

MAGICO-RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS, DREAMS, AND RITUAL TRANSFORMATIONS: TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TRANCE EXPERIENCE AMONG THE KHOI*

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ABSTRACT

In this article possible examples of trance-related behaviour amongst Khoi pastoralists are outlined. It is argued that altered states of consciousness were not unknown in the past and interviews with Khoi descendants in Namaqualand also indicate a knowledge of trance-like states. However, it appears that trance never formed a central part of Khoi religious expression. It is suggested that Khoi in close contact with Bushman groups could have been responsible for some trance-related rock art especially as the borrowing and transformation of Bushman beliefs is known to have occurred.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in altered states of consciousness in southern African archaeological interpretation was largely initiated by the rock art research of Lewis-Williams and his colleagues during the last two decades. These studies rely predominantly on Bushman ethnography and neuropsychological research and emphasise the shamanistic significance of rock art (Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988, 1989).

Rock art is seen in terms of symbols of potency, metaphors of trance experience, significant human and animal postures, entoptic phenomena, and hallucinations experienced by Bushman shamans. As a result the majority of rock art in southern Africa is considered to belong exclusively to Bushman hunter-gatherers whilst the depictions are regarded as a reflection of their ritual and religious ideas. However, it has also been argued that some of the rock art of southern Africa was executed by groups other than Bushmen.

Some publications (Rudner 1982; Rudner & Rudner 1959, 1970; van Rijssen 1984, 1985, 1986) have discussed the possibility that Khoikhoi or their immediate forerunners may have been responsible for certain depictions in Namibia and the western Cape. However, these ideas have generally been discarded by the majority of researchers since the Khoi are not known

to have painted on rock (Willcox 1985:167). Furthermore, it has been argued that there is no evidence that these pastoralists engaged in trance performance associated with physical, mental and social healing (Wilson 1989:4) despite the fact that descriptions and syntheses relating to Khoi medicine men have been available for many years (Laidler 1928:433-447; Schapera 1930:389-395).

The absence of trance is unusual, especially as Schapera (1930:399), in his monumental work on the Khoisan, has argued that a single religious system common to both the Bushmen and Khoikhoi can be identified. Closer examination suggests that trance-like states were not unknown amongst the Khoi. This paper is an attempt to outline possible examples of trance-related behaviour and point to possible transformations thereof. Additional data was obtained by interviewing the descendants of the Nama speaking Khoikhoi in Namaqualand.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS AND TRANCE

Little is known of the social organisation and religious system of the Khoikhoi as opposed to other indigenous peoples of southern Africa. This absence of first hand information is due to the fact that most groups were

either annihilated or acculturated/assimilated before their old way of life could be studied in detail. As a result researchers have had to rely on the observations of early travellers and other inquiring individuals (see Schapera & Farrington 1933). More detailed ethnographic studies amongst descendants of Khoi groups were undertaken earlier this century, most notably by Hoernlé (Carstens 1985), and others (Vedder 1928; Engelbrecht 1936; Carstens 1966; 1985). Unfortunately at the turn of the century most groups were in the process of social change whilst Khoi researchers were few in number compared with the number interested in Bushman hunter-gatherers and Bantu-speaking agropastoralists. Research on traditional Khoi groups therefore lacks the same multi-dimensional approach evident in the studies of other southern African groups.

The absence of direct evidence for trance among Khoi pastoralists can partly be explained with reference to the aforementioned factors. It is often difficult for fieldworkers to identify trance-like states and various ethnographers may interpret the same phenomena differently. A brief literature survey regarding Nguni diviners, for instance, has indicated that the trance content of certain actions, such as the "call of the ancestors" and the diviners seance, was not always identified although ample attention is usually given to the significance of dreams (Hunter 1936; Berglund 1976; Vera Bührmann 1984a, 1984b). This is rather unexpected especially since a broad anthropological distinction can be made between the trance divination, so characteristic of Nguni agropastoralists, as opposed to divination using divining dice favoured by the remaining Bantu-speaking groups of southern Africa (Hammond-Tooke 1989:105). However, the ethnographers dilemma can partly be ascribed to the fact that the distinction between dreams and trance visions is not always clear among traditional societies and dreams may entail trance-like elements such as "out-of-body travel" (Eliade 1972:33-66; Lewis-Williams 1987:168-170). Given this background it is important to reconsider Khoi ethnography and to identify those aspects that may relate to altered states of consciousness.

