

Praenotandum: This article was published in:

Karen Ralls-MacLeod & Graham Harvey (eds.) 2000, *Indigenous Religious Musics*. Aldershot, etc.: Ashgate, 2000: 122-135

The page numbers of the original publications are indicated in bold and between square brackets. It had endnotes on pp. 133-134. This version has footnotes.

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CHASING OFF GOD: SPIRIT POSSESSION IN A SHARING SOCIETY

This chapter deals with spirit possession in one of the oldest group of indigenous religions of Africa, the ‘curing dances’ of the Juho/’ansi, a San, or Bushman, society in the Kalahari in Southern Africa. Juho/’an religion and spirit possession are in many ways unique. Both deviate significantly from what we normally find among the indigenous religions elsewhere in Africa and the world.

My contribution has six parts. In the first, I briefly explain the notion of ‘spirit possession’. In parts two and three, I present data on the social and religious settings of the Juho/a’n curing dances: Juho/’an society and religion. In part four, I analyse Juho/’an spirit possession itself, and in part five I discuss Juho/’an pedagogics of dissociation by which the Juho/’ansi train their new mediums, of which they need a large number. In the last part, I present the traits that make Juho/’an spirit possession special.

Spirit possession

Spirit possession may be described in a preliminary way as those rituals in which at least one participant publicly enters into a ‘trance’, or ‘altered state of consciousness’ (ASC). Four features usually mark it. Firstly, a person in trance is, to a certain degree, not in a normal way in touch with his or her social environment: he, or she, is dissociated. Secondly, that person is often in a state of considerable bodily agitation, or *hyperkinesis*, and exhibits a certain loss of muscle and motor control, more especially in the early phase of a ‘spirit possession career’ and in certain kinds of spirit possession. Thirdly, the dissociated person often does not remember what he or she has said or done during the ritual. That loss of memory is termed *amnesia*. Lastly, in that state, the person in trance is acting out a character – or even several characters –, that are markedly different from his or her normal self.

This trance behaviour is interpreted by the other believers present as the manifestation of a spirit with the self, or character, that this person is acting out in his or her trance. They believe that that spirit has taken ‘possession’ of that person, and that the latter serves as its ‘medium’. ‘Spirit possession’ is, therefore, what anthropologists call an *emic* term: it expresses a meaning that the believers [123] themselves attach to what happens during a spirit possession ritual. It is also a religious term: it expresses ‘realities’ which empirical science cannot verify or falsify. It can only describe that the believers infer which spirit is present among them and communicating with them from the numerous marked changes in the medium’s face, voice, body language, attire, and actions during the period of the trance. These clues are traditional in a society, and the

believers readily recognise and interpret them. The medium, therefore, displays ‘coded behaviour’. However wild and uncontrolled the behaviour of the ‘possessed’ may seem to Western observers, they always display the behaviour that is prescribed by their role in the possession ritual. In one line: spirit possession is the public religious ritual in which the trance of a ‘medium’ is taken to signify that a meta-empirical being is present among the believers.

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.¹ 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 it in tiny bands, often using one of the many caves of the area as their shelter. Some of them have continued to practise till the 1960s, the life style, economy, society, and religion, that was common to all human societies throughout the world till 10,000 BP (‘before present’).² The San were the only inhabitants of Southern Africa till some 3,000 years ago, when the earliest Khoi-Khoi and Bantu cattle keeping nomads – the latter also practised 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 these were found only in the Kalahari region. They had disappeared from the other parts of Southern Africa, in part by intermarriage, but many of them had also been hunted down, as cattle rustlers, and exterminated.³ Of the 45,000 living in and around the Kalahari around 1960, all but 2,500 had changed from the traditional life of mainly nomadic food gathering to sedentary life, having become cattle hands and servants on white and Bantu farms, where they lived in great poverty as a despised proletariat. The few, however, who had continued in their traditional foraging life in relative isolation in the Kalahari by that time, were studied extensively by anthropologists between 1950 and 1975.⁴ The data on Ju’hoan religion and ‘spirit’ possession presented in this chapter are taken from that research.

