

6 “The Death That Kills Us All”

THE ACTIVATION of num into kia, followed by the application of kia into healing, is a process based on the experience of transcendence. The word *transcendent*, when used to summarize what happens to the Kung during kia, means an experience characterized by a certain level of profundity in perception and knowledge, rather than an experience that is just more intense than what is customary or expected. Transcendence is more accurately an enhanced rather than simply an altered state of consciousness. As such, it has great potential for understanding and growth (Bourguignon, 1979; James, 1958; Katz, 1976; P. Lee, 1977). That potential begins for the Kung with num.

Num is the basis of the healing dance. Though the word *num* has been translated by others as “medicine,” I believe that translation is too limited. Certainly one of the things num is is medicine. But its meaning seems far broader, more profound. A clearer translation is “energy.” But it is better to retain the Kung word *num* and try to arrive at an understanding of the phenomenon by considering what the Kung have to say about it.

There are many referents for num, and the limits to these referents are purposely ambiguous. Num, for example, refers to medicine, sorcery, menstruation, and power. It appears in many different things, both human and inanimate. Its effects are varied, both beneficent and maleficent. But in whatever form or function, num is consistently felt as strong. As with other strong phenomena, the word *num* itself carries the power of num.

The Kung believe that some num, such as that of the great god Gao Na, is especially strong. Gao Na created num, giving it his own power. He does not govern its functioning but can at any time stop it from functioning. Gao Na’s num is so strong it can be dangerous. As one Kung puts it, if Gao Na were to come “near” to ordinary men, perhaps 100 yards away, his num would kill them (Marshall,

1969, p. 351). Only the most powerful of healers can approach the great god during their healing efforts and bargain with him to save a patient. Ordinary healers can deal only with the lesser god, Kauha, and the spirits, as they seek to save sick ones from being taken away.

Referring to its strength, the Kung call num a “death thing” and a “fight” (Marshall, 1969). These two expressions are often used for anything strong or dangerous. The sun, for example, is also a “death thing” and a “fight.” Healers in kia must not point their finger fixedly at anyone, especially a child, because a “fight” might go along their arm, leap into the child, and kill her.

Num is said to be “invisible,” though it can be “seen” and “picked up” by those experiencing kia. Otherwise, num is known only by its action and effects. It is located only by its existence in a particular form, whether it be a person, a song, or a bee. Num is not personalized or personified. No one can possess it exclusively nor control it completely. Num’s “invisibility” enhances its power.

Num, this primary force in the Kung’s universe of experience, is at its strongest in the healing dance. It resides in the healers, the num songs, and the dance fire. The concentration of num at a dance far exceeds that generated in any other time or place of Kung life. Num is at its peak when the num songs are sung with the most abandon and enthusiasm, and when the healers in kia heal with the most intensity and depth.

The num in the healer must be activated for it to become a healing energy. The Kung say the num must gam or “rise up.” The singing of num songs helps awaken the num and awaken the healer’s heart (Marshall, 1969). The Kung feel that their hearts must “awaken” or “open” before they attempt to heal.

The num becomes stronger as its becomes hotter. The singing and the physical exertion of the dancing help heat up the healer’s num. So do the various ways healers bring themselves into contact with the fire, whether rubbing live coals in their hands and over their chest, or pushing their head into the fire. As the healer’s num is heated up to boil-

ing, it vaporizes and, rising up the spinal column, induces *kia*. At that stage, the num is at its greatest strength for healing.

The Kung word meaning “to boil” refers not only to boiling num, but also to the boiling of water on the fire and the ripening of plants (Lee, 1968). There is thus a strong symbolic association between boiling num, boiling water, the meat cooked in that boiling water, and ripened plant foods. Just as the num, which is dormant when cold, reaches its peak of available strength when boiling, so water becomes powerful when hot, and plant foods become nutritionally potent when ripe. The Kung sometimes go one step further and, in a joking manner, extend the boiling concept to females who have reached menarch. They say that such women are now “ripe” for intercourse and impregnation.

Kia is the experience of boiling num. *Kia* has been translated as “trance,” which is misleading. The word *trance* is used to describe a variety of altered states of consciousness, including possession, hypnotic, and meditation states. Its use remains ambiguous and inconsistent. So again, I prefer to keep the Kung word *kia* and let what the Kung have to say about *kia* lead to an understanding of that phenomenon.