TRANCE AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF RITUAL

Ethnographic evidence suggests that aspects relating to shamanistic trance, as experienced by Bushmen, were not only incorporated into Khoi beliefs and ritual but were also significantly transformed to adapt to the relevant social milieu. This process was probably initiated two thousand years ago when Khoi-speaking hunter-gatherers adopted livestock and eventually became Khoi pastoralists (Elphick 1975:10-14; Smith 1990:58-59). Continuous interaction with hunter-gatherer groups, on the magico-religious level, could also have fostered the incorporation of shamanistic elements.

It appears that Khoikhoi society was more hierarchical and structured than the egalitarian Bushman hunter-gatherers (van Tonder 1963:126-130) which may

explain why overt trance-like states have not been identified amongst the Khoi. In an extensive world-wide ethnographic survey Douglas (1970) has convincingly illustrated that trance-like states in closed societies (with well defined social categories and group boundaries) are regarded as dangerous and specialised, so that ritual simultaneously becomes more explicit with magical symbolism being acted out. In contrast trance is usually welcomed, and deliberately induced, where the society is loosely structured, (social categories undefined, group boundaries unimportant) whilst ritual is not highly developed and where it occurs it is predominantly intended for social interaction. Here the inarticulateness of the social organisation in itself gains symbolic expression in bodily disassociation and trance-like states (*ibid*). The emphasis on ritual to the exclusion of shamanistic trance in more structured communities, such as the Khoi, is well illustrated with reference to rainmaking; the most important communal ritual traditionally practised by these pastoralists. This ritual contains remarkable similarities to the rainmaking of the less structured southern Bushmen. These similarities are reflected in: a) the elements of capture and release of the rain producing animal; b) the killing of the animal and the utilisation of its blood and uterine fluid to make rain; c) the analogical relationship between the flowing of the blood and milk along the ground and flowing of running water caused by rain (for a more detailed comparison and discussion of Khoi and Bushman rainmaking see Solomon 1989; Prins 1992).

The most significant difference between Bushman and Khoi rainmaking is that the former is trance related (Prins 1992). Bushman shamans either experienced hallucinations relating to the capture of a mythical rain-animal or performed rituals with living animals such as eland or cattle in association with trance (Lewis-Williams 1981:108-109; Campbell 1987:80-101). In contrast there is no evidence that the Khoi rituals entailed altered states of consciousness. Some ethnographers actually observed Khoi rainmaking rituals (Hoernlé 1985:75-76) and descriptions therefore should not be interpreted metaphorically. The Khoi rituals involved the killing of a "real" animal, and none of these accounts provide evidence for a mythical, and therefore a trance related, rain-animal. That which was probably experienced as shamanistic trance amongst the southern Bushmen became acted out in "reality" as a living ritual amongst the Khoi, thus neatly illustrating that in more highly structured communities ritual is emphasised to the exclusion of overt trance-like states. The implication is that aspects relating to shamanism were incorporated and restructured into the belief systems of Khoi pastoralists and that the trance elements not only became muted but also highly ritualised (*ibid*).

INTERACTION AND TRANSMISSION OF IDEAS

It has recently been argued that the Khoi pastoralist mode of production was exclusive to the extent that competition with Bushmen was removed by restricting and denying

these hunter-gatherers access to the means of production (domestic stock). Bushmen were thus kept on the fringes of pastoralist society in a subservient status (Smith *et al.* 1991:90). There are numerous examples in African ethnography which show that the ruling groups afforded ritual status to the original occupants of an area; the latter is usually politically subservient (Stayt 1931:11; Schapera 1969:153; Felgate 1982:13; Turnbull 1984a:157, 1984b:167). Ethnographic reading suggests that this may also have applied to Khoi perceptions of Bushmen even though they were regarded by many Khoi as belonging to a lower "class". Examples of the transmission and incorporation of magico-religious ideas, usually from Bushmen to Khoi, abound in the literature (see Dornan 1923:507; Schapera 1930:395-399; Engelbrecht 1936:73-74; Wright 1971:9; du Pisani 1976:165; Schmidt 1979; Prins 1990:112) and suggest that such interactions were frequent during the historical period if not earlier. Two accounts in particular, relating to contact with Bushmen, can be singled out in the identification of trance involvement among Khoi pastoralists.

