



THE THREADS OF THE SKY

The change I envisioned had specifically to do with Harvard's anthropology department—and by extension, with academic anthropology in general. For me, it was never going to be enough to present an academically acceptable thesis account of my time in the field and then regard my career as made. I felt I was just at the beginning of doing what was of utmost importance to me: enabling expression of the existential position of indigenous peoples like the Ju/'hoansi in the modern world. I felt that my own work must not fail to raise awareness of their intricate cultural resilience as reflected in their stories, art, and ritual.

I was also thinking a lot about the precarious future my Ju/'hoan friends, like other indigenous peoples of the world, were facing, including lack of access to education, and the land expropriation, mining ventures, large-scale cattle operations, and high-end tourism enterprises that could cut them off from their own natural resources—in short, every kind of marginalization and structural violence. Though all these forms of exploitation were happening around them and to them, Ju/'hoansi and other San hunter-gatherers had at least one great thing that was theirs alone—*n/om*. Their healing dance medicine was the arena in which they were the acknowledged masters. “We are poor people with little to give,” they often said, “but we can tell other people about *n/om*, our healing dance. It is so beautiful! We can teach other people, and they can learn it and do it for themselves and their people.” Herero, Tswana, and other Bantu groups spoke admiringly of Ju/'hoan expertise in healing through dance and singing. Bantu people were cordially welcomed when they attended the Ju/'hoan dances. Though not required to, sometimes they paid or made gifts to the Ju/'hoan healers when they brought a sick person of theirs to be healed.

There was very general agreement among those who attended dances that the altered states of consciousness they fostered were, along with the whole community's participation, what conferred the healing power. Outsiders and Ju/'hoansi alike honored the unspoken line that existed between trances brought on through learned disciplines of dancing and singing, and altered states brought on by alcohol or marijuana. Alcohol and marijuana, both present and much enjoyed



Figure 8.1. Kxao =Oah. © Megan Biesele.

by most people but hard to get in that time and place, were considered lesser mind-altering forms. They were seen as substances from another context altogether, to be kept strictly apart from the dance, as things that would interfere with the serious business of spirit travel and healing. I was impressed with the degree to which people honored this contextual separation and underscored its importance.

It was almost impossible to imagine, for instance, that a healer like Kxao Giraffe would ever dissipate his fine healing focus by trying to cure someone on a day when he had been drinking. People I spoke to about this told me that healing simply took too much concentration. The first time I saw Kxao =Oah (Kxao Giraffe) healing was at !Aoan, near Dobe, before Mel and Marjorie left. Present at that healing were Herero, Tswana, and Kavango, as well as Ju//hoansi. At the time I had not yet recorded or translated the extraordinary monologue Kxao presented to me that early morning when he told me to “turn on my machine.” As mentioned, I had heard of this blind healer from Richard Katz, but I was unprepared to understand some of the things I saw when he healed.

One of the things I did not understand then was what was happening when Kxao rose and stepped away from the child he was healing. He strode out of the circle of singing women and began climbing up

the side of a rickety thatched hut that stood nearby. Before he climbed, he seemed to be inserting something beneath the big toes of his bare feet. What was that something? "It's the thread of the sky," a black man beside me whispered matter-of-factly in English, in answer to my question. "He's going to God."

I saw Kxao's head thrown back, his sightless eyes in their sunken sockets appearing to see all the way to heaven. He made as if to climb by his toes up the flimsy sticks of the thatched hut. One of the younger Ju/'hoan men dancers went to him and gently steered him back to the healing fire. With renewed vigor Kxao laid fluttering hands on the sick child and sang long and loudly for him, his song punctuated every so often by jerks of his neck and accompanying staccato shrieks each time the *n/om* in him boiled over.

In the fifteen months or so I was in Botswana after that healing dance, I had a chance to attend maybe fifty more dances, almost all of them culminating in trancing and sharing of *n/om*, the healing power. At one dance early in my stay, when I had a tummy bug, I was one of the sick people who received healing. When the healer came around the circle and laid his fluttering hands lightly on my shoulders and my stomach, I became for a few moments the focus of all the singing and all the energy of the group. The world seemed, briefly, to stand still. I remember feeling profound calm descend on me, a state I'm sure promoted healing. This was true even though I still had much to learn about the belief system on which the dance was based.