Kia is not a unitary, unidimensional, linear experience. *Kia* is an altered state of consciousness, which at different times in different or the same persons may function at different levels, may capture different degrees of meaning, and may express itself in different forms of behavior. For the Kung, *kia* refers to certain kinds of thoughts, feelings, and physical actions.

I remember my initial surprise while attending my second dance. There is Kinachau, having just experienced an apparently profound and agonizing *kia*, sitting down with his wife and commencing a routine conversation about the lack of tobacco in the camp. How could he talk so “normally” so soon after his profound *kia* experience? Then I recall how one can “move into” and “out of” an altered state of consciousness, or at least through different “levels” of the experience. *Kia*, too, shows different faces, and at

some points the healer in kia can talk coherently. Kia has permeable boundaries. A healer can pass into and out of the state, returning to so-called normal discourse or activity at different times during his kia experience.

I hesitate to use the phrases “into” and “out of” kia, or “return to” normalcy. Kia is not a state that begins definitely and at a discrete point, nor does it end that way. Healers work themselves into kia, and it is much easier to say whether at anyone point they are in kia or not, than to mark the point at which they enter kia. Healers come out of kia more like a glider than a machine which can be turned off by a button. They may float gradually back to their ordinary state, or like the glider, they may be caught up in an unexpected burst of song and sail off again into a deep kia.

Again, to speak of “levels” of kia, or to refer to an “intense,” “profound,” or “deep” experience of kia, is somewhat misleading, for the Kung do not propose sharp boundaries between levels of kia. But there are indications that a particular experience of kia is more or less intense or profound. Generally, the hotter the boiling num becomes, the more intense the kia it brings on. One experienced healer says: “When we fall in kia, our num is very hot, as hot as it gets.” Another healer puts it this way: “You feel your blood becomes very hot, just like blood boiling on a fire and then you start to heal” (quoted in Lee, 1968). Still another way the Kung express this variation in intensity is to say that when their num is “heavy,” the kia will be strong.

Having one’s num hot and heavy is enough to make one’s kia “intense.” But it is not necessarily enough to make one’s kia as “profound” or “deep” as possible. Being able to apply the kia to healing makes it profound. For when the num is hot and heavy, a person can be overwhelmed by it; fear then dominates rather than the clear perception necessary to see the sickness and heal. The kia in that case remains only intense. The effectiveness and power of the healing efforts determine the depth of the kia. For example, traveling to the god’s home to rescue the soul of a sick person is possible only when the kia is deep.

The Kung do not emphasize discrete stages of *kia* or a necessary succession of stages that all healers must experience. At anyone time, healers can go immediately into a deep *kia*; at another time, they may go through a more extended build-up period. Generally the more experienced the healer, the more intense and deep is their *kia* at a dance. Yet during the first experiences with boiling *num*, when the *num* and the utter fear escalate in response to each other, the *kia* can be especially intense. Dau speaks of this when he first got *num*: “I was very surprised when *num* came to me. It made me cry out in pain. I cried out: ‘What’s this pain in me? What’s come over me?’ ”

The heating up of one’s *num* brings on certain painful and frightening changes, which are expressed in a physical, emotional, and cognitive way. Fear dominates during these changes. If the fear is met and overcome, if healers transcend the fear by dying, then they can accept these painful changes rather than being dominated by fear of them. They can transform these changes into vehicles that allow them to heal. The experience up to this point of transcendence, or transformation, might be called “beginning” *kia*. Many of the Kung have had such experiences of beginning *kia*. Most of the men and perhaps one-third of the women have danced and sought *num*. Among those who seek *num*, perhaps 75 percent of the men and almost all the women experience beginning *kia*. But among those who seek, perhaps one-quarter of the men and three-quarters of the women go no further. They do not transcend their fears, nor transcend themselves. They do not become owners of *num*, and they cannot heal.

Experiences that include the moment of transcendence and the subsequent application to healing may be called “full” *kia*. It is in full *kia* that one can heal. More than half the adult men, or more than half of those males who seek *num*, and perhaps 10 percent of the adult women, or almost 25 percent of those females who seek *num*, experience full *kia*. They are called *num kausi*, “owners, or masters, of *num*,” namely healers. These healers experience beginning *kia* in their early contacts with *num*; beginning

kia is in a sense a preparation for full kia at some later dance. Also, at anyone dance, beginning kia usually occurs as a prelude to full kia, even for the experienced healers. The kia experience itself has its own internal development.

