"Mother! Sing Loudly for Me!": the Annotated Dialogue of a Basarwa Healer in Trance

by Polly Weissner and Flemming T. Larson

For years the Basarwa' trance dance has intrigued many people in Botswana with its powerful performance, its involvement of the entire community and its positive approach toward healing. Although most communities of desert Basarwa use trance healing, the !Kung are generally known to possess the most powerful ability to cure. In trance, with the support of the women in the community, who sing and clap, a master of trance works himself into a state where he transcends himself and enters the realm of the supernatural where the ghosts of dead ancestors live. Here he struggles with the ghosts, arguing that they should not take the sick person away, that he is not ready to go yet (Katz, 1976; Lee, 1967). Although ideas of exactly how sickness is caused and healed do vary from person to person, the idea of transcendance and argument with supernatural beings is central to !Kung trance healing.

The struggle is intense both physically and emotionally. As the energetic dance progresses, the dancer's veins bulge from the effort, he begins to sweat profusely and his healing energy, called 'n/um', boils up from the pit of his stomach, becomes vapour, travels up his spine to a point at the base of his skull, and then rushes to all parts of his body (Katz, 1976). He is overcome with pain and fear, afraid that he will lose himself in the realm of the supernatural and not return; only as he fights this fear and transcends himself can he share his n/um and use it to heal. Although many people can go into trance, not all can master this n/um and use it positively to heal. Throughout the dance, a master of n/um chants as he dances and heals, much of the time singing nonsense syllables, but other times telling about what he is feeling. To add another dimension to Katz's (1976) description of !Kung trance experiences, this paper will give translated excerpts from a n/um master's singing during a !Kung trance dance.

The dance which was recorded took place at /Xai/xai, a small community of about 200 residents in western Ngamiland and included members from most Basarwa and Herero camps at /Xai/xai. It was held principally for curing a 13-year-old girl who had been bitten by a snake and had a painful, badly swollen foot. The dance was unusually large with 60-70 participants and onlookers in three groups - the women sitting in a circle around the fire clapping and singing, some of the men dancing around them, and men, women and children onlookers. The women singing were very involved, as were the dancers, but the onlookers ranged from being totally enthralled to being completely casual, sitting in groups and talking. Since the night is long, people move in and out of these groups and only few 'hard core' sing or dance the entire night. The trance dance is a frequent event at /Xai/xai, sometimes held two or three times a week, so any one person may participate in one dance and casually watch another.

The central person involved in healing the girl was ≠Toma, a man in his forties, who is an excellent hunter, the central figure in his camp and one of the more powerful n/um masters at /Xai/xai. Unlike many !Kung who get their medicine gradually, through years of training with older n/um masters, ≠Toma received his directly from 'God'. One day while out hunting, he killed a duiker and hung it in a tree to collect on his return home. He then continued hunting, and when he returned to the tree, the duiker was sitting under it alive. He tried to kill it again and again, but couldn't and so brought it home, where his parents finally succeeded in killing it. They then cooked and ate it and that night ≠Toma became severely ill.
In his delirium, God came to him in the form of a middle-aged man in western clothing and told him he would receive the power to heal. Later an old n/um master healed him and from that day on, he himself has possessed very powerful n/um.

*Toma, like many masters of n/um is very willing to discuss his experiences of healing with those sincerely interested, as he feels that !Kung medicine is powerful, positive and to be shared with others. He was very cooperative about being taped during trance and was patient about listening to the tape again and again to decipher what he said and explain it when necessary. Because the dance lasted the entire night, only excerpts were chosen for translation — one from the beginning of the dance when *Toma is going into trance, a second from the most intense period of healing and a third after *Toma has temporarily been in a comatose state (called 'half death' by the Basarwa), wakes up and begins to heal once more, — representing a total of about 90 minutes of recording. The following is for the most part a word-for-word translation, although in some places it has been slightly altered to make sense in English. Each set of phrases was followed by long stretches of music during which *Toma did not sing or sang nonsense syllable — 'ah ha,' 'he he,' etc. These were omitted, as were several phrases which *Toma himself could not understand from the recording. These were difficult to understand because the microphone had to be kept at a distance, so as not to disturb *Toma with a strange object during trance. Explanation of certain aspects of the dance and *Toma's singing will be given on the right hand side of the text. Finally, the discussion of onlookers or that of the women during pauses in the singing have been omitted because they are fragmented, difficult to follow and often break up *Toma's singing. These conversations range from comments on the singing and dancing, to discussions of food and tobacco, to everyday gossip.

**Text**

*Toma: (Working into a state of trance)
I am imitating */Gauwa* (God).

(The !Kung use the term */Gauwa* to refer to three different supernatural beings. The first is the great God who lives in the eastern sky and is associated with good; the second, the lesser God in the western skies, is associated largely with evil. The great God created and named the lesser God. The plural form */Gauwasi* refers to the ghosts of the dead who live with the Gods and generally do what the Gods wish. *Toma says that here he is referring to the great God, because unlike most !Kung, *Toma feels that he can heal through coming into contact with the great God. It is not unusual among the !Kung for different informants to hold quite varied beliefs.)

