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I have changed the *JSR* endnotes to footnotes. I have inserted page numbers of the *JSR* article in bold between square brackets below. I have made many minor changes in the text as well as in the footnotes. E.g. footnotes 10, 35, 85, 99 and 142 have been added. The other footnotes therefore have higher numbers now. Footnotes 20 to 39, here 21-34 and 36-40, are missing at *JSR* 19, 1&2: 42. They are included in this version.

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THE RULE & ITS EXCEPTIONS: SPIRIT POSSESSION IN TWO AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The label ‘spirit possession’¹ covers a huge variety of trance behaviour² and belief complexes, from shamanism in Arctic societies to channelling in space-age religions. For teaching as well as research purposes, it invites the development of a general type for establishing the mean to which the generality of spirit possession behaviour and belief conforms. The main thrust of this article is that such a scholarly category – although by itself useful and legitimate – should not be used in limiting ways. We should study not only the rule, but also the exceptions to that rule, because they will keep us as close to the raw data of human religious history as our categories will permit. Our scholarly constructs should serve purely as revisable instruments of analysis. If we use them as limiting definitions, we impose bland simplifications on very complex cultural institutions. We often grasp them much better true to life intuitively by the diffuse prototypical concepts of ordinary language.³ To demonstrate this point, I will analyse two spirit possession rituals in two African traditional societies, and show the importance of deviations from the rule.

My article has four parts. Firstly, I will explain the rule; that is, what spirit possession, generally speaking, is thought to be; in which religions it is found; how it has been studied; and which theories have been developed to better understand and explain certain aspects of it. In parts two and three, I will analyse two spirit possession rituals as

[40] ¹ I am grateful to my colleagues, Dr. Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, University of Virginia, and Dr. Gerrie ter Haar, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, for their incisive comments on this article, which greatly assisted me in clarifying my argument, and I especially thank Mrs. Sylvia Dierks-Mallet for improving so well my English.

² For spirit possession behaviour outside the context of religious ritual, cf. below on ‘latent possession’

³ On diffuse prototypical concepts *versus* the scholarly-clarified and bounded ones of types, definitions and other *etic* constructs in the study of religions, cf. Saler 1993: 197-208; Platvoet 1999c: 463-464n4, *passim*

they were practised in two very different African traditional religions, in regions far apart on the continent of Africa, with vastly different ecologies, economies, demography and social structures, and with cultures that were very unlike.

In part two, I first present the context – geographical, historical, social, and especially religious –, of the first subject of study, the Ju/'hoan curing dances. Then I investigate these dances as they were practised in the Kalahari semi-desert in Southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. I follow the same order in part three for my second subject of study – the spirit possession event, in which 'Captain' Rattray, Government Anthropologist of the Gold Coast Crown Colony (now Ghana), took part on 5 May 1922 [6] at Tanoboase, a village just above the forested region of West Africa. In part four, I compare these two spirit possession rituals and indicate in which important respects they differ from each other and deviate from the general rule. I also discuss to what extent theories of spirit possession enable us to understand these rituals better. In the conclusion, I emphasise that certain concepts basic to Western religion and much used in the Science of Religions, are misleading in the study of African traditional religions.

Spirit possession

What is it?

Spirit possession is the standard label used by anthropologists and scholars of religions to denote rituals, in which one, or some, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which they, as believers, interpret as signifying that one, or some, of them have been possessed by a spirit or spirits. Persons displaying such behaviour are referred to as mediums, because it is believed that their bodies and minds serve as vehicles for the manifestation of unseen persons: for the faithful, they embody a spiritual being during the ritual. Believers will, therefore, experience these rituals as face-to-face encounters with spirits manifesting themselves in physical form among them. In ancient Greece, a medium was termed a *prophetès*, the 'mouthpiece' of a god, and the message received through the mouth of a possessed person was called an *oraculum* – from *orare*, 'to speak' – in Latin.

This article is limited to the discussion of spirit possession as manifested in rituals. The belief in spirit possession, however, may also cover what scholars refer to as 'latent possession' – the condition of a person presumed to be possessed, outside, or prior to, its explicit manifestation in ritual behaviour. 'Latent possession' is a condition that takes two main forms. One is the culturally coded form of 'odd' or 'deviant' behaviour, especially of being afflicted with brooding moods and/or illnesses which often precedes the first full manifestation of 'possession' in a ritual. Such behaviour allows a community to diagnose, or better prognosticate, 'possession long before an actual state of trance has been reached'.⁴ It is usually, in fact, the first intimation to a community that

⁴ Lewis 1989: 39

someone is about to embark on a career as a medium.⁵ The other form is not manifested in any behaviour but consists merely in the belief, or suspicion, of a believer that he himself, or she herself, is possessed by an evil spirit. As such, it serves as an alternative to the belief of being bewitched and serves for explaining untoward events.⁶ It allows a person to blame failures, or evil, on an evil spirit within himself, or herself, rather than on the supposed witchcraft of a fellow human being or the postulated activity of a (non-possessing) ancestor, god, or other 'good spirit'.

The term 'spirit possession' is in one respect a happy term, in that it readily calls to mind its primary element in nearly all religions - the belief that spirits [7] take possession of humans on certain non-ritual occasions and in particular in specific ritual settings.⁷ Spirit possession is, therefore, primarily what anthropologists call an *emic* term: it expresses the meaning which the faithful themselves attach to what they believe actually takes place in the postulated condition of someone being manifestly, or latently, possessed by a spirit. Spirit possession, therefore, is a religious, or theological, term. People who believe in spirit possession regard certain invisible beings, realms, actions and/or qualities as real, and assume that they are, or may be, active in the empirical world of humans in several ways, one of them being spirit possession. They conceive of spirits as belonging to both a meta-empirical realm, which we can neither observe nor investigate with scientific tools, and to be active in the empirical realm of human beings, but then again in ways which we cannot, despite claims to the contrary, empirically observe and research. In that respect, their faith is basically similar to that of, e.g., Christian believers who trust in the effects of the grace of God and the intercession of a saint in their lives, and the effectiveness of sacraments, and profess that mortal humans have an immortal soul.

The study of religions is, however, a scholarly enterprise, and is limited to what science can investigate. It can study only the empirical part of spirit possession rituals, i.e. those elements that are part of the history of human cultures in a verifiable, or testable, way. Scholars of religions have no means of investigating the presumed meta-empirical part – if any – of spirit possession or of any other religious ritual or belief. They cannot confirm, or deny, that spirits do actually exist, take possession of their mediums, and heal, or perform other work in the empirical realm. Not being able, on the grounds of the methodology of scientific research, to either prove or disprove the claims of believers in respect of spirits and their activities, scholars of religions can neither support them as true, nor reject them as false.⁸ Scholars can only take an agnostic position in respect of the truth, or falsehood, of the beliefs of the faithful.⁹ They must, therefore,

[41] ⁵ Cf. Lewis 1989: 40, 59-89

⁶ Cf. Ter Haar 1992: 105-108

⁷ Cf. Lewis 1989: 57

⁸ Cf. Platvoet (1990: 192-197; 1994; 1999b: 262-263) on non-verifiability/non-falsifiability as the *definiens* (defining trait) of an operational definition of 'religion' from which useful analytical instruments may be derived for studying religious rituals as processes of (postulated) communication between believers and postulated unseen beings

⁹ On 'methodological agnosticism' as a paradigm in the academic study of religions, cf. Van Baaren 1973: 48; Platvoet 1982: 16, 1990: 183-187, 1998: 341-349, 1999b: 246; Clarke & Byrne 1993: 50-52, 68

confine themselves to investigating what is empirical about these beliefs and rituals, i.e. to those elements and aspects of them that belong squarely to our own world and are part of its empirical cultural and historical realities. They need, therefore, to replace, or at least to supplement, spirit possession with another term, or set of terms, which clearly define what can be investigated in them.

The most empirical element of spirit possession is, obviously, spirit possession behaviour, particularly in its ritual, 'manifest'¹⁰ form. This is especially so because spirit possession rituals are always performed in public, as the spirit believed to possess a medium is in need of an audience which it/he/she can address, whether verbally or by any other means of conveying messages. Possession rituals can, therefore, be witnessed and recorded, and their significance for the believers can be discussed with them. It is in these public rituals that spirit possession beliefs are acted out. Beliefs are notions in the heads of the believers [8] and as such invisible. Their invisibility is, however, of the mental kind of human cultural constructs, in this case about the 'unseen', and not of the 'spiritual', meta-empirical kind of the beings and realms postulated by religions. Beliefs are, therefore, part and parcel of empirical human cultures, and are expressed, like any other social notions, in behaviour, verbal and other, and in writing (in literate societies), and in other material ways, such as dress, ornaments, organised space (e.g. buildings), organised time (e.g. calendars), etc. In addition, beliefs function as the institution by which spirit possession behaviour – of the mediums themselves as well as other participants in a ritual – is governed, moulded and constrained.¹¹ The spirit possession beliefs of the faithful determine which behaviour is appropriate for each of the participants. They model and constrain the different roles, which the participants have to play in a spirit possession ritual, and prohibit and prevent 'deviant' acts. Spirit possession beliefs can, therefore, be studied as a religious institution.

In addition, scholars can investigate how spirit possession rituals and beliefs were moulded by the cultures of the societies that believe(d) in spirit possession. In like manner, they can also study the many functions of spirit possession in such societies and in the lives of the believers.

As will become clear from the data presented below, spirit possession rituals may be defined, provisionally, as the public rituals in which at least one participant publicly enters into a trance, i.e. into a specific form of altered state of consciousness (ASC).¹² That special state of mind and body is usually marked by four features. Firstly, the person who has entered into a ritual trance is dissociated, to a greater or lesser degree, from his or her social environment. Secondly, that person often exhibits a certain loss of muscle and motor control – ranging from very minor, hardly perceptible twitchings to uncontrolled spasms not unlike epileptic fits. In certain kinds of theatrical spirit possession in

¹⁰ 'Manifest' may be taken here in two senses: the empirical one of the observer of ritual behaviour manifesting the trance of the medium; and the theological one of the believers of ritual trance behaviour manifesting the presence of a spirit among them. I have added quotation marks because of the second meaning.

¹¹ Cf. also Platvoet (1990: 187-188) on the wider, but analytically identical case of 'religion' as an institution governing ritual behaviour

¹² On the many different kinds of ASCs, cf. Ludwig 1967, 1968, 1972a, 1972b; Holm 1982a: 9

particular, and in the early phase of a spirit possession career, the medium may be in the state of considerable bodily agitation that is known as *hyperkinesia*. Thirdly, in that state, he or she acts out a character and role markedly different from those of his or her normal social self in ordinary life. Lastly, the possessed person often does not remember what he or she has said or done during the period of ritual dissociation. That loss of memory is termed *amnesia*.¹³

In the eyes of the believers, the medium manifests the spirit he, or she, is acting out in the trance behaviour displayed. During the ritual he, or she, actually *is* that spirit for the believers by virtue of his or her acting out, in this state of dissociation, the personality of a spirit in the idiom proper to that spirit, an idiom quite different from that of the medium's usual self.¹⁴ The participants infer from the medium's behaviour which particular spirit is present among them and converses with them. The medium displays numerous clues in his or her facial expressions, voice, speech, body language, attire, and actions during the period of the trance. Reading these signs, believers identify which spirit they believe is present among them in the body and mind of the medium, why it has 'come', how to 'converse' with it, and [9] how its wishes or demands are to be met. These clues are traditional in a society, and believers readily recognise and interpret them.¹⁵

The possessed person, therefore, displays coded behaviour. However wild and uncontrolled the behaviour of the possessed may seem to observers, mediums always display the idiomatic behaviour which their culture prescribes for their specific role in the possession ritual. Not only believers, but observers too, can verify that the possessed person displays a personality other than his or her own. From the way the believers respond to the medium during the possession trance, an outsider can also establish that the faithful interpret the actions of a medium as the behaviour of the possessing spirit. The behaviour of the believers towards the possessed medium is clearly different from the one they direct towards him or her outside the ritual, when the medium is no longer possessed and has returned to his or her own normal social self.

Four elements have now been identified which can all be empirically investigated. They are, firstly, the public character of spirit possession rituals; secondly, the hyperkinetic aspect of the medium's trance behaviour; thirdly, the coded behaviour displayed by the possessed person from which the other participants infer that such and such a spirit is now among them; and fourthly, the beliefs of a society that spirits take possession of humans, as expressed in the coded behaviour of believers towards a possessed medium during a spirit possession ritual. In short, in empirical terms, spirit possession may be defined as the public religious ritual in which the trance behaviour of a medium is taken to signify that a meta-empirical being is present among believers and interacts with them.

¹³ Cf. also Lewis 1989: 35-43; Holm 1982a: 8, 15; Bourguignon 1976: 7-8

¹⁴ Cf. Crapanzano 1977: 9-12

¹⁵ Cf. Crapanzano (1977: 7) defining spirit possession as 'any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit'

The task of scholars of religions investigating the empirical elements of spirit possession may now be summarised as follows. It consists in accurately describing, firstly, the public ritual actions which believers perform as an expression of their beliefs in spirit possession; and secondly, the meanings which spirit possession rituals have for those who believe in them – without pronouncing on either their truth or falsehood. Thirdly, it consists of showing how spirit possession beliefs function as an institution by assigning specific roles to specific believers, as well as governing, moulding and constraining the role behaviour of each of them. Fourthly, it studies how a spirit possession event affects the state of mind and behaviour of the possessed person(s) during the ritual. Fifthly, it researches how the culture of the participants (which includes their religion) has shaped these beliefs and rituals. And finally, it investigates how they affect the relationships between the members of these societies.