Every dance was different, yet somehow each one of them was "the same," reminding me of the paradoxical unity of the different versions of the folktales. Some stories were told with high energy and were highly dramatic, and they went on all night; some were told gently and sweetly and ended quietly, as people headed for their beds in restored harmony with each other. Some dances were very large, if people were visiting their relatives in distant camps; some, like the one I heard at night from outside a sleeping hut, were raised by just a few people, often singing for a single sick or troubled person.

A few of the dances were marred by discord, and did not cohere, and were dismissed as having been "light" or inconsequential. At such dances people were disappointed in themselves and loudly said so. But in general, I saw, the dances followed a reliable pattern: they were started in fun, in play, often by children, usually just before sundown. Women singers and men dancers came to join in and eventually, over the course of hours, wove sound and motion into something that had a powerful and unstoppable life of its own. In the course of a night men might also sing and women might also dance; children moved freely in

and out of the dance circle, and often they spent whole nights wrapped in blankets between their mothers' knees, or snug on their mothers' backs in carrying skins, bobbing and bouncing in time with the music when the mothers jumped up to briefly join the line of dancing men.

Watching the intricate dancing of the men, I saw that their steps included both faithful repetition of stereotyped patterns *and* innovations on those patterns. As Lorna Marshall (who herself danced ballet) wrote,

The basic step is a precise, loud stamp. A man lifts his foot two or three inches off the ground, or a little more, and stamps it down with vigor. The basic pattern appears to be a period of four steps; a man stamps with one foot, say his right, then with his left, again with his left, again with his right, with an accented beat on the first and third steps—right, left, left, right. The steps carry a man forward very little. In stamping the unaccented steps he may move forward no more than an inch or so, or not at all, but on the accented beat he steps forward three or four inches.

The men vary their steps in several ways. When they are tired they may just walk to the rhythm. One sees old men dance this way. Strong dancers may make two stamps to a beat, or very strong young dancers may float a light triplet of stamps onto a beat. A man may hop with both feet on beat one, move one foot forward with a stamp that scuffs up the sand on beat two, hop again on beat three, and scuff his other foot forward on beat four. He may put two stamps or three into the beat after the hop. Individuals keep to no one way of dancing consistently throughout a dance period. They change from moment to moment in response to mood and energy. The !Kung dancing is so expert that it looks easy, as ballet does, until one sees someone dancing who is not practiced in it, with a mischievous young !Kung following him and mimicking his slovenly, ill-timed steps.

The volume of sound made by the dancers varies, falling in slack periods, rising when the intensity rises. At the moments of highest intensity, all the men would be stamping loudly and some young, very vigorous dancers would be bent over in the right-angle position, lifting their feet higher off the ground than is usual and driving them down like pile drivers. Such strenuous dancing occurs only in bursts. Even the young men cannot sustain it long. (Marshall 1999: 72–73)

The people liked to sing and dance all night if possible, to take advantage of the extra surge of healing energy they said rose up along with the sunrise. Anyone within earshot of a dance could join in. Or word could travel and bring people in from distant *n!oresi*. The singing for the dances was universally welcoming, a force that drew people like a magnet. One of the things about the healing dance that struck me most forcibly was that for the Ju/'hoansi, no matter how dramatic, thunderous, or surprising the course of a dance might seem, each dance was yet another iteration of something that was routine, predictable,

and reliably productive. Dancing always seemed a good thing to do, no matter what the circumstances. Even if a sick person was not healed, the people who gathered to help him or her were brought into consonance with each other as they worked together to make the dance grow “heavy” with efficacy. Anyone at a dance could feel the power of this “heaviness” when it asserted itself.

The power seemed to lie in the connectedness between the bodies of the dancers and singers as the music and their movements came together. This was what my colleague Richard Katz had spoken of as “interpersonal synchrony.” I saw that once this synchrony had been achieved, once people had seen that the mysterious power had reliably arisen yet one more time, people left the dance with lifted hearts no matter what the occasion for it had been, and no matter what the outcome. “Outcomes,” in fact, seemed beside the point, once everyone had participated in the dance. The dance itself was the point.