The second reason for which the San are special is their physique. It differs considerably from that of Negroes. San have short bodies, males being on average 1,60 m. long and 49 kg. heavy, and females 1,50 m. and 41 kg. This slender built enabled the San hunter to track game for long distances after he has 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.⁵

[124] The third reason is that the San of the past were great artists. 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 but also on rock faces. The most recent rock paintings are dated to the middle or even the late 19th century, and the oldest one so far to 26,000 years ago. Most are a few hundred to a few thousand years

[133]¹. On the San, cf. Barnard 1992; Lee & DeVore 1976; Shapera 1930.

². Around that time, increasing demographic pressure caused some societies in the Near East to embark on the so-called ‘neolithic revolution’, i.e. on food production. They began to complement food gathering with very limited forms of keeping animals and/or tilling fields, and slowly, in the course of a few millennia, shifted the balance towards the latter.

³. For further details, cf. Platvoet 1999: 11-17 and the literature cited there.

⁴. Cf. Platvoet 1999, especially note 73 and *passim*.

⁵. For more details, and references, cf. Platvoet 1999: 12.

old. They represent the longest continuous art history of humankind. They depict animals, especially elands, in delicate polychromes and with great sophistication, and present scenes of human life in striking detail. Humans are often depicted in elongated shapes, or as flying, or swimming under water, or as figures combining human and animal traits. These rock paintings were mysterious to archaeologists for a long time. Their riddle has now been solved by research into San mythology, as recorded in the late 19th century by Bleek,⁶ and by anthropological research into San religion since 1950. It is now accepted that many of these rock paintings, especially those with elongated, or flying, or swimming, or theriomorphic humans, depict experiences of San 'mediums' during 'curing dances', the San variety of 'spirit' possession.⁷

The Ju/'hoansi speak the !Kung language, the largest of the four San languages. They are tonal languages and among the world's most complex from the phonetic point of view because they have four extra consonants in the form of dental, palatal, alveolar, and lateral 'clicks'.⁸ In the !Kung language, *Juho/ansi* means 'ordinary people'. Two groups of Juho/ansi, three quarters of which were living primarily by food gathering and hunting in the Kalahari, were investigated between 1950 and 1975 by American anthropologists. One, of 900 Juho/ansi, consisted of the bands living in the Nyae Nyae area in Namibia. They were studied especially by Lorna Marshall.⁹ The other group counted 500 members and was made up of the bands roaming the close-by Dobe area in Botswana. They were studied by a team of Harvard anthropologists led by Richard B. Lee.¹⁰

The bands consisted each of a core of siblings – a few brothers and sisters – who were considered the 'owners' of one or a few permanent waterholes and the territory around – usually some 50 to 70 km. long and wide. The bands contained also the wives, husbands and children of these 'owners', and often also a few in-laws and/or friends. On average, a band consisted of some 25 members, but it might exceptionally have as few as four (e.g. when a family had just heaved off from a larger group because of discord), or as many as forty. Bands are better viewed as 'camps', for the Juho/ansi often stayed in one spot for weeks, i.e. as long as there was sufficient food around. A camp consisted in a number of windscreens built by the women, one for each family of husband, wife and children, and a fire in front of each of them, which was kept ablaze at night for warmth and to keep wild animals away, and was covered in day time. The fire was the real social centre of each family, and, in Juho/an perception, the row of fires constituted a camp.

Fundamental to a camp was the trust that its members would get along well and reach decisions by consensus. Mutual trust was strongly cultivated by the institution of sharing. They shared the meat hunted by the men and often also the surplus of the food that each woman gathered for her own family. They also presented each other with gifts of tobacco and the other articles they obtained through their trading networks. And also with the instruments they manufactured [125] themselves in their ample free time, especially the poisoned arrows with which the men hunted. In wintertime, the 'owners' of an

⁶. On Wilhelm Bleek, sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, and Bleek's daughter Dorothea, as recorders of 'Bushman folklore', cf. Lewis-Williams 1990: 35-39.

