

A Tsonga Initiation

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The Tsonga are a Bantu-speaking people of southeastern Africa, numbering about 1,200,000 in Mozambique and 700,000 in the Northern Transvaal. They are famous among neighboring tribes for the emphasis they place upon the maintenance of their folklore tradition, an important part of which is mime, music, and dance. Toward the end of a two-year (1968-70) period spent studying the various Tsonga art forms, the author was unusually fortunate in gaining entrance to the girls' secret initiation rites held at the river's edge, and in tape-recording and photographing the musical events there.

Infertility and infant mortality are high in Tsongaland, and the secret rites are thought to provide protection against barrenness caused by witchcraft. Invoked in these rites are fertility-associated visions (water, snakes), the hearing of supernatural voices, music/color synesthesia, and other hallucinogenic experiences. All of these result from a combination of the ingestion of a plant drug called *Datura fastuosa* (known as Jimson weed in California), fast rhythmic drumming at basic brain wave frequencies, hyperventilation through energetic dancing, hypersuggestibility due to the leader's strong urgings, and the culturally-patterned motivations, expectations, and attitudes possessed by the girl-novices.

In the secret river-rites, known as *khomba*, nubile Tsonga girl-novices, "schoolmothers" (the previous year's graduates), and the supervisor wear blue-dyed salempores, wave blue flags, and paint their faces blue. This color is considered significant because the harmless, bluish-green snakes (*Dendrophis subcarinatus*, called *xihundze* locally) which live under the eaves of Tsonga huts are thought to be ancestor-spirits, and because bluish-green patterns (*mavala-vala rihlaza*) are expected to be experienced as part of the drug's effects.

The march to the river bank starts out from the village plaza, after an initial ceremonial beer-drink at which the elders debate the time, length, and place of the rites. Three large carved wooden hemispherical *tingoma* drums are played at the assembly beer-drink. After the decisions are made here, the men hold a special meeting of the Chief's council in order to confirm and/or modify the decisions (Fig. 1). Girl-novices on their way to the assembly point often play musical instruments as they go (Fig. 2).

The procession to the river takes the form of hierarchical lines, with the supervisor followed by the drummers followed by the "schoolmothers" followed by the novices, all singing special assembly and departure songs containing fertility connotations and references to marriage and in-lawship (initiation is a passport to marriage). On the way, the procession stops to perform various dances, including one in which the girls blow whistles and wave hatchets (Fig. 3).



(TOP) 1. A COURT MUSICIAN PLAYS A XIZAMBI FRICTION BOW AT THE MEETING OF THE CHIEF'S COUNCIL HELD TO CONFIRM THE WOMEN'S DECISION TO BEGIN THE KHOMBA (BOTTOM) 2. A GIRL INITIATE PLAYS A XIPENDANA BRACED BOW ON HER WAY TO THE ASSEMBLY POINT.

and another in which grass skirts are donned (Fig. 4). An important aspect of the initiation is the variation of the uniforms worn by different officiants and dancing-groups.

At the river's edge the fast drumming recommences, and novices perform a series of mimes, such as imitating the crocodile (Fig. 5), and lifting one another into the air at shoulder level. They are then covered with red ochre, which symbolizes fertility, and are laid upon a *milala* palmleaf mat, which according to their belief, "separates girls from the dust they knew as children." Then they are administered potions of the plant drug, which will facilitate hearing the voice of the fertility god and experiencing a fertility vision.

One of the officiants, who is experienced in the use of the drug, appears out of the bush dressed in frightening raffia costume, head-gear, and various bandoliers of medicines such as toads' skins. She and her assistant shout and sing admonitions to the girls, who are wrapped in colored blankets upon the mat (Figs. 6, 7).

The *Datura fastuosa* is administered in a large ceremonial shell, into which have been put small quantities of human fat and ground human bone. This is thought to provide an ingredient which protects against witchcraft, particularly infertility curses, as flesh-eating is an activity of witches (the grave-disturbing done by hyenas at night is thought to be the work of witches).

