

THE ILLUSION OF A FUTURE? MEDICINE DANCE RITUALS FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF TOMORROW

Thomas WIDLÖK

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

ABSTRACT The medicine dance continues to be the main ritual of the Hai om and many other groups of southern African “Bushmen,” or “San.” It is, therefore, an appropriate starting point for investigating the possibilities for developing a comparative model of the religion of hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers, typically provide exceptions to anthropological models. However, carefully designed models, in particular those focusing on ritual form, not only facilitate comparison across space, for example between Africa and Australia as in this contribution, but also an understanding of the dynamics of ritual and religion over time. A re-formulation of Bloch’s model of rebounding violence exhibits three aspects of the medicine dance, namely voluntary participation, forceful engagement, and relevance to everyday life. This characterization may hold not only for the case of the Hai om, but also for other hunter-gatherers elsewhere who no longer live in a world of “hunters among hunters” but increasingly in settings with a plurality of religious activities. Hunter-gatherer religious forms need not be considered to be close to the beginnings of human religious activity but with an emphasis on personal autonomy, rituals like the medicine dance may give an insight into the religious practices of a future civil society.

Key Words: Bushmen; San; Medicine dance; Ritual; Civil society

INTRODUCTION: THE FUTURE OF HUNTER-GATHERER RELIGION

The opening question “The illusion of a future?” relates back to Sigmund Freud and even further back to Ludwig Feuerbach, radical critics of religion. According to them, and other European philosophers, religion is an illusion and the future of this illusion is that it will disappear. However, although atheism is widespread, religion certainly seems far from disappearing, and it is no longer expected to do so. Instead of a linear development away from religion towards non-religious rationalism it seems more realistic to assume that there is a dialectical movement between the two (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1971) or at least a future that will include both. There is evidence from hunter-gatherer groups which suggests that there is, at least in some cases, an intensification of religious activity as a reaction to challenges posed by modern conditions (see Kolig (1981) for Australia and Guenther (1976) for southern Africa). At the same time this intensification goes along with fundamental changes in ritual practices and symbolic representations (Kolig, 1989; Guenther, 1979). My point of departure for pursuing this matter further is an analysis of the “San” or “Bushman” medicine dance in the light of a specific model of religious practice which invites further comparative work.

Since the contents of this chapter was first presented as a draft version at CHAGS 8 in Osaka, the paper has changed its direction slightly to include not only an assessment of the future of hunter-gatherer religious practice but also of the comparative perspective on this practice. Several colleagues in the CHAGS audience commented critically not only on particulars of the paper presented but also on the general idea of developing a comparative perspective, or even a model, of hunter-gatherer religious practice. It was suggested that more ethnographic work was needed before an attempt at constructing a model could be made. I still do not share this view but I think I understand some of the reservations towards model building which have been aired. Above all it was pointed out that hunter-gatherers, or at least some of them, are typically exceptions to models. A well-known example is Bloch and Parry's thesis on "death and the regeneration of life." Bloch and Parry conclude - after considering data on four hunter-gatherer societies presented by Woodburn - that in contrast to evidence from many cases of non-hunter-gatherers "in none of these [hunter-gatherer] instances is there any systematic attempt to transform death into a rebirth or a regeneration of either the group or the cosmos." (1982: 42). Therefore, rituals may not produce the same effects in hunter-gatherer contexts as we may expect them to do against the background of other cases. However, I maintain that it is reasonable to assume that hunter-gatherer rituals, too, have transformative power in the sense that social relations are in fact altered through ritual activity and it is this process which we can attempt to model. At another point during the discussion the point was made (probably tongue in cheek) that nobody needs models unless they are attractive. Clearly to some participants the construction of a model of religious phenomena seems to be superfluous at best and impoverishing and corrupting our ethnographic data at worst. It is important to note that working with models as it is suggested here will not replace ethnographic work on religious practices and beliefs but should complement ethnographic work. I maintain that a major attraction for developing a model of hunter-gatherer ritual, in particular of the formal dimension of ritual, is that it helps us to understand change and to make an assessment of the future of hunter-gatherer rituals in a civil society with a plurality of religious activities and convictions.

Keeping these reservations in mind, this paper is only a modest attempt to pursue the project of a comparative model of the religion of hunter-gatherers and more particularly in the field of the theory of ritual. Models facilitate comparison, not only across space, say between Africa and Australia, but also across time as a means of understanding the dynamics of ritual practice. My starting point for a comparative perspective is not the assumption of shared origins but of a shared future. That is to say I do not suggest that hunter-gatherer religious forms are somehow closer to the beginnings of human religious activity and therefore should share common features of rituals elsewhere and possibly exhibit the core or elementary forms of what religion is. Rather I suggest that analyzing current transformations of hunter-gatherer rituals may shed some light upon the future of religious practice more generally. Here I am not so much concerned with the modern demand for participating in or recreating "authentic" community-based, yet individualistic, religion (see Prince & Riches, 1999 on New Age foragers). Rather, it seems to me

that participants in hunter-gatherer rituals of today exhibit a degree of personal autonomy which many modern practitioners of religion and theoreticians of a civil religion across the world consider their ideal for the future. In other words, what is real for many hunter-gatherers seems ideal to many people in the post-industrial world - with the important caveat that today (former) hunter-gatherers still have to grapple with very real problems as they continue practicing their way of life, including their religion. More concretely there are three aspects of the ideal for the future which I want to focus on: Firstly, the fact that participation in ritual is voluntary, secondly that the ritual experience is entertaining but also forcefully engages the person as a whole, and thirdly that it has a bearing on concerns of everyday life. Before investigating these three aspects in detail, some more general remarks about the use of models in hunter-gatherer studies of religion are in order.