⁷. Cf. e.g. Lewis-Williams 1990; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989, 1994; cf. also for further detail and references, Platvoet 1999: 5-11.

⁸. They are written as /, !, ≠, and //. On the San languages, cf. e.g. Lee 1979: 33-36; 1983: 9-10.

⁹. Cf. Marshall 1957, 1961, 1962, 1969, 1976.

¹⁰. Cf. Lee 1968, 1979, 1983; Katz 1976, 1982.

area also shared the water and the food of that area for a considerable time with other bands (see below). Finally, and most importantly, they also shared *n/um*, healing and healing-power, in the curing dances, as I will explain below.

As nomads, the Ju/'hoansi had no use for more possessions than they could carry. Therefore, they used whatever surplus they had as 'social capital' for maintaining harmonious relationships in the camp, and for creating goodwill for themselves among the members of their band. By sharing without demanding, or expecting, an equivalent return at short notice, Ju/'hoansi practised what sociologists term 'generalised' – i.e. unbalanced and non-exhaustive – 'reciprocity'. It is the most important principle of social cohesion in foraging societies.¹¹

In the wet and warm 'summer' season, roughly October to March,¹² when there were ponds of water and water fowl everywhere, and other food quickly became more plentiful, the Juho/'ansi bands roamed far and wide through their territories. Basking in the easier harmony of the camp of one band only, the practice of the 'curing dance' possession ritual was usually at its lowest tide in that season. But it would be held at least once a month, at full moon. For the rest, it would be on as often as there was a reason to hold one: to celebrate the killing of a large beast of game that had brought plenty of meat into the camp, the visit of family or friends, or when someone had fallen ill.

In the dry and cold 'winter' season, roughly April to August, several bands congregated by camping at small distances from one of the permanent waterholes. They stayed around as long as that area provided them with a sufficient supply of mongongo, or mangetti, nuts (*Ricidendron rautanenii*), their staple food in winter-time, and/or other kinds of roots and bulbs to sustain their numbers. The intensification of social contacts in that period, in which e.g. marriages were arranged and young men might be subjected to the initiation rites, occasioned a high tide of 'curing dances', as did often also the increase of tensions, especially when food began to become scarce.

As 'total' performances, the curing dances always served several purposes simultaneously. They were held 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 Juho/'an society. They served also to prevent, dissipate, or solve tensions and discord. And in the minds of the Juho/'ansi themselves, their primary purpose, as I will show below, was the cure of disease, the expulsion of dissent, and the prevention of death and other misfortune.

Two thirds of a family's food was vegetable: nuts, berries, melons and other wild fruits, and bulbs, roots and tubers. It was collected mainly by the women. They were experts in gathering roots, bulbs and tubers with their digging sticks. The other one third was the highly prized meat that small parties of men, hunting with bow and poisoned arrows, and often also with the help of dogs, brought in. Food-gathering San enjoyed a relatively good life in 'normal' years – i.e. when [126] rain was sufficient and no other major catastrophe like an epidemic occurred –, for food was relatively abundant for these tiny bands. It was collected with limited effort in a relatively short time, which left them much free time. In addition, despite, or perhaps 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 authority and power

¹¹. Cf. Lee 1979: 117-119, 456-461, *passim*; Platvoet 1999: 22-23.

