Trance Cure of the

!KUNG BUSHMEN

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

The speaker, whose words I have translated, is a Bushman. The !Kung Bushmen, a non-Bantu, click-speaking (the exclamation point stands for a click sound) people of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana, are one of the last peoples of the world to maintain a hunting and gathering way of life — until 10,000 years ago, the universal mode of human organization. According to the Bushman belief, each tribe and race in the world has a distinctive kind of medicine. The Bantu medicine consists of witchcraft and sorcery. The European medicine is contained in pills and in hypodermic syringes. The Bushman medicine, or n/um, is a physical substance that lies in the pit of the stomach of the n/um kausi, or "medicine owner." Medicine was given by God to Bushmen in the beginning, but men can transfer medicine from one body to another; this, in fact, is the main reason why Bushman trance dancers cure by laying on of hands on patients or subjects and by rubbing sweat. Normally medicine lies dormant. It is necessary to dance in order to heat it up. In their view, dancing makes the body hot. When the medicine reaches the boiling point, the vapors rise up through the spinal column, and when the vapors reach the brain, the dancer enters trance.

The dance ordinarily begins in the evening when a handful of women light a central fire and begin to sing. The dancing circle has a tight, symbolic organization. In the center is the fire, representing medicine, which must be kept burning throughout the all-night dances. Surrounding the fire and within the circumference of the circle, the women sit shoulder to shoulder facing inward. The women are primarily singers, dancing only occasionally. The men dance in an outer, circular rut, stamping around and around hour after hour, now clockwise, now counterclockwise. Beyond these two tight circles of singers and dancers sit the spectators—the children and those dancers who have paused and are temporarily resting.

The songs are sung without words, in the form of yodeling accompanied by syncopated hand clapping. There is a generally known repertoire of about ten named songs, each commemorating game animals or natural phenomena, such as the giraffe, rain, God, and mongongo nuts. Each has a recognizable tune and associated dance steps. However they do not attempt in the dance to imitate the behavior or locomotion of animals.

Phase I—Working up

Chaxni Chi ("dance and song")

Soon after the women begin singing, some of the men enter the circle to dance. They maintain a tightly hunched posture, arms close to the sides and semiflexed, there is a parsimony of movement, and the body is held stiff from the waist up. Short, heavy footfalls describe complex rhythmic figures built on quarter- and eighth-notes and formed into five- and seven-beat phrases. Artifacts of the dance include chains of rattles tied around the ankles, a walking stick to support the torso, and an indispensable fly whisk.

A dance lasts from five to ten minutes, with a short break followed by another dance of equal length. The women determine the beginning and end of each number and the choice of songs. For the first two hours of dancing the atmosphere is casual, even jovial.

Phase II—Entering a trance

n/um n/i n'uma ("causing medicine to boil")

Several of the dancers appear to be concentrating intently; they look down at their feet or stare ahead without orienting to distractions around them. The body is tense and rigid. The footfalls are heavy and the shock waves can be seen rippling through the body. The chest is heaving, veins are standing out on the neck and forehead, and there is profuse sweating. This phase lasts for thirty to sixty minutes.

The actual entrance into trance can be gradual or it can come suddenly. In the first instance the trance staggerers and almost loses balance. Then other men, who are not in trances, come to his aid and lead him around in tandem until the trance shouts and falls down in a coma state—called "half-death" by the Bushmen. The sudden entrance is characterized by a violent leap or somersault and an instant collapse into the half-death.

Phase III—Half-death

Kwi ! ! ("like dead")

Now the trance is stretched out on the ground outside the dance circle. While the others continue dancing,
When trance dance begins, above, the mood is more social than sacred. Later, below, it grows more serious as men, some with magical ankle rattles, wear a groove in the sand.