HUNTER-GATHERERS AND MODELS OF RITUAL PRACTICE

This is not the place to review the rich diversity of anthropological approaches to ritual but rather to select one model and to encourage colleagues to assess the usefulness of other models. Although hunter-gatherer religion has often been defined by a void, in parallel with definitions for other aspects of hunter-gatherer social organization, say their political institutions, hunter-gatherer societies have been subjected to a number of models in the history of anthropological research. The initial ethnocentrism according to which hunter-gatherers were considered to be people without religion (without politics, without human language, etc.) gave way to a period of intensive research and theorizing. However, this interest grew not necessarily out of an appreciation of the religious activity of hunter-gatherers as such but was probably more due to the fact that researchers such as Durkheim or Freud found it less contentious to apply their general theories to the ethnography of hunter-gatherers than to that of their own society. More recently, theories of religion have had rather little to say about the religion of hunter-gatherers, except again to emphasize what these religions usually do *not* include, namely for instance witchcraft, priests, ancestor worship, or sacred kings. Few if any hunter-gatherer specialists have taken the trouble to apply recently developed models of ritual to their field. The model that I have selected for this contribution, for reasons that will become apparent below, is Bloch's model of ritual as rebounding violence.

In spite of its title *Prey into Hunter* (Bloch, 1992) Bloch's book says very little about hunters and gatherers. Bloch's theoretical model evolves around the idea that ritual (but in Bloch's approach, this usually entails religion in all its manifestations) is seen as divided into three aspects which usually correspond to three stages in the ritual process:

1. The construction of a dualism between the passing vitality of humans and a complementary lasting ("transcendental") element to which humans have access.
2. The violent overcoming of the vitality part by the conquering transcendental part to the extent that the permanence thus created is cleansed of all transient vitality.

3. The violent re-appropriation of vitality by the pure permanent element. Those who have participated in the ritual experience do not have to deny their transient vitality but now regain confidence in the permanence of the social institutions to which they belong.

Bloch's model like most anthropological models of ritual includes features dealing with ritual form as well as semantic features. As Rappaport (1999: 30) has pointed out, it is worthwhile to consider these two aspects separately despite the fact that they are inseparable in any given ritual event. This separation of the semantic and formal dimension may be exemplified with regard to van Gennep's analysis of ritual in terms of a rite of passage on which Bloch has built his model, suggesting important alterations to it (van Gennep, 1999 [1909]; Bloch, 1992: 6). An analysis of female initiation among "Bushman" groups in southern Africa is amenable to van Gennep's model. The formal stages of a rite of passage can be identified in a number of very different manifestations of female initiation among the Hai om (see Widlok, 1999: 228-230). At the onset of her first menstruation a Hai om girl is secluded in a separate hut which is taboo for men and boys. There is then a liminal phase in which the girl is asked to carry out a number of "symbolic" tasks such as fetching water and firewood before she is re-integrated into the community as an adult woman. Formally the female initiation among the Hai om and other Khoisan-speaking groups shares this structure with initiations elsewhere including the case of Bantu-speaking agropastoralists who live in the same area as the Khoisan speakers (Widlok, 1999: 228; see also Carstens, 1982: 515): Semantically, however, there are considerable differences since the Khoisan female initiation - not only that of "San" hunter-gatherers but also of Khoekhoe pastoralists - strictly speaking celebrates the girl's first menstruation while initiations of Bantu-speaking groups tend to get fused with marriage ceremonies. In the Khoisan rituals the initiated women are re-integrated as sexual and economic partners and whole persons while among their Bantu neighbours the initiation of women is primarily a (re-)distribution of productive and reproductive agents for co-operating and competing sets of men. The fact that ritual form is very similar across quite different performances and different fields of semantic meaning should not, however, mislead us to believe that ritual form is irrelevant or that it is a neutral medium for all kinds of semantic messages. To begin with all these different rituals are not primarily performed in order to convey messages, even though the anthropological descriptions sometimes may seem to suggest that. Rather, these initiation rituals are always performed to achieve a change in the status of persons and to change the social relationships that are involved. They cannot easily be replaced by, or translated into, other formats because they are more than expressions of a message in a dramatic performance.

Whereas van Gennep's model of rites of passage is all about individuals crossing boundaries between life stages, Bloch's model of rebounding violence is about moving the boundary that demarcates the in-group from the out-group (see Houseman & Severi, 1998: 176 for a more detailed comparison of the two models). At a formal level his model is about shifting the boundaries so that all participants of a ritual end up "on the winning side," making this shift a forceful experience and

one that has a rebounding relation to what happens outside the core of the ritual. With regard to hunter-gatherers, the relative permeability of social boundaries and the individual autonomy to move in a virtually unbounded social universe is often considered to be a special characteristic of hunter-gatherers living in “bands” (see Ingold, 1999: 407). Therefore a model of ritual activity that considers processes of inclusion and exclusion is a promising starting point for establishing as to whether particular ritual forms play the same role among hunter-gatherers as they apparently do among many other societies. While the semantics of hunting occur repeatedly in the examples that Bloch discusses in *Prey into Hunter* he gives little attention to the formal properties of hunter-gatherer relationships with regard to what I have identified above as the formal aspects of his model. In this contribution I want to fill this gap by going through the elements of Bloch’s model with reference to the transformation of social relations of the ritual that I know best, namely the Hai om medicine dance.

PARTICIPATORY COOPERATION

In many rituals of non-hunter-gatherers that Bloch considers for his model of rebounding violence, dualisms are embodied in the main groups of participants, in particular men versus women, juniors versus seniors, initiands versus initiates. The performative roles in the “San” medicine dance, too, show a fairly clear-cut division of labour between men who dance and fall into trance and women who clap and sing (and make men fall into trance). It may appear at first sight that those who enter trance and those who do not, form two groups that are fundamentally set apart from one another, especially since this coincides with the gender division, at least in the majority of cases. Occasionally men may clap and sing to initiate a dance and women may themselves dance and go into trance. The complementarity of male and female activities and the male dependency on women’s support has always been emphasized by the “Bushmen” and needs emphasizing from the anthropologist’s perspective, too. Among “Bushman” groups where the accumulation of “*n um*” (energy that leads to trance) is considered to be of major importance for healing, the singing of the women is an important way through which the (usually male) dancers receive *n um* (Katz, 1982: 295). In the Hai om case women prepare the ritual paraphernalia (for instance the ornamented skin apron) before these are used by the men. However, the two groups do not come to stand for two opposed principles.