The well known traveller R.J. Gordon witnessed a Khoi medicine man treating a patient in the late 1700's. His version is given below.

...saw an old Hottentot witchdoctor (though he did not want to admit it) making *goideni*. Sometimes he strikes the big Hottentots, and they dare not defend themselves. Everything he asked of the others they did not dare to refuse. In the evening I saw him healing and doctoring, and practising magic on a youth after their fashion. He made the youth come naked into his hut in the twilight. I had a candle lit in order to see better whereupon we went to sit beside the youth who had a pain in his foot. He rubbed his thigh and his leg, and holding his foot against his head and heart and did this a few times, after which he sneezed three or four times in succession and, opening his hand, displayed some beetles which he said he had taken from the leg. First, he rubbed some sheep fat on his leg, and rubbed himself with the rest. After that he fetched some thorn tree or *Mimosa* roots, bound together, which were hollow and in which were little stones rattling, and began his magic song always sitting, but with many contortions of the body, beating on the ground with bushes, often swinging furiously and shaking his head, while his wife accompanied him, clapping her hands. We could not understand him, not even Iteki (Gordon's Khoi guide), who said that it was the language of Bushman magicians. When he stopped, wet with perspiration, I asked him several questions, but all I could get out of him was that Tuiqua (God) had taught him in a dream. They are said to have jackal and other animals in their service who take messages for them to other magicians." (Raper & Boucher 1988:203).

Again the influence of Bushmen is clearly implied. Some elements in this account, such as the vigorous dancing, contortions of the body, profound sweating, and uttering the words of an unknown language, are reminiscent of trance inducement and experience although it is not conclusive evidence. Of particular significance is the healers statement that God had instructed him in a dream, the implication of which is discussed below. It has also been indicated that Bushman "doctors" were in great demand by the Korana (a Khoi group living on the Central Orange River) who became familiar with the curing dance and the healing practice called "snoring" whilst many of their "witchdoctors" are supposed to have been taught by the Bushmen (Engelbrecht 1936:73-74). Indeed Korana informants described a possible Bushman trance dance to Engelbrecht;

He also practised some form of exorcism by dancing with camel-thorn pods, etc., tied to his ankles, clapping his hands and chanting the syllables ho ho ho in monotone (*ibid*).

In this way the Korana could have become familiar with trance associated with shamanism as was experienced by Bushmen (e.g. where the trance experience is active in that the spirit of the shaman temporary leaves the body to fight those powers causing sickness and death).

Some Khoi, particularly those in the eastern Cape, could also have been familiar with mediumistic trance (e.g. where the trance experience is passive in that the diviner only acts as a medium for the ancestral spirits) as a result of intimate contact and assimilation with Xhosa agropastoralists who expanded into Khoi territory (see Harinck 1969). Again there are numerous examples of interaction in the magico-religious sphere between these two groups (Bleek 1857:199-296; Lichtenstein 1928:316-317; Maingard 1934:132-134; Harinck 1969:153). In contrast to the transmission and restructuring of religious ideas from the Bushmen to the Khoi, there was also an influx of religious concepts from the Khoi to the Xhosa (Hodgson 1982:17-40, 62-74). In other instances Khoi individuals became religious functionaries for the Xhosa, thus adopting Nguni methods and practise. Historical and linguistic evidence, for instance, indicates that the Xhosa employed Khoi individuals extensively as diviners in the recent past (Harinck 1969:153; Hodgson 1982:8). In traditional Nguni society the profession of diviner was open to anyone who had experienced the "call of the ancestors" and this included psychological events such as hallucinations, stereotyped dreams (Lee 1969:140) and periods of unconsciousness (Hammond-Tooke 1989:105). As part of the training programme the apprentice had to learn the special *xhentsa* dance of the divining seance, and how to enter trance so that the ancestors could communicate through him (Hammond-Tooke 1989:107). These factors relating to Nguni divinership strongly suggest that mediumistic trance was not unknown amongst Khoi who had been in

contact with the Xhosa.

