in normal Bushman behavior: he is aggressive rather than shy, violent rather than submissive, bold in calling out to the spirits instead of cautious and discreet. Within the protective dance complex, the dissociative state provides a release of the individual's emotions: a potential for increasing personal growth. (When one confronts death and rebirth, the supernatural, the unknown, and returns as an integrated, normal member of society, one is a vital, evolving person!); an explanation for the unexplainable:

In *!kia* your heart stops, you're dead, your thoughts are nothing, you breathe with difficulty. You see things, *n/um* things; you see ghosts killing people, you smell burning, rotten flesh; then you heal, you pull sickness out. You heal, heal, heal . . . then you live. Then your eyeballs clear and then you see people clearly. [Katz, p. 291]

Able to recognize a more essential self, one *n/um* master said that he wanted to have a dance soon so that he could become himself again. [Katz, p. 287] Often accompanied by X-ray vision, clairvoyance, and/or prophecy, the heightened state provides an imaginative vehicle for explaining misfortunes, physical forces, mysteries. A blind, respected *n/um* master, Tsau, describes his own transformation:

. . . God keeps my eyeballs in a little cloth bag. When he first collected them, he got a little cloth bag and plucked my eyeballs out and put them into the bag and then he tied the eyeballs to his belt and went to heaven. And now when I dance, on the nights when I dance, and the singing rises up, he comes down from heaven swinging the bag with the eyeballs above my head, and then he lowers the eyeballs to my eye level, and as the singing gets strong, he puts the eyeballs into my sockets, and they stay there and I heal. And then when the women stop singing and separate out, he removes the eyeballs, puts them back in the cloth bag, and takes them up to heaven. [Katz, p. 287-88]

Having carried on dialogues with the *//Gauwa* and *//gauwa-si*, a trancer can recall the journey that led him to their presences:

When you go to him you climb a thread. You climb a long thread. First you have entered the sand. Up ahead there you emerge again. When you emerge, you begin to climb the thread. And when you arrive at God's place, you make yourself small. You come in small to God's place. [Description of *Gauwa's* camp: flies boil in a pot there, animals assemble there. *//Gauwa* is a big man with long hair, a horse, a gun, and big boots.] You do what you have to do there. Then you return to where everyone is . . . and come and you finally enter your body again. All the people . . . who have stayed behind waiting for you, they fear you. Friend, they are afraid of you. You enter, enter, enter the earth, and then you return to enter your skin. [Marshall & Bieseke, p. 5-6]

In his article on the Bushman trance, Richard B. Lee designates five stages of transcendence during the dance ceremony: I-Working up *Chaxni Chi* ("dance and song"), II-Entering a trance *n/um n/i n!uma* ("causing medicine to boil"), III-Half-death *Kwi!!* ("Like dead"), IV-Active curing *n/um* ("medicine"), and V-Return to a normal state. Of this last phase, he writes:

The active curing phase lasts about an hour, after which the trance performer usually lies down and falls asleep. It is common for medicine men to have two trance episodes per night, one about midnight and the other just after dawn. The dance continues all night, reaching a peak intensity between midnight and 2:00 a.m. when the maximum number of medicine are in trance. It slackens off in the predawn hours and then builds up to full strength again at sunrise with a renewed round of trances. The dance continues until midmorning and usually terminates by 10:00 or 11:00 a.m. . . . Although there are always ten to thirty people actively participating in the dance, individuals are constantly entering and leaving the circle in four- to six-hour shifts. [Lee, p. 33]

Lee sums up the trance phenomenon of the Bushmen as:

a culturally stereotyped set of behaviors that induces an altered state of consciousness by means of autosuggestion, rhythmic dancing, intense concentration, and hyperventilation. These exertions produce symptoms of dizziness, spatial disorientation, hallucinations, and muscular spasms. The Bushmen were never observed to use any drug or other external chemical means of inducing these states. [However, Katz indicates that an indigenous drug is available to a member if he is too fearful and having trouble entering *!kia*. the drug is regulated by the master supervising his student.] The social functions of the trancers are to cure the sick, influence the supernatural, and provide mystical protection for all members of the group. [Lee, p. 33]

!Kia, and its setting within *n/um tchai*, serves as the *!Kung's* primary expression of a religious existence and a cosmological perspective. Encouraged and prepared in the socialization process, the trancer recognizes the territory of the unknown (fear). He can cross the threshold painfully yet triumphantly, and return to his familiar world. The *!Kung* education for *!kia* is effective because of its cultural context and integration. Transcendence is brought into ordinary life surrounded by its support system, and ordinary life into transcendence. Katz proposes that this factor allows for personal growth to occur rather than personal detachment. Further, he explains: "When transcendence is pursued in isolation of any cultural supports, if it is experienced, it quickly dissipates, with very little effect on a person's daily behavior. Transcendence needs to be educated toward growth." [Katz, p. 301] And isn't growth what gives life its excitement, frustration, and *raison d'être* whether in the desert or in a more favorable climate?

Anita F. Newman is a Graduate student in Dance, with a choreography specialization, in the UCLA Dance Dept.

This paper was originally prepared for Dance Cultures of the World: Africa 140A, 1979.

Sources Documented and Consulted

Bjerre, Jens. *Kalahari*. Trans. Estrid Bannister. London: Michael Joseph. 1960.

Bourguignon, Erika. "Trance Dance." *Dance Perspectives* 35. Autumn, 1968

- . Ed. *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1973.
- England, Nicholas M. "Dance and the Supernatural Among the Bushmen of Southern Africa." Paper presented African Studies Association Conference. Bloomington, Indiana. Oct. 27, 1966.
- Katz, Richard. "Education for Transcendence: !Kia-Healing with the Kalahari !Kung." *Kalahari Hunter-Gathers, Studies of the !Kung San and Their Neighbors*. Ed. Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1976.
- Lee, Richard B. "Trance Cure of the !Kung Bushmen." *Natural History*, Nov. p. 30-37, 1967.
- Marshall, Lorna, and Megan Biese. *N/um !Tchai: The Ceremonial Dance of the !Kung Bushmen, A Study Guide*. Documentary Educational Resources Inc. Mass. 1974
- Schapera, I. *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa, Bushmen and Hottentots*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1965.
- Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall. *The Harmless People*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House. 1959.
- Van der Post, Laurens. *The Heart of the Hunter*. England: Penguin Books. 1976.
- . *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. England: Penguin Books. 1975.