At the beginning of each medicine dance there is a more fundamental division than that between dancers and singers, namely that between healthy ordinary persons who take part in communal life (including the composition and performance of medicine dances) and sick persons who are said to have “lost their breath.” This division between those who suffer - that is primarily sick individuals but also a whole group of people under conditions of stress or conflict - and those who have the energy to heal, that is the trance dancers supported by the singers, is re-enforced by the fact that the trance dancer in fact moves from the position of ordinary healthy member of the group to a person in trance who is considered to be

either almost dead (*!gai o* in Hai om) or certainly seriously threatened. In some cases he is conceived of as sending his breath out to capture that of the sick person and to heal like a shaman, that means he manages the safe return for himself and the sick person.

The changing of sides which Bloch diagnoses (and which he confounds with the idea of overcoming dualisms) for the rituals that he looked at is therefore in formal terms also a feature of the “San” medicine dance. The medicine dance concerns life or more precisely the difference between living a healthy life and losing or having lost that healthy life. Everybody is constantly threatened by illness and potentially by death, young children as much as adults including trance dancers themselves. Consequently, in the medicine dance not only obviously sick people are cured but everybody present receives the attention of the trance dancer and of the women who sing and clap. At the end of the ritual everybody involved is expected to have shifted to the winning side, the healthy earthly life. As Marshall has put it: “Led by the healers, the people act together for their mutual good” (1999: 40). The changes that have affected the “San” since colonization began seem not to have altered this basic formal structure of the medicine dance. The dances of “Farm Bushmen” do not differ from those of “Veld Bushmen” in this respect (see Widlok, 1999: 239). What seems to have changed, however, is the fact that participation can no longer be taken for granted. The “minimal choice” present in any ritual (Rappaport, 1999), namely the decision as to whether one participates or not, has become a major factor in determining the impact of the dance event. Marshall observed in the 1950s that nobody dared to stay away from a dance, making attendance virtually obligatory (1969: 350). While it is also true for the Hai om case that nobody is excluded, evidence from a large Hai om settlement suggests that ritual is now subject to “demand cooperation.” Ritual projects can take very different trajectories depending on who participates in the ritual (Widlok, 1999: 256-7). Participation is not obligatory but has to be achieved anew in each instance. The ways in which the ritual begins suggests that women and junior people have at least as much influence on the participation pattern as dancers, visitors, and patients.

At the main Hai om settlement in northern Namibia, where I carried out my field research, there is no pre-determined place where medicine dances should take place and no pre-determined set of participants. Theoretically the dances could take place anywhere and can be composed of different people. However, in practice they do not. In Table 1 I have summarized the medicine dances that have taken place in the three different parts of the Gomais settlement during my field research period.

Differentiating the dances according to the part of the settlement in which they took place allows us to see the proportion of dances in each of these localities which involved the participation of outsiders (not counting the anthropologist), including either Owambo or Damara patients as well as !Kung trance dancers who visited the place. A clear pattern emerges as !Uri!hums - which has only a few dances anyway - only has medicine dances when outsiders prompt it. The other two places have both kinds of dances but seem to have a distinct profile as being either local or extra-camp oriented and as places that mainly attract external

Table 1. Medicine dances at Gomais during 1990-94 research period.

	Aba!anis	Nul!hoas	!Uri !hums
Dances prompted by external patients	0	3	3
Dances prompted by external dancers	2	8	2
Dances without outsiders	13	2	0
Total number of dances	15	13	5

patients and dancers (Nul!hoas) or as only attracting external dancers, but not patients (Aba!anis). That is to say, although people who live in these three parts of the settlement frequently cooperate in dance events, they seem to encourage distinct orientations for the dances taking place in their immediate vicinity in a way that produces the pattern which I have described. To conclude this section, it seems that for the medicine dance of today shifting the boundaries of inclusion is achieved either by demanding participation for the cure of particular patients or by attracting participation by inviting particular medicine dancers. Nevertheless, control over participation lies with the individuals.

FORCEFUL ENGAGEMENT

The religious practices of hunter-gatherers are not free of violent experiences. The “Bushmen” of southern Africa have been depicted as “harmless people” but that should not lead us to believe that violent experiences are not part of their ritual repertoire, including the medicine dance:

[“Bushmen”] Healers plead and argue with the gods to save the person and as they ‘pull out the sickness’ (hoe) they usually utter their cries of healing, earth-shattering screams and howls that show the pain and difficulty of the healing work, which may go on for several hours.” (Katz et al., 1997: 21)

Whereas Bloch has emphasised instances of violence in which one group of ritual performers imposes force on another group of ritual participants, the hunter-gatherer case under investigation here seems to suggest that there is only violence in the sense that the trance dancer is exposing himself to a violent force. In the trance dance, too, force is instrumental insofar as it is indispensable for achieving a desired result, namely the healing of the people present. However, there is no sense of one group violently imposing itself onto another, nor of overcoming an element that constitutes the subdued part of composite persons. Nevertheless, sharing the violent experience, or contributing to it, is an element that saturates all “San” medicine dances including those in modern contexts of present-day Hai om in northern Namibia which produce very different ritual projects as outlined above.

