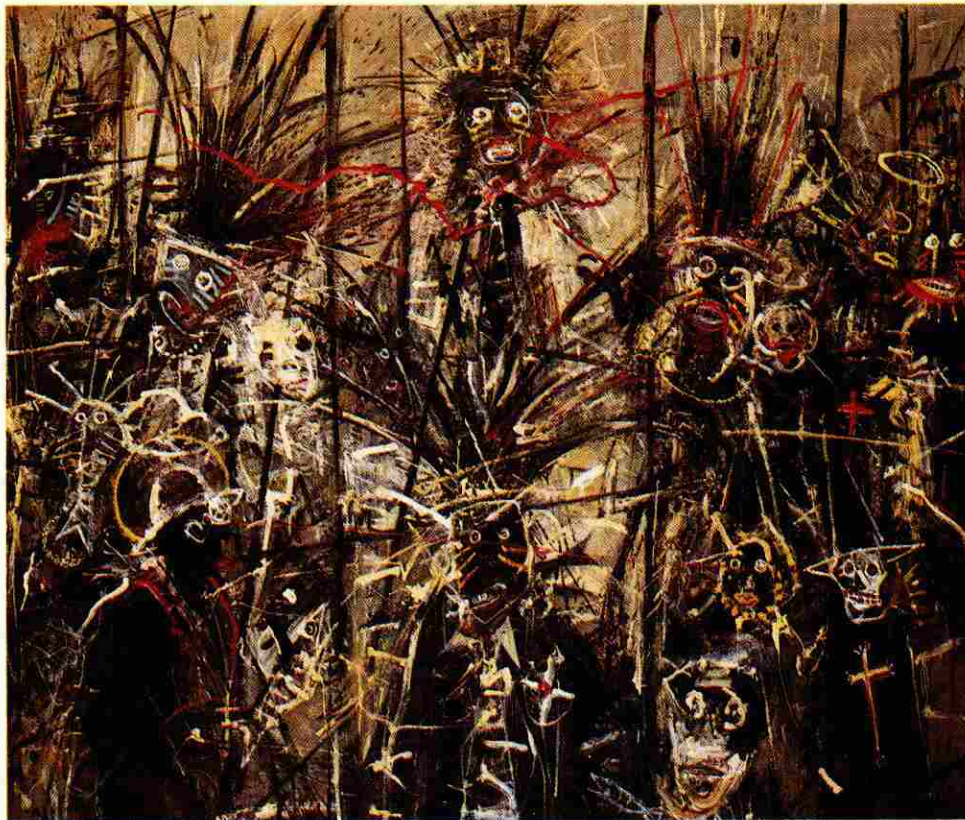


# ON HUMAN NATURE

Melvin Konner



John Alexander, *The Doctor and His Disciples*, 1984

## Transcendental Medication

Dusk is closing. The horizon of the Kalahari Desert makes a distant, perfect circle, broken only by scrub bush and an occasional acacia. The human sounds of the evening meal are heard throughout the village camp, a rough ring of small grass shelters with a fire and a family in front of each. For some reason, on this night, there is an unusually high level of excitement among the people of the !Kung San band. Perhaps there is meat in the camp, or perhaps it is just the round moon rising. Perhaps someone has been ill. Or maybe no one has; what is about to happen will benefit the healthy almost as much as the sick.

The women have talked among themselves and decided to try. They may have been prodded by the men, or they may have tested the men's interest with questions—or they may have just decided, simply and unilaterally. They begin to clap in complex rhythms and to sing in a strange yodeling style that bridges octaves gracefully, creating a mesmerizing array of sounds. Gradually, they collect into a circle around a fire. Emotion-

ally and musically they echo one another's enthusiasm. Someone stokes the fire as the dusk turns to dark.

Two of the men sitting cross-legged in front of a hut poke each other and stir. "These women are really singing," says one. "But we men are worthless." They chuckle and then become more serious, although the joking will begin again as the night wears on. They strap dance rattles onto their lower legs and get the feel of the sound that bounces back when their feet slap the ground. "Look," one of the women says, smiling. "These things might become men tonight." The dancing begins as other men join in, tracing a circle around the singing women. The men's feet slam to the ground repetitively and solidly. That sound becomes orchestrated with the clapping and singing of the women, and the network of echoing enthusiasm widens.

A newborn baby wakes and cries, and is adjusted in the sling at her mother's side. A toddler stumbles over to his mother, leans against her, and stares, wide-eyed, at the dancers. A pretty young woman

whispers something into the ear of the woman next to her; both of them glance at one of the men dancing and burst out laughing. The fire is stoked again, and it burns more brightly.