In beginning kia, one typically sweats profusely and moves about stiff-legged or perhaps staggers on wobbly legs. Kinachau says: "Your footing gets bad, your legs become rubbery. You feel very light; your feet don't touch the ground properly. It seems that you don't have any weight on the ground holding you steady. You have to work to keep your balance. You can lose control over your body because you feel as if there are no bones in your body." The body trembles, especially the legs, and one has a blank, glassy stare. Any or all of these physical manifestations may occur while one is moving about in the area of the dance. One's perception is "congested"; one's thoughts "whirl." And fear dominates.

There is fear of the hot, almost boiling num which creates great pain and confusion. Dau speaks of these effects: "What happens in kia is that it hurts in the gebesi, the pain is great on the sides and in the stomach. Your belly and spine quiver. Your vision becomes funny in that when you look at people or the fire, you will see the fire as if it is way above the ground or at eye level." Another healer describes the effects this way: "I see all the people like very small birds, the whole place will be spinning around and that is why we run around. The trees will be circling also" (quoted in Lee, 1968, p. 11). There is also fear of the unknown and of the potentially frightening experiences to come, which will herald full kia.

Dau describes what it is like to be in beginning kia: "You can tell a person who is fearing num by the expression of pain at his gebesi. You see a person grimacing with stomach pain. Now look at me for example. The pain sometimes gets too strong for me and I have to sit down, and when it subsides, I can get up and dance again. We will massage and feel our gebesi, not to bring the num up, but to keep the num down so that we can dance."

Nai talks about beginning kia from a different point of

view. As she sings at the dance, she is looking for those in beginning kia. She is ready to offer them support if they need it. I ask her how she can tell if someone fears num. "Num hurts, you know," she replies. "Those who are new to kia leap up to heaven and then fall down and dive into the fire and scatter the coals all over us singers, and we leap up brushing the coals off ourselves and say, 'What is this man doing? Does he fear num? Look, he's going to murder us with the fire.' Then he sprays the coals, and he climbs into the trees. Then he might go and pick things up in his hands, and we might help. We have to take them away from him and say, 'What're you doing?' His face is also blank; his eyebrows might be slightly raised, and his eyes might close and open." Nai demonstrates by staring blankly into space, her eyes bulging, and then gradually her expression becomes like a frightened or pursued animal.

The dynamic that moves one from an experience of beginning kia to full kia is being able to "die." This dying should not be reduced to the Western concept of psychological death or ego-death. Nor do I find evidence that the Kung call this dying a "half-death." For the Kung, it is simply dying. This dying and attendant rebirth are the central expressions of transcendence in Kung healing. When persons still seeking num experience this death, it signifies their capacity for full kia and healing. It is said that they have finally "drunk num." They then embark on a phase of active dancing and kia, trying to gain more and more experience in applying their boiling num to healing. When established healers experience this death, it may signify their entrance to a very deep, full kia.

Often a particular form of dying marks the passage from beginning to full kia. Dancers usually fall to the ground. They may crash down suddenly after running around wildly, or they may slip to the ground, their feet becoming like soft rubber. Lying on the ground, their body is sweaty and clammy. It usually twitches and trembles, sometimes in violent spasms. There seems to be much physical tension in the body, and sometimes it is as rigid as a board. At other times the body is limp, almost lifeless. Either the eyes are

closed tightly or, if open, the eyeballs are often rolled up into the head, only the whites showing.

While in beginning kia, the healers' soul or spirit remains in their body. As Kinachau says: "The soul is inside, not traveling around. It's there. It's small, but it's there." During the death of full kia, the soul leaves the healers' body through their head. The soul goes to encounter god and the spirits of the dead ancestors. It pleads for protection for the Kung back at the dance. The Kung say that healers are in great danger at this time. Their soul might wander away or be taken by the spirits. Then they, too, would die and become a "spirit of the dead."

When healers are in this death, the others at the dance focus their attention and energy on protecting and caring for them. The singing may become more enthusiastic and intense. Others work over the person in death, trying to cool down their num, healing them, and calling out for their soul to return.