In contemporary Hai om medicine dances, there seems to be less going into trance than in other cases reported from “San” groups. However, Hai om dancers

may still receive burns as they can no longer fully control their steps. And also those healers who do not enter trance are genuinely exhausted and seem battered after the experience. In fact, in Hai om medicine dances of today which frequently involve no trance, there seems to be a fluid boundary between violent trance and just forceful dancing. No categorical difference is made between the medicine dancers who achieve trance and those who do not. They are all considered *!gaisaokwa* (*!gai*-men), men who hold the chest of the patients, who rub scented powder under patients' noses, on the chest and across the head, who suck the skin of patients and who ultimately feel an enormous pressure building up in their stomach (the meaning of *!gai*) which leads them to cough, choke and collapse. These men are said to enter *!gai o* (*!gai*-death) even though they may only be in a trance-like condition for some short moments returning to more relaxed movements as they hold the patients or dance around the fire. Medicine dances (and medicine dancers) are differentiated and judged by their potential to create forceful experiences but all these different manifestations of medicine dancing are considered to be “*huru*,” “playing” (translated by Hai om themselves into Afrikaans as “*speel*”). It is important to note that “*huru*” is distinguished from “*homi*” which denotes “kidding,” “playing tricks,” or “pretending to do something.” Some dancers are in fact considered to be playing tricks in the sense of *homi*, at least by some Hai om who clearly disapprove of this kind of behaviour. “*Huru*” by contrast is the regular term used for all medicine dancing, including that which involves trance but also including all other dance events which are considered to be genuinely exhilarating experiences. Against this background we may conclude that the boundary between play and ritual is being blurred or rather that the established view of ritual as being sacred and serious has imposed a boundary where there is in fact none. The medicine dance may be exhausting, it may be triggered by a serious cause (sickness) and may have a serious impact, but it has entertainment value nevertheless. Dancers do not play lightly though. They take pains to show how close they are to trance, to losing control over themselves, to stepping into the fire. They experience physical exhaustion and they show it. Their “game” is not idle play but it aims at forcefully engaging all persons present. The medicine dance needs to be performed, not as a drama in which a poet wants to express him- or herself but rather as a forceful but also playful engagement of participants.

Here, violence is not directed against another group but everyday experience is violated as the trance dancer is propelled out of everyday life and as the ritual is considered to involve potentially life-threatening experiences. It is worth repeating that the force of women's singing is crucial for the strength of the trance achieved, and therefore for successful healing. The trance dancer is subject to a deliberate exposure to force, sometimes conceived of as a shamanic separation of breath and body. The singing pressures him to accumulate heat and to be violent against himself to the point of near-death (when his breath is separated from his body). The trance stage is fearsome for the trance dancer and it leads to total bodily exhaustion, but to a considerable extent the dancer is giving up his vitality voluntarily for the purpose of healing. Correspondingly, there is also a context in which women who do not usually become trance dancers, are said to have a similarly violent experience which conveys pain and spiritual energy at the same time, namely in childbirth (Biesele, 1997). Again, autonomy is the ideal and the capacity to act autonomously in these violent situations grows with personal experience.

REBOUNDED ACTIONS

Bloch's model puts particular emphasis on the final stage of a ritual, for example the communal meal that concludes the ritual and which may be interpreted as an instance of rebounding violence. "San" medicine dances end in exhaustion not in meals and even though they may pick up force towards the very end, they do not have a spectacular finish but support gradually crumbles with more and more people retiring to their own fire places. However, Bloch's model more generally opens the boundaries that are considered to confine "a ritual" and our analysis of it. This resonates with the "San" case where there is a clear link between the inter-dance period, the events that take place in this period, and the ritual performance in the more narrow sense. Medicine dances are not life-cycle rituals but there is an expectation that they will take place repeatedly with an unknown interval in between. The changes that have affected "San" in many parts of their life, and across different groups, have led to surprisingly few changes in ritual form. Rituals still take place reasonably frequently among the Hai om of northern Namibia. If ritual activity has lapsed in some parts of the "San" community the reason seems not to have been a deterioration in the quality of rituals but rather a deterioration in the quality of life in between ritual performances.

At the end of a Hai om medicine dance people sit together, talk quietly and share a smoke, common everyday activities. However, just as the elaborate and lengthy preparations and side-events of a ritual need to be analysed, so do the final stages of the ritual events which were often considered to be merely afterthoughts of the "actual ritual." After all, the climax of the ritual - trance among the "Bushmen" - may only last for a few moments. There is, therefore, reason to give close attention to the winding down of ritual experiences, and equally to the preparations and the side-events. In a sense these "marginal" aspects are constituent parts of the ritual process. What differentiates a "serious" medicine dance from other dances is trance, or at least a general state of exhaustion at the end of the dance which leaves people satisfied but also slightly pensive. But although these small end phases of rituals are more important than previously recognised, there is more to a successful passage between ritual and non-ritual activities. Bloch himself has extended his idea of "rebounding," that is a change of direction in the course of the ritual, to include instances such as the relation between Shintoism and Buddhism in everyday Japanese religious practice, where there are in fact two kinds of rituals that in alternation achieve this effect of rebounding, which he sees as a reconciliation of the violent suppression of vitality in one ritual with the invigoration of everyday non-ritual life in another. I suggest that in the hunter-gatherer case, at least in the case that I am discussing here, it is not two parallel ritual complexes but the expectation of future ritual events which contains an element of rebounding. Any participant in a ritual, anywhere, might reasonably expect that a similar ritual will be held again at some time in the future, as commonly happens with life-cycle rituals. However, what is noteworthy with regard to the "Bushman" medicine dances that I have sketched is that they do not only move people from one stage or period of their life to the next. These rituals also move place.

Medicine dances are not transferred every time they are performed, although theoretically that is always possible in the sense that there is no copyright attached to these dances and most Hai om practitioners have learned their skills through participating in dances elsewhere. More generally it needs to be pointed out that medicine dances do not consist of a fixed liturgy or script. Rather they are cultivated by the joint effort of participants, starting with the very first instance in which a creative person sings the tune to his or her groom who then creates a second voice to the tune and so forth until a multivocal song is put on its track through various communities (see Olivier, 1998).