¹². On the seasons, as the Juho/'ansi distinguish them, cf. Lee 1979: 103; 1983: 25-28.

between males and females, and the older and younger generations.¹³ This was strengthened by respect rules: San were trained to avoid direct relations, and to be reserved, with persons of the opposite sex, and of the generation above or below them, but to be frank and outspoken with members of their own sex and their own generation.¹⁴

Violence, however, was not absent from this society. Verbal fights occurred when someone felt insulted by a ‘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 the Juho/’ansi never fought wars, they possessed no weapons developed for attack on fellow men, nor the means to defend themselves against them. But they could, and did sometimes use their short hunting spears, or their poisoned arrows, to kill an ‘enemy’. As the Juho/’ansi did not have leaders who could impose peace upon fighting parties, violence endangered the very existence of a camp. The normal way out was for the group to split before verbal quarrels resulted into physical fights, and each side to go its own way, or to join other groups.¹⁵ The curing dances had an important function in prevention of internal violence.¹⁶

Juho/’an religion

Juho/’an religion was as sparsely populated as was its society. It knew but the creator-god, ≠Gao N!a; a lower god, //Gauwa; the //gauwasi, or deceased; and *n/um*, ‘healing power’. It may even be doubted whether //Gauwa was actually a distinct god for the Juho/’ansi, or just another representation of ≠Gao N!a, particularly in his funny, stupid, spiteful and evil aspects. The Juho/’ansi told stories about ≠Gao N!a’s incest, cannibalism and other foolish pranks that made them roar with laughter.¹⁷ ≠Gao N!a was said to live with his wife and ‘children’ – the //gauwasi – in a two-storey house next to a big tree in the East, at the place where the sun rises, and //Gauwa, also with wife and ‘children’ – again the //gauwasi –, in the West, where the sun sets.

≠Gao N!a was thought to have created this world, but in a fumbling fashion. The first time, it went all wrong, humans and animals being undifferentiated and taking each other’s names and roles. The second time, the ‘proper’ order was achieved, but more or less by accident, as the unintentional side effect of the pranks of //Gauwa. But even that 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 presented woman with the digging stick and fire, that she might collect food and cook it, and man with bow and arrow, poison, and the short spear, that he might [127] hunt animals. But at death, he transformed them into the //gauwasi, the spiteful deceased whom he used to capriciously spread dissent, disease and death among humans by having them shoot tiny, invisible arrows into the bodies of humans when they were spying on them. As also did //Gauwa. He was also

¹³. Cf. Marshall 1976: 447-454; Lee 1979: 24, 221, 224-229, 457.

¹⁴. Cf. Barnard 1992: 47-51, 267-271.

¹⁵. 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.

¹⁶. Cf. Lee 1968: 51-53; 1979: 377.

¹⁷. 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 1999: 26-31, esp. notes 137, 141, 142.

believed to wander the face of the earth in the shape of whirlwinds in order to spread all kinds of misfortune among men.

At creation, ≠Gao N!a, however, had also given *n/um*, ‘healing power’, to humans.¹⁸ The Juho/’hoansi conceived of it as resident in the bellies of their *n/um kxau*, ‘owners of *n/um*’, at the base of their spines. It was said to be inactive, like a covered fire, in daily life, but to be set ablaze during the curing dance, making their owners ‘boil’ and ‘steam’ with perspiration, and able to share out its healing power.¹⁹ They also believed that ≠Gao N!a regularly appeared in dreams to the ‘owners of *n/um*’, to increase their *n/um*, and teach them the songs that were to be sung at the curing dances by the women; which songs themselves were believed to be sources of *n/um*.²⁰

The ‘unseen world’ of the Juho/’ansi, therefore, consisted of two distinct parts: a meta-empirical one of addressable personal beings: ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa (?), and the //gauwasi; and an intra-, or infra-, empirical one of an impersonal, non-addressable power or potency, which was fully part of the Juho/’ansi themselves and their communities. They regarded both with great ambivalence. They viewed the first as, on the one hand, the source of their ordered world in as far as it was ‘normal’, enjoyable and good. But they regarded it also, on the other hand, as the capricious source of disorder, dissent, disease and death, and as inflicting these out of indifference or spite. They viewed it, therefore, as evil and hostile, and as no part of their communities. They regarded *n/um* with ambivalence also, but for a different reason. For, although *n/um* was for them their main source of health and protection against the evil whims of god and the dead, and the most vital part of their world and communities, it was itself won only at the cost of great pain and through an experience of death.²¹