Years later I read that Dorothea Bleek, of the Bleek family of linguists, who had done so much work with the /Xam in South Africa and had also traveled through part of the Ju/'hoan area in Botswana in an oxcart during the 1920s, had noticed that healing dances were as often held in times of plenty as in times of hunger or sickness. She went on to describe the social tensions that arose over the complex sharing of a superabundance of food, saying they were as powerful and dangerous as the tensions stemming from scarcity. Social balance, I eventually came to see, was everything to San people: without it, group survival was not possible. But balance was never easy, always requiring nuanced understanding of each other, efforts to heal rifts by dancing together, and adherence to strict rules of sharing. Egalitarianism, though it may seem casual or lackadaisical to outsiders, or even a saccharine, romantic concept, is underpinned by determined effort and by fierce and sustained attention to expectations and rules. I wondered whether, judging by its long-lived success, this effective social technology had taken a lot of trial and error to perfect during prehistory. I came to think of egalitarianism as another of the great cultural achievements of humankind.

It was the relationship of Ju/'hoan individuals and their own individual creativity to their carefully maintained egalitarian system that most thoroughly excited my interest. Far from implying a “sameness” of any kind, the egalitarian ethos of Ju/'hoan life seemed to release individuals to “be themselves” in most definite and delightful ways. This phenomenon expressed itself most forcibly in stories I heard about the discoveries—the innovation moments—of *n/om* songs, those with palpable force to enable healing.

Lorna Marshall wrote about one such innovation moment, “When Be of Samangeigei was given a Giraffe song, she did not see //Gauwa [God]. She only awakened in the morning with a song in her head. She sang it to her husband /Ti!kay who recognized it as a medicine song. ‘Anyone with sense would know,’ informants assured us” (Marshall 1999: 76). I began to collect accounts of the innovation of this Giraffe song and other *n/om* songs. I saw that these accounts were based on instances of inspiration that occurred to specific individuals but were quickly made community property by being shared, and by the ongoing creativity in their use by other individuals. I began to see that the oral storage processes of tradition may “conserve” the past at the same time as they allow great latitude for individual contributions. Be’s inspiration for the Giraffe song, which spread east from her home in what was then South West Africa across wide swaths of both that country and Botswana, became a story with many variants. They were all, in an important sense, “the same” story, yet as they were embellished and burnished and further shared by individuals, they became the property of all.

One account held that the woman named Be was alone one day in the bush. She saw a herd of giraffes running before an approaching thunderstorm. The rolling beat of their hooves grew louder and mingled in her head with the sound of sudden rain. Just then a song she had never heard before came to her, and she began to sing. G//aoan (//Gauwa, or God) told her it was a medicine song. Be went home and taught the song to her husband, /Ai!ae (/Ti!kay). They sang and danced it together. It was indeed a song for trancing, a medicine song. /Ai!ae taught it to others who also passed it on. Old men then, in 1971, and most recently in 2018, named for me the people who learned the song in turn as it spread eastward from (then) South West Africa into (then) Bechuanaland Protectorate. I was told, and was able to document, that the Giraffe medicine tradition gradually replaced the former “Gemsbok” singing and dancing over vast areas of the Kalahari.

I decided it would be important to locate Be to hear her story for myself. I tried but failed to visit her and Old /Ai!ae, her husband, as permission for me to cross the border into South West Africa was withheld by the still-apartheid South African government at Pretoria. In 1972, Ju/’hoansi who came across the border fence reported that Old /Ai!ae had died. However, people continued to affirm that Be was alive and well at a camp some thirty miles west of the border. Twenty years later, when I was working in Namibia, I finally met Be and heard her account directly from her lips. Shortly after that, Be died in a fire: her hut burned down around her. People were devastated, as was I when

I heard the news. The child who caused the fire was never punished; people just said, as they invariably do in such a case, “he was not old enough yet to have sense.”

After Be died, I heard and recorded three more accounts of her story from the late healer /Kunta Boo, the last as recently as 2018. /Kunta enlarged the story by adding details of how the Giraffe song and its dance were practiced by his own nuclear family, and how it spread still further south into his extended family’s territory in Namibia and eventually into Botswana. It crossed multiple language lines among the San. This song and dance, innovated by one inspired woman and her husband, is still the San healing form of choice over much of eastern Namibia and western Botswana seventy years after Lorna Marshall first heard about it.

Be’s story of innovating the Giraffe song underscores the widespread acceptance of sharing processes in Ju/’hoan artistry and religious practice. It also emphasizes the respect given to individual renderings of what is beyond the world of human beings and to individual ideas of how to communicate with it. All the accounts of the origin of the Giraffe song share a conviction that Be was in an altered state of consciousness at the time of the inspiration for the song. These states, whether dreams, trances, or daytime confrontation with the spirits, are regarded as reliable channels for the transfer of new meaning from the other world into this one.