What is the importance of these practices of transfer for a theory of hunter-gatherer ritual? Bloch, following Durkheim's rather vague idea of ritual effervescence, stated that the whole purpose of rituals, the dualism that is created and the rebounding violence that is acted out, lies in the attempt to endow social institutions with continuity in the face of the transience of human life. A ritual, as it were, recharges the institutional batteries of a society. Taking the form of rituals among hunter-gatherers seriously, this metaphor may be turned around. Medicine dancers are clearly exhausted after a long night of dancing. A new ritual is not the product of social, spiritual or psychological exhaustion but it grows out of an intermediate period in which energies, resources, and initiative can - and have to be - accumulated in order to carry out a ritual successfully. The participants seem to be in need of fresh non-ritual experiences and resources before they engage in the next ritual or more appropriately the ritual is in need of being connected to new participants and situations before it is put into practice again. Thus, the incentive for a new ritual does not grow as the participants and their social order weaken but as the social order is enriched by (or loaded with) new encounters and new experiences. As rituals move with people into new contexts and circumstances this exposure to new situations fuels new ritual activity. There is an element of rebounding, of change of direction, but it may be quite different to what we tend to think it is. Since the opposition created in most hunter-gatherer rituals is not one of transcendence versus vitality but one of equally permanent and transient individuals, or groups of individuals, the rebounding does not take place between pure states of ritual and non-ritual life, nor between sacred and profane, but between one ritual event and its participants and another ritual event with probably different participants. This move in time or space covers the emergence of social problems and conflicts as well as the emergence of enriching social experiences such as a successful hunting expedition or such like. Both kinds of experiences stimulate ritual activity.

The cycle of feedback between new social constellations and ritual action and form seems to have been very short among "Bushman." There is almost immediate access to ritual form as trance dancers might at any time compose a new song or may elaborate on an existing one - just as they may elaborate on a myth or folktale, too (see Biesele, 1993; Widlok, 1999: 250). Furthermore, the other participants who are not composers themselves may at any stage try to initiate a dance at a particular place and with a particular set of people. In my Hai om data there are numerous examples in which a fairly small group of determined women initiated a forceful medicine dance simply by their insistent singing and clapping.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In this contribution I have used Bloch's model of ritual practice to elucidate the dynamics of the medicine dance in the present-day Hai om environment. However, the usefulness of a model is also determined by its applicability across cases. If hunter-gatherer cases depart from many models developed in the anthropology of religion, the question needs to be raised whether these cases have anything in common at all. In order to identify elements which are shared by different hunter-gatherer groups I want to add a comparative perspective on the material presented for the Hai om medicine dance by looking at ritual practices of Aboriginal people in Australia, more particularly in the Kimberley (northwestern Australia). The religious practices of Australian Aborigines and southern African "San" or "Bushmen" bear fairly little resemblance to one another in outward appearance. Aboriginal rituals, in comparison to Khoisan rituals, are more elaborate in terms of ritual paraphernalia (body decorations, sacred objects) and with regard to the many mythological links that ritual actions have. More fundamentally, Aboriginal religion has been described as being highly formalised to the degree that there are strict rules of how to perform a ritual and how to protect the secret nature of the ritual knowledge that is involved (Keen, 1994). Khoisan religion, by contrast, is known for its adaptive character, its flexibility in incorporating new elements, and its openness to all members of a society (Barnard, 1992). Thus, the two cases represent in the religious domain, as well as in the other domains of social life, two extreme cases of hunter-gatherer social organisation, "formal structure" and "formlessness." It remains a matter of debate as to how much of this opposition is due to an observer effect as anthropologists projected their own ideas of formless and formal social relations onto these two cases (see Shapiro, 1998). In any case, any commonalities found in a comparison of these two diverging cases are most likely to indicate fundamental characteristics of hunter-gatherer religion.

In both cases under consideration here it seems that, semantically, ritual practitioners do not entertain a dualistic world view which separates the natural identity of humans as reproducing organisms from their cultural identity of humans as interacting persons. Instead they consider individuals as unified biological and social persons that engage with one another and with other beings in the environment which are also conceived of as holistic rather than dualistic units (see Bird-David, 1999). In terms of ritual form there is an apparent similarity in the participatory structure of these two ethnographic cases. The division of labour into singers and dancers (women and men) in the "Bushman" case corresponds to a division between "boss" and "worker" in the Australian case. "Bosses" are usually considered the owners of a ritual but their role is rather passive in the ritual proceedings which are led by the workers. However, just as in the medicine dance the two participatory roles do not constitute a dualism but a forum for turning sick into healthy people, it can be argued that the Australian division of labour is the set-up for turning uninitiated into initiated persons. There are not only bosses and workers but also "prisoners," and to incorporate them into the group of knowledgeable persons, is a major incentive for carrying out the ritual. There is, however, a marked difference in the two ethnographic cases with regard

to the degree to which access to these roles has been formalised. In the Australian case the roles of “boss,” “worker,” and sometimes also that of “non-initiated” tend to formally alternate according to membership in a “skin” group (sections or subsections which are grouped into moieties, patrimoieties or semimoieties). In the Khoisan case, by contrast, the “dancer,” “singer,” and “patient” in different medicine dance performances may change informally and according to situational needs and biographical contingencies. Healthy people get sick, dancers start or stop being trance dancers, people participate in one dance but not in the next, and so forth. However, notwithstanding the emphasis on formal groups in the Australian case, the situation on the ground includes considerable contingencies, as well. Section systems vary across the Kimberley (and across Australia), their spread can at least be partially reconstructed and the ways of making different section systems compatible with one another are well known. Also, non-Aborigines such as visiting anthropologists are given a skin identity and can be accommodated in the system. Certainly today for many displaced Aborigines, including those who have been separated from their families by state authorities, skin identity cannot be taken as a “given” that generates the participatory structures of rituals. Rather, it seems to be secondary in many instances, depending on informal social commitments created in previous events, especially in previous ritual experiences. Even though the Aboriginal groups involved appear to be more formalised, ritual participants in both ethnographic cases are involved as persons with their individual combinations of links to other individuals or groups of individuals and not as impersonations of an underlying dualism.