Where may it be found?

Spirit possession, defined in this way, has been found in virtually all religions of humankind, from those of foraging bands in Palaeolithic times to those of today's modern metropolis.¹⁶ Apart from the (more or less) common core set out above, the forms and, to a lesser degree, beliefs of spirit possession display a [10] diversity of forms and types as amazing as that of the religions of humankind as a whole. We have special labels for the most important varieties of spirit possession. Some are 'shamanism' – Arctic, Siberian and other –, 'mantic oracles' and 'dansomaniac cults' in Mediterranean religions, and 'prophetic movements', in addition to *jinn*, *zar*, *bori*, *sheitani*, *pepo* and numerous other cults in Africa. Others are the 'exorcist rituals' whereby 'evil' gods, demons, devils and (unbelieving) *jinn*¹⁷ are believed to be expelled from their 'victims', as well as some forms of 'ritual healing'. Again others are 'spiritism' and 'spiritualism'; 'glossolalia' in the Pentecostal and charismatic varieties of Christianity; and 'channelling' in New Age religions.¹⁸

No less varied are its functions. Apart from their obvious religious and cosmological purposes, they may also be shown to serve important psycho-hygienic, therapeutic, socio-structural, political, economical, and other functions.

¹⁶ Cf. also Bourguignon 1973a

¹⁷ Possession by *jinn* is a complex matter because of their ambiguous position in Islam. The Koran mentions them in several places. It views them as created by god from smokeless fire (*sura* 15: 27; 55: 15) and to constitute a category between angels (created from light) and humans (created from clay). It also associates them with *as-sjaitaan*, 'satans' (*sura* 6: 112) and with Iblies (*sura* 18: 50). Some *jinn* are said to have heeded the messengers Allah sent to them (*sura* 46: 29-31; 51: 56; 72: 1-14); others to have refused to submit (*sura* 6: 128-130; 72: 7, 14). The latter will be condemned to hell (*sura* 6:128; 7: 38, 179; 11: 119; 32: 13; 34: 12; 72: 15, 17) for that reason, but also because they beguiled men into believing in them as Allah's kin (*sura* 37: 158) and his 'associates' (*sura* 6: 100; 34: 41; 38: 158; 72: 2-5); and because they opposed god's messengers actively (*sura* 6: 112; 27: 10). They know they will be punished (*sura* 37: 158). They inspired poets and mantic seers, and took possession of men, even in the mosque in which Mohammed prayed (*sura* 26: 224; 72: 10, 18-19). Because of the conceptual links between (unbelieving) *jinn*, *as-sjaitaan*, and spirit possession, some varieties of the widespread *zar*, or *jinn*, spirit possession cults in East Africa are called *sheitan* cults, e.g. among the Giriama of Kenya (Lewis 1986: 98).

¹⁸ Many of these are surveyed in Lewis 1989. On glossolalia, see Goodman 1972, Samarín 1972, Malony, Newton & Lovekin 1985, Holm 1982:19-22; for 'channelling', see MacLaine 1984: 143-213

The place accorded to spirit possession in religions varies greatly. Spirit possession has a prominent, and often a central, position in what I term the 'non-doctrinal community religions' of small-scale preliterate societies,¹⁹ as is clear from the two cases analysed below. Spirit possession is practised frequently in them, and is regarded as a normal and approved way of communication with the unseen. It usually provides those who opt to be the vehicle of a spirit with an interesting career, income, influence, or other kinds of satisfaction. Spirit possession has a central place in these religions because (they believe) they habitually practise ongoing communication with the world of the spirits. Their believers feel they are in constant need of pragmatic revelations from the unseen. They believe they need to be in continuous touch with the a-empirical, both as a means of improving the quality of their lives in the here-and-now, and for warding off disease, disaster, dissent, death and other evils. They believe they maintain, so to speak, an open channel with the meta-empirical in spirit possession and other 'revelatory' rituals, such as divination, in order to ensure a constant utilitarian 'communication flow' from the unseen towards them. In addition, spirit possession is a ritual of inclusion in these religions: unseen beings are thereby 'incorporated' into human societies.

Spirit possession has a central place in these religions for another reason: they are intimately tied to their societies' political order, public morality, social structure, gender relations, medical therapy, and other aspects. Spirit possession cults according to Lewis, may be divided into categories of both the 'central' and 'peripheral possession' types, the first serving to maintain the existing political and socio-structural order, and the latter expressing the plight and promoting the aspirations of the less privileged in its margins.²⁰

The 'trans-national doctrinal religions of the first axial age' - Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam²¹ - however, are generally speaking, hostile to spirit possession. Viewing it as credulous superstition, these religions have a long history of attempting to relegate spirit possession to a marginal place, if not to eradicate it altogether, for three reasons. The first is that spirit possession consists of [11] processes of ongoing revelation of the pragmatic kind. As such, they cannot be reconciled with the complete, unique, once-and-forever valid revelations accredited by the trans-national religions to their 'canonical' scriptures. They credit these revelations with absolute authority and found their exclusivist soteriologies on them.²² These canonised revelations, moreover, are directed to a purely spiritual, i.e. non-material, transcendent kind of salvation beyond this life, rather than to pragmatic well-being within this life. Spirit possession is suppressed by these religions both as a competing source of revelation, and as a threat to the absolute authority they claim for their own revelation.²³

The second reason is that these religions regard spirit possession as the superstition of ignorant folk-believers. They attempt to banish it from their congregations by repre-

¹⁹ Cf. Platvoet 1998: 109-115; 1999c: 488-492

²⁰ See below; cf. also Lewis 1989; Holm 1982: 14-15

²¹ Cf. Platvoet 1998: 115-118; 1999c: 492-496

²² Cf. Platvoet 1998b: 94-95, 102-105, 115-118

senting spirit possession in terms of an absolute, moral and cosmological dualism, as if evil spirits, gods, demons and devils captured their believers against their will and in order to seek their eternal perdition. It is presented, therefore, as an unmitigated evil that can be overcome only by conquering the demons and driving them out of their 'victims'. Having thus been doctrinally demonised, spirit possession mostly takes the form of ritual exorcisms in these religions- rituals of exclusion, for casting out the evil spirit, devil, or (unbelieving) *jinn*, etc., not only from the possessed person, but also from the community of believers.

The third reason is that possession by the devil (etc.) is regarded as radically different from, and squarely opposed to, the rituals of dissociation of which these religions do approve. They are, in Buddhism, the disciplining of the mind in meditation, through which enlightenment is sought. In Islam, they are the ecstatic rituals for experiencing (personal or collective) mystic unification with god, such as in Sufi *zikr* rituals and the dances of the dervishes. And in Christianity, they are the speaking in tongues (glossolalia), and other ecstatic experiences in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in mainly first century and twentieth century Christianity.

Though *zikr* and glossolalia may *etically* (by scholars of religions) be classified as rituals of what Lewis called the 'central spirit possession' type, spirit possession as a whole has a markedly marginal position in these religions, for two reasons. One is that the peripheral spirit possession cults referred to by Lewis²⁴ are much more numerous in these religions, but are doctrinally marginalised by them through demonisation and other means of repression. The other is that the spirit possession rituals of the central type are relatively few, have been allowed only a marginal position at the centres of dogmatic authority and/or religious learning of these religions, and are also viewed with much suspicion as being potentially subversive of the established order.

Finally, through this demonising of spirit possession by Christianity, the general public and scholars in modern Western societies with little knowledge of indigenous societies and religions have generally regarded spirit possession as [12] weird, occult, strange, primitive, repulsive and pathological. Western intellectuals have habitually viewed spirit possession as indicative of mental instability and insanity, and explained it in terms of psychopathology. Western psychiatrists and psychologists especially, have a long tradition of regarding it as a symptom of the nervous disorder of hysteria, because mainly women were found to 'suffer' from it in the Europe of the nineteenth century. More recently, they regard it as evidence of mental instability, and as a folk-means to cure, or forestall, mental illness.²⁵

²³ Cf. Lewis 1989: 29

²⁴ Cf. below on Lewis's central-peripheral spirit possession typology

²⁵ Cf. Lewis 1989: 30, 35, 161-170; Prince 1977: XII; Crapanzano 1977: 1-7, 12-14; Holm 1982a: 10, 12-13, 19, 22-23; cf. also note 24

How may it be studied?

Spirit possession may be studied in numerous ways, most of which are complementary, each yielding some insight into this complex phenomenon. An example of the pathological approach is Walker's psychiatric theory that spirit possession rituals mainly serve to provide mediums with an opportunity for 'regression in the service of the ego'. Walker states that during the rituals, mediums relinquish control to a sub-system of their minds which hallucinates and recalls 'repressed material'. Mediums, she says, derive from it the representations of the possessing spirit, as well as from the clues on how to act its role. By thus using 'the [fictive] gods' as objects of transference for past traumas, mediums could gain greater control over their unstable minds and restore their mental health, or manage to maintain them in a precarious balance.²⁶

Other theories have been developed in the past few decades to account for certain aspects of spirit possession. As social scientists, anthropologists have primarily studied spirit possession in the context of the ritual interaction between the medium and the other participants in possession rituals, by means of which religious as well as important other social, economical, political and other processes are transacted. An important example of this approach is the theory developed by the British social anthropologist I.M. Lewis, who distinguishes between central and peripheral types of spirit possession.²⁷ The former serves, he suggests, to legitimise and maintain the existing public order of a society. The peripheral type serves rather as the ineffective means by which some of those situated in the periphery of a society in terms of prestige, privileges and pay, (i.e. the poor and women), try to shift the uneven balance of power and possessions a little in their own favour. As such, they are cults of protest and religions of the deprived.²⁸ This type is found in far greater numbers in all societies than is central spirit possession, and flourishes likewise in the major missionary religions of Buddhism,²⁹ Christianity³⁰ and Islam.³¹ Lewis argues that even central possession cults are, in a way, marked by peripherality. They are found especially in societies or religions exposed to acute external pressures (e.g. an extreme ecology), and, as a result, face internal instability.³²

Mary Douglas disagreed with this emphasis on deprivation in the Lewis theory of peripheral spirit possession, and of constituting religions of the oppressed.³³ Instead of Lewis's functionalist explanation,³⁴ Douglas proposes a socio-structural theory of spirit possession. In her view, spirit possession is a type of [13] uncontrolled and unconstrained, emotional religious behaviour that is intimately tied to societies or groups which are

²⁶ Walker 1972: 33-39, 154

²⁷ Cf. Lewis 1989: 26-30, *passim*

²⁸ Lewis 1989: 59-116; also Lewis 1986: 23-50. On Lewis, cf. Morris 1987: 231-233

²⁹ Cf. e.g. Kapferer 1991

³⁰ E.g. Goodman 1981, 1988: 52-63, 79-122

³¹ Cf. references in Lewis 1986, 1989 to *jinn*, *zar*, and *bori* cults

³² Lewis 1989: 29-30

³³ Douglas 1970: 116-117; 1982: 83-84

³⁴ Cf. Morris 1987: 231-233

hardly constrained by 'grid' and 'group'.³⁵ The first refers to the internal structure of a group, and more specifically to the degree to which social hierarchy prevails in it; and the second refers to the experience of group boundaries - of inclusion in one group, and exclusion from others.³⁶ Douglas suggests that the more weakly a society is structured by grid and group, the more approved and welcome trance will be, because in trance (as dissociation of the mind and diminished control of the body) the inarticulateness of the social organisation gains symbolic expression.³⁷

Spirit possession usually takes the form of dramatic, expressive rituals with a great deal of role acting by the possessed and, in response, by the congregation. They may also be interpreted, therefore, as discourses in which the identities, statuses, duties and aspirations of certain persons, or groups of persons in a society are expressed, maintained, developed or reconstructed, especially those of the inner selves of the persons possessed. Spirit possession discourses make full use of the rich symbolic means which the spirit possession idiom offers for these purposes. Viewed from this analytical perspective, spirit possession functions as a means by which the possessed and the other participants can re-imagine themselves. It presents an institutionalised opportunity for mediums to act out problems, to comment, in often provocative ways, on issues they would not, or could not, comment on in their ordinary lives, and to voice demands their normal social selves would not, or could not, express. In brief, spirit possession serves for both the possessed and the congregation as a means of achieving a degree of pre-theoretic awareness of their particular situation – usually a stressful, subordinate one – in their societies. Acting it out by means of spirit possession drama, symbol and story, they reformulate it in terms of its metaphors. Janice Boddy has presented such a discourse analysis of a *zar* possession cult group of women in a village in Northern Sudan.³⁸

As spirit possession rituals are often performed in the belief that they cure diseases, or provide protection against the 'spiritual' agents believed to cause diseases and other misfortunes, the therapeutic function of spirit possession rituals may also be given special attention.³⁹

The most distinctive part of spirit possession, however, is the trance into which the medium enters in order to serve as the vehicle and mouthpiece of some (postulated) intelligent being from a realm other than the empirical one. The psychological and cultural mechanisms by which that altered state of consciousness may be achieved, and the marks of that state itself, demand neuro-biological and psychological analysis and inter-

³⁵ Douglas defined 'group' and 'grid' as the two independent variables by which personal relationships in a society are structured, causing societies to vary from the loosest possible, very open bands with personalised roles to tightly knit, closed groups imposing group-focussed roles upon their members. In communities with a strong grid, roles are allocated on principles of sex and seniority, and the flow of behaviour is controlled by a group organisation marked by a hierarchy of command. In groups with a weak grid, roles are ego-centred and allocated by delegation of responsibility (Douglas 1982: 57-60). Douglas, however, is not consistent in her definition of 'group' and 'grid'. For her three versions of it, cf. Spickard 1989; 1991: 144-146; and Douglas 1989

³⁶ Douglas 1982: 84

³⁷ Douglas 1970: 104; 1982: 74

³⁸ Boddy 1989

pretation. Studies of this crucial aspect of spirit possession are, however, very few as yet. The neurobiology and psychology of ASCs (altered states of consciousness) and trance have been dealt with mainly by Ludwig and Lex.⁴⁰

Lastly, it is also possible to analyse spirit possession rituals as processes of [14] presumed communication between humans and postulated unseen beings, in that the faithful believe that the latter make contact with them by taking possession of one, or several, of them. It is believed that they thereby become present in bodily form among humans, and enter into a dialogue with them. In order to analyse spirit possession rituals as communication events, I have developed three complementary analytical tools, which I term network analysis, process analysis and context analysis.⁴¹ I discuss them briefly.