Healers on their travels along the threads of the sky bring back the benefits from the other world to the community on earth. They communicate to those who participate in the dances that support their travels not only healing power but also information about how things are in the other world and how people in this world would do best to relate to them. Great attention is given to trancers’ accounts of what they have experienced, and each one’s account of a genuinely altered state is respectfully heard. Individuals’ accounts of travel to the other world (what Westerners might call “out-of-body” travel) tick off some of the culturally expected signposts along the way, but they also naturally differ according to the individual’s experience. I saw no one being held to an orthodoxy of any kind. To an observer like myself, the respect given to individual tellings of such travels was an exercise in both radical tolerance for difference and the possibility of a collective reality.

The rendering of individual accounts into culturally shared images, such as the ones Kxao Giraffe directed me to record early in my fieldwork, seemed a central process in the spiritual unity of the Ju/’hoansi. It was an interweaving of tradition and creativity that seemed to keep the society itself alive, so that individuals were experiencing their own

lives as contributions to shared reality. It seemed that past traditions were nothing unless they were alive, renewed, today.

The energy of these traditions was available to groups of people dancing and singing together, but it was also available, between group events, to individuals. As I wrote in my event calendar on September 15, 1971: “Walked back with !Xuma [from Kauri] at sunset to find =Oma !Oma dancing . . . alone by a fire on the hill.”

My Western presupposition when I saw him there alone was that he was unhappy or homesick. Yet =Oma !Oma didn’t seem moody or withdrawn as he danced—he just happened to be alone while matter-of-factly wanting to dance. I mused that there seemed no concept of performance or audience here. =Oma seemed to be doing his dance solely for himself. I remembered that Nicholas England, the ethnomusicologist who accompanied the Marshalls, had described the music, and musical rituals, of the Ju/’hoansi as “self-delectative” in character. Learned from infancy, they seemed an entirely portable and flexible resource of enjoyment for an individual—whether with others or alone.

How moved I am when I spend a long time with someone, [having hired him] to tape *sitengena* [thumb piano] music, and after he’s done and I pay him, he still plays on for himself after I’ve gone to bed. . . . Last night, after I left Jimmy and went to bed, he played on. I had a sort of revelation that if he hadn’t wanted to play on, if he’d been drained, it would have been sad in retrospect. . . . At first I thought, “Oh, I’ll go back and fill up that last half inch of tape,” and then realized that I’d be happier leaving it empty and knowing he felt like going on alone.

All along, I had been asking myself exactly *how* individuals’ experiences could be presented to “tradition,” be accepted, and become part of a living tradition. As I learned more about the long social apprenticeship of young men and women for the frightening, dangerous, and valued roles of daring death in healing that some of them chose to take on, I began to see that their experiences were, from an early age, already deeply culturally informed and mediated. Those learning have certain experiences in trance partly because they expect to do so, based on what they have heard in older people’s accounts. They encounter expected signposts (like the skein of beckoning light they recognize as the threads of the sky) and are reassured that, though they may be frightened of the unknown, they are traveling a known path, one traversed many times before by their elders and ancestors.

Although experiences beyond one's earthly self are unique to each traveler, certain common elements link the accounts made of them. The Ju/'hoansi treat these accounts as unique messages from the beyond, accessible in no other way save through trance, and they regard narratives of their experiences as valuable to share. The narratives are thus pre-constrained by tradition but also add to it. Powerfully, the assimilation of new material takes place simultaneously with reinforcement of the old.

I began to regard this process as a constant looping back of individuals' experiences (which are based to some extent, but not completely, upon those of their predecessors) into the shared tradition, where they become available to individuals again as part of a cultural repertoire they themselves have helped to build. The fact of individuals being dynamic parts of the looping process cements their allegiance to the tradition. The power of their healing religion may lie largely in its having provided an amendable, growing form to which individuals, working idiosyncratic experience into concerted social understanding, can meaningfully add.

Both the religious ideas and the folklore of the Ju/'hoansi seemed to be characterized by this sort of sharing process. I came to think that both should be seen as evolving, ongoing systems of expression of meaning and experience. I thought of them as a kind of language, continually discoursing through dramatic representation—of resolving conflicts, of journeys, of transcendence—on valued ideas in the structure of humans' relationships to each other and to the other world.