Phase IV—Active curing
n/um ("medicine")

The culmination of the trance episode occurs when the performer rises up to move among the participants and spectators to "cure." The technique used is laying on of hands. The performer's eyes are half-closed, He rubs the subject with trembling hands and utters moans of rising intensity, punctuated by abrupt, piercing shrieks. The trance performer goes from person to person repeating this action, ensuring that every person present is treated. He may break off curing to dance for a few minutes. This appears to reinforce the tranced state and to forestall a premature return to a normal state. If there is a sick person present at the dance each trance performer will make a special effort, often giving ten or fifteen minutes worth of treatment to this one individual.

Phase V—Return to a normal state

The active curing phase lasts about an hour, after which the trance performer usually lies down and falls asleep. It is common for medicine men to have two trance episodes per night, one about midnight and the other just after dawn. The dance continues all night, reaching a peak intensity between midnight and 2:00 A.M. when the maximum number of medicine men are in trance. It slackens off in the predawn hours and then builds up to full strength again at sunrise with a renewed round of trances. The dance continues until midmorning and usually terminates by 10:00 or 11:00 A.M. Some memorable dances, however, continue throughout the day and into the following night, terminating thirty-six hours after they have started. What makes these marathon dances possible is the change-over of personnel. Although there are always ten to thirty people actively participating in the dance, individuals are constantly

some men work over the trancer. They rub his body with their hands and with their heads so that the body is kept warm and made to shine with sweat. The trance performer is rigid, arms stiff at the sides or extended. His body may tremble, and he moans and utters short shrieks.
entering and leaving the circle in light is better. A dance is a major all-night affair that involves the majority of the adult members of the camp. It is worth noting that the dance is a social and recreational event as well as an opportunity for trance performance. Many of the younger men dance for no more profound reason than to show off their fancy footwork. There is a juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane in the dance, with the intense involvement of the trance performers contrasting with a background of casual social chatter, laughter, and flirtation.

A dance will spring up spontaneously if the informal organizers can talk up enthusiasm for it. Three kinds of circumstances favor its initiation: the presence of meat in a camp, the arrival of visitors, and the presence of sickness in a camp.

The trance phenomenon of the Bushman is a culturally stereotyped set of behaviors that induces an altered state of consciousness by means of autosuggestion, rhythmic dancing, intense concentration, and hyperventilation. These exertions produce symptoms of dizziness, spatial disorientation, hallucinations, and muscular spasms. The Bushmen were never observed to use any drug or other external chemical means of inducing these states. The social functions of the trancers are to cure the sick, influence the supernatural, and provide mystical protection for all members of the group.

The key symbols and metaphors that are found in the Bushman trance complex are the concepts of boiling, fire, heat, and sweat.

Boiling (n:'um—to boil) refers not only to the boiling of water on the fire but also to the ripening of plants. Water, like medicine, is dormant when cold, but powerful when hot. Similarly plant foods are dormant when young and unripe but become nutritionally potent when ripe. Thus there is a symbolic association of boiling water, cooked meat, ripened berries, and activated medicine. Sometimes this metaphor is extended, in a joking manner, to nubile maidens who have reached menarche. These young women are now considered “ripe” for intercourse and impregnation.

Fire (da) is the source of heat (khui) for boiling water, cooking meat, and for activating medicine. The central fire symbolizes medicine, and rubbing of live coals on the body, which is often done, was interpreted by one informant as a means of rapidly incorporating the sources of medicine. Another informant interpreted fire rubbing as a means of heating up internal medicine. These two views are not necessarily contradictory. Trance performers use the same word (da) to describe both the central dance fire and the fire within their own bodies, which heats up the medicine.

Sweat (cho) is the most important of the trance symbols for it is the palpable and visible expression of medicine on the surface of the body. Sweat is symbolically equated with the steam rising from boiling water and with the vapors that rise from the medicine boiling in the pit of the stomach.

The production and transmission of sweat is the key element in the curing ritual. Illness is lodged at
sites on the body of the sick person and can be driven out by the implanting of medicine.

There is an important contrast to be made between Bushman sweat symbolism and that of the sweat lodge and sweat house religions of North American Indians. In these rituals sweating is interpreted as a means of purification of the body. The perspiration, therefore, carries the negative or harmful substances out of the body. The Bushman belief specifies the opposite—the sweat is itself the positive and life-giving substance. In the sweat house it is necessary for the patient to perspire in order to be cured. In the Bushman case only the curer must sweat in order for the medicine to be effective.