Given that there is not a single underlying dualism, both cases also seem to lack the violent overcoming of one component by another, which - according to Bloch - characterises the rituals of non-hunter-gatherers. However, there is an element of violence in hunter-gatherer rituals which needs to be considered in this context. This is particularly clear in the Aboriginal case where workers not only isolate the initiates and the bosses but also show explicit violence towards them. Initiates are captured often against their resistance or that of their mothers. The workers keep them in seclusion, often without food or drink, they force them to lie down in one place for a long time while they dance around them, etc. Australian male initiation in particular has been described in terms of violence, as in the following instance:

“In the western desert of Australia a boy is made into a man by extracting his upper front teeth with a rock, without any anaesthetics or allowing him to express pain. By cutting of his foreskin with a stone knife piecemeal with him looking on how some of his male relatives eat the skin. And as a climax to his suffering his penis is slit open like a sausage from his testicles right up to his urethra.” (Greenway, 1974: 7).

More characteristically for rituals in the Kimberley, however, apparently violent behaviour is not only directed against the non-initiated, those who are to be initiated, but also to the bosses, the legitimate owners of a ritual. The role of the worker “specifically prescribes aggressive behaviour” while it is the role of the bosses to “behave submissively” to the extent that there is a “slight absurdity in the situation” (Kolig, 1981: 169). Potentially, all participants of such a ritual are subject to violent acts. As the ritual develops, sacred objects are exhibited and the situation gets charged to the extent that people expect “magical” things to happen such as the breakdown of vehicles or a change of weather. Participation and non-participation are at your own peril in both ethnographic cases.

In both ethnographic cases, the rituals can be said to involve violent acts. In the Australian case participants may trust that the roles will be reversed at some future stage as all participants are caught in the same system of moiety/section/subsection identities, and as the same kind of violence is imposed by different workers in any particular ritual that may follow. With regard to the travelling rituals in the Kimberley (see Widlok, 1992), but also with regard to “stationary” rituals like the smoking ceremony after a funeral, it is important to point out that the roles are likely to be inverted at the next ritual event. It is therefore difficult to argue that one moiety/section/subsection which happens to be at the receiving end this time comes to stand for vitality which is overcome by transcendence. Participants are aware that the direction that the violence takes is contingent upon the origin of the particular ritual at hand. Instead of transcendence violating against vitality, it seems that a group, or groups, of participants (for instance the bosses and workers belonging to certain subsections) are keen to establish the power and authority of their knowledge. Far from dissolving a latent dualism, these rituals emphasise the plural opposition of individuals and groups that are complex entities because they are the experts of ritual knowledge in one context and the non-initiated in other contexts. The violence encountered by the “San” trance dancer is best described as a strong, forceful experience which the trance dancer learns to manage as he gets more experienced so that he is no longer conquered by it. The violent experience is not imposed by others or on others but accessed by the person himself. Through the lack of formalisation the trance dancer has some autonomy over his decision to expose himself to this violent experience or not. In neither of these two cases, however, would it be more appropriate to conceptualise this violence as a violation of everyday experience than in terms of a conquest of one principle over another. It is not the duality of principles but the plurality of experiences.

At no stage in hunter-gatherer rituals is vitality lost or overcome by a pure element of transcendence despite oppositions being created by the participatory structure and despite the violence to which participants are exposed or expose themselves. There seems to be little need therefore to re-appropriate vitality, natural reproductive potential or such like at the end of a hunter-gatherer ritual in parallel to what has been suggested to be a key element of rituals elsewhere. Nevertheless, hunter-gatherer rituals, too, change the non-ritual set-up. At the end of a ritual, things are not as they were beforehand. Rituals do not provide a parallel world but they engage with the world, and therefore it matters how the ritual experience is tied into the post-ritual experience and how action is rebound for the

non-ritual life. In Australia, a ritual event that can be called a travelling ritual by definition involves the expectation of another ritual event to follow. Aboriginal people are initiated in order to carry out the rituals that they have learned about elsewhere. People who are receiving rituals are keen to get into the position of those who give rituals, either through their own creation or through transfer. Aboriginal creators of songs may “sell” their songs, exchange them for other songs or elements of rituals, but may also retain ownership rights so that the path of a song can be traced over some distance (see Widlok, 1992; 1997). They also retain the privilege to receive other songs or ritual paraphernalia when the situation arises that a new song is being imported. Travelling rituals in Australia are usually more complex events that require more collective preparation than medicine dances do. However, Aborigines may decide to “leak” single objects or designs at almost any instance and may try to integrate them into other ritual occasions. Individuals may thereby try to push ritual activity or alternatively they may want to hold back since they want to enjoy the possession of a certain ritual or object for longer. In any case here, too, is plenty of room for adding new meanings and for debunking existing ones as people carry ritual objects and elements into new contexts. As noted before the characteristic difference seems to be that “Bushmen” share their dances while Aborigines exchange or sell their ritual objects. For the underlying process of rebounding, this difference may in fact be of secondary importance since there is always a realistic expectation that rituals will enter new situations and that new situations will stimulate new ritual activity.

OUTLINE OF THE THEORY OF HUNTER-GATHERER RELIGION

Although this paper has focused on ritual form, a short discussion of transformations in the semantic dimension of hunter-gatherer religion is in order. Hunting and gathering people today and in much of the recorded past have practised their religion in an environment dominated by other worldviews. Many (former) hunter-gatherers now have a long record of interaction not only with Christian missionaries but also with Islam and other religions. Usually this contact has led to a selective adoption of ideas originating in other religions (see von Bremen, 1991). Most “Bushmen” in southern Africa (not to speak of Aborigines in Australia) are baptised Christians who, however, do not necessarily consider this to clash with other aspects of their religious life. Arguments have been put forward by historians of religion suggesting that the adoption of new concepts into hunter-gatherer religion involves some of the key ideas that were previously thought to have originated in the context of “hunters amongst hunters” (see Swain, 1993). This is not to say that these ideas are not “genuine” but simply that the process of lending ideas seems to have been more complex and lengthier than previously thought. Similarly, religious elements that have originated in a hunting and gathering context are now included in the religious repertoire of non-hunter-gatherers. Followers of New Age religions who conduct shamanic sessions or incorporate symbols of wild animals into their practices, in contrast to hunter-gatherer religion, do not form