There are different things healers can do while in full kia, each an expression or application of a transcendent experience. They may handle, contact, or walk on the dance fire without being burned. Describing something like X-ray vision, they may predict the sex of infants in utero or describe the location and shape of a sickness inside someone's body. They may see at a great distance, enabling them to warn persons of lions lurking out of sight or to describe people's activities in a far-away camp. Even those working on healers, affected by the latter's kia, may themselves handle hot coals in their supportive efforts without being burned.

Healers in full kia may obtain special information, for example, about the appropriateness of an impending marriage. They may also have what could be called "out of the body" experiences. (Tart, 1969). These experiences may be both elaborate and extended, as are the trips to god's home. Healers may have direct contact with god in the form of a conversion experience, where god himself gives them num.

The Kung believe that a few of the most powerful healers

of the past could transform themselves into lions, who stalked the desert in search of human prey (Lee, 1968). Lions do not ordinarily attack man, and sometimes the Kung hunters may even drive a lion away from its fresh kill in order to scavenge the meat. On the several occasions when a lion has attacked a man, therefore, the Kung say that the attack was made by a human healer turned lion. This ability to become lions is the only one attributed to the healer that is not benevolent.

The primary application of full *kia* is in healing sickness. Healing itself is a transcendent experience. Healing becomes possible through the healers' ability to go beyond their ordinary self into *kia* and, in *kia*, to allow their *num* to work against sickness. Full *kia* becomes a transcendent experience with definite applications in daily life.

During full *kia*, the Kung certainly transcend themselves. They have experiences and do things beyond their ordinary capacities. But most important, they “see” things with a clarity and understand with a depth beyond their ordinary states. This enhanced perception and knowledge come from their contact with the spirits and gods and, in particular, from their working with *num*.

The word *kia* is also used to refer to other states, such as those associated with the consumption of alcohol and the smoking of tobacco. Being drunk is seen by most Kung as a “bad thing.” Kaha, a strong healer from Kangwa, remarks that a person who is drunk does not “know people. You start off talking nicely but then can't finish.” The Kung way of smoking, which involves a series of rapid, deep inhalations, can lead to a tobacco *kia*. As Kau Dwa describes it: “You can achieve *kia* from tobacco if you're dying for a smoke. Tobacco diffuses throughout your flesh, but it is not *num*. It is not *num*. It is tobacco. It's like an arrow that fires into your chest and kills you. If you take tobacco only, you will not pull sickness. Tobacco is just like a food you might eat.” These other *kia* experiences involve alterations of consciousness but, more important, do not result from the activation of *num* and are not applied to healing. Alcohol and tobacco *kia* are viewed primarily as sources of

pleasure or release. The *kia* of *num* remains distinctly, uniquely significant.

Healing is what ties *kia* directly into the Kung's everyday life. Healing is the function for which the pain of *kia* is endured. This healing must be understood in the broadest sense of protection and enhancement for the individual, the group, and the entire Kung people. Healing is a give-and-take process. Those who put on the dance, especially the singers, give the healers the setting in which their *num* can be activated. In return, healers give to all the healing power of that activated *num*. Healing seeks to maintain a balance in the Kung's universe of experience. The healers go forth into active contact with the spiritual realm, struggling with the spirits and gods over issues of sickness and death. The character and outcome of these continuing struggles do much to establish the texture of the Kung universe.

The healer struggles with the gods because it is from them that sickness comes to people. The great god Gao Na, the creator and controller of all things, is said to create sickness and, according to his own will, to send sickness to his people, the Kung. The actual sending is through the lesser god Kauha and his messengers, the *gauwasi* or spirits of dead Kung. An experienced healer from Dobe describes this act: "Kauha is the owner of sickness. He holds it in his possession and shoots it out [into a person] when he wants to kill [that person]. The healer's job is to draw sickness out [of the person] and send it back to Kauha, who must receive it and keep it until it is sent out to kill another. Kauha is very bad. He possesses terrible purposes" (quoted in Lee, 1963-1974).

Sickness is more an existential condition or level of being than a particular illness or symptom. Everybody has some sickness, and so everybody who is at a dance is given healing. In most persons, this sickness remains incipient, neither serious nor manifested in symptoms. In some persons, the sickness is actualized into what Westerners would call an illness. Persons who are ill get especially intensive and extensive healing. *Num* is for prevention as well as treatment.