I saw that both the healing narratives and the folktales, far from codifying a single version of dogma, were carrying on a dialogue among themselves about what is to be valued and believed. That belief was not enshrined somewhere beyond the stories but was rather in the stories themselves, in the intertextual repartee between them—and even, powerfully, in occasional apparent contradiction. “Different people just have different thoughts,” as !Unn/obe said with her memorable shrug.

In retrospect, I realize how very fortunate my timing was, that I had a chance to observe at close hand the workings of this still exclusively oral tradition. In oral traditions, I learned, the “truth” is in the ever-growing repertoire of variants as well as in the individual tales and narratives. It lies in the involvement of tellers and listeners with all the variants, much more than in supposed ur-versions or immutable principles.

This realization went hand-in-hand with one about oral traditions in general: there is a very different attitude in oral cultures toward what scribal (written) traditions perceive as “contradiction.” It is only when,

in cultural history, the absorption in a succession of dramatic oral narratives gives way to written texts, which may be laid side by side for comparison, that contradiction becomes salient and problematical.

As these realizations came to me, I finally began to settle on the theme of my thesis. Ju/'hoan oral lore provides good illustration of a tradition allowing high variability in its performed versions. I wanted to focus on this tolerance of variability. I thought I could draw parallel examples from three main genres: folktales; accounts of individual journeys to the otherworld in trance; and medicine songs, *n/om* songs, created by individuals, whose use becomes widespread through routine processes of social sharing. I was also finding that the "repartee" I noted among folktale variants was in fact active among all three of these genres. I was witnessing a cultural tapestry of these (and even other genres, like beadwork and rock paintings) fairly spangled with meanings gleaned from the experiences and cultural ruminations of individuals through foregoing time.

Many of these meanings gleamed out from the Ju/'hoan cultural "tapestry" for me because they took the form of complex sets of metaphoric ideas that were idiosyncratic to Ju/'hoan culture and thus completely unfamiliar to me. They included ideas about control and luck involving weather, hunting, childbirth, dangerous carnivores, and healing. I began to see that I could center my thesis around these "folk concepts" that tied the Ju/'hoan people's various expressive genres together. These were concepts that "worked for" the culture in long-standing, adaptive ways.

When I first settled down to work at Kauri and talked to the people about religion, about their relationships with their departed kin, and about their life stories, I more and more frequently was struck by references to the beliefs of the healing complex. These beliefs were endlessly present in the folktales, too, in the form of very subtle metaphors. The stories about the trickster god G!ara or Kaoxa, as we saw in chapter 4, specifically point to the origin of healing powers in the dance context through the use of animal abilities, substances, or surrogates (such as tortoise shells, eland fat and horns, information provided by bird familiars, etc.). G!ara's characteristics and use of such magical animal powers resemble those of tricksters in many indigenous traditions.

Trickster tales are often closely associated with themes of origin. Paul Radin's *The Trickster*, however, points out that the trickster is not a conscious benefactor as a culture hero might be, a figure setting out to

seek good things for mankind. Instead he discovers the necessities of life in the course of serving his own selfish, appetitive, and often hypersexual desires. Trickster stories, too, had adaptive strength in identifying the necessities of life and in making their acquisition memorable and valued.

The tale of the trickster G!ara and his sons provided me a good introduction to the use of a metaphor of transformation basic to all the Ju/'hoan tales, the concept of *n!ao*. *N!ao* is a complex of ideas, a "folk concept" relating men, the weather, and the hunting of the great meat animals—and women, the weather, and the children they bear. I first learned about *n!ao* from the writings of Lorna Marshall and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, whose pioneering work on this set of ideas I was able to replicate in detail and also to extend a bit. I learned that the relations among the items in the complex involve two transitive verbs, *kxani* and *//xui*, whose actions, respectively, have favorable and unfavorable results. I came to translate the two concepts into "being lucky, or fitting well with" and "being unlucky, or not fitting well with." These two concepts assured me of the structural duality (à la Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss) of the comprehensively dualistic action of the *n!ao* complex as a whole.