The act of curing involves the laying on of hands, and the rubbing of medicinal sweat onto and into the body of the sick person. If the patient complains of chest trouble, the curer’s attention will be focused there; similarly with other complaints located in specific organs, the curer will work on the afflicted part.

In this ritual it is not necessary for the patient to enter trance in order for the cure to be effective. Often three or four curers will work simultaneously or in shifts on the body of a sick person. Thus there is no concept of individual responsibility if the cure is successful or unsuccessful. A demand of payment for the curer’s service is not a common feature among the Bushmen, although some curers do receive payment when they are called in to give treatment to neighboring Bantu peoples.

In addition to healing, another class of powers attributed to the trance performer is the ability to see the ghosts of ancestors, to see at a distance, and X-ray vision.

Spirits of the dead may be responsible for causing sickness. The ritual curer in trance is able to see the shade hovering at the edge of the dance circle. These shades are invisible to all but the most experienced curers. Having diagnosed the source of the illness the curer then pleads with the ghost to make it go away. The following chant is used:

Why do you bother this one?
Go away and don’t trouble us;
We love this man.
What have we done to you?

Some trance performers claim the ability to see distant scenes. On one occasion a performer stopped curing, walked to the edge of the circle of firelight and facing north described the scene at a Bantu village forty miles away. On another occasion a performer pointed to the horizon and announced that trouble was coming from the west. (As far as I know it never materialized.) This power was commonly attributed to trance performers, although I rarely observed it to be exercised.

X-ray vision takes the form of determining the sex of infants in utero. I lack a statistically significant sample of these predictions (only ten births occurred during the study period), so I cannot judge the effectiveness of this technique.

The Bushmen believe that, in the past, a few of the very powerful curers had the ability to transform
A dancer, wearing a sardine key on his ear, works into trance in the clockwise sequence beginning at far left. Near “half-death” in the second photograph, he is guided by a fellow dancer until he collapses. A few moments later, he rises from his comatose state and transmits “medicine” by the laying on of hands. He treats his assistant first, then a woman and her child.

themselves into lions and to stalk the desert in search of human prey. Lions ordinarily do not attack men, and hunters occasionally drive lions off fresh kills in order to scavenge the meat. On the several occasions when a lion has attacked a man, the Bushmen attributed the attack to a human turner-lion. Since such incidents occur perhaps once or twice in a decade, there is little reinforcement for the belief in the malevolence of trance performers.

It is instructive that, apart from this belief, all of the !Kung folk beliefs about trance performers assign
to them a benevolent, positive, and socially constructive role.

This positive evaluation of the trance performer's role is most clearly demonstrated in the offering of mystical protection. It is the performer's duty to lay hands on all who are present at a dance, including men, women, children, and young infants. Thus one sees the curers moving around the dance circle and through the spectators, treating each individual in turn, even though there is no sickness in the camp.

The !Kung Bushman trance complex resembles in some ways the classic shamanism of Siberia and native North America. Both the Bushman and the shaman complexes emphasize individual trance as a means of activating extraordinary healing powers. In addition the trance complex as a system of explanation of misfortune has some correspondence to the institution of witchcraft found in many non-European societies. However, the Bushman case differs from shamanism and witchcraft in critical areas.

The well-known distinction between the shaman, whose powers derive from direct contact with the supernatural, and the priest, who learns a codified body of ritual knowledge from older priests, is blurred in the Bushman context. Unlike the shaman who contracts directly with the spirit world, the Bushman trance performer derives his power from within the social body itself.

The Siberian shaman, to take one example, is a lone figure whose power comes from "spirit possession." This supernatural contract—he has entered into a pact with the supernatural—tends to alienate the shaman from his community, and it is significant that the shamanistic role serves as an outlet for emotionally unstable individuals. In American Indian societies, such as the Pawnee, the shamans as a group are set off from the community in a formal fraternity of medicine men. In a number of African societies the shaman may assume the role of an authoritarian prophet figure and may gather a considerable following around him. In all these cases the medicine men are collectively and individually regarded by the laity as awesome and potentially dangerous.