As with empirical communication between humans,⁴² the postulated communication between believers and possessing spirits cannot take place in a social void. It presupposes an imagined community of believers and unseen beings, and some of the latter as actually taking possession of some of the former, i.e. a presumed network of pre-existing relationships between the believers and the 'spirits'. That imagined network serves both as the field, or arena, in which the actual ritual communication events take place, and as the institution by which that communication is governed and constrained. Network analysis lays bare the system of relations deemed prevailing between the participants, seen and unseen, in the spirit possession ritual studied, for the purpose of understanding how that system moulds the presumed communication transacted in that ritual. It looks at the statuses and roles of the participants in the ritual; at whether or not they received training for their role; at the culturally-enjoined distance between the participants, and at the symbols by which the hierarchy prevailing between them is expressed.

Network analysis is followed by process-analysis, which investigates an actual (postulated) communication event as conducted between the spirit (believed to be embodied in a medium) and the other participants in a particular spirit possession ritual. Several aspects of it are studied. Who, for instance, took the initiative for the ritual? For what reason? At what time and place did the ritual take place, and why there and why then? What messages were exchanged? By which symbolic means were they conveyed? How was the communication event ordered, i.e., by means of what opening, closing and other phases?

To these two analyses must be added the relevant context analyses, in which the various settings of a spirit possession ritual are examined, insofar as they are relevant for understanding and explaining that ritual. One of these is the wider religion of a given society. Others are its ecology, history, culture, political order, social structure, economy, etc. The purpose of context analysis is twofold: firstly, to investigate how that ritual has been shaped by these settings; and secondly, to discover which functions it has in them. In this study, the contexts of the Ju/'hoan and Bono societies and religions have

³⁹ Cf. e.g. Ter Haar 1992

⁴⁰ Cf. Ludwig 1967, 1968, 1972a, 1972b; Lex 1976, 1978, 1979

⁴¹ On these instruments of analysis, cf. Platvoet 1982: 29-34, 84-200; 1983; 1995: 39; 1999b: 262-263

been presented. The naturalness of the exceptions to the rule, which I discuss below, will transpire from the ways these spirit possession events are embedded in their own rich ethnographic, historical, religious, and other contexts.

Finally, to the network analysis, process analysis and context analysis, must [15] be added an analysis of the trance of the possessed. That is, by which means it was induced; how 'deep' it was; was there any evidence of hyperkinesia and/or amnesia; how did the relationship between the possessing spirit and its medium begin; with what status did it endow the medium in his, or her community; which benefits or suffering did it bring to the medium; which other ends did it serve; etc.?

As is clear from the above, spirit possession is a very complex phenomenon that needs to be studied from the viewpoints of quite a number of different disciplines.

Ju'hoan Society, Religion and Curing Dances

Ju'hoan society

The Ju'hoansi are a San or Bushman society in the Kalahari semi-desert in the modern states of Botswana and Namibia in Southern Africa. The San are special for at least three reasons.⁴³

The first is that they have lived in Southern Africa below the river Zambezi for at least 11.000, and probably for over 55.000 years. As food-gatherers and hunters, they roamed their land in tiny bands, often using one of the many caves in the area as their shelter. Some of them continued (until recently) to practise the life style, economy, society, and religion common to all human societies throughout the world until 10.000 BP ('before present').⁴⁴ The San were the only inhabitants of Southern Africa until some 3.000 years ago, when the earliest Khoi-Khoi and Bantu cattle-keeping nomads – the latter also practising some agriculture – began to cross the Zambesi. It is estimated that by 1656, when the Boers began to settle in the Cape region, the San numbered between 150.000 and 300.000 in the whole of Southern Africa.

By 1960, their number had dwindled to 45.000, and they were found only in the Kalahari region. They had disappeared from the other parts of Southern Africa, in part as a result of intermarriage, but largely by being hunted down and exterminated as cattle rustlers by white settlers.⁴⁵ Of the 45.000 living in and around the Kalahari around 1960, all but 2.500 had exchanged the traditional, mainly nomadic foraging way of life for a predominantly sedentary existence, as cattle hands and servants on white and Bantu farms, where they lived in great poverty as a despised proletariat.

⁴² The same holds for communication between humans and their domestic animals, and between all animals living in groups structured by social relationships.

⁴³ On the San, cf. Barnard 1992, Lee & DeVore 1976, Shapera 1930

⁴⁴ At that time, increase of demographic pressure caused some societies in the Near East to gradually complement foraging with very limited forms of food production (the 'neolithic revolution').

⁴⁵ For further details, cf. Platvoet 1999a: 11-17 and the literature cited there

The few, who maintained their traditional foraging life-style in the relative isolation in the Kalahari, were studied extensively by anthropologists between 1950 and 1975.⁴⁶ The data on Ju/'hoan society, religion and spirit possession, presented in this section, are taken from that research.

The second reason for which the San are special is their physique. San have short bodies, males being on average 1.60m tall and 49kg in weight, and females 1.50m and 41 kg respectively. This slender build enabled the San hunter to track [16] game for long distances after he had wounded it with his poisoned arrow. The skin of the San is yellow. Their youthful, heart-shaped faces are small and flat, and they have high cheekbones. Their hair is implanted in small 'islands'.⁴⁷

The third reason is that the San of the past were great artists. Indeed, they have left us, all over Southern Africa, with many thousands of rock paintings (and fewer rock engravings), especially in the caves in which they often lived, as also on rock faces. The most recent rock paintings have been dated to the middle, or even the late, nineteenth century, whilst the oldest, so far, go back some 26.000 years. The majority range from a few hundred to a few thousand years old, and they represent the longest continuous art history known to humans. They depict animals - elands especially - in delicate polychromes and with great sophistication, as also amazingly detailed scenes of San social and religious life. Humans are often depicted in elongated shapes, flying or swimming under water, or as theriomorphic figures combining human and animal features.

These rock paintings mystified archaeologists for a long time, but their riddle has now been solved by the combination of Bleek's late nineteenth century research into San mythology⁴⁸ with anthropological studies of San religion from the 1950s onwards. It is now accepted that many of these rock paintings, especially those with elongated, flying, swimming, or theriomorphic humans, depict the experiences of San trance dancers during the curing dances, the San version of spirit possession.⁴⁹

The Ju/'hoansi speak the !Kung language, one of the four San languages. They are all four tonal languages, and among the world's most complex from the phonetic point of view, because they each have four extra consonants in the form of dental, palatal, alveolar, and lateral clicks.⁵⁰

In the !Kung language, *Ju/'hoansi* means 'ordinary people'. Two groups of Ju/'hoansi - three quarters of which were living primarily as foragers in the Kalahari at the time - were investigated by American anthropologists between 1950 and 1975. One group, numbering some 900 Ju/'hoansi, consisted of bands living in the Nyae Nyae area in Namibia and were studied mainly by Lorna Marshall.⁵¹ The other group was investigated

⁴⁶ Cf. Platvoet 1999a, especially note 73 and *passim*

⁴⁷ For more details and references, cf. Platvoet 1999a: 12

⁴⁸ On Wilhelm Bleek, his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, and Bleek's daughter Dorothea, as recorders of 'Bushman folklore', cf. Lewis-Williams 1990: 35-39

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. Lewis-Williams 1990; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989, 1994; cf. also for further detail and references, Platvoet 1999a: 5-11

⁵⁰ They are written respectively as < / >, < ! >, < ≠ >, and < // >. On San languages, cf. e.g. Lee 1979: 33-36; 1983: 9-10

⁵¹ Cf. Marshall 1957, 1961, 1962, 1969, 1976

by a team of Harvard anthropologists led by Richard B. Lee.⁵² The bands which made up this group roamed the neighbouring Dobe area in Botswana and counted around 500 members.

Ju/'hoan bands consisted of a core of siblings (a few brothers and sisters), their spouses and children, and often a few in-laws and/or friends as well. On average, a band consisted of some 25 members, but might, in exceptional circumstances, have as few as four – e.g. when a family had just left a larger group because of discord – or as many as forty. The siblings were considered to be the owners of one or more permanent water-holes in addition to the territory surrounding them – usually an area some 50 to 70 km².

Bands are better viewed as camps, because the Ju/'hoansi often stayed in one spot for several weeks when there was sufficient food around to sustain it. A [17] camp consisted of a number of windscreens constructed by the women, one for each family unit, with a fire in front of it. The fire was the real social centre of each family, and, according to Ju/'hoan perception, it was the row of fires that constituted the camp. The fires were kept ablaze all night for warmth and to keep wild animals away, and were covered in the daytime.

Fundamental to a camp was the implicit trust that its members would get along well and reach decisions by consensus. Mutual trust was strongly cultivated by the institution of sharing. Ju/'hoansi shared the meat hunted by the men, and often also the food surplus gathered by each woman for her own family's needs. Ju/'hoansi also habitually presented each other also with gifts of tobacco and other articles obtained through their trading networks, and with the implements they manufactured in their ample free time, especially the poisoned arrows with which the men hunted. In wintertime, the 'owners' of an area also shared its water and food with other bands, and often for a considerable period of time (see below). Most importantly, they shared 'healing-power' (*n/um*) and 'healing' in the curing dances, as I will explain below.

As nomads, the Ju/'hoansi had no use for more possessions than they could reasonably carry. They used whatever surplus they had as social capital for maintaining harmonious relationships in the camp, and for creating a climate of goodwill among the members of their own band. By sharing without demanding, or expecting, an equivalent return at short notice, Ju/'hoansi practised a system of generalised – i.e. unbalanced and non-exhaustive – reciprocity, which is the most important principle of social cohesion in foraging societies.⁵³

In the wet and warm season, roughly from October to March,⁵⁴ when there were ponds of water and water fowl everywhere and when other food began to become more plentiful, Ju/'hoansi bands roamed far and wide through their territories. Basking in the easier harmony of a solitary band camp, the practice of the 'curing dance' possession ritual was usually at its lowest ebb, although it would be held at least once a month, at full moon. It would otherwise be performed only when there was a patent reason to hold

⁵² Cf. Lee 1968, 1979, 1983; Katz 1976, 1982

⁵³ Cf. Lee 1979: 117-119, 456-461, *passim*; Platvoet 1999a: 22-23

⁵⁴ On the seasons, as the Ju/'hoansi distinguish them, cf. Lee 1979: 103; 1983: 25-28

one: to celebrate the killing of a large beast of game that had brought a rich supply of meat into the camp, the visit of family or friends, or when someone had fallen ill.

In the dry and cold season, roughly from April to August, several bands congregated by camping at small distances from one of the permanent waterholes. They stayed together for as long as the area provided them with sufficient food to sustain their numbers. It consisted mainly of ample supplies of mongongo, or mangetti, nuts (*Ricidendron rautanenii*, their staple food in wintertime) and other kinds of roots and bulbs. The intensification of social contacts in that period, in which marriages were arranged or young men initiated, occasioned a high tide of curing dances, as also did the increase of tensions, especially when food became scarce.

As 'total' performances, the curing dances always served several purposes [18] simultaneously. They were held both for the joy of singing and dancing together, and for mere recreation. They could also be held to celebrate the company of friends and to fraternise with strangers. They also expressed the complementary domains, functions, and roles of the males and females in Ju/'hoan society; and they served too to prevent, dissipate, or solve tensions and discord. To the Ju/'hoansi themselves, however, their primary purpose, as I will show below, was to cure disease, eliminate dissent, and prevent death and other misfortune.

Two thirds of a family's food supply was vegetarian: i.e. nuts, berries, melons and other wild fruits, plus bulbs, roots and tubers. All these were collected mainly by the women, who were experts at gathering roots, bulbs and tubers with digging sticks. The remaining one third of the diet consisted of the highly prized meat brought in by the small parties of men hunting with bows and poisoned arrows, often with the help of dogs. In normal years, when rain was sufficient and no other major catastrophe such as an epidemic occurred, foraging Ju/'hoansi enjoyed a good life, food being relatively abundant for their tiny bands. As they collected their food with limited effort and in a relatively short time, they also had a good deal of free time at their disposal.

In addition, despite, or precisely because of, clear separations between male and female domains, San bands were among the most egalitarian societies that humankind has ever known, not only in wealth, but also in terms of the degree of authority and power exercised between males and females, and between the older and younger generations.⁵⁵ This was strengthened by the respect-rules San were trained to observe. They were expected to be reserved, and to avoid direct relations, with persons of the opposite sex, and also with members of the generation above or below them, but to be frank and outspoken with members of their own sex and their own generations.⁵⁶

Violence, however, was not absent from this society. Verbal fights occurred when someone felt insulted by a (not so) funny remark, or felt that gifts (of meat, food, or articles, etc.) had been improperly distributed. More serious, and even fatal fights, broke out over marital infidelity, or broken promises of marriage. And killings sometimes resulted in protracted feuds. As Ju/'hoansi never fought wars, they possessed neither the

⁵⁵ Cf. Marshall 1976: 447-454; Lee 1979: 24, 221, 224-229, 457

⁵⁶ Cf. Barnard 1992: 47-51, 267-271

weapons specifically developed for attacking fellow men, nor the means to defend themselves against attacks with weapons. But they could, and did sometimes, use their short hunting spears or their poisoned arrows to kill an opponent.