Lorna and Elizabeth, working with the superb Tswana translator Kernel Ledimo, laid the groundwork for our anthropological understanding of the Ju/'hoan *n!ow* (or *n!ao*) complex. Good luck in the *n!ao* complex results in good weather—the Kalahari summer, the fruitful rainy season. To it is opposed the dry season, which unites painful nighttime cold at its beginning with the dryness and hunger that continue into the sudden, scorching heat of springtime. Mothers and hunters cause either rain or drought when bearing children or hunting because the *n!ao* they possess interacts with the *n!ao* of the newborn or the hunted animal. If a hunter is "lucky" about an animal he kills, there will be rainy, cool weather. If he is unlucky, the sun will parch the land. Working without translators, but with my language teacher !Xuma and others, I was able to replicate every single item of belief about *n!ao* (and many other Ju/'hoan concepts and practices), about which I had first read in Lorna's and Elizabeth's work.

I also learned that *n!ao* itself can be used as a transitive verb: if a person (male or female) is "lucky," they can *n!ao g!a*, "bring rain with their *n!ao*." If they are unlucky, they can *n!ao !am*, "bring sun." The means by which these transformations are accomplished include, according to Lorna Marshall, burning horns or hair, urinating in the fire, or cutting the throat of an animal with a predictable *n!ao* reaction and allowing the blood to flow onto the ground.

Clouds are called by the Ju/'hoansi "rain's hair." In their *n!ao* beliefs and those of other San peoples, putting one's hair in the fire can change the weather. Old //Xukxa at Dobe told me that if she puts her hair in the fire the sun is so hot it kills people. Her husband, though, she said, "is rain, *g!a*. If he puts his hair in the fire, it rains. It will also rain when he dies." It all depends on the kind of *n!ao* the person has. Both men and women can be either rain or sun. Their type is determined at the moment of birth, by the weather at that time.

N!ao is active at one's birth and death, and occasionally in between when one seeks to change the weather by using it, or when a woman gives birth or a man kills an animal. The great meat animals like giraffe, eland, gemsbok, kudu, and hartebeest are *n!ao* animals and have an effect on the weather. Smaller meat animals like steenbok and duiker generally do not possess *n!ao* (a fact I later realized may account for their low frequency in another San symbol system, the southern African rock paintings).

!Am and *g!a*, sun and rain, are the oppositions the Ju/'hoansi connect with *n!ao*. If a hunter or a mother is "unlucky" with a hunted antelope or with childbearing, *!am khui*, they say, "the sun will burn." The opposite, "good luck," brings *g!a*, rain, and *=a'u*, coolness. Due to the seasonal peculiarities of their area, the hot sun of spring is associated with the cold nights of winter; both fall within the dry and hungry time of the year. To this pair of unpleasant atmospheric conditions is opposed the ideal of coolness, *=a'u*, associated with rain. One man told me that if a child is born and the day is one of searing heat, Ju/'hoansi might rhetorically say, "What kind of child is this who gets born and the sun is so hot?" The implied answer is "a child with an unlucky *n!ao*."

N!ao was associated by some Ju/'hoansi with a certain part of the body, the skin of the upper back at the base of the neck. This area is called the *n//ao* or *n//aosi* (plural)—note the different click from the one in *n!ao*. It is explicitly designated as the spot from which sickness, drawn from the body of an ill person, is expelled from the body of a *n/omkxao*, a "master of *n/om*" or working curer. (Only a *n/omkxao*, however, can see sickness leave this spot on another healer.)

A person (healer or nonhealer) with a foul or bad *n//ao* (*n//ao !kau*) will keep rain from falling. Also, a lion may come to bite him. One person told me that the lion would bite him precisely on the *n//ao* spot. But a person whose *n//ao* was good, *!'hom* (fine or beautiful), would not die "even if the person were cursed." Special feelings are attributed to the *n//ao* spot: it "tingles" if a person with whom one has a kin avoidance relationship sits behind one. If a young man is being given the power to trance and cure by an experienced curer who is sitting behind him,

he might feel his *n//ao* tingle, as well. In the story of G!ara and his sons, echoes of the beliefs about the sensitive *n//ao* spot and the *n!ao* complex regarding weather are prominent.

Recall that we saw in the tale that G!ara tries to resuscitate his sons after they have been killed by lions. He calls a dance for rain, then uses eland horns to summon lightning or a meteor to strike the lions dead. To cleanse himself of the killing, he makes a tortoise-shell medicine box, sniffs smoke from it, then goes into a trance for the first time.

Sigrid Schmidt, the consummate cataloguer of Khoi and San tales and beliefs, told me later that the tortoise and the trickster are linked with rain in many San groups. Lions, she said, “are the anti-rain forces.”