It is at the healing dance that the issue of health and

sickness is dealt with most directly and forcefully. For it is there that the spirits, attracted by the beautiful singing and dancing, hover in the surrounding darkness, waiting to shoot their arrows of sickness into people. It is there that the healers can confront these spirits and battle with them to save the people from sickness and death. The very performance of a dance calls for such a confrontation.

Theoretically, *kia*-healing is appropriate for all kinds of what Westerners would call physical, psychological, social, and spiritual sicknesses. In practice, healing is withheld in certain cases, for example, if the sickness cannot be understood or diagnosed. The cause of the sickness may be something the healer is not able to handle. Koto describes the cure of a Herero, Mr. Thomas, who lives at *Xaixai*: "When Mr. Thomas was struck by lightning and died, his body was carried back to his village. *Wi* was called in, and *Wi* pulled him and pulled him. We had all given Mr. Thomas up for dead, and then he opened his eyes and lived. But the first *Kung* to be called in was *Kinachau* and he refused. Then they called in another, and he refused. They both said, 'We don't know this sickness, it is not from our place.'"

Since the sickness must be drawn out by healers into their own body before they expel it into space, some healers are wary of having an unknown sickness enter their bodies, even temporarily. What would happen if the sickness did not leave them? Such a question is usually not raised with recognizable illnesses, but it is with unknown ailments. When the sickness is diagnosed as being the result of *Goba* witchcraft, then a healing is usually withheld. *Goba* witchcraft is in one sense a label for sicknesses the *Kung* cannot understand or heal.

A young healer from *Nokaneng*, who has been told to stop dancing because his *num* has "killed his father and uncle," comes to *Xaixai* in part to visit relatives, in part to be cured. He is completely lethargic in physical appearance, extremely depressed. When I speak with *Toma Zho* about him, *Toma Zho* becomes thoughtful and reflects for a moment before saying: "I don't know about that young man

from Nokaneng. He's sick, but I don't know what he's sick from. I haven't been to him."

"Has anyone been pulling him?" I wonder.

"No." Toma Zho looks perplexed. "And I don't know why nobody's pulling him here at Xaixai. I don't know why."

I too am puzzled. "But he's pretty sick, isn't he?"

"Yes," says Toma Zho. "I've heard around that he's sick. But he's been to dances. He went to our dance the other night."

"That's right," I say, "but nobody pulled him there. Why did Kinachau pull others at that dance but not him?"

"I didn't see. I didn't see that dance," Toma Zho replies simply.

I then ask Kinachau about the sick healer. Kinachau expresses sincere bewilderment. "I don't know what's wrong with the one from Nokaneng," he remarks. "He just arrived. I went over there to see him the other day, but I didn't heal him. The num in me is no longer strong." This characteristic Kung disclaimer ends Kinachau's response.

I am still puzzled why such a sick person is not healed more immediately and extensively. It was only later, after talking with Kau Dwa, the healer who lives at Kangwa, that a possible explanation emerges. "Yes, I know that man very well," says Kau Dwa. "He came off the truck at Kangwa a few months ago, almost dead. I pulled and pulled and pulled him. Then I said to him, 'Look, don't stay in this place. Get out of here. Go down to Xaixai and ask for num.' "

"What's wrong with him?" I ask again.

"We don't know. I don't know. Maybe the Gobas gave something to him. I think it's some kind of gun the Gobas have that they can shoot into you. So perhaps it was the Gobas who gave him that disease. He also had a hunting accident. He was hunting with a rifle. He shot a wildebeest in the right haunch, and the wildebeest turned on him and gored him in the thigh and then gored him in the stomach."

"When you pulled him, what did you see?"

"I saw nothing. I just saw blood in the places where the wildebeest had gored him."

The Kung do not feel that kia-healing is omnipotent. The

healers lose some of their battles with the spirits. Persons die. And often a person dies in the hands of a healer, who up to the end has been trying to save him. Upon such a death, healers may acknowledge the outcome of their struggle in words such as: “The sick one must go now. The spirits have taken him for their own.”