Because the Ju/'hoansi did not have leaders who could impose peace upon fighting parties, violence endangered a group's very existence. The normal way out for a camp was to split up before disputes developed into physical fights, and for each side to go its own way, or to join other groups.⁵⁷ The curing dances thus served another important function, i.e. the prevention of internal discord and violence.⁵⁸

[19] *Ju/'hoan religion*

In Ju/'hoan religion, the 'unseen world' was as sparsely populated as was its society. It knew but the creator-god, ≠Gao N!a; a lower god, //Gauwa; the //gawwasi, or deceased; and *n/um*, 'healing power'. It may even be doubted whether //Gauwa was actually viewed as a distinct god for the Ju/'hoansi, or was merely another representation of ≠Gao N!a, particularly in his funny, stupid, spiteful and evil aspects. The Ju/'hoansi immensely enjoyed stories about ≠Gao N!a's incest, cannibalism and other foolish pranks. They made them roar with laughter.⁵⁹ ≠Gao N!a was said to live with his wife and 'children' – the //gawwasi – in a two-storey house next to a big tree in the East, at the place where the sun rises, whilst //Gauwa was thought to reside in the West, where the sun sets, also with his wife and children – again, the //gawwasi.

Ju/'hoansi believed that ≠Gao N!a had created this world, but in a fumbling fashion. The first time, it went all wrong, humans and animals being undifferentiated and assuming each other's names and roles. At the second attempt, however, the proper order was established, albeit more or less by accident, as the unintentional side effect of //Gauwa's pranks. But even that second creation was flawed, because humans had to die, and humankind was divided into superior and inferior groups, with the San at the bottom. Having created this world, and woman and man (in that order!), ≠Gao N!a was believed to have presented woman with the digging stick and fire in order that she might collect food and cook it, and man with bow and arrow, and poison, and the short spear for hunting animals. But at death, he transformed them, it was said, into the //gawwasi, the spiteful deceased, using them capriciously for spreading dissent, disease and death among humans by having them shoot tiny, invisible arrows into humans, when they were spying on the humans, particularly at night. //Gauwa was believed to do the same, and also to wander the face of the earth in whirlwinds, to spread all kinds of misfortune among humans.

⁵⁷ Cf. Marshall 1961; 1969: 373-374; 1978: 288-293, 311-312; Lee 1979: 157, 370-400, esp. 381, 388-389, 392-397; 1983: 81, 87, 90-97

[43] ⁵⁸ Cf. Lee 1968: 51-53; 1979: 377

⁵⁹ Cf. Marshall 1962: 228-229, 233; also Bieseke 1976: 307-310, 316-321; 1993: 22, 23, 103-115, 175-185; Katz 1982: 29-31; Lee 1983: 107 note 3; Barnard 1988: 224-228; 1992: 56, 252, 256-259. Cf., for a discussion of this difficult point and more references, Platvoet 1999a: 26-31, esp. notes 137, 141, 142

Ju/'hoansi, however, also believed that ≠Gao N!a at creation had also given *n/um* (healing power) to humans.⁶⁰ They conceived of it as resident in the bellies of their *n/um kxau*, (*n/um*-owners), and at the base of their spines. It was thought to be inactive, like a covered fire, in daily life, but ready to be set ablaze by the curing dance, making the *n/um*-owners 'boil' and 'steam' with perspiration, and capable of transferring *n/um*'s healing power to others by sharing out their sweat.⁶¹ They also believed that ≠Gao N!a regularly appeared in dreams to these *n/um*-owners, in order to increase their *n/um*, and to teach them the non-verbal songs sung by the women during the curing dances. These songs were themselves believed to be sources of *n/um*.⁶²

The unseen world of the Ju/'hoansi, therefore, consisted of two distinct parts: the meta-empirical one of addressable personal beings: ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa and the //gawwasi; and an intra-, and infra-empirical one of the impersonal, non-addressable power, or potency, *n/um*. The Ju/'hoansi regarded both with much ambivalence. In some contexts, they viewed the unseen beings [20] as the source of this world as ordered, normal and enjoyable, and regarded them as morally neutral. But in any 'evil' context, they considered them the capricious, irresponsible and immoral source of disorder, dissent, disease and death, and as inflicting these on them out of indifference and spite. As they were thought to be evil and hostile to humans, the Ju/'hoansi definitively did not regard the unseen addressable beings as part of their communities.

The Ju/'hoansi regarded *n/um* with ambivalence for a different reason. Although they viewed it as their main source of health and protection against the evil whims of god and the dead, *n/um* was won, they believed, only at the cost of great pain and through an experience of 'death'.⁶³ They, however, regarded *n/um* as an integral part of themselves and their camps, and as the most vital element of their world.

Ju/'hoan religion was quite exceptional. It knew, for instance, no worship of ≠Gao N!a and //Gauwa, and no prayers, sacrifices or other gifts were offered to them. The //gawwasi were not regarded as ancestors and were afforded no cult. Ju/'hoansi also had no belief in souls, nor in witchcraft, charms or 'medicines', whether for the good purposes of curing, protection, success in hunting or love, etc., or for the evil ones of sorcery. They also had no priests, and did not practise divination with the help of the meta-empirical. Actually, their religion consisted of just one ritual: the curing dance, performed not as worship of god, but rather as war on god, as I will show below.⁶⁴

Ju/'hoan curing dances

I will first describe the four phases, and concentric circles, of the curing dances. These are the singing and dancing, the experiences of the *n/um*-owners in trance, their 'healing', and their 'war on god'. I will then describe the Ju/'hoan pedagogical praxis of

⁶⁰ Cf. Platvoet 1999a: 26-32 and the references cited there

⁶¹ Cf. Lee 1968: 43-45; Platvoet 1999a: 30, 36-37

⁶² Cf. Shostak 1981: 295-296

⁶³ Cf. Platvoet 1999a: 30, 41-44, 50-51, and the references cited there

⁶⁴ Cf. Platvoet 1999a: 32-34, 49-50, 52-53

‘training for transcendence’, by which they encouraged their men to enter upon a career as *n/um*- owners.

The four phases of the curing dances

The Ju’hoan curing dances (*n/um tsxai*) were both recreation and religion, prophylaxis and cure, life and death, peace and war; in brief, they were night-long, multi-media song and dance performances of great symbolic depth and complexity. They began in the late evening by women lighting a new and bright fire in an open space in, or very close to, the camp. Curing dances consisted usually of three bouts of some two hours of intensive singing and dancing, one in the early night, one after mid-night, and one towards dawn which might last well into the early morning. Each period consisted of a number of separate rounds of singing and dancing of five to fifteen minutes, followed by brief rest pauses in between.

The centre, and the central symbol, of a curing dance was the dance fire. Spatially as well as symbolically, it was at the heart of four concentric circles: the [11] singing women, the dancing men, the trance healing, and the trance war.

The first was formed by women sitting in a tight ring around the fire, shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee, and facing the fire. They sang the *n/um* songs and clapped their fierce rhythms with outstretched hands. The second ring was that of the dancers, mainly males, who heavily stamped the ground behind the women with small, intricate dance steps, in tune with the rhythms of the songs, to which they contributed by the shaking of the rattles bound to their legs. They often danced in peculiar postures, with arms stretched backwards, or with their bodies slightly bent forward and supported with a stick. The bright fire in the dark night, and the singing, clapping, stamping and rattling, produced the photic and sonic drive that facilitated the induction of the trance state (*!kia*) in the dancers. The physical exhaustion and hyperventilation, caused by dancing vigorously, also contributed much to the production of dissociation in them, as did the concentrated attention of the dancers on the rhythms of the song and the dance. These synchronised them with the collective event and its cultural expectations and representations.

The latter pictured *n/um* as a covered fire at the base of the spine of the *n/um kxau* or *n/um* possessors, which was thought to become alive and hot as a result of the dance. These expectations and representations as well as the dance itself not only produced dissociation in the *n/um kxau*,⁶⁵ but also wrought specific mental and bodily changes in them. The dancers recounted afterwards that they felt *n/um* ‘stand up’ in their lower backs and stomachs, and rise along their spines into their heads. When they sensed the power of *n/um* surge up in them, they felt their heads swim and their bodies elongate, or float in water, or fly through the air. Or they saw things around them grow small and move through the air. Or they felt fire engulf them. Such sensations were overpowering at first and caused new *n/um kxau* at times to try to break through the circle of women and attempt to jump into the fire, or to take live fire into their hands, press it against

⁶⁵ For the various agents and procedures, by which trance may be induced, cf. e.g. Ludwig 1968: 70-75; Jackson 1969; Lex 1979: 122-125; Winkelman 1986: 178-183

their bodies, or heap it upon their heads. This behaviour, from which they were usually restrained before they incurred serious harm, expressed their feeling that the *n/um*, now alive and hot in them, was much more fierce and potent than the dance fire. It was also symbolic of that other feeling that they themselves were much more powerful now than the sources of evil - the *gauwasi*, //Gauwa, and ≠Gao N!a. They also said that *n/um*, when hot and alive, made them see both what was troubling everybody, and the sources of that trouble.

When the *n/um*-owners felt that fire of *n/um* ‘burned fiercely in them’ through the dancing and the dissociation and sweated profusely, they stepped out of the circle of the dancers into third circle: the area surrounding the central dance event. In it several smaller fires were burning, and anyone resting from the singing and dancing sat around one, together with the other onlookers. The dissociated trance dancers visited these fires in order to ‘transfer their *n/um*’ to anyone sitting at them whom they thought was in need of *n/um*, whether for healing, [22] protection, or for entering on a career as a *n/um kxau*. They did this by rubbing their sweat onto them.

At the same time, the trance-dancers ‘saw’ all the ‘evil’ that the //gauwasi and //Gauwa had stealthily shot into those they were treating. To pull that out, they stood or sat behind them and placed their hands on them. Then, trembling, sighing, panting and moaning, they ‘pulled those “arrows” out of their patients’ and, with a few high shrieks, ‘absorbed all their evil into themselves’, where they said it was conquered and destroyed by their fiercely burning *n/um*.

And so the scene for the concluding part of the drama of the curing dance was set, namely the ‘war’ on the source of evil. That ‘battle’ was fought in the fourth circle: the dark night around the fire-lit dance area. It was waged, it was thought, with the //gauwasi and //Gauwa, who were said to be watching in the darkness around the dance. Having ‘transferred *n/um*’ and ‘pulled out all evil from the members of the camp’, the *n/um*-owners would throw up their heads and arms and, with a violent motion, ‘throw it back’ at its ‘origin lurking in the dark of the night’: the unholy trinity of the //gauwasi, //Gauwa and ≠Gao N!a. That action was often supplemented by the trance dancers yelling abuse at them and/or charging vigorously at them with firebrands to chase them off, back into the deep darkness in which they ‘belonged’.

This ritual ‘warfare’ might also take the form of ‘wrestling’ in a visionary trance with the source of dissent, disease and death in the camp. *N/um*-owners would recount how in their visionary trance they had plucked up all their courage, had faced the source of evil squarely, and had commanded the //gauwasi, or had pleaded with them, not to bother the camp any longer and to be off. Or that they had sought out //Gauwa and had pleaded with him to assist them in curing the sick by shooting healing arrows into them instead of harmful ones. This ‘facing //Gauwa’ was considered to require great courage, because it was held it exposed the trance dancer to grave risks. After all, //Gauwa, who was regarded as the very epitome of caprice, might arbitrarily grant the request and save the life of the sick person, but he might equally, out of mere spite and vindictiveness, kill both him or her, and the trance dancer himself.

Having thus ‘chased off’ the //gawwasi, and/or faced //Gauwa, the drama of the healing would be concluded by a *n/um*-owner emerging from his trance. An experienced trance dancer summarised this as follows:

In *!kia* [trance] your heart stops, you’re dead. [...] You see ghosts killing; you smell burning, rotten flesh; then you heal, you pull sickness out. You heal, heal, heal, heal ..., then you live. Then your eyeballs clear and then you see people clearly.⁶⁶

[23] *Training for transcendence*⁶⁷

As sharing enabled their egalitarian society to survive, it was vital for the Ju/’hoansi to educate as many *n/um kxau* as possible and thereby maximise their (presumed) stock of *n/um*. Every young Ju/’hoan man knew, therefore, that he was expected to do his best to become an experienced *n/um*-owner and thus assist in protecting the camp from disease, dissent and death. The novice trance dancer, however, was also very much aware that learning to enter the state of trance was reputed to be a long and painful process. It was also greatly feared because the first trance experience was known as *kwe!i*, death,⁶⁸ a state of very deep trance which the Ju/’hoansi considered extremely dangerous.

The Ju/’hoansi had therefore incorporated into their curing dances an institution which Katz has aptly called ‘education for transcendence’. Its function was to assist young Ju/’hoan males to overcome that fear, to accept the pain of the trance dance for the sake of the general well-being of the band, and to guide them through the ‘death’ of their first trance. Although virtually every young male embarked on this training, only about half of them completed it. The rest quit for fear of that pain and ‘death’, but continued nonetheless to participate in the curing dances just for the fun of it, which was considered perfectly respectable.