Throughout the various mimes and dances of the initiation period, fast drumming accompanies special songs related to parts of the rites; both the songs and the drumming are mime-specific. It is interesting that the speed of the drumming appears to be that best suited for tapping and slightly altering human basic brain wave frequencies, which are in the order of 8-to-15 cycles per second, and that the energetic dancing (which causes a flow of adrenaline and a drop in the blood-sugar content) complements the effects of both the drug and the drumming. Further complementarity is to be seen in the way in which the novices are expected to receive messages from the fertility god in visions or dreams, for the drug *Datura fastuosa* is known to facilitate visions. The association of snakes with fertility is common in many societies, and may be an example of the phallic symbolism described and discussed by Freud.

Observation of the novices' behavior during the loud, fast drumming serves to confirm hunches that African drumming may be functional to a high degree. The many frequencies present in the sound of un-tuned drums stimulate



(TOP TO BOTTOM) 3. "SCHOOLMOTHERS" PERFORM A DANCE CALLED NANAYULA WHICH PRECEDES THE SECRET RITES AT THE RIVER'S EDGE. THREE MIDDLE-AGE WOMEN (WITH INFANTS TIED TO THEIR BACKS) ATTEND TO THE DRUMMING WHILE DANCERS MAKE CHOPPING MOTIONS INWARD TOWARD THE DRUMS WITH WOODEN STAGE-PROP HATCHETS. 4. "SCHOOLMOTHERS" PERFORM THE MANAGA, THE LAST DANCE BEFORE PROCEEDING TO THE RIVER. THEY WEAR GRASS SKIRTS, WAVE HATCHETS AND KERCHIEFS AND DANCE TO DRUMMING ACCOMPANIMENT WHILE A SENIOR OFFICIANT CONSECRATES THE GROUND WITH MEDICINE. 5. AT THE RIVER'S EDGE, INITIATES FILE PAST THE DRUMMER-OFFICIANT WHILE IMITATING THE CROCODILE AND SINGING THE CROCODILE SONG. (LEFT) 6. THE DOCTOR AND HER ASSISTANT OBSERVE THE EFFECTS OF THE HALLUCINOGENIC DRUG, AND EMPLOY HYPER-SUGGESTIBILITY TO OBTAIN THE EXPECTED VISION.

a larger area of the brain than do single-frequency sounds, and the lower frequencies characteristic of Tsonga initiation school drumming meet with a higher amplitude-tolerance than do higher frequencies, the ear receptors for which are more delicate.

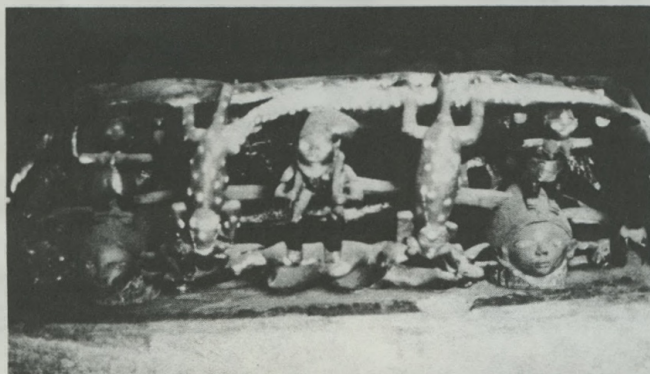
Furthermore, Tsonga drumming is more often than not polyrhythmic, with several drum patterns being performed at the same time. This may represent an intuitive attempt to tap the wide range of basic brain wave frequencies possessed by different individuals within a group (individuals are not alike in this respect), thus ensnaring the entire assembly in one psychophysiological net.

Mime, dance, and music, then, in the Tsonga girls' initiation school called *khomba*, exhibit an extraordinary amount of functional complementarity, the purpose of which is to attain the strong cultural imperative of fertility among the young women. Procreation is of great importance in Tsonga society. For one thing, no bride's parents wish to return the

cattle that have been paid for her by the husband's people.