MODERN-DAY "BOSSIESDOKTERS" AND TRANCE

The results of colonial domination, missionary endeavour, and intermarriage with other groups has led to significant socio-economic changes amongst Khoi descendants. Yet in spite of this it is possible to identify aspects of a remnant cultural tradition which suggests a tenuous continuity with the past. This cultural tradition entails the survival of some of the original language (although Afrikaans is the most common medium today) and some ritual, much of which is still embodied in myth, legend, and belief (Carstens 1966:93; Waldman 1989:19-50). Although missionary endeavour altered beliefs in supernatural systems, many aspects relating to traditional Khoi cosmology can still be identified. For instance only some cosmological change took place concerning beliefs in a supreme being. Traditionally *Tsui//Goab* the creator and powerful High God of the Khoi was regarded as omnipresent and although he died he also awoke from death several times; (See Hahn (1971) for other important supernatural figures). It was believed that *Tsui//Goab* sent rain and caused the crops to grow and prayers were directed to him to this effect. These similarities between *Tsui//Goab* and the God of Christian theology is remarkable, especially as such beliefs were independently derived (Carstens 1975:80). The most significant difference between *Tsui//Goab* and the God of Christian teaching is that the latter is seen as omnipotent (Carstens 1975:93). The rapid adoption of Christian teaching by the Khoi can be explained by the fact that traditional beliefs were in many instances compatible with missionary teachings. The result is that a blend of the old and the new can be identified in the belief systems of Khoi descendants as observed in Namaqualand, the Northern Cape, and adjacent areas (Carstens 1975; Waldman 1989). Systems of action relating to these beliefs, such as techniques of divination, are still found in some areas inhabited by Khoi descendants. These diviners are locally known as "bossiesdokters" in Namaqualand and Richtersveld although the original Nama word *!ga aob* has also been retained by some. Informants stated that "bossiesdokters" of today are mere amateurs in the art of divination but the general feeling was that these people are representative of Khoi medicine men of olden times. Whilst all the Nama descendants interviewed by the authors had knowledge of "bossiesdokters" of Khoi descent their whereabouts are less well known. Nevertheless informants, including those in the Richtersveld, generally pointed to Paulshoek (situated in the Leliefontein Reserve, in central Namaqualand) as being the "bossiesdokters" area of habitation. Informants were uncertain as to why most "bossiesdokters" live in Paulshoek but it has been observed that a large quantity of plant medicines occur in the Kamiesberge mountain range adjacent to Paulshoek which may explain their tendency to accumulate in this defined area. The

inhabitants of Paulshoek had knowledge of four "bossiesdokters" and only two were present at the time of the visit by the authors.