I am imitating the medicine men.
I am imitating the medicine men.
I am imitating Hatshe.
I am imitating my father.
Because I imitate a medicine stick...
I am imitating those who teach medicine.
People here say that this will be a long night.
Brrrrrr prrrrr, that is what people say.

(another word for */Gauwa* or God)
(who was a powerful master of n/um)
(not completed)
(a long stretch of music followed by a repeat of these lines)

+ Toma says that at this point trance was just about to come on. The word *ldwa*, imitate, can either mean literally 'to imitate' or in other contexts 'to feel like'. + Toma suggested that here he is not yet fully in trance, that he learned the lines from his father, and so 'imitate' is more appropriate. Later, however, when his is in full trance and no longer imitating but really feeling like what he is describing, the same word will be translated as 'feel like'.

+ Tomat: (now in trance)
  Mother, mother, my father!
  It's bad.

(chee dole, means literally 'a bad thing' or 'a foreign thing'. It is a very common expression and can be applied to anything from a serious predicament to something only mildly unpleasant. Here + Tomat says he is feeling frightened and miserable.)

Who will I follow?
It's bad, it's bad.
Where will I enter?
It's bad.
And where will I jump off?
It's bad.
Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh
Kumbora (nonsense syllables)
Mothers! mothers! mothers!
Mothers! mothers! mothers!
Hu huh
Where will I jump off?

(enter the 'heavens', or home of the ghosts)

(jump aside or 'get out of this')

(How will I get out of this?)

+ Toma has gone into trance very quickly and is showing signs of distress. Others in the dance circle see that he does not hurt himself be falling in the fire, etc., and give him support, massage his body etc. Meanwhile most of the other dancers are still warming up, singing and joking. Early in a dance, young men, like young + Tomat, dance rather ostentatiously to try to catch the eye of the young women. Later, when the dance becomes more serious, they drop out.

Young + Tomat: (who does not trance)
People will insult me if I sing!
Ah ha!
People will insult me if I sing. (joking)
Eh he!
When will I be able to trance?
Oh hoo!

(or 'make fun of me')

+ Tomat: (in trance)
I am imitating *Nuruha*.
I am imitating //Gauwa's (God's) stick.
I am imitating *Nuruhe*.
I am imitating //Gauwa's stick.

(another word for God)
Tsolo: (working into trance)
Hey hey, it's a long night.
Look at what he (≠ Toma) is doing.
Hey, hey it's a long night.
Lift your voices!

(He asks the women to sing louder to help him go into trance, as it is their singing and clapping which is believed to activate the n/um (Katz, 1976).

1:00 a.m.
≠ Toma: (deep in trance)
I am trembling!
I am like a little child who is learning.
I am like a child who is stumbling.
I am like a child who is learning.
Mother! Yoo yoo eh hey!
I AM BEING 'Mi Ku Ku,' (or I am myself)
≠ Toma now is in full trance, feels that he is as he would like to be, leaves the dance circle and staggers over to heal the girl, singing and trembling:

A little child is teaching me.
A little child is teaching me.
It's bad.
My years here, it's bad.

≠ Toma says that here he felt that he had been dancing and trying to heal the girl for a long time, but hasn't succeeded in doing anything. Actually has only been there for about 10 minutes.)

Hiss, hiss, hum, hum
Where will I learn to heal this (her)?
Where will I learn to heal her?
I am imitating //Gauwa (God)
It's bad, mother!
People must hate me, they don't sing up.

(The !Kung believe that a person in trance who has entered the realm of the supernatural is supported and protected by the women's singing, and so will be able to return.
Here ≠ Toma feels the women are not singing loudly enough for him and therefore do not care about him, as he is in danger of not returning from he 'heavens' and thereby dying.)

Where will I enter?

I still am getting nowhere.
//Gauwa (God) should teach me.
Mother, mother!
A child is teaching me.

(enter the realm of the supernatural or 'heavens')
I am like a falling star.  
(The !Kung associate falling stars with death Marshall, 1962)

I am imitating //Gauwa.  
Mother! Take me!  
(or 'rescue me'. This is a very common saying of small children when they want to be picked up. It also occurs frequently in !Kung songs.)

Mothers!
I have been dancing so long!
My thirst!
I am imitating my father, but I am stumbling.

2:30 a.m.

≠Toma has left the girl and is going around outside the dance circle 'healing' onlookers. At a dance almost everybody receives some kind of n/um healing from those in trance whether or not they are ill. ≠Toma claims that what he does in trance is to look into and examine each person for sickness, which appears to him 'like a storm looming in the sky,' threatening it's victim. He then tries to ward it off and thereby prevent the person from becoming ill. In this way, n/um healing can be preventive medicine as well.

While ≠Toma has been healing outside the dance circle, four others dancers have gone into trance, but only fragments of their singing were picked up by the recorder. At this point, they have collapsed and when ≠Toma returns, they begin to crawl, holding onto one another to give each other support.