Beginning with an ecological question (infertility due to malnutrition, infant mortality due to areal diseases) and eliciting a partly ecological response (the use of an indigenous solanaceous plant to produce altered states of consciousness), the incorporation into the initiation rites of the various goal-achieving ancillary mechanisms such as drumming, dancing, drug-taking, and dreaming, represents environmental adaptation. It is a form of innovativeness and functionally-oriented cultural evolution on the part of the Tsonga, and shows how human behavior (in this case musical behavior) in what at first sight may appear to be an unscientific and "backward" society, may employ sophisticated systems within systems to achieve desired ends such as procreation and perpetuation of that society. □

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19-21. GELEDE MASK SPECIAL DOUBLE MASK FOR ONIDIFOI, TUTELARY DEITY OF EFE/GELEDE AMONG IMALA/IDOFOI PEOPLE, AND GOD OF SNAKES. THE ELABORATE SUPERSTRUCTURE CONTAINS SNAKES EATING TORTOISES, FROGS, AND CROCODILES. THE MALE FIGURE WITH KORAN, CANE, BEARD AND TURBAN IS SAID TO REPRESENT SULE, THE FOUNDER OF ISLAM IN IMALA. DURING HIS LIFE, AS A MEMBER OF THE EFE/GELEDE CULT, HE HELPED CARRY THE DOUBLE MASK FOR ONIDIFOI. THE OTHER FIGURE WITH A BEARD AND SNAKE AROUND HIS NECK IS THE ELEMU, CHIEF PRIEST OF ONIDIFOI. THE FEMALE FIGURES ARE THE IYALASE AND SYMBOLIZE APOTUN, WIFE OF THE FOUNDER OF THE CULT, ABODU. THEY SIT BEFORE ONIDIFOI WORSHIPPING WITH KOLANUT, AND ARE ALSO CALLED OUR MOTHERS (AWON IYA WA). ATTRIBUTED TO ABEGURE AKERE WHO DIED "MANY YEARS" BEFORE 1971. OTHER PIECES ATTRIBUTED TO AKERE (MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, UCLA #X70-603 AND X70-644A,B) SHOW SOME CORRESPONDENCE WITH THIS WORK. REGIONAL STYLE: IMALA, EGBADO

Gelede *Continued from page 19*

(Beyioku 1946) ceremonies in which special masks might be carved, often with a figure of the deceased shown in a characteristic activity or attitude. Thompson describes such a funeral commemoration in Lagos and illustrates a specific mask showing the deceased (1971:Ch 14/pl. 5).

Other Gelede masks preserve histories or mythic events and personages (Figs. 19-21). An elaborate double-Gelede mask from Imala unites two heads by an intricate composition of snakes, crocodiles, monkeys, tortoises and humans. Two individuals wear this mask, which concludes the Gelede performance at sunset. The imagery in this mask can be clarified by oral testimony concerning the history of the Efe/Gelede cult among Imala and Idofoi people. Some Imala people say their ancestors came from Oyo to Ketu, and from there to the present site of Imala (Kilomoninse 1971; Adeleye 1971). It was at Imala, within the Idofoi forest, that they began to worship their chief *orisa* Onidofoi (the-owner-of-Idofoi-forest). Onidofoi is believed to be the god of snakes and has the power to utilize them for any purpose. The traditions say that the first to perform the sacrificial rituals for Onidofoi was Abodu who wore a turban and "dressed like a Muslim during his lifetime," even when performing Onidofoi rituals. When Abodu died, his son Elemo became the chief devotee of Onidofoi. The name Elemo now refers to the male head of the Efe/Gelede cult among Imala/Idofoi people. With these historical traditions in mind let us look at the imagery contained in the mask for Onidofoi and testimony about the mask provided by the king of Imala, I. O. Adeleye.

The snakes, which form the basic structure of the elaborate composition, represent the special power of Onidofoi. They symbolize his vital force or *ase*. The testimony states, "He controls the snakes . . . the snakes were biting the crocodiles while they carved the image . . . just to show his [snake's] ability toward other animals." These snakes thus refer to the mythological powers of a particular *orisa* and proclaim his superiority in hierarchical terms. The figure of a Muslim holding a cane and Koran represents the *elemo* (Fig. 20). Pointing to the figure, the king said: "Whenever we wanted to worship Onidofoi this man was called upon to go and face him . . . now the history I am telling you, if you