Those who did persevere, however, were coached intensively by experienced *n/um*-owners, especially by their fathers, their father’s brother, or an elder brother. They would dance behind their pupil, giving him psychological support and encouragement,⁶⁹ as well as steadying him when the onset of the trance began. The novice’s education also included the *n/um*-owners ‘transferring’ their own *n/um* to him by ‘shooting invisible arrows (*n/um tchisi*)’ into him, and by rubbing him with their sweat. At the onset of his first full trance, the staggering novice was usually steadied by two *n/um*-owners, one in front of him, the other behind him,⁷⁰ in order to carry him through his fear and into *!kia*, and also to prevent him from straying into the fire. This first trance was often signalled by the novice uttering a shriek, jumping high and then falling to the ground, trembling all over and foaming at the mouth, and lying unconscious in a catatonic spasm.

⁶⁶ Katz 1976: 291, quoting an ‘owner of *n/um*’; for further references, cf. Platvoet 1999a: 34-41

⁶⁷ My paraphrase of Katz 1976

⁶⁸ Barnard (1992: 58) regards Lee’s translation of *kwe!i* as ‘half-death’ (Lee 1968: 40, 47) as ‘an unfortunate phrase which has stuck in the literature. In my view, this phase is best described as metaphorical death; indeed, it is called “death” (not “half death”) in several Bushman languages’.

⁶⁹ Katz 1976, 1981; Shostak 294

⁷⁰ Katz 1976: 292-294; 1982: 47-49

At this point, he was believed to have entered *kwe!i*, death: the world of //Gauwa and the //gauwasi, and to be pleading and fighting with them for the lives of the sick.⁷¹ Some told afterwards that they had seen the //gauwasi as real people, others as eerie ghosts, or as having only one leg and being suspended in mid-air. Most //gauwasi were said to have been silent, and some to have explained their reasons for being there.

This visionary trance was feared as a dangerous, liminal state, because the body of the trance dancer was believed to be in this world and he himself in another. As long as a novice was in a state of deep trance, he was therefore the object of intense concern and care. The women intensified the singing of the dance songs, and the *n/um*-owners, who were at that time in *!kia* themselves, constantly rubbed him with their sweat, drawing all evil from him, [24] and blowing into his ears or shouting his name into them, in order to inform his mind where it might find his body and persuade it to return to it. This continued until the novice had regained consciousness and could be left to sleep or rest.

Another mark of these deep trance experiences was complete amnesia. The young trance dancers neither remembered their trance nor anything they had done, said or experienced during it. Amnesia, however, marked only the early phase of a Ju/hoan trance career, as distinct from the later one of experienced *n/um*-owners who preserved and cultivated the memories of their mental experiences during trance and spoke much about them. It was these memories that were recorded in rock paintings.

After this death experience, upcoming trance dancers usually exhibited reckless trance behaviour for several months, such as running into the central dance fire, scattering red-hot embers over themselves and setting their hair ablaze, at which point others stepped in to restrain them. They also habitually dramatised the ritual of the 'war' against the supernatural sources of evil by running into the night with burning sticks and shouting abuse at //Gauwa and the //gauwasi.⁷² Their 'coaches' then went after them to bring them back from the dark, or attended to them when they re-entered the catatonic state of 'death'.

Their tutors continued to coach these young trance dancers until they had gradually learned to control their trance and slowly had reached the stage, and status, of experienced *n/um*-owners. They were able then to slip easily in and out of a relatively light dissociation with relatively little loss of motor control, in order to heal two or three times in a night of curing dances, and to abundantly share out their healing power to the members of the camp. They were then also able to enter into a trance for healing outside the context of a curing dance, when someone had seriously fallen ill and needed attention immediately.⁷³

⁷¹ Lee 1983: 107

⁷² Lee 1968: 47-48

⁷³ Lee 1968: 48

Rattray's Request for a God

Rattray visited Tanoboase, a tiny village not far from Takyiman in the Gold Coast, on 4-5 May 1922 for what he regarded as 'an ambitious but delicate project',⁷⁴ but which, with the benefit of hindsight, we might judge now as an utterly colonial one.⁷⁵ He wished to put the request before Tano, the highest god after Nyame, God, in Akan traditional religion, that he permit his priests to produce an *atano*-god, a 'son of Tano', for him to take to England for the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924.⁷⁶

This section has three parts. I first present relevant data by which Rattray's request to Tano may be contextualised, understood, and analysed. We are concerned here with Bono-Takyiman both as an Akan matrilineal society and as an outer province of the former Asante empire. I will then deal with the relevant elements of Asante-Bono religion, and finally describe the event in question.

[25] *Bono society*

The Bono, or Brong, were an Akan society numbering some 520.000 in 1980, with Takyiman (Anglicised as Techiman) as its capital, in the Brong-Ahafo region of the Gold Coast, now Ghana. They are one of the 15 Akan ethnic groups of Southern Ghana, each of which speak a dialect of the Akan language. The Asante (often written as Ashanti) constitute the largest group. They and the Bono speak varieties of Twi. Asante and its capital Kumase are well-known. Around 1700, its rulers established a powerful state in the interior by which they gained control of the gold, kola nuts, and salt trade routes from the Sahel to the forest region, and to the approximately forty fortified European trading posts on the coast. Chartered companies from Portugal, Holland, England, Denmark, Sweden, France, and Prussia had built these castles as gold and slave trading posts between 1470 and 1720.⁷⁷ By 1800, the Asante empire covered virtually all the territory which in 1902 ultimately became the British Crown Colony of the Gold Coast (now southern Ghana). By which time Asante had finally been subjected to British colonial rule.⁷⁸

The Akan societies had a matrilineal social structure, political organisation and religion. Matrilineages (*abusua*) consisted of all the descendants, in an Akan town or village, from a common ancestress who lived some ten to twelve generations ago. Num-

⁷⁴ Machin no year: 78

⁷⁵ Cf. idester 1996 on colonialism as the violent context in which the Science of Religions was produced

⁷⁶ Machin no year: 89

⁷⁷ Cf. e.g. Bosman 1705/1967, Kea 1982

⁷⁸ The British established a 'protectorate' over the coastal Fante part of the Gold Coast in 1844. After the Danish had ceded their four castles to the British in 1850 and the Dutch had likewise handed over their part of the Gold Coast to the British in 1872, the British sent a large British expeditionary force against Asante that captured, looted and burned Kumase on 4-6 February 1874. Having withdrawn to the coast, the British declared the full length of the Gold Coast coast a British Crown Colony in 1874 (cf. Platvoet 1991: 148-152). The Asante kingdom was finally defeated in 1896 only and formally incorporated into the Crown Colony of the Gold Coast, together with the hinterland, in 1902 (cf. e.g. Wilks 1975).

bering from a few scores to a few hundred, each matrilineage had lived together in the pre-colonial period in its own quarter, where it was governed by an *abusuapanyin* and *obaapanyin* (a male and female elder respectively). These elders were elected by the adult members of an *abusua* and had important ritual, social, economical, judicial and political duties.

The local matrilineages were the basis of Akan traditional political organisation. Their male elders sat on the council of the *ohene* (leader, or chief) of a town (*kurow*), who was elected from the matrilineage that 'owned' that town. A number of towns might unite into an *oman* (state), in which case the *ohene* of its 'capital' served as its *omanhene*, 'head of state' or king, and the chiefs of the other towns sat on his council. Such states might again unite into military confederations, as did the *amantoonum*, 'the five states', when they allied with Kumase in the late 17th century to form the powerful *Asanteman*, 'Asante state' or nation.

Towns, states and nations were ruled by an *ohene*, 'king', and an *ohemmaa*, 'queen-mother'. The latter was elected from among the adult females of the 'royal' lineage that 'owned' the town, the state, or the nation – she was either the king's mother or sister, biological or classificatory, but never his wife.

The rulers of the biggest Akan political units held large courts with many titled dignitaries. The higher ones were the chiefs who sat on the ruler's council and held one of the many military offices. The larger Akan states could muster large armies, often equipped with the latest weaponry from Europe, for wars against other Akan states or for raids on [26] the non-Akan regions to the North. Those captured were put to work as slaves in the fields or in the homes of Akan families, or became soldiers in the Akan armies, or were sold, together with political dissidents and criminals, to African slave merchants. The latter then walked them to the coast in chain gangs and sold them to European slave traders in the castles, or to the 'interlopers' (unlicensed ships) for shipment to the slave markets in the Americas to serve as labour force on plantations.

The lower functionaries in an Akan royal court were numerous, ranging from the treasurer, the keeper of the keys and the supervisor of the secluded parts of the palace to the instructor of a new *ohene*. They also included several officials and groups accorded various functions in public ceremonies, such as the *okyeame* (speaker), the crier, the praise singers, the drummers, and the horn blowers. Others were the bearers of state swords, stools of office, fans, palanquin and state umbrella, and the keepers of the public order (*abrafo*) who also acted as the ruler's bodyguards and as state executioners. Other court officers took care of the physical and ritual wellbeing of the king and the cult of his predecessors. They ranged from his cooks and bathroom attendants to those in charge of the rituals for the king's souls,⁷⁹ and others who tended the royal mausoleum and performed the twice-monthly royal ancestor rites.⁸⁰

The most important of these lower court dignitaries for our present purpose was the speaker (*okyeame*). He was the mouthpiece of the ruler and his council in any public

⁷⁹ Akan believe that a human being has three 'souls'; cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 45-46; Bartle 1983

⁸⁰ On the Akan month, cf. Bartle 1978

proceeding, addressing the audience as if he himself were the ruler.⁸¹ By custom, an Akan ruler never spoke in public. The function of the *okyeame* in political and judicial rituals was, in Akan eyes, an exact parallel of the role a medium served in relation to the god who had taken possession of him or her. A spirit also addressed its audience through the mouth of its medium.

States were established in the Akan area from 1400 onwards. Bono-Manso, the oldest of the Akan states, just north of the forested area and in the northernmost part of the Akan area, had been established in the 15th century to control the trade from Bighu, some 50km to the North-West of Bono-Manso, to the coast. It is thought that Bighu may have been established as early as the 11th century by Muslim Mande-Dyula merchants, arriving from Jenne in Mali. Subsequently, Bighu became a famous centre for cloth-making, metalwork production and trade. Bono-Manso learned a great deal about the arts of gold-mining, trade, government, military organisation (e.g. cavalry) and religion from the Sahelian merchants until Bighu collapsed, for reasons unknown, early in the 18th century.⁸² Bono-Manso itself flourished until 1723, when its Sahelian-style cavalry proved no match for the Asante who were equipped with the newest firearms from the coast and captured and destroyed the town of Bono-Manso. In 1724, the Bono region was incorporated as a province in the budding Asante empire with Takyiman as its capital.⁸³

The Asante, in their turn, learned much from the Bono, particularly in terms of art, ritual, and religion. Even in Rattray's time as a government official in the Gold Coast, 1907-1929, the Asante [27] regarded Bono territory as 'one of the sites of original Akan culture'. For them it was also the home of the most senior of the Akan gods, Tano, the 'father' of the numerous *atano* gods, the cult of which was dispersed throughout the Akan area.⁸⁴

Asante/Bono religion

The Asante and Bono varieties of Akan traditional religion consisted in the first decades of the 20th century of seven loosely integrated belief complexes about meta-empirical and/or intra-empirical realms and/or categories of unseen beings. Together they constituted Asante/Bono cosmology. They were, in hierarchical order, those of the creator-god Nyame⁸⁵ and the gods (*abosom*); the ancestors (*nsamanfo*); the three souls attributed to humans (*kra*, *sunsum* and *mogya*); the one soul of animals and plants (*sunsum*);

⁸¹ On the *kyeamepoma*, the speaker's elaborately carved, gold-plated staff of office and its origin in the walking cane of Europeans on the coast, cf. McLeod 1979, Ross 1982; cf. also Rattray 1923: 187; Warren 1974: 102, 110, 404

⁸² Cf. Hiskett 1984: 134, 136; Anonymous 1994

⁸³ On Bighu, Bono-Manso and Bono-Takyiman, cf. also Kea 1982: 26-27, 31, 52-55, 58, 74, 78, 187, 194-196, 249-250, 282-284; Warren 1974: 17-28; Anonymous 1994

[44] ⁸⁴ Warren 1974: 2, 31, 102, 119-120, 129-130, 141, 390, 404.

⁸⁵ The sky god Nyame came to be regarded in pre-colonial times (ca. 1400 to ca. 1874) only gradually as also creator god through contact with Muslim and Christian traders and missionaries. Cf. Platvoet 2012

the ‘spiritual’ power of revenge (*sasa*) attributed to humans, animals and plants that had suffered an unfortunate death; the witches (*abayifo*); and the forest imps (*mmoatia*).⁸⁶

For the purpose of developing the background to the Bono spirit possession event to be discussed below, a brief discussion of Asante/Bono beliefs regarding Nyame and the gods will suffice, although they are much more complex than I will indicate here.

The relations between the invisible realms of god and the gods, and the empirical one of the humans, as conceived by the Asante and the Bono, were manifold and complex. Firstly, this religion was basically monotheistic⁸⁷ as well as thoroughly polytheistic, its monotheism actually including its polytheism without any conflict or contradiction. Nyame was believed to be the one and only supreme god who had created everything, including the gods (and the Bono before everyone else).⁸⁸ The gods were conceived as his sons, but the Asante and Bono did not think of Nyame as having begotten them in wedlock. Female gods were actually very rare in Asante and Bono religion. Warren found only fifteen goddesses – identified by Akan names for females – among the nearly 400 he registered in and around Takyiman,⁸⁹ and only exceptionally was a god thought of as having a wife.⁹⁰ This may seem curious for a matrilineal society but is explained below.