Juho/’an religion is, therefore, quite exceptional. It knew of no worship of ≠Gao N!a and //Gauwa, of no prayers to them, nor of sacrifices or gifts to them. The //gauwasi were no ‘ancestors’ and the Juho/’ansi practised no ‘ancestor cult’. But they also held no belief in souls, nor witchcraft beliefs, or beliefs in charms or ‘medicines’, whether for the good purposes of curing, protection, success in hunting or love, etc., or for the evil purposes of sorcery. They also had no priests, nor did they practise divination with the help of the meta-empirical. Actually, their religion consisted of one ritual only: the curing dance. And that was no worship of god, but a war on god, as I will show below.²²

Juho/’an curing dances

I will first describe the ‘four phases’ of the curing (or healing, or medicine) dances: the singing and dancing, the experiences of the ‘owners of *n/um*’ in trance, their ‘healing’, and their ‘war on God’. The Juho/’an pedagogical practice of ‘training for transcendence’ by which they encourage their men to enter upon a career as an [128] ‘owner of *n/um*’ took also place in these dances. I will describe that institution in the next section.

The Juho/’an curing dances (*n/um tsxai*) were recreation as well as religion, prophylaxis as well as cure, life as well as death, peace as well as war. They were night-long, multi-media song and dance performances of great symbolic depth and complexity. They began in the late evening by women lightening a new and bright fire in an open space in, or very close to, the camp. Curing dances consisted usually of three bouts of

¹⁸. Cf. Platvoet 1999: 26-32, and the references cited there.

¹⁹. Cf. Lee 1968: 43-45; Platvoet 1999: 30, 36-37.

²⁰. Cf. Shostak 1981: 295-296.

²¹. Cf. Platvoet 1999: 30, 41-44, 50-51, and the references cited there.

²². Cf. Platvoet 1999: 32-34, 49-50, 52-53.

some two hours of intensive singing and dancing, one in the early night, one after midnight, and one towards dawn which might last well into the early morning. Each bout consisted of a number of separate rounds of singing and dancing of five to fifteen minutes, with brief pauses for resting between them.

Its central symbol was the dance fire. It was the centre of four other concentric circles. The first was that of the women who sat in a tight row all around it, shoulder to shoulder, and knee to knee, facing the fire. They sang the *n/um* songs and produced their fierce rhythms by clapping with outstretched hands.

The second was that of the dancers, mainly the males, who heavily stamped the earth behind the women with small, intricate dance steps, in tune with the rhythms of the songs, to which they contributed by the rattles they had bound to their legs. They often danced in peculiar postures: with their arms stretched backwards, or with their body slightly bent forward and supporting it 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 trance (*!kia*) in the dancers. The exertion of the vigorous dancing, causing physical exhaustion and hyperventilation also contributed to it. So did the concentration of the attention of the dancers on the rhythms of the song and the dance, which synchronised them with the collective event and its cultural representations and expectations. In them, *n/um* was pictured as a covered fire at the base of the spine of the *n/um kxau*, ‘possessors of *n/um*’, which was believed to become alive and hot by the dance. This, the dance and the dissociation wrought 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 spine until it made their head swim. It caused them to perceive themselves and their environments in curious ways: their bodies elongated, floated, swam, or flew; things around them became small and flew also; and fire engulfed them when they felt the power of *n/um* to surge up inside them. These sensations caused new *n/um kxau* at times to try to break through the circle of women in order to enter the fire, or to take life fire into their hands, press it against 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 fire of *n/um* in them was more fierce and powerful than ordinary fire, and that they were more powerful than the *//gauwasi*, *//Gauwa*, and *≠Gao N!a*, the sources of evil. *N/um* alive made them see what was troubling everybody, and the sources of that trouble.