a mainstream society. Their religious practices are “constructed in explicit opposition to a dominant orthodoxy” (Prince & Riches, 1999: 118). In terms of numbers, however, they probably already outnumber the hunter-gatherers themselves. Again, this is not to denounce the importance of discussing these issues, especially with regard to current debates on intellectual property rights (see Brown, 1998). However, what seems to be lacking is a sophisticated discussion as to how formal aspects of hunter-gatherer ritual transform under these circumstances (or resist transformation if that is the case). Developing a model of ritual forms in hunter-gatherer religious practice is therefore not primarily a means to set apart hunter-gatherers as a category but rather a tool for comparing ritual form across time and across contexts. The re-assessment of the concept of “animism” has led to a discussion about the extent to which animistic ideas, beyond the semantics of animals and other non-human features, are or could be part of religious life elsewhere (Bird-David, 1999). Hunter-gatherer societies tend to concentrate on the ways in which persons, conceived of as undivided natural and cultural wholes, engage with their environment which again is made up of undivided beings that are at the same time “natural” as well as “supernatural.” In this context rituals, or religious practices more generally, are not concerned with the internal make-up of persons, the relation between their vital and transcendent parts for instance, but they are concerned with the relation between these holistically conceived beings. In the ritual process human and other beings are being grouped in order to allow the practitioners of rituals to make demands on the cooperation of the members of these ritually formed groups as well as to invoke bonds between human and non-human partners. The procurement of cooperation and partnership between whole beings is the major motivation behind hunter-gatherer rituals and any theory of hunter-gatherer religion has to account for the formal features of hunter-gatherer rituals on these grounds.

If ritual is a form of demand cooperation (Widlok, 1999), in parallel to demand sharing in the economic sphere, then it requires tools to make these demands as effective as possible. If talking and simple co-presence are the interactional tools for demand sharing, then dancing and creating violent or at least forceful experiences are the ritual tools for demand cooperation. And the form force takes may in fact resemble violent acts in rituals elsewhere. But the main difference seems to be that hunter-gatherer rituals tend to preclude the imposition of violence on a group of people understood to stand for one of the internal principals of a duality inherent in all humans. Instead of violence as an expression of tense relations we are here dealing with force as a cause that forges dense relations. Frequently these forceful experiences are to some degree self-imposed, or at least individuals have some autonomy over the terms on which they are entering this experience. Given that there is this element of force in hunter-gatherer rituals, it has been a matter of debate for some time to what extent relations, especially non-egalitarian relations, that are established between ritual practitioners are carried over into the political or economic sphere (Bern, 1979; Tonkinson, 1988). How come that the force and violence in hunter-gatherer rituals seems to be much less prone to be appropriated for domination and abuse? Here the main point seems to be that the rebounding of violence has to be conceived of differently than in rituals elsewhere.

Since access to rituals is fairly open to all individuals the rebound is not to be found within each ritual but rather between ritual performances. As the participants, the initiators, or the owners and the places are likely to change between ritual events, rituals are not replications of previous ritual occasions but they are genuinely new events. This provides the scope for new experiences. The ritual includes violent experiences, it makes strong impressions and emotions possible, but it provides these experiences potentially at all times and for all. While the forceful experience is exhausted at the end of a ritual, each new ritual event provides an opportunity for rebounds, for a change of direction.

What does the model that I have developed here suggest with regard to the hunter-gatherer rituals of the future? Naturally this depends much on how we envisage the future to be. Let me adopt an optimistic view by assuming that the future will bring what many enlightened social scientists of today hope it will, namely a global civil or civic society as outlined by Dahrendorf (1994). In this model of a future civil society, religious activities and ritual participation are neither enforced nor hindered by states or supra-state organisations. In consequence this means that ritual participation will have to be stimulated and motivated by the members or participants themselves, very much in the way in which hunter-gatherers practice it today. There will not be a state church or state religion and therefore room for diversification, potentially also for hunter-gatherer religions. More specifically the now still dominant dualistic perceptions of the world, kept alive by powerful religious organisations as well as by popular science, will give way to a pluralistic forum. When Ingold encourages us to understand hunter-gatherers in accordance with their view of the world as inhabited by “undivided centres of action and awareness, within a continuous life process” (1996: 150), he really urges us to see ourselves and all human evolution in this way. This is not a matter of accepting that “the foragers were always right” but simply a sign that living conditions of hunter-gatherers and of intellectuals in the advanced modern age are similar enough to support similar world views, and possibly a similar kind of religious activity, as well. Although we are slightly closer to having a global civil society than we used to be, there is still some way to go, especially in some countries in which hunter-gatherers live today. For some communities of hunter-gatherers today, but for many other present-day people, too, global civil society in its full sense will come too late to experience it. Having said that, I believe that there is, in a future civil society, a future for demand cooperation religions as practised by hunter-gatherers. There is also a future for forceful experiences contained in these religions. With the diversification of religious practice generally speaking, the scope of individual religious experiences increases and there will be a demand for unusual experiences. In Namibia this can already be seen at present. In a country that was thoroughly missionised by mostly Lutheran Christians, many urban black people in particular travel a long way to participate in the “Bushman” medicine dance (see Widlok, 1999). Even though they may despise the “Bushman” for their poverty and way of life, they value the medicine dances as one of the few possibilities in Namibia today to experience ritual practices that differ significantly from monotonous purely word- and script-based church liturgies. In Australia there are cases of neo-pagans discovering Aboriginal religion which has enjoyed considerable