The most important god after Nyame, however, was female, and she was known as Asase Yaa, ‘Earth Thursday’. But she was not just a female goddess, but unique in her kind, for she and Nyame represented the two main realms of Akan cosmology: the earth and the sky. The Akan connected Asase Yaa intimately with the fertility of the earth and agriculture, and paradoxically also with the dead buried in the earth, and with death, defilement, and decay. They addressed her in prayers as *Asase ode nsie*, ‘Earth who owns the underworld’, thereby connecting her with *nsamandow*, the (vague) realm of the ancestors. Moreover, unlike all other (male) gods, she was viewed as not polluted by menstruating women, nor by the blood of decapitated humans. Like Nyame, she was viewed as not married, but unlike him [28] and the numerous male gods, she was said to have no offspring at all: no gods were believed to be her daughters or sons. So, she was not viewed as Nyame’s wife, nor was she, or any other goddess, regarded as his daughter, or of any other god.⁹¹

Even so, to the Akan it was obvious how Nyame, and other male gods, begot sons without being married. The relevant saying runs: ‘as a woman gives birth to a child, so may water to a god’.⁹² It is explained as follows: human procreation is matrilineal, through the blood, *mogya*, of women and so associated with red, the colour of the female Asase Yaa. In the world of the gods, however, descent was considered to be patri-

⁸⁶ For a brief survey, cf. Platvoet 1982: 41-44

⁸⁷ As Bosman (1705/1967: 146) already saw in the late 17th century, the pioneer missionary linguist, J.G. Christaller (1827-1893), recognised in the 1860s (Christaller 1933: 356) and Rattray (1916: 17-23; 1923: 139-144) understood before 1920; cf. also Warren 1974: IV, 98-99

⁸⁸ Warren 1974: 31

⁸⁹ Warren 1974: 374, 389; 497-514

⁹⁰ Warren 1974: 389, 429

⁹¹ Warren 1974: 389

⁹² Rattray (1923: 146) quoting a traditional priest; cf. also Busia 1954: 193; Platvoet 1982: 255-256

lineal, through ‘water’ (*nsuo*), and associated with the colour white, the colour of the male gods.⁹³ *Nsuo* was a complex notion that signified rain, any river or standing body of water, the sap of plants, the male *semen*, and a god, as drinkable ‘medicine’ (*aduro*) for swearing an oath of fidelity to that god or to a pact.⁹⁴ In rituals, the gods were associated with water as white by the abundant use of *hyire*, the white kaolin clay powder that was dug up from the beds of brooks and streams.

The ritual use of such symbolic complexes signified that the gods were perceived as untamed nature. They were believed to be resident in forests, rocks and hills, rivers and lakes as well as in the sky, both as brilliantly blue and with white clouds during most of the day, and as dark with rain storms, lightning and thunder in the afternoon and at night. By conceiving of the gods as born of rain, and of their social structure as patrilineal, and of their world as wild, the Akan presented the gods as structurally opposed to humans born of blood. Their social structure was matrilineal, and their towns and villages were islands of culture and order in a sea of wild forest, the domain of the gods.

The Akan intimately associated Nyame also with rain (*nsuo*). He was thought of as resident in rain, as descending in the torrents in tropical rainstorms – *Totorebonsu*, ‘water that beats down in torrents’ was one of his appellations –, as softly touching the earth in the wet mists and damp clouds that were often seen on hilltops and encountered in the depths of the damp, dark, awe-inspiring forests.⁹⁵ Nyame descending on earth as rain was regarded as begetting the gods on earth, as is clear from the three categories into which the gods were divided: water-, rock- and forest-gods. Most gods were *nsuobosom*, ‘water-gods’: any body of water standing or flowing on earth – rivers, lakes, brooks, and the sea – were viewed as gods. In Asante and Bono religion, very many of these gods were *atano*: sons, or sons of the sons, etc., of the river, and river god, Tano, who was regarded as the ‘first born’ (*piesie*) son of Nyame, and as the most senior god of the Akan pantheon.⁹⁶ Some gods were conceived as *bosombodò*, ‘rock-gods’, rocks being intimately associated by the Akan with lightning, thunder and rain. A few were *wurambosom*, ‘gods in the forests’, because the forests grew from the rain on the rocks, and because both they and the gods were wild, untamed and *ehu*, (fearful),⁹⁷ inasmuch as they were not domesticated.

The Akan, therefore, regarded the *abosom* primarily as the untamed world [29] of the uncultivated forest. They were, in modern Western terms,⁹⁸ unseen spiritual beings, but at the same time, in Akan view, also in a way visible in the sky and the clouds, and material as rain, waters, rocks, and the forest. Their materiality, however, was not the main point for the Akan. It was rather that as untamed and wild nature, they were not part of

⁹³ On the colours red, black and white as the symbol complexes, by means of which the Akan integrated their ideas about the universe, society and man into a complex system, cf. Bartle 1983

⁹⁴ Christaller 1933: 478

⁹⁵ Cf. also Platvoet 1985: 177-179; 2012: 59sq

⁹⁶ Cf. e.g. Warren 1974: 95, 119-120, 374ff, 392-393

⁹⁷ On the forest as fearful, cf. Platvoet 1985: 177-179; 1991: 157-158, 163-165

⁹⁸ Cf. Platvoet 1999b: 250-251; 1999c: 490-491, 507-508

the human world and unobservant of its rules and laws. Not having been educated how to behave well, they were 'wild', uncontrolled and dangerous.

But they were seen also as Nyame's messengers to men, and as his plenipotentiaries on earth, to whom he had entrusted the government, care and cure of men after his 'departure into the sky'.⁹⁹ They could only fulfil that task, it was thought, by also being 'born' into human society, i.e., by their being transformed from the 'wild gods of untamed nature' to *fiēbosom*, the 'house-gods' of Akan orderly society.¹⁰⁰

Akan viewed the incorporation of a wild god into human society as a long process of socialising and educating that god. It began, it was thought, when an untamed water-, rock-, or forest-god suddenly 'fell on' a person, and 'seized' him or her in a violent and mute trance during a major public ceremony, such as the annual procession in honour of the tutelary god of a town. By manifesting himself in this way, an unknown god was believed to show that it wished to enter human society by being 'born' among men, and that it had selected the person 'caught' as its future medium and priest (*okomfo*).

If that first violent spirit possession was accepted by divination as indeed being the manifestation of a new god, the two, the god and his mute medium, were sent for training to an experienced *okomfo* for a considerable period of time.¹⁰¹ The training was deemed to have been successful, when the god had learned to speak through his medium's mouth, had revealed his identity as well as the terms upon which he was ready to work for the benefit of men, and had been taught how to behave. The 'incorporation' of the god into human society was then completed by the ritual 'installation' of the god into a material abode, or shrine.¹⁰² For the *atano* gods, that shrine was a brass pan (*yawa*), which was lodged in a *bosomdan* (room of the gods), or in a *bosombuw* (a little round 'temple').¹⁰³ There he might then begin to 'work' for the humans who approached him with their problems, prayers and presents.¹⁰⁴

By this (presumed) incorporation into human society, a god was thought to have acquired four additional, man-made ways of being present in the material world on top of the natural one in which he was deemed to be embodied in untamed nature. In Akan perception, a god, apart from being a river or a rock, might also be present among humans, firstly, in (the trance dance of) his medium-priest in order to meet with people during possession rituals. Secondly, in the shrine in his temple at which he was thought to receive their prayers and gifts of libation, food, and sacrifices. Thirdly, in his *nsuo Yaa* (a waterpot), through which he was said to attend to their problems by divination.¹⁰⁵ And fourthly, in his 'medicines' (*nnuru*), through which, it was believed, he might heal and protect humans, or assist them in other ways with their problems in life.

⁹⁹ Cf. Platvoet 2012 on Akan stories about Nyame retiring to the sky

¹⁰⁰ Warren 1974: 101, *passim*

¹⁰¹ Cf. e.g. Warren 1974: 140-141, 395-396

¹⁰² Cf. Rattray 1923: 145-150

¹⁰³ Cf. Warren 1974: 375-378

¹⁰⁴ Cf. e.g. Warren 1974: 404-422

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Rattray 1927: 44-47; Warren 1974: 107, 375, 388, 390, 508

[30] By this (presumed) incorporation, the god became an *abusuabosom*, a god 'owned' by the matrilineage of the medium that he had 'married'. If the matrilineage of the medium happened to 'own' a town, state or nation, its *abusuabosom* might also be regarded as assisting this matrigroup in its political fortunes, whereby it also became an *omanbosom*, i.e. a god of that political unit.¹⁰⁶

Even after gods had become attached to human society in these ways and for these functions, the Akan continued to view them with ambivalence, because despite their presumed domestication, they were believed to remain basically untamed and wild. While they regarded presence in nature – in rivers, rocks, and forests – as their natural, proper, and permanent abode, they viewed their incorporation into human society as temporal, artificial and not fully reliable for in human society a god remained a powerful being who, it was thought, might act in capricious, unruly ways despite having been 'taught' the rules of civility and reciprocity. The wary Akan expressed this by placing the residence of their house-gods close to, or in, the *kurotia*, the transitional area between a town and the forest.¹⁰⁷

Nyame and Asase Yaa were gods of a different kind. They were the gods of the sky and the earth, the two realms of Akan cosmology conceived to be radically outside human society. Nyame and Asase Yaa, therefore, had no mediums, nor shrines, nor instruments of divination or medicines, nor were they ever regarded as *fiēbosom*, house-gods, working to solve the daily problems of humans in society. They were too big and distant to become part of human society for the mere purpose of being at the service of men. No myth was told to detail Asase Yaa's distance to humans, but it was generally known why Nyame had retired on high. In primeval time, when he had just 'finished creation', Nyame and men were said to have often kept company. Moreover, it was said that humans did not procreate at that time, that they did not die, and that they had abundant food. However, it was added that at times Nyame's closeness was experienced as oppressive by some. In one myth, he was said to have been that close that women could not pound *fufu* (mashed tubers) for the evening meal in their wooden mortars with their long and heavy pestles without hitting him in the face. They, therefore, requested that he retire to 'on high' (*soro*). With which request, the Akan said, he complied and has remained there ever since.¹⁰⁸

But Akan did not therefore regard Nyame as a *deus remotus et otiosus*: the remote and inactive god of Deism who takes no interest in his creation. To the Akan, Nyame was both remote and nearby. For them, he was both *deus mediatas*, 'god mediated' in the gods, and through them at the same time a 'god in fragments'. Apart from the sky, clouds, lightning, thunder and rain, he was also deemed present in some man-made artefacts, such as the *nyamedua*, the 'tree of god', found in many Akan homesteads in the

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Warren 1974: 121, 127-140

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Platvoet 1985: 177-179

¹⁰⁸ There are several variants of this myth; cf. Perregaux 1906: 198-199; Rattray 1916: 20-21; Groh 1922: 65; Ringwald 1952: 21-22; 93-95; Amoah 1978: 146-152

past.¹⁰⁹ Exceptionally, a *Nyamedan*, a special room for Nyame with its own priest-servants, was found ‘in the remote corners of the older palaces’ in Rattray’s time.¹¹⁰ But Nyame’s place was especially prominent in the minds of the Akan, as is clear from the many proverbs that refer to him, from their (very few) [31] myths,¹¹¹ and from their stock invocations of him and Asase Yaa in prayers at the beginning of religious rituals.¹¹² Asase Yaa was likewise, in her own way, both remote and close.

The request

Robert Sutherland Rattray (1881-1938), who spoke Asante-Twi fluently, served as Government Anthropologist in the Crown Colony of the Gold Coast from 1921 to 1930.¹¹³ He came to Bono-Takyiman on 11 April 1922, partly because he had often been told that much of Asante culture and religion, as well as many Asante institutions had originated there, but mainly because he had been told that it was ‘the home of the gods – and the factory, so to speak, of their shrines’.¹¹⁴ New gods were usually ‘born’ in an Akan town in the manner described, but they could also be imported from elsewhere.¹¹⁵ After Bono’s incorporation into Asante in 1723, the fame of Tano spread far and wide. Many Asante towns had sent delegations to the village of Tanoboase (‘Under Tano’s Rock’), the spiritual capital of Bono-Takyiman, to request that the priests of Tano produce a son of Tano for them and allow them to install him, i.e. its *yawa* or shrine, in their own town. Shrines of *atano* gods were thus spread throughout the Akan region.

Rattray wished to witness the production of a new *atano* god, and his intention was to obtain an authentic *yawa*, shrine, for himself. He had just been informed that an Empire Exhibition was to be held at Wembley in London in 1924, and that he would be in charge of the sections on the Gold Coast. His pet project for this exhibition was to obtain permission from priests of an *atano* god in Takyiman-Bono to take a shrine of a son of Tano with him to Europe in order to put it on show there, in an Akan *bosombuw* (‘temple’), as an authentic example of Akan culture and religion. Rattray had been encouraged to conceive this bold plan, because the priest of Taa Mensa Keseè,¹¹⁶ the most important *omanbosom*, ‘state-god’, of Bono-Takyiman, was well disposed to at least part of his plan by implying that a shrine might be made for Rattray.¹¹⁷ But he was reluctant to let him take it to Europe. Rattray then decided to take his plan to the highest

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Rattray 1923: 142-143

¹¹⁰ Cf. Rattray 1923: frontispiece, 94, 142-144

¹¹¹ Cf. Rattray 1916; 1923:142-144

¹¹² Cf. e.g. Rattray 1923: 101-102, 147-148, 165, 264, 267, 278, 297; Warren 1974: 98-101; Platvoet 1982: 91

¹¹³ On Rattray, cf. Platvoet 1982: 57-68; Von Laue 1975, 1976; there is also an unpublished biography of Rattray by N.P.F. Machin, *Understanding the Natives: The Life of R.S. Rattray*

¹¹⁴ Rattray 1923: 146, 152sq., 172; Machin no year: 76-82

¹¹⁵ Cf. Platvoet 1973: 32-35

¹¹⁶ Tano’s ‘third son’, *miensa*, ‘the great’, *keseè*; cf. also Rattray 1923: 155, 159-171; Warren 1974: 129, 130, 138-140, 429, 510

¹¹⁷ Rattray 1923: 172

religious authority by putting it before Kofi Duro, (high-)priest of Tano himself and the *ohene* of Tanoboase.¹¹⁸

Rattray arrived at Tanoboase in the afternoon of Thursday May 4th, 1922.¹¹⁹ He put his request before the priest of Tano that very same evening. His plea was strongly supported by his two Asante friends who accompanied him on the trip, and by the priest of Taa Keseè. Kofi Duro and his elders replied that the request was too extraordinary for them to either grant or refuse. Only Tano himself could permit it. They informed Rattray that the next day was a *Fofie* ('Court Friday'), the special day in the 42-day Akan month¹²⁰ on which Tano was welcomed back to his temple after an 'absence' of six days for his monthly 'retreat for prayers'. They would put the request before Tano first thing next morning.