It was also believed that the fire of *n/um*, having become fiercely alive by dancing and dissociation, caused ‘owners of *n/um*’ to sweat profusely by *n/um* ‘boiling’ and ‘steaming’ in them. That, it was thought, enabled them to share *n/um* [129] out, and thereby ‘heal’ and ‘protect’. That they did, whilst still in trance, by stepping out of the circle of the dancers into the third circle, that of the area around the central dance event in which a number of little fires burned, at which those resting from the singing and dancing and other onlookers sat. To anyone in need of *n/um*, for healing, for protection, or for beginning, pursuing or completing a career as *n/um kxau*, the dissociated dancers would hand out *n/um* by rubbing their sweat onto them, and thereby, it was believed, transfer it to them. In addition, they would ‘extract’ from them all the evil that the *//gauwasi* and *//Gauwa* had stealthily ‘shot’ into them. They did so by standing or sitting behind them, placing their hands on their bodies, and then, trembling, sighing, panting and moaning, pulling their hands off them and ‘absorbing’ into themselves, with a few

high shrieks, all the evil that they had thus ‘pulled out’. Their *n/um*, fierce and alive, would conquer and destroy it there.

That set the scene for the last part of the drama of the curing dance, that of ‘battling’ the source of evil. That ‘battle’ was with those in the fourth circle, the dark night around the dance event, the //gauwasi and //Gauwa, who were thought to be lurking in the dark around the fire-lit area of the curing dance. Having ‘transferred *n/um*’ and ‘pulled out all evil’ from the members of the camp, the ‘owners of *n/um*’ would throw up their head and arms and, with a violent motion, ‘throw back’ that all evil to its origin, the unholy trinity of the //gauwasi, //Gauwa and ≠Gao N!a. That action would often be supplemented by other actions symbolising their ‘warfare’ against them, such as their yelling abuse at them and/or charging vigorously at them with firebrands to chase them off, back into the deeper darkness to which they ‘belonged’. However, that ‘warfare’ might also take the form of ‘wrestling’ with the source of dissent, disease and death in the camp. Feeling strong by *n/um*, hot and alive in them, the ‘owners of *n/um*’ would courageously ‘face’ the source of evil in their visionary trance, and command them, or plead with them, not to bother them any longer and to be off. Or they would face //Gauwa, who was regarded as in possession of not only harming but also of healing (invisible) arrows, and plead with him to assist them to cure the sick by shooting the latter into the sick and undo the harm he had done by shooting the harming ones into them. This ‘facing’ capricious //Gauwa was considered to require great courage and expose the trance dancer at great risk, for //Gauwa, it was believed, might arbitrarily grant the request for the life of the sick person, but equally, from spite and vindictiveness, kill him or her, or even the dancer.

Having thus ‘chased off’ the //gauwasi, or ‘faced’ //Gauwa, the drama of the healing by an individual ‘owner of *nu/m*’ would end by him emerging from trance. An experienced trance dancer summarised that 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.²³

*Training for transcendence*²⁴

Being based in a culture of sharing for the sake of the survival of an egalitarian society, it was vital for the Juho’ansi to educate as many *n/um kxau* as they [130] possibly could in order to increase their collective stock of *n/um* as much as possible. Thereby they tried to insure that they would be able to share it out abundantly in the near future. Every Ju’hoan young man knew that he was expected to try to become an ‘owner of *n/um*’ and 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 a long and painful process, which was, moreover, greatly feared because the first trance experience was known as *kwe!i*, ‘death’,²⁵ 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

²³. Katz 1976: 291, quoting an ‘owner of *n/um*’; for further references, cf. Platvoet 1999: 34-41.

²⁴. My paraphrase of Katz 1976.