Tsao: (in trance)
I hold my hips.
Sing! Sing, ≠Toma and I are crawling.
Why don't you sing up! (Tsao also is asking the women to sing loudly so he will not become lost in the realm of the supernatural)

≠Toma:
I feel like a lion that the people are killing. (Other Barsarwa believe that the !Kung medicine masters can turn into lions while in trance. However, ≠Toma says he is not referring to that, but rather to feeling cornered and hunted)

/Gau: (deep in trance)
Old ≠Toma is a little child crawling in the sand.
The child is following you.
How are you doing Old ≠Toma?
The night has exhausted you.
Hoooo hoooooo he he.
Chaina, Chaina, Chaina

('Chaina' is the nickname of one of the dancers)

I feel like a dead thing.
(incomprehensible singing)
I feel like a dead thing.
I am following tall Kxrao,
I am following tall Kxrao,
I cry for myself.

≠ Toma leaves the dance circle once more and the others pass out around the fire. A few minutes later /Gau and Xr ao awake. /Gau's arm is getting burned and Xr ao says to him: "Why don't you take your arm out of the fire?" In the trance dance, somebody usually sees that the person in trance does not hurt himself, but this is done very casually so as not alarm the trancer. For instance, earlier when one man picked up fire throw it in the air, keeping one flaming stick, a women quietly took it from him and lit her pipe as if she had offered it to her. It is absolutely necessary that other participants restrain a person in trance when he wants to come close to the fire, walk through it, put his forehead in it, throw coals, etc.

≠ Toma: (in trance and trembling, looking at the other dancers who have collapsed around the fire.)

I feel like I am trembling,
I feel like a duiker. (referring to the duiker he tried to kill when he received medicine)

I feel like I am trembling,
I feel like a little duiker.
I feel like a child.
help!
//Oume (God)!
A young child is teaching me,
A young child is teaching me.
I am a small child who is learning.
Sing for me,
Sing for me,
Sing for me,
Sing loudly for me my mother!
I am singing,
I feel like something that is crazy (or drunk).

≠ Toma passes out in exhaustion.

Discussion

There is great variation in what different dancers sing during trance, so the above text gives just one example. The phrase "I am imitating", followed by "//Ga wu", "my father", some animal name, etc., is a very common one in the trance dance and many dancers in the Qangwa - /Xai/sai area say that their singing centres around these lines. The !Kung say that they tend to sing these things in trance, because "that is how their fathers taught them to sing." It is not necessary, however, to sing anything in particular when in trance; some masters make up their own lines, while others sing largely nonsense syllables. As with many other things among the !Kung, there is no set formula for how something must be done. In addition, although n/um masters participate together in a dance with the help of the entire community and not in competition with one another, each takes pride in his ability to heal and enjoys expressing himself and entertaining others by his individualized style of singing and dancing. ≠ Toma is less concerned with his outward performance than others. That is, he goes into trance and begins to heal quickly, while others take more time to warm up, performing amusing imitations of animals, etc. ≠ Toma's first singing is rather standard, "I am
imitating my father. I am imitating //Gauntwa." He says that his father taught him to sing that way. Once in trance, however, he says that he sings whatever comes into his head and that these lines are less likely to be repeated by others. In deep trance, dancers sing about what they see and feel, which depends on their state that evening as well as on their history and ideas about trance.

Toma's experience in trance, as expressed in his singing, is very similar to that of other //Kung masters (Katz, 1976). First comes the fear of losing himself and not returning from the realm of the supernatural when he asks "Where can I jump off?" and calls for his mother and father. Then comes the conquering of fear — "I am like a child who is learning". And finally there is the breakthrough into a state where he can heal — "I am being". What becomes apparent in the rest of the text, which does not come out in //Kung descriptions of trance experiences, is that throughout an evening of dancing, a //Kung master constantly falls back into stages of agonizing pain and doubt, as in "Mother, take me!" or, "I feel like a lion that the people are killing", which he overcomes again and again. During the trance, Toma felt humility and frustration at being unable to heal, but upon listening to the tape the next day, he said he had forgotten these feelings after healing successfully and seemed rather surprised by them.

The recording ended about 2:30 a.m., but the dance continued, with Toma and others in and out of trance and healing, until dawn. Although the trance is an intense emotional experience for many members of the community, it is also very well integrated into everyday life. Thus, just after dawn, the singing waned, Toma walked out of the dance circle, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, stretched his arms and went over to his hut to take several slow, deep puffs on a pipe of tobacco. Then he picked up his bucket and went down to the well to water his cow. Mid-morning he returned, slept for several hours and then went about his daily business.

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NOTES

1. The terms Son and Bushmen may be used interchangeably with //Batswana.
2. For further information about //Kung trance and religious beliefs see Lee (1967, 1968) and Marshall (1962).
3. Note on orthography:
   / Dental click.
   * Alveolar click.
   / Alveopalatal click.
   // Lateral click.

REFERENCES