[32] That night a violent rainstorm broke over Tanoboase. A tree just outside the room in which Rattray slept was struck, the lightning splitting it from top to bottom, without, however, charring it.¹²¹

*The possession rite*¹²²

In the early morning of 5 May 1922, Rattray, his two companions, and the Taa Mensa Keseè priest were met in the courtyard of the Tano temple by Kofi Duro, clad in a white cloth, and some six Tanoboase men. They entered the *bosomdan* ('room of the gods') barefoot. Most bared the upper part of their body too. The oblong room contained the shrines of Tano and eight of his 'sons', and five *apunnua*, 'black stools'. Tano's own broad, flat shrine stood on top of a raised, cloth-covered altar placed in the far right-hand corner of the room.¹²³ Just below it were the smaller and slightly higher shrines of two of 'sons', Ateakosea¹²⁴ and Taa Kwasi Kramo (the 'Muslim').¹²⁵ Ateakosea was said to serve as Tano's *okeyame* ('speaker') in Tano's 'court' at Tanoboase,¹²⁶ and Taa Kwasi Kramo as *kyidomhene*, ('commander of the rear of the army'). He was said to rule the court in Tano's absence. The shrines of Tano's other six 'sons' stood, each on its own *akonnua*, 'stool', on the floor of the temple along the long rear wall to the left of the altar, opposite the entrance to the room. Along the short wall at the rear in the left-

¹¹⁸ Rattray 1923: 172-173

¹¹⁹ Rattray 1923: 175

¹²⁰ Cf. Bartle 1978; Rattray 1923a: 114-115

¹²¹ Rattray 1923: 175-176

¹²² Rattray 1923: 176-182

[45] ¹²³ For Rattray's photographs and descriptions of the Tanoboase temple of Tano, Tano's shrine on top of the altar and the medium carrying the shrine of Ateakosea, cf. Rattray 1923: 172-177, figs. 74-78

¹²⁴ Cf. also Rattray 1923: 159, 161, 177, 178, 184; Warren 1974: 102, 110, 131, 429, 501

¹²⁵ Cf. also Rattray 1923: 164, 177, 184; Warren (1974: 389) found in the late 1960s that 'four [of the 400] deities [in the Takyiman area] are regarded as Muslims, but no deities are stated to be Christian'. Bono religion is distinctive here, as compared with Asante and other Akan traditional religions, in showing up here relicts of the intensive influence of the Muslims of Bighu upon Bono-Mansu in the period before it was incorporated into Asante. In that period, 'many members of the royal household were converted to Islam' (Anonymous 1994).

¹²⁶ Cf. below note 127

hand part of the room stood the blackened stools of Kofi Duro's four predecessors in office, and that of a deceased *obaapanyin*, 'female elder'.

Kofi Duro and his followers seated themselves on their low stools (*nkonnua*), or on the floor, on the right-hand side of the room, in front of Tano's shrine. Rattray and his three followers did likewise in the left-hand part of the room, in front of the five blackened stools. A cloth was spread out between the two groups in front of the six shrines of the sons of Tano. One man from Kofi Duro's group came forward, placed his stool in the centre of the cloth, and, facing the entrance, sat himself on it. The shrine of Ateakosea was now uncovered. A carrying pad, of twisted cloth, was taken from the altar and handed to Kofi Duro who spat on it, pressed it to his forehead and breast and passed it under his left knee. Then he handed it to the man sitting on the stool in the centre of the room, as a commission to 'carry the god', i.e. to serve as the medium of Ateakosea in this consultation of Tano. The man set his heels firmly on the cloth, straightened his back, and put the pad on his head. The shrine of Ateakosea was then immediately put on top of the pad. The medium sat perfectly motionless, balancing the shrine while holding a *bodua* (tail switch) in his left hand as a sign of his office. An intense and deep silence reigned in the room.

In this silence, an old man with reddish hair and light complexion, who was seated between Kofi Duro and the medium, began to act as Kofi Duro's *okyeame* by addressing in a soft voice a prayer to Tano full of praises and historical allusions,¹²⁷ which he ended with the request:

[33] Today is Court-Friday, and we wish to see your face;
Therefore, come and listen to what we have to discuss with you.

A minute of deep silence followed. Everyone in the room sat intensely alert and their breathing could be heard. The medium then began to twitch all over his body and to slap the side of the shrine on his head with the flat of his right hand. At once, all present, in one voice, greeted 'the god': *Nana, makye oo* ('Grandfather, good morning').

The priest with the red hair now addressed the Taa Keseè priest and requested that he act as Rattray's spokesman and state the petition to be put before Tano. The priest of Taa Keseè rose to his feet, and addressing the twitching medium who now held the *bodua* between his teeth, he related that Rattray had come to visit the great Taa Koraa ('Preserver'), for one reason because he, Rattray, was aware that Tano was the greatest of the gods; and for another because he hoped that Taa Koraa would permit the priests of Tanoboase to construct the shrine of a son of Tano for him. He added that Rattray knew well how shrines were made,¹²⁸ but that he had never actually witnessed the consecration of a shrine. If his request were granted, Rattray would leave it to the discretion of the Tano priests as to whether or not he could take the shrine with him to Europe.

¹²⁷ Cf. Rattray 1923: 178-179 for the Twi text and Rattray's translation of this prayer; cf. also Platvoet 1983a: 205-206, 214-215, for my analysis of this prayer

¹²⁸ Cf. Rattray 1923: 145-150

The medium, quivering more spasmodically now with his heels on the cloth and still slapping the side of the shrine on his head with the flat palm of his right hand, took the *bodua* (switch) from his mouth again into his left hand, holding it upright. He then called out the names of the Kofi Duro and Rattray spokesman, and began to say that he had always come to the aid of the kings of Asante whenever they needed his help. But they had never asked him to present them with one of his children. Being Taa Koraa, the ‘Preserver’, he was not an *akoraa*, ‘old man’, who allowed things to spoil. If Rattray had come to ask for help, he could, and would, have assisted him, but he could not give him one of his sons.

After a pause, the medium added that he, Tano, granted permission to Rattray to visit him ‘in the [cave] where I live’, and to sprinkle himself with water from the source of the river Tano. He added that he had no quarrel with his many ‘children and grandchildren’ who went to school and now served God in the Christian way. But he also asserted that he was himself ‘in truth a child of God’. He finished by saying:

If my grandchildren say that the white European says that he loves me and has drawn near to me, then I will protect him also.¹²⁹

[34] After a brief pause, Rattray rose and said in Asante-Twi that he had understood the words of Taa Koraa. He thanked him for the permission to visit Tano in his cave and at the source of the river. He also complimented him on his liberal attitude to the Christian religion. It was, he said, as liberal as that of the English, who allowed freedom in matters of religion to all men. In school, the children would be taught about God, but that God, Rattray said, was none other than Nyame, the creator whom the Akan had known and worshipped long before the Europeans came to this country. When Rattray had finished, the priest of Taa Keseè repeated his words in Bono-Twi.

To this the medium answered: *Me da mo ase*, ‘I thank you [all]’, followed by the words: *Me kotenase*, ‘I am going to sit down’, the set formula for announcing the end of a consultation. The shrine of Ateakoseaa was removed from the medium’s head, and the medium shook the pad from it. Kofi Duro and his *okyeame* watched closely how it fell to the ground and concluded from the side it showed uppermost, that Tano had indeed ended the consultation. The medium sat dazed for a few moments and then passed his hand over his face as if he awoke from sleep. He later told Rattray that he had no recollection of what he had said and done during the trance.

The rule and its exceptions

Space does not permit full network-, process-, context-, and trance-analyses of these two spirit possession rituals nor an exhaustive comparison on the basis of them. I restrict my analyses and comparison of the Ju/’hoan curing rites and Rattray’s consul-

¹²⁹ For the Twi text and translations, cf. Rattray 1923: 180-181; Platvoet 1983: 207

tation of Tano to showing that each conforms, to some extent and in certain elements, to the general model of spirit possession, but deviates from it in other important respects. Acknowledging these exceptions to the rule and analysing them is important, because they force us to give precedence to empirical realities, grasped prototypically and diffusely, in the study of spirit possession above our scholarly constructs of it in order to keep our *etic* categories open, revisable and instrumental. I will also briefly discuss whether the theories of Lewis and Douglas have any relevance for these two spirit possession rituals.

Network analysis

A striking feature of both the curing dances and the consultation of Tano is the isomorphism of the networks governing these two rituals with the most central and typical institution of their two societies: the hierarchical, political institution of the king and his court in Akan society in the latter, and the egalitarian, socio-structural institution of sharing of the Ju/'hoan bands in the former.

Rattray's consultation of Tano was pervasively structured in accordance with the institution of the Akan royal court. Three 'rulers' – Tano, Kofi Duro, and Rattray – were present in Tano's temple at Tanoboase, each with their own [35] 'courts'. As was proper to Akan 'kings', they communicated through their spokesmen (*akyeame*). The shrine of Ateakosea, Tano's *okyeame*,¹³⁰ was placed on the medium's head, and not that of Tano himself, and it was, therefore, Ateakosea who was believed to have taken possession of the medium and to speak as the *alter ego* of Tano, the 'king within the rock'.¹³¹ The priest with the red hair acted as spokesman on behalf of Kofi Duro, *ohene* of Tanoboase, whilst the Taa Keseè priest served as Rattray's spokesman when Rattray's request had to be put before Tano. As Government Anthropologist, Rattray was clearly perceived as a highly placed representative of *aban*, the colonial government.¹³² Akan spirit possession of this kind fits in well with the general traits and sociological functions which I.M. Lewis postulated for central spirit possession.¹³³

Significantly, it was Rattray who offended against the rules of this institution by responding personally to Tano's decisions. His response also showed him to be the outsider in this ritual: he was permitted to speak because, as the Akan proverb says, 'the stranger does not break laws' (*ohoho nto mmara*).¹³⁴ His position in this event was an anomalous one. On the one hand, the Bono had already nicknamed him *oburoni okom-*

¹³⁰ His name expresses this function of listening to, and speaking on behalf of, the king: *ate a, ko se a*, 'what he has heard [from the king's mouth in private], he comes to speak [in public]' (cf. also Rattray 1923: 178; Warren 1974: 429)

¹³¹ Tano's praise-name *obomuhene*, 'king in the rock', referred to Tano holding court in *Tano bodan*, 'Tano's rock-chamber', a cave in the hills outside Tanoboase; cf. Rattray 1923: 183, 185, 186, 188-194; Warren 1974: 102, 110, 121, 129; Platvoet 1982: 92-93

¹³² Cf. Platvoet 1983: 211-214

¹³³ Cf. Lewis 1989²: 29-30, 114-159. More recent Akan types of spirit possession, many of them imported from non-Akan areas, have not, or only to a very limited degree, been integrated into the Akan traditional political system (cf. Platvoet 1973). They belong to the other major type distinguished by Lewis as 'peripheral spirit possession' (cf. Lewis 1989²: 27-31, 59-113)

fo, ‘the white [traditional] medium-priest [of an Akan god]’, because of his exceptional interest in traditional religion,¹³⁵ and because he participated in this ritual as a (more or less) sincere supplicant of Tano. On the other hand, he was distinctively present as a high-ranking officer of the colonial government, who had the full backing of the local District Commissioner,¹³⁶ and himself held a commission from the government of the colony for this research. As such, he was actually the person with the greatest power present. Conflicting and contradictory hierarchies, traditional as well as colonial, were therefore shaping, constraining and, to some degree, confusing this communication event. It is also significant that it was the representative of the political capital Takyiman, the priest of the state-god (*omanbosom*) Taa Mensah Keseé, who acted as Rattray’s *okyeame*; and it was *he* who had already assented to the request which Tano refused. The Taa Mensah Keseé priest also repeated Rattray’s response, spoken in Asante-Twi, in Bono-Twi, thereby acting – again – as Rattray’s linguist.¹³⁷

No hierarchy ruled the network underlying the Ju/’hoansi curing dances. Instead, based as it was on sharing, and in particular on the sharing of *n/um*, it was truly egalitarian. The Ju/’hoansi trained as many ‘owners of *n/um*’ as they could and made no use of possession as an avenue to power, prestige, status or income, at least not among themselves.¹³⁸ It would also have been difficult to use it for those purposes, for they were possessed by *n/um*, a non-personal, non-addressable something, that did not, and could not, receive a cult. Ju/’hoan curing dances are, to my knowledge, the only spirit possession ritual in the history of religions, so far, in which mediums are possessed by a non-empirical something instead of a meta-empirical someone. Moreover, that intra-empirical something constituted the heart of Ju/’hoan religion. It was, however, unfit to [36] be presented, and to function, as an intelligent being and thus was not at all suited for establishing hierarchical relationships of power. As Ju/’hoan curing dances served an egalitarian society and were unfit for legitimising or de-legitimising power, they did not fit either of I.M. Lewis’ types of spirit possession.¹³⁹ The Ju/’hoan data presented in this article, and San, or Bushmen, curing dances generally seem to confirm, however, a central element of the grid-group theory of Mary Douglas predicting that ‘trance [...] will be more approved and welcomed the weaker the structuring of society’,¹⁴⁰ That is certainly the case in Ju/’hoan curing dances.