Kashay talks about when he was “given up for dead”: “There was the time I was very sick, so sick that I was given up for dead. This disease absolutely ruined my feet; they were limp, as limp and pale as dead flesh. I was deathly thin. They were dancing for me. They brought me from my camp to the dance. Toma Zho danced over me until the sun rose. I was so sick I couldn’t sleep. My eyes were closed but they were full of visions of ancestors. Toma Zho pulled me and pulled me and pulled me until the sun rose. Then I was taken back to my camp, and I said, ‘Is today the day I’m finally going to see some sleep?’ I lay down, and to my great surprise I fell into a sound, good sleep. And I woke up saying, ‘I’m saved.’ ”

The actual process of healing has three main aspects: “seeing properly,” “pulling out the sickness,” and “bargaining” or “battling” with the gods and spirits. Seeing properly allows the healer to locate and diagnose the sickness in a person. Wi, an old experienced healer, speaks of Dau, who is still comparatively young in *kia*: “What tells me that Dau isn’t fully learned is the way he behaves. You see him staggering and running around. His eyes are rolling all over the place. If your eyes are rolling, you can’t stare at sickness. You have to be *absolutely steady* to see sickness, steady-eyed, no shivering and shaking. You need a steady gaze. Your thoughts don’t whirl, the fire doesn’t float above you, when you are seeing properly.”

Dau acknowledges that he is not a *geiha*, that is, a “completely learned” healer: “A *geiha* is a person who really helps people. He is someone whose eye-insides are steady. He can see people properly. I heal people, but I can’t see them properly.” In seeing properly, not only does one see where and what the sickness is, but also, with that “absolutely steady” stare, one starts to treat the sickness.

Proper seeing can become even more general. A healer

can begin to see into and beyond many material manifestations. “Invisible” elements of the dance become “visible.” Wi talks about this aspect of *kia*: “You see the *num* rising in other healers. You see the singing and the *num*, and you pick it up. As a healer in *kia*, you see everybody. You see that the insides of well people are fine. You see the insides of the one the spirits are trying to kill, and you go there. Then you see the spirits and drive them away. You see the spirits being selfish. You see them trying to take the person away for themselves.” Others describe how they can see at a distance, or see what the gods want to tell the Kung. This enhanced dimension of perception and knowledge strengthens the healer’s powers.

Proper seeing is a transcendent function and is itself a transcendent experience. The literal, physical act of seeing may or may not be involved. The eyes may be open, they may be closed; it is not crucial. The experience remains one of enhanced perceiving and knowing.

Sickness is pulled out as the healers bring their vibrating hands close to or in contact with a person. When there are no manifest symptoms of illness, the healers’ fluttering hands generally move lightly and sporadically over the person’s chest and head. When particular symptoms are present, the laying on of hands becomes more focused on the symptom area. Healers put their *num* into the other person, and at the same time pull the sickness out of the other and into their own body. This is difficult, painful work. The sickness is then expelled from the healers. They shake their hands vigorously toward the darkness which fringes the dance, throwing the sickness out away from the people and back toward the spirits hovering nearby. The Kung word *twe* refers to both the process of pulling out sickness and the physical actions, such as the laying on of hands, which accomplish this process.

Sweat (*cho*) is a most important phenomenon in healing (Lee, 1968). As the sweat first pours out of the healer during *kia*, it is the visible expression of the boiling *num* within, a sign of *kia*. The Kung equate sweat with the steam rising from boiling water and with the vapors that rise up the

spine as num boils in the pit of the dancer’s stomach. This sweat then becomes a critical element in the pulling out of sickness.

The Kung believe that activated num is exposed on the surface of the healer’s body in the form of sweat – mainly at the forehead, the small of the back, the chest, and the armpits. Sweat is rubbed onto and into the body of the person being healed. The rubbing is usually focused on the area of illness, when such is specified.

The laying on of hands is the typical healing behavior. Some healers do only that. Others also try to maximize body contact between themselves and those healed. Kau Dwa, for example, at times wraps his arms and legs around the one he is healing, his chest against the other’s back or chest, his head rubbing all over the other’s upper body and head. Sometimes Kau Dwa lies down over a person, lengthwise or crosswise. He seems to want to spread his sweat all over the person and to increase the points through which the exchange of his num and the other’s sickness can occur. By enclosing the one being healed with his own hot, vibrating body, even though he often is not physically touching him, Kau Dwa establishes a kind of healing-energy field.