In our story, the trickster G!ara wants rain so he can have lightning. Lightning, called “God’s fire,” will do his bidding. To get rain and lightning, he hangs eland horns in a tree. In a similar story from the G/ui San further east in Botswana that also involves eland hunting (Lorna Marshall, unpublished story, collected July 22, 1955), the trickster throws his own hair into the sky to make rain. Hair and horns, as we saw, are two of the instruments for changing weather within the *n!ao* complex.

Though the hair and horns are not burned in our story, the way they are used as instruments of transformation is suggestive. At least one of the storytellers connected the lightning thus invoked with the *n//ao* spot at the back of the neck, which we have seen is connected with weather and *n!ao*. The lightning descends directly into the *n//aos*i (plural) of the lions, this storyteller said. A young woman chimed in and said, “N//ao is that you fear things [e.g., dangerous predators] when you are walking alone. Your *n//ao tsau* [hackles rise] when you are afraid.”

The fear of dangerous predators like lions and hyenas is extended to include fear of people whom the Ju’hoansi in Botswana also refer to as “carnivores.” The Ju’hoansi, with lighter skin than most Africans, refer to themselves as “red people.” “Carnivores,” in contrast, include black people (mostly Bantus) and “angry whites.” Ju’hoansi use the word *!xoma* (or *!xomh*, plural) to refer to this group of people as well as to animal carnivores in general, including the smaller ones. Another word they use for both carnivores and these groups of people is *jom* (or *jomh*, plural), which means “pawed creatures.” The silent hand sign for a lion is a clenched fist bent at an angle, as if walking on the ground, from a dangling lower arm. To *jom* is for a person to turn himself into a lion and kill people by magical means—a practice never attributed to a person in one’s own group but rather to other groups, usually far away, who are thought to be practicing the power with ill intent.

“The great *n/omkxaosi* of long ago used to do that,” people said. When a person says “lions are walking,” he does not ordinarily mean

animal lions. Such an expression is used at an eerie or strange time. For instance, I heard it in late 1971 when I was with the musician Jimmy /Ai!ae during the near-total lunar eclipse. Bantu people living nearby still say that, if they wish, San people like the Ju//hoansi can turn themselves into vengeful big cats and stalk human beings. The Ju//hoansi in turn call the Bantu people and ill-disposed whites “carnivores.” And so the negotiated neighborly balance continues.

Lorna Marshall wrote of a small group of Ju//hoansi who were traveling and camped for the night with nothing but a fire to keep predators from them. A lion arrived and kept circling the terrified people until dawn. Toward morning, one of the men, a healer named Bo, went into a trance and began shouting at the lion. It finally left at dawn, and the people said the healer’s spirit followed it and chased it far away. When Bo’s spirit returned to his body and he came out of the trance, his nose bled severely. The power that allowed Bo’s spirit to go out to chase the lion was *n/om*. *N/om* boiled up in him, perhaps from prolonged stress and fear, and he went into a trance.

In trance, Bo “died” to this world temporarily (*!aia*, the cognate of *!ai*, to die) so that he could perform the supernatural feat of chasing the lion away. In our folktale about G!ara and his sons, the trickster uses dancing, trancing, and their appurtenances on a number of occasions to cure or cleanse himself. He says, “How will I powder myself with *sa* [the fragrant magical powder I’ve mentioned in the dance context] so that my brains won’t be spoiled by this killing I’ve done?” In another tale, this same trickster, whose mouth has, tragically but temporarily, disappeared so that his face is smooth and he cannot eat, says he wants to dance so he can get his mouth back. Which he then proceeds to do.

So dancing and going into *!aia* (a kind of death) is what G!ara uses to cleanse himself of the killing of the lions. The lightning he calls makes a deadly attack on the *n//ao* spots of the lions, those places on the back of the neck lions themselves would go for on men. He calls the lightning by using eland horns stuck in a tree. One storyteller told me that his two boys, Kha//an and !Xuma, “are an animal’s horn; they are an eland’s horn. They taught G!ara to dance around under an eland’s horns in a tree.” Thus was healing power discovered.

There are parallel discoveries in the stories whose heroic protagonist is a woman. Though there is controversy about using the word “heroine” for these figures, which in some Western contexts has come to connote the charming, helpless female who has to be rescued by the male

hero, the word is completely appropriate in the gender-egalitarian San world. As will be seen below, the heroine-protagonists in the Ju//hoan tales are fiercely protective of their own rights and those of their children and communities, and they even cause meat to become available for the first time to human society through acts of will. I've chosen to use the word "heroine" for these figures and emphasize that this usage has nothing whatsoever to do with helplessness (as in the hapless heroines of Western movies, for instance), though it may have something to do with charm.