The networks underlying the Ju/’hoan curing dances, however, were marked too by the clear divisions and oppositions that also marked Ju/’hoan social life, especially those between males and females, and those between the members of the band and outsiders. In the context of curing dances, the unwanted aliens were ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa, and the

¹³⁴ For Twi proverbs on the position of the ‘stranger’ (*ohoho*) in Akan societies, cf. Akrofi n.y.: 82-83

¹³⁵ Rattray 1923: 152

¹³⁶ Rattray 1923: 152

¹³⁷ In pre-colonial and colonial times, *okyeame* was commonly, but wrongly, translated as ‘linguist’, restricting this office, in Eurocentric fashion, to the translation of messages delivered by Europeans at an Akan court

¹³⁸ Some did when they were called upon to serve outsiders, such as Tswana farmers

¹³⁹ Cf. Platvoet 1999: 49-51

¹⁴⁰ Douglas 1970: 104; 1982: 74

//*gauwasi*. The logic of their introvert society, built on maintaining harmony by sharing, required the Ju/'hoansi to attribute the mystical causes of dissent, disease and death among them to beings beyond the borders of their bands. They believed in ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa and the //*gauwasi*, but only to the extent of blaming and rejecting them, rather than to serve or trust them. In the terms of the grid/group theory of Mary Douglas, the Ju/'hoansi had virtually no grid, or internal hierarchy, and a weak group, or boundary consciousness, in respect of fellow San. But they cultivated a virulently strong border towards 'aliens', in particular the supernatural ones. That, says Douglas, explains why they not only approved and welcomed possession by *n/um*, but were also ambivalent towards it.¹⁴¹

Process analysis

Process analysis is concerned with a ritual as a communicative event, and with the business transacted in it. In a spirit possession event, the communication is normally of the dialogical type, because it is believed that the spirit is present, can be addressed face-to-face, and can respond, by virtue of its possessing the medium. Rattray's consultation of the god Tano is an excellent example of this dialogical conversation, albeit that Tano, as Akan court etiquette demanded, did not speak personally but rather transacted business through his mouthpiece, Ateakosea.

Ju/'hoansi curing dances are once again a curious exception to the average spirit possession event. The possessing 'agent', *n/um*, was powerfully present, but only as shared out 'medicine' believed to be active in healing and protecting the members of the band to whom it was transferred by the owners of *n/um*, and in empowering the owners of *n/um* and the novices on their way to becoming owners of *n/um*. It could not be addressed, nor did it respond. There was therefore no communication in the sense of an exchange of messages between intelligent, addressable, responsive and responsible personal beings. The communication was that of the exchange of gifts established by Marcel Mauss as the central institution of 'archaic' societies founding and fostering reciprocity and solidarity in them.¹⁴²

[37] Even so, the curing dances were communicative events of a superbly dramatic kind. Moreover, like the wordless *n/um* songs, their communicative power lay primarily in the ritual actions, and hardly in words. The principle communicative actions were sharing and chasing off. The first was sharing the joy of singing and dancing, the teaching of and caring for the novice dancers, and the sharing out of *nu/m* to all the members of the band. The second was the exorcism, time and again, of what the Ju/'hoansi to be the source of all evil, the unholy trinity of ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa and the //*gauwasi*. Ju/'hoan curing dances were rituals of inclusion of the members of the band, and of exclusion of the supernaturals who were told emphatically that they were not part of human society. And this brings me to context analysis.

¹⁴¹ Douglas 1970: 107-109; 1982: 77-81

¹⁴² Cf. Mauss 1925, 2016

Context analysis

A major subject to be studied in context analyses is what 'secular'/non-religious (i.e. social, political, economical, etc.) functions spirit possession rituals, or events, have in the society in which they are enacted at a particular place time. One obvious result of the Ju/'hoansi confronting the supernaturals as their enemies and exorcising them was that the curing dances greatly strengthened the bonds amongst the Ju/'hoansi themselves. War on outsiders eliminates or reduces internal divisions. Rituals of confrontation and exclusion of 'aliens' and 'enemies' are immensely powerful instruments for establishing the cohesion of a society.¹⁴³

The situation was quite different in the ritual consultation of Tano on behalf of Rattray on Friday, 5 May 1922. The Bono religious and political establishment with whom Rattray was negotiating before and during this event was clearly internally divided, and neither able, nor willing to stage a war, ritual or real, in the interests of regaining full internal solidarity and cohesion. Moreover, the British colonial governments in West Africa were actively pursuing the 'Dual Mandate' policy of governing subject peoples through their own traditional rulers, most of who were actually puppets who had won the contest for the throne with the backing of the colonial authorities. The Bono political establishment in the capital Bono-Takyiman, represented in this matter by the *okomfo* of the state-god Taa Mensah Keseè, was quite subservient and willing to accommodate almost all of Rattray's wishes, precisely because he was a high-ranking officer in the colonial government. The spiritual centre, Tano's priests at his courts in the village of Tano-boase and in his cave, *Taa Koraa Bodan*, showed more backbone, dignity and diplomacy by refusing the request, and by forestalling alienation through granting Rattray an important favour as compensation. He was taken to the two dwelling places of Tano in nature: *Taa Koraa Bodan*, the cave of Tano, and the source of the river Tano, 'variously known as *Obo tirim* (at the head of the rock), *Tano atifi* (at the head of the Tano), and *Tanom* (in the Tano)'.¹⁴⁴

Context analysis also examines those elements in the context (ecological, economical, historical, etc.) of a spirit possession ritual which exert an important [38] influence on its morphology or content. Such contexts may be endogenous, and have shaped and constrained the ritual for a long time, or exogenous, and have begun to affect a ritual only recently, or, more often, to develop new varieties of it. Examples of the endogenous kind have already been mentioned above, to wit, the Akan court model in Tano's consultation and the combined effects of ecology, demography, sharing and an egalitarian social structure that have shaped the Ju/'hoan curing dances for many millennia.

Of the exogenous, more recent kind of context, one example is worth mentioning, that of the collusion between the colonial government of the Gold Coast and the Christian missions. By 1920, colonial rule had been securely established, and a transformation of the economy was well under way. The situation offered new opportunities for many people, but required a measure of formal education. This was made available on a

¹⁴³ Cf. Platvoet 1995, 1996a

¹⁴⁴ Rattray 1923: 197

massive scale by the many different Christian missions active in the Gold Coast at the time with the full backing and limited financial assistance of the colonial government. The Christian missions, however, were quite eager to foot the bill for the schools, hospitals, and other modernisation programmes, because they provided them with very effective means of competition for adherents between themselves. They were eager to initiate mass ‘conversion’ to the several modes of Christianity by offering literacy and the Christian religion in a package deal.¹⁴⁵ It is clear from Tano’s remarks on the shift of religious allegiances among ‘his children’ – the traditional believers –, that the priests at Tanoboase were very much aware of these developments. In the tolerant, adoptive and adaptive spirit of the non-doctrinal community religions, they did not oppose them, for one reason because they viewed Christianity as just another kind of *nyamesom*, ‘service of god’ (in Dutch: *godsdiens*; in English: religion). At the same time, Tano emphatically asserted his own divinity - *meara mu* ‘Nyame ba ne, ‘myself, however, I am god’s [divine] child’ - and also asserted his ability and willingness to protect the white man (*oburoni*) Rattray, should he become a devotee of Tano.¹⁴⁶

Trance analysis

There are only two remarkable elements here. The first has to do with memory. The A-teakosea medium suffered *amnesia*. Loss of memory of what he had said and done, however, was not merely neurological. It was also a ‘normal’, culturally conditioned trait of Akan possession. It served to strengthen the common belief of the Akan that mediums were really possessed. It also absolved the mediums, and in this case also the priests of Tanoboase, from responsibility for the unpleasant elements contained in the messages to be conveyed.

Not only did amnesia protect and strengthen belief, it was also a strategy for concealing the power, political or otherwise, which the medium actually had and indeed used. The Ju’hoan *n/um*-owners, however, suffered amnesia only in the initial phases of their careers as trance dancers. The better they mastered [39] dissociation, the more they cultivated the memory of their (culture-bound) experiences during *!kia*. After the trance dances, they spoke about them openly, and have probably done so for thousands of years. They also recorded the memories of their trance visions in the innumerable rock paintings that are found all over Southern Africa, and which represent the longest art tradition humankind has ever known.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Cf. for Ghana, Platvoet 1979: 566-575; for Sub-Saharan Africa, cf. Platvoet 1996b: 61-62; 1998c. Cf. also Platvoet 1996b: 55-57 on the ‘intellectualist’ theory of Robin Horton (1971, 1975) that the big numerical successes of Islam and Christianity in Africa in the 20th century may be accounted for by the micro/macro shift in cosmology brought about by the colonisation of Africa. Horton’s theory suggests that the mental shift from the ‘micro’ space and time world of [46] the ‘African village world’ to the ‘macro’ globalising world of the colonial empires caused Africans to adopt Christianity or Islam as an adaptation to this shift in their mental worlds. Cf. however also Seat II 2016 for a critical discussion of Horton’s intellectualist theory.

¹⁴⁶ Rattray 1923: 181

¹⁴⁷ Platvoet 1999a: 8-11, 44-48

The second element has to do with the procedures for entering into trance. The Ju/'hoan trance dancers used the whole battery of the standard means for entering into public hyperkinetic dissociation: the fierce, monotonous sonic drive of the clapping and singing of the women, and the rattling of the rattles on the dancers' stamping feet; the photic drive of the flames of the central dance fire; the exertion of the vigorous dancing; and cultural expectation, to wit, the strong feeling that it was perfectly normal – a calling even – for them to enter that altered state of consciousness under these ritual conditions.

The Tano consultation was exceptional in that the Ateakosea medium needed none of the usual driving forces – sonic and photic drive, exertion or drugs – to enter into the required ASC. He slipped into a deep trance on the basis of cultural expectation only, by his mandate to carry Ateakoseaa, and the silence of intense expectation. The dignified quiet of diplomatic conversation reigned paramount during the consultation between Tano, the Preserver and King-inside-the-Rock (Tano *Taa Kora Obomuhene*), and Rattray, despite the hyperkinetic state of the medium's body, which nonetheless did not prevent him from securely balancing the Ateakosea shrine upon his head throughout the rite.

In conclusion

I conclude this article by emphasising two general points of methodology that emerge from this study. One is that these two spirit possession rituals and their religious settings do not substantiate the Western religious dichotomies of the supernatural *versus* the natural or empirical realms, the spiritual *versus* the material, and the holy *versus* the profane.

The first two dichotomies are not applicable to these rites and religions, because the participants in these rituals conceived them as continuous and intermingling realms. Although the unseen and the seen were to some degree conceptually distinct for them, they were perceived nevertheless as substantively overlapping, and often even as fully identical. This was especially so in Akan traditional religion in which Nyame was the (unseen) creator-god as well as the visible sky, and descended on earth as rain, to become rivers and lakes, and the gods on earth. Tano, likewise, was not only Nyame's eldest son, the greatest of the Akan *atano* gods, and *obomuhene*, 'king inside the rock',¹⁴⁸ but he was also the rock, the source of the river Tano, and the river Tano itself.

In a different way, this is also true of Ju/'hoan religion. It fostered [40] belief in unseen realities of both the spiritual or meta-empirical, and the material or intra-empirical, kinds. God, //Gauwa and the //gauwasi belonged mainly to the meta-empirical, but were not without their material trappings, and *n/um* was part of the intra-empirical, human world, but was not without certain spiritual qualities.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Rattray 1923: 183, 185, 186, 191, 192; Platvoet 1983: 208-211

The third modern Western conceptual dichotomy, the sacred *versus* the profane, is also totally inapplicable and analytically irrelevant to these events and these religions, and conceptually and theoretically misleading in their study.

More important, however, is the second point. In Ju/'hoan religion, the hierarchy inherent in these three dichotomies is inverted and thereby subverted. *N/um* is conceived as located in the bodies of the *n/um*-owners, and as part of the world of humans in several other ways. *N/um* is the focus of Ju/'hoan religion and the mainstay of Ju/'hoan social life, whilst God, the demi-god and the dead are not. In Ju/'hoan eyes, they are both sources of evil and unwanted aliens. This is also true, but in a different way, for Akan religion. The gods in nature must be tamed by being immersed in, and constrained by, the four additional man-made forms that made them not only more visible and tangible, but also turned them into *fiēbosom* (civil parts of human society) and as such addressable, and even, as 'medicines', consumable. They manageable and trustworthy only as part of the networks that constituted human society, albeit even then only to a certain degree.

These religions prove that Western categories such as the three dichotomies mentioned are provincial and that the hierarchies they imply are culturally contingent and arbitrary. They have analytical value only for religions of their own Western kind, and not for these African preliterate indigenous religions. The construction of analytical categories that do not import foreign biases into the description and explanation of these religions is, in my view, by far the most difficult, and most important, task with which these religions confront the modern Science of Religions.

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