[134]²⁵. Barnard (1992: 58) regrets Lee’s translation of *kwe!i* by ‘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’.

young Ju/'hoan males to overcome that fear, to accept the pain of the trance dance for the sake of the well-being of the band and guide them through the 'death' of their first trance. Although virtually all young males started out on this training, only about half of them completed it. The rest quit for fear of the pain and 'death', but continued to participate in the curing dances for just the fun of it. Which was considered respectable. Those who persevered were coached intensively by experienced, 'owners of *n/um*', especially by their father, father's brother, or elder brother. They would dance behind him, to give psychological support and encouragement,²⁶ to steady him when the onset of the trance began, and especially to assist him by 'transferring their own *n/um*' to him by 'shooting' invisible arrows (*n/um tchisi*) into him, or by rubbing him with their sweat. At the onset of his first full trance, the staggering novice was usually steadied by two 'owners of *n/um*', one in front of him, the other behind him²⁷ in order to 'carry him through' his fear and into *!kia*, and 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.

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.²⁸ Some told afterwards that they had seen them as real people, others as eerie ghosts, or as having only one leg and being suspended in mid-air. Most were said to have been silent, but a few to have explained why they were there. This visionary trance was thought to be a dangerous liminal state, because the body of the trance dancer was believed to be in this world and his 'soul' in the other. As long as he was in that state of deep trance, he was the object of intense care. The women intensified the singing of the dance songs, and the 'owners of *n/um*', who were at that time in *!kia* themselves, constantly rubbed him with their sweat, drawing all evil from him, blowing into his ears or shouting his name in order to inform his mind where it might find the body and persuade it to return to it. This continued until he regained consciousness and could be left to sleep off his exhaustion. 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, was a mark of the early phase of Ju/'hoan trance careers only, for the 'owners of *n/um*' preserved and [131] cultivated the memories of their mental experiences during trance and spoke much about them. It was these memories which they recorded in the rock paintings.

After this 'death' experience, upcoming trance dancers usually exhibited dangerous trance behaviour for several months, such as running into the central dance fire, scattering its red-hot embers over themselves and setting their hair ablaze. Others stepped in then to restrain them. They also dramatised the ritual of the war against evil by running into the night with burning sticks and shouting abuse at //Gauwa and the //gauwasi.²⁹ Their coaches then went after them to bring them back from the dark or attended to them when they again entered into the catatonic state of 'death'. Their tutors continued to coaching these young trance dancers until they gradually learned to control their trance state and slowly reached the stage, and the status, of experienced 'owners of *n/um*'. They were able then to slip easily in and out of a relatively light dissociation

²⁶. Katz 1976, 1981; Shostak 294.

²⁷. Katz 1976: 292-294; 1982: 47-49.

²⁸. Lee 1983: 107.

²⁹. Lee 1968: 47-48.

with relatively little loss of motoric control, to heal two or three times in a night of curing dances, and abundantly share their healing power with the members of the camp. They were also able then to enter into a trance for healing outside the context of a curing dance, when someone had seriously fallen ill and needed attention immediately.³⁰

The special traits

Juhoan curing dances were very special, first of all, because the most central feature of spirit possession was absent from it: Juho/'an trance dancers were not believed to be possessed by a spirit. In a spirit possession event, the communication is normally of the dialogical type, for it is believed that a spirit is present, is met 'face-to-face', can be addressed, and can respond by virtue of it 'possessing' the medium. Juho/'ansi curing dances are here the remarkable exception to the average spirit possession event: no spirit was thought to arrive during a curing dance among the Juho/'an believers for dialogical communication with them. The possessing 'agent', *n/um*, was powerfully present, but it was not addressed and did not respond. It was only shared out, as a 'medicine', and active in healing, protecting, and empowering the 'owners of *n/um*'. There was no communication with it in the usual meaning of an exchange of messages between intelligent, addressable, responsive and responsible personal beings. Juho/'an curing dances were, to my knowledge, the only spirit possession ritual in the history of religions so far in which mediums were possessed by a non-empirical 'something' instead of a meta-empirical 'someone'. Moreover, that intra-empirical 'something' constituted the heart of Juho/'an religion.