entertainment value both among urbanised Aborigines and detribalised white people. Finally, the rebounding of hunter-gatherer rituals, the fact that rituals are not repetitions but that individuals try to turn rituals into unique events which provoke new unique events, is in my experience increasingly a common element of many contemporary Christian religious practices. Therefore, there are trends in the civil societies of today that broadly support the three elements which I have identified as characteristics of hunter-gatherer religion. The main problem that remains is that the civil societies of today are still far from complete. Especially when it comes to the awareness that membership in society does not depend on a single shared culture. As long as the homogenisation of culture is pushed by major political forces, hunter-gatherer religions and many other products of human creativity will be under threat. The future religious activities of hunter-gatherers may look quite different to what we have got used to, probably no bear skins, no bullroarers and no bird feathers, just as today the ritual of one hunter-gatherer group looks so different from that of another. But once we accept this prospect, I see no reason why we should think that hunter-gatherer religions only have the illusion of a future. They may well provide input for the design of the civil society of tomorrow.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS This contribution is a revised version of my oral presentation at CHAGS 8 in Osaka. I am grateful for comments made by members of the audience at this event and particularly to my co-chair Kazuyoshi Sugawara whose creative mode of thought has been very stimulating. My participation in the conference was facilitated by financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. During my stay in Japan I enjoyed the hospitality of the staff at the Center for African Area Studies at Kyoto University where I had a very productive and pleasant stay. I am particularly thankful to Mitsuo Ichikawa, Jiro Tanaka, and their graduate students at the Center who have introduced me to their work and to the Japanese way of life more generally. The data included in this chapter was collected during field research from 1990 until 1994, funded by the University of London, the James Swan Fund in Oxford, and - during the second half of this period - by the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. I gratefully acknowledge the support received from these institutions. In the field my participation in dance events was always welcomed and I am particularly indebted to Abakub Gam gaeb, Dadab Khamamub, Xareb Gam gaeb, and Ubeb Ob who tried to convey their trance dance experiences to me.

REFERENCES

- Barnard, A. 1992. *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa. A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bern, J. 1979. Ideology and domination: Toward a reconstruction of Australian Aboriginal social formation. *Oceania*, 50: 118-132.
- Bieseke, M. 1993. *Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan*. Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg.

- . 1997. An ideal of unassisted birth: Hunting, healing, and transformation among the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi. In (R. Floyd-Davis & C. Sargent, eds.) *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, pp.474-92. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Bird-David, N. 1999. Animism revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology. *Current Anthropology*, 40: S67-S79.
- Bloch, M. 1992. *Prey Into Hunter*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bloch, M. & J. Parry 1982. *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Brown, M. F. 1998. Can culture be copyrighted? *Current Anthropology*, 39: 193-222.
- Carstens, P. 1982. The socio-economic context of initiation ceremonies among two southern African peoples. *Revue canadienne des études africaines / Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16: 505-22.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1994. *Der Moderne Soziale Konflikt*. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Munchen.
- Greenway, J. 1974. *Verfluchte Wüste*. Rowohlt, Reinbeck.
- Guenther, M. G. 1976. The San trance dance: Ritual and revitalization among the farm Bushmen of the Ghanzi District, Republic of Botswana. *Journal of the South West African Scientific Society*, 30: 45-53.
- . 1979. Bushman religion and the (non) sense of anthropological theory of religion. *Sociologus*, 29: 102-32.
- Horkheimer, M. & T. W. Adorno 1971. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main.
- Houseman, M. & C. Severi 1998. *Naven or the Other Self: a Relational Approach to Ritual Action*. Brill, Leiden.
- Ingold, T. 1996. Hunting and gathering as ways of perceiving the environment. In (R. Ellen & K. Fukui, eds.) *Redefining Nature: Ecology, Culture and Domestication*, pp.117-55. Berg, Oxford.
- . 1999. On the social relations of the hunter-gatherer band. In (R. B. Lee & R. Daly, eds.) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*, pp.399-410. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Katz, R. 1982. *Boiling Energy: Community Healing among the Kalahari !Kung*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Katz, R., M. Biesele & V. St. Denis 1997. *Healing Makes Our Hearts Happy. Spirituality & Cultural Transformation among the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi*. Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vt.
- Keen, I. 1994. *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Kolig, E. 1981. *The Silent Revolution: The Effects of Modernization on Australian Aboriginal Religion*. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia.
- . 1989. *Dreamtime Politics: Religion, World View and Utopian Thought in Australian Aboriginal Society*. Reimer, Berlin.
- Marshall, L. 1969. The medicine dance of the !Kung Bushmen. *Africa*, 39: 347-81.
- . 1999. *Nyae Nyae !Kung. Beliefs and Rites*. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, Mass.
- Olivier, E. 1998. The art of metamorphosis - or the Ju/'hoan conception of plurivocality. In (A. Bank, ed.) *The Proceedings of the Khoisan Identities & Cultural Heritage Conference*, pp.263-268. The Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town.
- Prince, R. & D. Riches 1999. Back to the future. the new age movement and hunter-gatherers. *Anthropos*, 94: 107-20.
- Rappaport, R. A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Shapiro, W. 1998. Ideology, 'history of religions,' and hunter-gatherer studies. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4: 489-510.
- Swain, T. 1993. *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Tonkinson, R. 1988. 'Ideology and domination' in Aboriginal Australia: a Western desert test case. In (D. Riches, T. Ingold & J. Woodburn, eds.) *Hunters and Gatherers, Vol. 2. Property, Power and Ideology*. Berg, Oxford.
- van Gennep, A. 1999. *Übergangsriten (Les Rites de Passage)*. Campus, Frankfurt.
- von Bremen, V. 1991. *Zwischen Anpassung und Aneignung. Zur Problematik der Wildbeuter-Gesellschaften im modernen Weltsystem am Beispiel der Ayoréode*. Anacon, München.
- Widlok, T. 1992. Practice, politics and ideology of the 'travelling business' in Aboriginal religion. *Oceania*, 63: 114-36.
- 1997. Traditions of transformation. Travelling rituals in Australia. In (T. Otto & A. Borsboom, eds.) *Cultural Dynamics of Religious Change in Oceania*, pp.11-22. Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden.
- 1999. *Living on Mangetti: 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

——— Accepted *September 25, 2000*

Author's Name and Address: Thomas WIDLÖK, *Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung, Postfach/P.O. Box 110351, 06017 Halle/S. Germany.*
E-Mail: widlok@eth.mpg.de