The Bushman trance performer, by contrast, maintains strong social ties with the community. Indeed, recruitment and training of performers forges bonds of affection between the novice and his mentors, and between the curers as a group and the rest of the community. The Bushman curers do not form an exclusive minority of unusually gifted men, nor are they organized into a secret society with special access to the mysteries. The ability to enter trance and cure is possessed by half of the adult men (and by a number of the women).

This close identification of the trance performer with the community at large becomes evident when we consider the logic underlying the Bushman conception of the sources of healing power and the sources of misfortune. The Bushmen regard the healing power as being derived from other living men. Illness and misfortune, however, are brought mainly by the spirits of the dead and other forces external to the living. In other words they seek within the social body for benevolent powers, but project the blame for malevolence to forces outside of the social body. Such a conception of health and disease serves to bind together the living in a common front against hostile external forces.

Societies in which sorcery, shamanism, and witchcraft are prevalent divide good and evil into a radically different projective system.

Dawn breaks on an intensive round of trance curing, which has lasted the entire night.
these societies, malevolence springs from within the social body as well as from without. Witches, sorcerers, and wizards are all conceived of as living humans who (willfully or not) cause harm. To combat this malevolence, the individual may resort to the services of another sorcerer sympathetic to his cause. It is true that in witch-oriented societies not all evil is defined as coming from the living. However, the logic of the system leads inevitably to such features as good and bad shamans, good and bad sorcerers, and a spiral of magical attack and counterattack.

When misfortune strikes a member of a witch-oriented culture, he is likely to seek its source among the living members of the community. In many cases the prime suspects are the individual’s close relatives. The hostility that is an inevitable byproduct of interpersonal relations is thus translated from the profane into the realm of the sacred. Nevertheless the hostility must be absorbed largely by the social body. The Bushmen, simply by attributing misfortune to an external source, have evolved a projective system that dissipates, rather than intensifies, interpersonal hostility.

It would be misleading to allow the reader to draw the conclusion that all the problems of social living are resolved by the Bushmen in the trance performance and its associated system of explanation. Although the role of “witch” is not an institution of Bushman society, there is a prevalent belief that a living man can (willfully or unknowingly) cause harm to others by neglecting to propitiate his ancestors.

I cite a case in which two old men, Kumsa and Neysi, had been feuding with each other over a period of years. Once, when Kumsa became ill, he complained that Neysi was indirectly the source of his difficulty. This accusation of witchcraft took the following form.

Neysi has spoken ill of me. His ancestors have overheard these words and now they have come to bother me. Why can’t Neysi control his ancestors?

In order to clear himself of the charge, Neysi was required to come to Kumsa’s bedside and to plead publicly with his offending ancestors to leave Kumsa in peace. In this ritual of reconciliation Neysi used an incantation that is similar to that used by a trance performer when he sees a ghost hovering at a dance.

This territory here is ours to share. Now the ghosts should just go away and let this man live in peace. . . . Because of my words the ghosts are trying to kill Kumsa. Now I say—Kumsa is my child. Ghosts! Go away!

However, this incident was an isolated occurrence; by far the more common attribution of malevolence was to a ghost who was acting entirely of its own volition—uninfluenced by human manipulation.

In conclusion, the attainment of a trance is a co-operative enterprise involving both women and men. The trance performance itself is characterized by a lack of secrecy and a high degree of mutual aid. The psychological rewards of the trance experience are available to a high percentage of the adult men of the community. All members including women and children enjoy the benefits offered by the mystical protection of the curer. The socially positive evaluation of the trance performer’s role in society is congruent with the Bushman belief that misfortune springs largely from the dead, and not from the agency of living men. The !Kung Bushman trance performance can be regarded as a drama in which the stresses and tensions of social life are transformed into a common struggle against the external sources of malevolence.