Even so, the curing dances were communicative events of a superbly dramatic kind, and ones, moreover, which – like the wordless *n/um* songs – were communicated mostly by actions and hardly by words. These communicative actions were two of a different kind: sharing and chasing off. The first was that of sharing the joy of the singing and dancing with all the fellow members of the camps; of the teaching and caring for novice dancers with fellow 'owners of *n/um*'; and the sharing out of *nu/m*. The second was that with the spirits. They were believed to be present in the darkness of the night around the event, not in the dancers in the heart of the event. Even at the margin, they were not welcome, but [132] driven off, time and again, together with the evil they had introduced into the camp, as the source of all evil. Juho/'an curing dances were a ritual of exclusion, of telling the unholy trinity of ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa and the //gauwasi that it was no part of human society.

Secondly, the Juho/'an 'owners of *n/um*' did not suffer amnesia. On the contrary, they cultivated the memory of their trance dance experiences: of the 'battles' they had fought in them with the //gauwasi or //Gauwa; or of their facing him with the demand that he assist them in the cure of the sick and desist of sending evil. They suffered amnesia only in the initial phases of their career as trance dancers. The better they mastered dissociation, the more they cultivated the memories of their (culture-bound) experiences during *!kia*, not only for speaking about them after the dances, but in the past also for painting some of their trance visions in the innumerable rock paintings that are found all over Southern Africa. They did so for thousands of years. Their rock paintings represent the longest art tradition of humankind.³¹

Another striking feature of Juho/'an curing dances is that it was egalitarian. The Juho/'ansi trained as many 'owners of *n/um*' as they could and these made no use of pos-

³⁰. Lee 1968: 48.

³¹. Platvoet 1999: 8-11, 44-48.

session as an avenue to power, prestige, status or income, at least not among themselves.³² 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. It was unfit to be presented, and ‘function’, as an intelligent being and thus seems not well suited at all for establishing hierarchical relationships of power. Juho/’an curing dances were performed in, and shaped by, an egalitarian society. They were unfit for either legitimising or de-legitimising power. They fit neither the type of ‘central spirit possession’, nor that of ‘peripheral spirit possession’, distinguished by I.M. Lewis.³³

The network governing the Juho/’an curing dances was, however, marked by the clear divisions and oppositions that also marked their social life, especially that between males and females, and that between the members of the band and outsiders. In the context of curing dances, the outsiders were ≠Gao N!a, //Gauwa, and the //gauwasi. They were even defined as *personae non gratae*, unwanted aliens, for the logic of their introvert society, built on maintaining harmony by sharing, required that the Juho/’ansi attribute the mystical causes of the 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 blame and reject them, not in order to serve or trust them. By treating them as their enemies, they greatly strengthened the bonds amongst themselves. War on outsiders forces internal divisions out. ‘Rituals of confrontation’ are immensely powerful instruments for establishing the cohesion of a society.³⁴

In conclusion

It is clear from Juho/’an spirit possession ritual that the Western analytical dichotomy of the ‘supernatural’, or ‘spiritual’, *versus* the empirical, or ‘material’, is not substantiated by Juho/’an religion. The two were not only conceived as continuous realms but also as overlapping, intermingling, and often as identical, [133] the ‘spiritual’ being ‘material’, and vice versa. Juho/’an religion knew of ‘unseen realities’ of both the ‘spiritual’, or meta-empirical, and ‘material’, or intra-empirical, kinds. God, //Gauwa and the //gauwasi belonged to the meta-empirical, and *n/um* to the intra-empirical. More important, however, is that in Juho/’an religion the usual hierarchy between the two was inverted. *N/um*, the ‘unseen’ that was conceived as located in the bodies of the ‘owners of *n/um*’ and as part of the world of humans in other ways, was the focus of Juho/’an religion and the mainstay of their social life. God, the demi-god and the dead were not. They were the sources of evil for them and unwanted aliens.

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³² Some did when they were called upon to serve outsiders, such as Tswana farmers.

³³ Cf. Platvoet 1999: 49-51; Lewis 1989.

³⁴ Cf. Platvoet 1995, 1996a.

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