Suddenly a man falls to the ground. Because he is in late middle age, the naive observer wants to rush to his aid, but for the same reason his !Kung companions are unconcerned. (They have been expecting someone to fall, and the older and wiser among them, because of their experience, are most susceptible.) He lies there for a time, moaning softly and trembling. Other men drift over to him and kneel. They rub him gently, then vigorously, as one of them lifts the fallen man onto his lap. Finally, the man comes to a semblance of his senses and gets to his feet. Now he is in another state entirely, still trembling and moaning but walking, fully charged with energy. He bends over one of the women in the circle and places his hands on her shoulders. The trembling intensifies, taking on the rhythm of his breathing. With each breath, the amplitude of his voice and the

tremor of his arms increase until the crescendo ends with a piercing shriek: "Kow-hee-dee-dee!" He seems to relax momentarily, then moves on and repeats the ritual with each woman in the circle.

Meanwhile, the circle of singers has swelled, more men have joined the dancing, and other villagers, mostly children and adolescents, have formed a spectators' circle outside the inner two. One of the onlookers is a pregnant woman with a fever. The man in the healing trance goes to her for the laying on of hands, exerting himself at exceptional length and with exceptional vigor. At one point he pauses and stares out into the blackness, shouting almost hysterically, "You all! You all get out of here! You all get out of here!" Then he stares for a time into the void beyond the circle of spectators, before returning to the task of healing.

**H**ow does the healing trance come about? Does it truly impart the power to heal? And if so, how?

If Lorna Marshall, Richard Lee, and Richard Katz—the three great students of this ritual—could be at your elbow while you watched the !Kung dance, they might provide the following information. The trance and its power to heal are due in large part to the energy of the community. If the women sing and clap well, the men will dance well; if the sound of the dance rattles is good and someone begins to fall into a trance, the clapping and singing will rise to a new plane of excitement; if that plane is high enough and the men are sufficiently trusting of the women and of one another, several may enter deep and prolonged trances, and their healing power may last until after dawn.

The power itself, called *num*, is said to reside in the flanks of the abdomen, the pit of the stomach, or the base of the spine, and to boil up in a very painful way during the trance. The power to heal is not exactly the same as susceptibility to trances, but both are said to grow steadily during early adulthood and then diminish after middle or late middle age. A young man may have all the courage and energy he needs but, lacking experience and control, may be quite useless as a healer; an elder may have all the experience required, but his energy will not be what it was. (The parallel to the life cycle of male sexuality is striking, and perhaps significant.) As many as half of all men in the tribe can attain the healing power, which is an act of great courage, since the !Kung San believe that in a deep enough trance the soul may leave the body forever. The trance itself is at once exotically self-involved and heroically selfless. The individual is elevated in a way that is almost unique in this egalitarian culture, and yet his identity is dissolved; the ritual is of, by, and for the whole community.

If the dancer is experienced, his soul can travel great distances, to the world of the spirits and gods, and communicate with them about the illnesses and problems of the people. This marginal condition, between life and death, can be controlled only by the healer's own skill and by the vigorous ministrations of other healers. Their taking him in their arms, embracing him, and rubbing him with their sweat are considered lifesaving. In the process, the healing power can be transferred from an older, "big" healer to a novice; the novice places himself and his life in the hands of the older man, who must convey the power while protecting the novice from the grave dangers—both spiritual and real—that lie in wait.

In 1970, when I lived with the !Kung San in northwestern Botswana, along the fringe of the Kalahari Desert, I became an apprentice healer myself. The music created by the combined instruments of voice, clapping, and dance rattles struck me as being what used to be called psychedelic. Its eerie beauty seemed to bore into my skull, loosening the moorings of my mind. The dancing delivered a shock wave to the base of the head each time my heels hit the ground. This happened perhaps a hundred times a minute and lasted between two and ten hours. The effects on the brain and its blood vessels, and on the muscles of the head and neck, were direct and physical. Hyperventilation probably played a role, and perhaps smoke inhalation did as well. The sustained exertion may have depleted the blood of sugar, inducing light-headedness. And staring into the flames, while dancing those monotonous steps around and around the circle, seemed to have an effect all its own. ("Look not too long into the fire," warns Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, for it may unhinge the mind.)

But more than any of these factors, what made it possible for me to enter into the trance (to the limited extent that I did) was trust. On the one night that was followed by a morning full of compliments, especially from the women, on how well I had done, I had it in the extreme—that "oceanic" feeling of oneness with the world, which Freud viewed as echoing our complete, blissful infant dependency. Whom did I trust? Everyone—the women; the other dancers, apprentices, and healers; the whole community—but especially my teacher, a man in his late forties (I was then twenty-six). He was not one of the most powerful healers, but he was strong enough to teach a novice like me. God had strengthened his healing power (and given him his own dancing song) in a dream, during the course of a long illness. He was a well-respected leader in the community, and most important, he was my friend.