Perhaps the most famous "bossiesdokter" known to have lived in the reserve was Wilhelm Bahrends, who died a few years ago, and it is significant that the methods used by him were also mentioned by Laidler in the 1920's (1928:434). Wilhelm Bahrends passed on some of his knowledge to his sister's son, referred to here as G, who became a "bossiesdokter" in the 1970's. G told the authors that he used to accompany his uncle whilst he was collecting plant medicine in the veld. However, God had given him the talent to heal by showing him in his dreams which plant medicines to use. He said, however, that it was important to collect certain medicine on particular days of the month, especially at the approach of full moon (see also Laidler 1928:434). He reported utilising his talent to heal common illnesses (i.e. flu, etc.) as well as people who have been bewitched. These people are usually plagued by //has, a mythical species of spring hare with large red ears and superhuman powers, and the *tokoloshe*, a small hairy humanoid, almost certainly introduced from Bantu-speaking people (Schmidt 1984:38-39). G can usually identify the witch or sorcerer in his "minds-eye" but he never tells the bewitched person who the guilty party is in order to avoid conflict (this is in stark contrast with witchcraft amongst Bantu-speaking peoples where the identified witch/sorcerer is expelled or removed from the community (Hammond-Tooke 1989:73-90)). It was also said that one of the side effects of being in the company of evil-minded persons is that he himself feels physically ill afterwards. The "psychic" insight given to G, however, varies over time and place. Mostly he sees images in his dreams but it may also occur while walking in the veld. G said that it was important for him to isolate himself from other people in order to get insight from God. Occasions such as walking in the mountain to find plant medicine was mentioned as being particularly helpful. Sometimes he would see a patient in his "minds-eye" long before he arrived for consultation. G insisted that it is unnecessary for him to use divining bones as he is "psychically" talented and his faculties were improving all the time. His uncle, Wilhelm Bahrends, initially used divining bones but also abandoned them altogether because he only needed his "minds-eye". Unfortunately Wilhelm Bahrends later lost his mind and G expressed the fear that the same would eventually happen to him as a result of developing his "psychic" faculties. In his dreams he could travel in the sky to far away places. G particularly remembered looking down at cattle and horses while on these travels; he also emphasised the particular brightness of colours. As was previously indicated such "out-of-body experiences" is characteristic of trance and may indicate that G is familiar with such mental states.

J, a second "bossiesdokter" interviewed, also insisted on the importance of dreams in showing him the way to become a "bossiesdokter". These dreams, sent to him by God, improved over a period of time until he

eventually became a practising healer seven years ago. In accordance with G he helped people with normal illnesses as well as those who were bewitched. He could also "see" those responsible for witchcraft but would not tell the affected person. The location and means of preparation of plant medicines is shown to him in his dreams. However, unlike G, he does not remember visiting far away places in his dreams. Significant is the fact that J belongs to the "Traditional Healers Association of Southern Africa". He regularly meets with Bantu-speaking healers whilst Bantu-speaking and even European patients regularly visit both him and G. A notable example of such recent interaction between Khoi descendants and other groups is provided in reports of individual Bushmen who were seen hiring their services as "medicine men" in Namaqualand and the western Cape in the first half of the present century. Informants were vague as to the background of these seemingly detached Bushmen and could not indicate any relationship between them. However, it was reported that they came from southern Namibia and would attach themselves to the local Nama descendants for long periods at a time. One of these individuals, locally known as Saul Namib, lived in a shallow rock shelter outside Steinkopf in the 1940's. He periodically visited the local matjieshut homesteads of the area to "throw his bones" for those interested and would charge 10 shillings for this service. His divining set comprised mostly yellow pips, needles and shells which he kept in a small, leather bag. Saul Namib was mostly consulted to find lost livestock and valuable minerals, but he could also identify those people who had bewitched others. Informants were uncertain as to whether he experienced trance-like states. However, convincing evidence for trance inducement among such Bushmen in contact with Khoi descendants has been provided in an eyewitness account (Laubscher 1945:9-11). The validity of this account has been independently verified by a subsequent visit to the area by one of the authors in 1988. According to Laubscher (*ibid*) a Bushman used to visit farms in the southwestern Cape near Vredendal in the 1930's and 1940's. The account mentions him "throwing bones" for an old woman farm labourer in order to treat her illness. Later on the same evening he was offered a bottle of wine and tobacco, both of which he immediately consumed, in order to "read" the fingerbones of a skeleton which was unearthed a few days before. Half intoxicated and with smoke clouds puffing through his nostrils he gave an account of a vision which he was experiencing. This Bushman stated that, in his dreams, he could visit far away places where he would meet and talk to other people including spirits of the dead (*ibid*). As was the case with G it would seem that he was experiencing "out-of-body travel", thus also indicating a trance-like state.