Many of the heroine stories involve dramatic confrontations between the heroine wife and her in-laws. Often they end in a magical flight across the landscape in which the heroine strews ever-larger thorns to foil her pursuers, or calls down clouds and lightning so that rain beats upon her male affines, breaking the strings of their loincloths, cooling their anger, and thus ending the pursuit. Sometimes she blows upon a magical gemsbok horn that causes the village of her in-laws to be blown down and "ground into powder." The same verb, *xai* (to grind), is used for grinding the heroine's magical, visually transforming substance, her characteristic cosmetic—ochre. (You will see the longest, most complex and beautiful version of the heroine's story that I recorded, one told me by !Unn/obe, at the end of chapter 9).

In one of the shorter versions I recorded, the final adventure of the heroine, often called G!kun//homdima, doesn't end with the mere vanquishing of yet another husband and his treacherous people. After being hounded and harassed by a series of male adversaries, tricked, bereaved, killed, eaten, sought against her will in marriage, and pursued like wild game, the virtuous heroine has her final triumph by actually turning into a meat animal. Old /Asa's version ended this way: "Then G!kun//homdima changed herself into something else, and became a steenbok. Her heart became a steenbok, the steenbok that the Ju//hoansi shoot and take home to cook and eat. The first steenbok was once a person's heart, G!kun//homdima's heart."

The metaphor has come full circle. A woman pursued as meat becomes meat by her own will, and since then people have had game to eat.

Taken together, the ideas about healing power, about human relationships with weather and carnivores and food, and the events of the stories of transformation add up to a complex of belief that enables trance and the community healing on which the San's ancestors have relied for millennia. One could indeed, I thought, regard this vast web or network of meaning, like the egalitarianism whose values it so faithfully reflected, as an example of the most important achievements of humankind.

Yet importantly, I saw, these beliefs were always alluded to only indirectly, through the intricately interwoven metaphors of dance, song, and story—and therein lay their power. The Ju/'hoan expressive forms fairly glittered with powerful—but only briefly and delicately phrased—allusions. I saw the whole as a panoply we might liken, rather than to simpler symbolic models, to a vast, fine, deeply interconnected literature.

Many years later, when I was back in the United States, an energetic middle school student in Cleveland, Ohio, named Aaron Kohn contacted me with a plan to bring a few Ju/'hoan leaders to Cleveland to speak to schools and colleges and to the media. He raised the finances for this as donations to the Kalahari Peoples Fund, the nonprofit I had founded with my HKRG colleagues in 1973, at the end of my first fieldwork. He arranged the visit and set up talks for the Ju/'hoan speakers for several days at TV studios and in various educational institutions. One of the Ju/'hoansi who came was /'Angn!ao /'Kun, a tiny man known by the Afrikaans name of Kiewiet, a small, bright, active bird (one of the many kinds of plovers that inhabit the Kalahari). Kiewiet was known for his eloquence in speaking in his areas of expertise, which were politics, storytelling, and healing. In Cleveland he was to speak one evening at a historically black college, and his topic was the intersection of these three domains. I felt privileged to stand with him at the podium as his translator. The venue was the gymnasium of the college, with the audience seated on risers.

Kiewiet was much smaller (and lighter skinned) than almost anyone in the audience. The podium dwarfed him and the microphone took a while to get arranged effectively. But he riveted the listeners with his account of the Ju/'hoan people's participation in the recent independence process South West Africa had gone through in becoming Namibia. He also talked about the practices and values of their healing religion, with its sharing ethic and tolerance for all, and he spoke of the process of traveling to God's village on the threads of the sky. He explained how these ideas had underwritten and supported all that the Ju/'hoansi had accomplished in terms of community organizing and communication with the new government during the independence process. Many in the audience could be seen taking out Kleenexes and wiping their eyes before the end of this story.

After his speech Kiewiet took a few questions. The last question came from a large black woman on the third row of the risers. She stood up

and remarked, “You said that you travel to God when you are in trance and are healing. Please tell us what God looks like.”

Kiewiet chuckled. “I have never seen God. Nobody can see God. All that human beings have is stories.”