Over the two years during which we

worked closely together, my regard and affection for him matured into love. He was sensitive, wise, loyal, witty, bright, vigorous, generous—in a word, the perfect father. During that night I committed myself entirely into his hands, much as a suggestible person might do with a hypnotist. And as I drifted into a mental world not quite like any other I have experienced (although it shared some features with states induced by alcohol or marijuana), my mind focused on him and on my feeling for him. I felt sure that he would take care of me. He left me to my own devices for hours, and then at last, when I most needed some human contact, he took my arms and draped me over his shoulders. I suppose we looked rather comical—a six-foot-tall white man slumped over a five-foot-high African hunter-gatherer—but to me it seemed one of the most important events of my long and eventful stay in Africa.

**A**ll folk healing systems—and modern scientific medicine, too—are based on the relationship between the healer and the victim of illness. The behavioral and psychological features of this relationship—such elements as authority, trust, shared beliefs, teaching, nurturance, and kindness—significantly, and sometimes dramatically, affect the course of illness, promoting healing and preventing recurrence. Counseling and psychotherapy speed recovery from surgery and heart attack and mitigate the suffering of patients receiving radiotherapy for cancer. Even a room with a view reduces the amount of pain medication requested by patients recovering from surgery.

Call it placebo if you like, but the human touch has a real and measurable effect. Some aspects of it appear to act directly, through neuroendocrine mechanisms, which, though poorly understood, clearly serve as intermediaries between mind and body. Meditation, for example, decreases heart rate and blood pressure and thus helps relieve hypertension, and psychological stress has been shown in laboratory animals to decrease the number of "natural killer cells," which seek and destroy tumors and may provide resistance to cancer. On a more mundane level, the human touch can improve the patient's compliance with medical advice—an area in which modern physicians have not exactly excelled.

In my case, the deep and all-encompassing sense of trust did not last the whole night through. I drifted into a delusion that something terrible was happening to my wife, who was back resting in our grass hut, a mile or so away. This idea arose from an almost completely irrational fear of the Kalahari and all the creatures in it, animal and human. I darted from the circle, jumped into a Jeep truck, and

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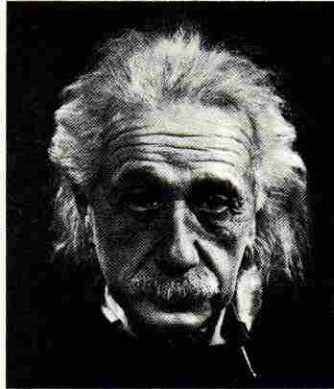
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began to drive. The trance was broken by the sound of the Jeep lodging itself on a tree stump.

What was happening in my mind and brain? No one can really say. We can guess that the neocortex, which is centrally involved in logical thought, was dulled, and probably have a piece of the truth; but it is possible as well that selected parts of my brain were heightened in their functioning. Because of the trance's superficial resemblance to a seizure and, more important, because of the powerful shifts in emotion, we can presume the involvement of the limbic system, the structure, between the brain stem and the neocortex, that mediates the emotions and has been implicated in epilepsy. Finally, we can be pretty sure that the trance involves some alteration of the brain stem's reticular activating system, which is the regulator of consciousness, ushering us from sleep to waking, from concentration to reverie. But this is all what mathematicians call "hand waving"—lines of argument so vague and sweeping as to satisfy no one.

So, it is too soon to conclude that !Kung healing "works" (according to scientific standards), and too soon to give an adequate explanation of the trance itself. I suspect, though, that in the end we will have convincing evidence. In the meantime, we can give the !Kung credit for discovering a deeply insightful system of psychology, based on knowledge and methods comparable in interest to anything in the West—and with at least equal symbolic richness. Consider the case of a young mother who had a serious bout with malaria in the wake of her middle-aged father's death. The healer in charge of her care entered a deep trance, during which his soul left his body. Traveling the road to the spirit world, it caught up with her father, who held the daughter's soul in his arms. After much discussion, the father was convinced that his daughter's need to remain on earth outweighed his own need for her and even his own considerable grief, so he returned her soul to the world of the living. A few days later, her fever and chills were gone.

Could the healer's report of his encounter with the father have influenced the course of the daughter's parasitic illness? Your guess is as good as mine. But mine is that the !Kung may have something to teach Western physicians about the psychological, and even spiritual, dimensions of illness. ●

*MELVIN KONNER, author of THE TANGLED WING: BIOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE HUMAN SPIRIT, teaches anthropology at Emory University and will soon complete medical school. His essays will appear regularly in these pages under the heading "On Human Nature."*

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