Apart from possible experiences by "bossiesdokters" and other "medicine men" in contact with Khoi descendants a second type of trance has also been pointed out by Nama informants. Accordingly some people sometimes involuntarily experience

hallucinations and periods of unconsciousness. This experience is similar to epileptic fits although informants insisted that it represents a different state of mind. Descriptions of this state showed some similarities to the *thwasa* experience of novice Nguni diviners (Hammond-Tooke 1989:105-108) but it has different implications in Namaqualand. The affected person, unlike the southern Nguni, is not regarded with special religious and ritual status. In contrast these trance-like occurrences are usually ascribed to witchcraft directed against the affected person and is seen as evil. This affliction is treated by sprinkling water on the patient for short periods of time. It is believed that sustained periods of sprinkling would result in permanent loss of consciousness.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The evidence presented suggests that trance-like states are not unknown amongst Khoi pastoralists or their descendants. However, it appears that altered states of consciousness never formed a central part of Khoi religious experience as was the case with Bushman hunter-gatherers (Lewis-Williams 1981:78-101) and southern Nguni agropastoralists (Hammond-Tooke 1989:105-144) with whom they were in contact in the historical period. Both these groups had religious functionaries (shamans and diviners) who regularly entered trance in order to utilise supernatural power for the wellbeing of their societies. The fact that the Khoi never had a central religious ceremony connected with altered states of consciousness, such as the ceremonial trance dance amongst the Bushmen, is clearly illustrated with reference to their language. Nama informants told the authors that the Nama expression *Kai!hawos! nã sã hã* refers to trance-like states (also referred to as "beswyming" in Afrikaans). This paraphrase literally means, resting in a big dream (Haack pers. comm.), thus indicating a link between trance and dreams. Indeed this emphasis on dreaming amongst traditional Khoi "medicine men" and modern day "bossiesdokters" is particularly significant. Lewis-Williams (1987:168-170) has pointed to the close relationship between dreams and shamanistic visions as experienced by Bushman shamans, referred to as trance-dreaming. Such relationships seems to characterise other societies as well (Eliade 1972: 33-66). The spirits of Bushman shamans could visit God in a trance-like state or in dreams (Biesele 1978:163-168) whilst contact between God, other supernatural beings, and "medicine men", amongst the Khoi, occurred in dreams as well (see also Schapera 1930:357-395; Smith & Pfeiffer in press). Certain elements in the dreams of "bossiesdokters" seem to suggest trance-like states, notably the "out-of-body travel" and bright colours which G saw while dreaming (*vide* Eliade 1972). Trance-dreaming amongst "bossiesdokters" is probably a survival of traditional Khoi beliefs and practise as is suggested with reference to the account given to Gordon in the late 1700's (Raper & Boucher 1988:203) and the

general importance attached to dreams by Khoi "medicine men" (Schapera 1930:393). A link can therefore be postulated between dreams and trance amongst the Khoi, although this relationship is not as well defined as has been suggested for the Bushmen (Lewis-Williams 1987:168).

Thus although Khoi "medicine men" were the diviners of the community with their principal function being to cure people who had been bewitched, their treatment was mostly restricted to the application of herbal medicines. Great faith was also placed in divining bones and omens (Schapera 1930:389-395) and their only link with trance was restricted to dreams, some of which had trance-like attributes. In other instances aspects relating to former shamanistic practices among the Khoi, such as rainmaking, became highly ritualised whilst trance itself disappeared. However, more direct involvement of Khoi individuals in overt trance experience certainly took place where interaction with other groups occurred. Indeed ethnographic evidence argues for intensive contact between Khoi and other groups, such as the Xhosa and Bushmen, in the magico-religious sphere. Given the aforementioned it is thus hypothetically possible that the Khoi could have produced shamanistic rock art. It has been suggested, for instance, that the younger geometric engravings at Driekopseiland, in the northern Cape, could have been made by Korana or Korana/Bush people (Fock 1969; Willcox 1985). Such engravings could also have been an expression of ritual and religion especially as Bushman beliefs were incorporated and transformed into those of the Khoi (see Schapera 1930:395-399) and in particular with those of the Korana (Engelbrecht 1936:73-74). However, these and other examples of rock art possibly executed by Khoi artists should be thoroughly researched, evaluated, and placed within the appropriate historical and ethnographic context before any final conclusions can be made.

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