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ADEVU AND CIWARA RITUALS IN WEST AFRICA COMPARED TO HUNTING RITUALS AND ROCK ART IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2013 in Accra, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Vice Chancellors of the University of Ghana (Professor Ernest Aryeetey) and the South African University of the Witwatersrand (Professor Loyiso Nongxa). Almost immediately, ethnographers and archaeologists from both countries met to discuss matters that related to anthropology in Ghana and South Africa. Of particular interest were accounts of hunting rituals, stimulated by discussion of research reported by Frobenius (1931) and Thackeray (1986, 2005, 2013). Here we report the results of our initial research, associated with the principle of ‘sympathetic magic’.

ADEVU IN WEST AFRICA AND RITUALS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Among the Ewe in Ghana, there are hunting rituals during which adevu, a term derived from two words (ade, hunting, and vu, dance or music), features prominently. Amu (1997) provides the following definition of adevu: “Hunter’s music and dance performed to celebrate a successful hunt. Hunters performing this hunting ritual are known to reach altered states of consciousness (trance). The question arises as to whether adevu and other rituals in West Africa are related in any way to hunting rituals and trance-related rock art in South Africa of the kind known at the Melikane Shelter (Fig. 1) in Lesotho (Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981; Thackeray 2005, 2013).

Thackeray (2005) has discussed the Melikane painting in the context of the ‘sympathetic hunting magic’ ritual described by Lichtenstein (Thackeray 1986), and in the context of the Melikane painting (Thackeray 2005).

At least some examples of rock art in southern Africa, including the scene of therianthropes at Melikane in Lesotho (Fig. 1) copied by Orpen (1874), Vinnicombe (1976) and Thackeray (2005), are likely to be associated with trance-related beliefs (Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981), death, and rituals associated with the principle of ‘sympathetic hunting magic’ (Thackeray 2005, 2013). It may not be coincidental that hunting rituals associated with adevu among the Ewe in Ghana are also related to the concepts of death, success in the hunt, and trance.

HYPOTHESIS H1

We propose as a working hypothesis (H1) that West African rituals (including adevu among the Ewe) and iguba rituals in South Africa, have common heritage, both relating to the principle of ‘sympathetic hunting magic’ whereby a ritual is performed to mimic the wounding and killing of an animal, in the belief that this will facilitate success in a forthcoming hunt. This hypothesis can be assessed in the context of rituals and belief associated with various African animals, including roan (Hippotragus equinus), which has a widespread distribution, occurring in Ghana, Mali and East Africa, as well as in southern Africa.

The possibility that Tyi Wara (or Chi Wara; alternatively Ci Wara) rituals in Mali (Fig. 2) developed in part from hunting beliefs associated with roan antelope, and incorporated in agricultural rituals, needs to be considered in the context of an etymology of Tyi Wara, from tiyi (wounded, pierced) and oura (wild animal), as proposed by Thackeray (2005). Remarkably, a ritual performed at Logageng in the Northern Cape of South Africa, and photographed in 1934 (Fig. 3) is similar to West African Tyi Wara rituals, incorporating a person under the head, skin, skull and horns of a roan antelope, adopting a quadrupedal posture (cf. Fig. 2). At least three stripes are painted on the skin of the roan antelope at Logageng, and are interpreted as


In South Africa, Bantu words for wounds or painted stripes are based on the form -tshi, similar phonetically to Khoisan !gi which are stripes or scarifications inflicted on hunters in the belief that these ‘wounds’ will contribute to success in a forthcoming hunt (Thackeray 2013). Our H1 hypothesis is supported by linguistic evidence, in the sense that South African words based on -tshi or !gi are phonetically similar not only to an Ewe word, si, which refers to wounding, cutting, scarification or painting, but also to the Bambara word Tyi (as in Tyi wara or Chi Wara or Ci Wara) which means to pierce (cf. wound) (Thackeray 2005). Perhaps not coincidentally, the Khoi term for a supernatural potency is Tsui //khoab, where tsui means wounded (Hahn 1881) and //khoab means roan antelope (Thackeray 2005).

ADEVU AND THE PRINCIPLE OF ‘SYMPATHETIC HUNTING MAGIC’

The Ewe adevu is associated not only with hunting but also with war. It is generally associated with the music and dance form of spiritually powerful hunters and/or warriors, although other members of the public may perform it in context of entertainment. Some of the drums on which the music is performed are supposedly vested with special powers. Their membranes are of the skins of roan and other animals which are thought to have powerful spirits. The lead drum, the most powerful, is normally covered with calico, red fabric or strands of plant fibre and is often protected from public view. Performers of the music and dance are mostly men of the African Indigenous Religious faith. They adorn themselves with indigenous regalia that may comprise plant-dyed fabric to which animal hair (tails/whisks) and other charms are attached.

According to oral accounts narrated by elders of Kpando in the Volta Region of Ghana, warriors usually perform adevu to ‘charge’ or psyche themselves before going to battle. In contemporary contexts of performance, such as during the funeral rites of deceased chiefs and other elderly statesmen and warriors, ‘asafo’ or the guards of chiefs of Kpando use knives, machetes and clubs to mimic the act of hunting, stabbing and cutting the throats of their victims. Some of them test or show off their magical powers, ‘ade-dzo’, by attempting to cut or stab themselves or cut their tongues with sharp knives without drawing blood. In effect, a well-fortified warrior is not expected to be harmed by a knife wound and is attributed with the ability to kill a live animal through the pointing and flipping of his fingers. Seasoned priests and priestesses of the Indigenous Religion fortify hunters and warriors through the use of herbs (Apoh & Gavua 2010). The flipping and pointing of fingers of a hunter (or a warrior) to kill an animal or enemy could be viewed as ‘sympathetic magic’ since it provides an assurance to the hunter or warrior of the effectiveness of his magical potency which could ensure a successful hunt for prey or success over enemy.

In secular contexts, including festivals and other celebrations an adevu dance is performed by anyone who has learnt the art of taking the right steps and making the right throat and hand cutting and stabbing gestures to accompany the adevu music (Fig. 4).

CONCLUSIONS

Beliefs associated with hunting would have had a widespread distribution in Africa prior to the domestication of plants such as sorghum, and prior to the dispersal of domesticated animals (notably sheep, goats and cattle) within the last 3000 years. Hunting rituals such as those reported by Lichtenstein (1812), and rituals of the kind associated with the Melikane rock painting and the ‘buckjumper’ (Fig. 1) in southern Africa (Thackeray 2005, 2013) may have prevailed among ancestral Khoisan as well as Bantu speakers who immigrated into the African sub-continent within the last 2000 years from West Africa and elsewhere on the continent. Anthropologists and archaeologists from the University of Ghana and the University of the Witwatersrand are pursuing research related to the H1 hypothesis, suggesting that West African rituals (including adevu among the Ewe) and iguba (as well as related
rituals in South Africa) have common heritage, both relating to
the principle of ‘sympathetic hunting magic’ whereby a ritual is
performed to mimic the wounding and killing of an animal, in
the belief that this will facilitate success in a forthcoming hunt.
Such beliefs may have considerable time depth in African
prehistory, recognising that an Apollo 11 Cave therianthrope
(art mobilier from Namibia, dated at 27 000 BP and associated
with hippotragine horns), may relate to the principle of ‘sym-
pathetic magic’ (Thackeray 2013).

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