But even the simple laying on of hands is quite physical, direct, and penetrating. “When I lay hands on a person, I take sickness into my hands. Then I shiver from the sickness, and then I throw it away.” As Wi speaks these words, he makes a strong holding gesture, forming a cup with both hands when he says, “I take sickness into my hands.” The process of locating and removing sickness is sometimes accompanied by the healer’s treacherous journey into the patient’s body.

The pain involved in the boiling of the healers’ num, in the putting of that num into the one being healed, in the drawing of the other’s sickness into their own body, and in the violent shaking of that sickness out from their body is acknowledged by the healers by crying, wailing, moaning, and shrieking. They punctuate and accent their healing with these sometimes ear-shattering sounds. As their breath

comes with more difficulty, until they are rasping and gasping, the healers howl the characteristic kowhedili shriek, which sounds something like “Xai — i! Kow-ha-di-di-di-di!” and usually accompanies the pulling out of the sickness. Some say the shriek forcibly expels the sickness from a spot on the top of the healers’ spine. Others say the shriek marks the painful process of shaking the sickness out from the healers’ hands.

A person need not be in *kia* to be healed. In fact, except when other healers or singers in *kia* are healed, the person being healed is often in an ordinary state. When the *kia* and healing are not especially heavy, a person being healed may be carrying on a conversation about how uncomfortable he feels in the cold night, or how weak a gatherer someone was yesterday – uninterrupted by the healer’s fluttering hands, uninterrupted even by the healer’s shrieks.

Beneath these healing behaviors a continuous, nonlinear process is occurring. The putting in of *num* and the pulling out of sickness are not different acts, nor even clearly delineated stages in the same action. This is particularly clear when healers in *kia* heal other healers not yet in *kia*. In the very act of putting *num* into the others, the healers who are already in *kia* are not only pulling out the others’ sickness but also stimulating them into *kia*. And as the other healers go into *kia*, their own newly boiling *num* contacts the first healers, reintensifying their *kia*.” In this case, the *num* is put into others to draw out the sickness and to activate more *num*, which among other things helps draw out the sickness. The healing process is an even more dramatic unity when more experienced healers heal themselves. Their *num* and their sickness exchange within themselves. Healing is an organized process where a substance called sickness is transformed by a substance called *num*. It is not a mechanical process where one substance is replaced or erased by another.

The singer Nai talks about how it feels when she is healed: “If my body is feeling bad or having a pain and they heal me, they will *hxobo* my body and make it nice.” *Hxobo* means to “cool” or “calm down.” The healers speak

of having to cool down themselves and their num when num boils too fiercely. In healing sickness, the hot num makes the patient cool. *Deu*, "coolness" or "well-being," is the desired state, being neither too hot nor too cold (Biesele, 1975). The interplay between substances which are hot and cold, or heavy and light, characterizes the application of num to healing sickness.

The goal of the healing is to remove all the sickness, "to remove everything." Kaha talks about how he can tell if he is more powerful than another healer at a particular dance: "I'd sit and look at the other man and say, 'That man isn't pulling. He must be new at num. He isn't pulling. He removes some things and leaves other things.' I see and remove everything. I remove things completely. I would pull everything out, and then your body would feel good." The Kung say that everything is pulled out when the healer "sees all sicknesses leave" the patient.

Kaha and his wife Nukha speak about this process of pulling or removing sickness with pained understanding. For the past several weeks Nukha has been so weak that she has to lie on the sand, wrapped in a blanket most of the day. She has great difficulty breathing and eating, and the ravages of her illness show in her bone thinness. Her respiratory problems have become severe in the last several years, though intermittently she has periods of feeling much better. A visiting medical researcher once suggested she has advanced tuberculosis or cancer, though no definite diagnosis could be made. Nukha looks so close to death that, when her hacking coughs violently shake her frame, it seems they will tear her apart.

For several weeks, Kaha has been pulling Nukha each day, and when she reaches a low point, he works on her several times a day. Kaha says that when he pulls his wife, he sees that "her chest area is full of breaks and holes." Since yesterday, Nukha has taken a slight turn toward health, though she continues to look more drawn to death than life. She is able to rest on one elbow. Today Kaha is sitting by her side, whittling a stick. Nukha motions for me. I go over and express my wish that her sickness will leave

her. She smiles a warm response. "I've had this sickness for years," Nukha says. "Look at all these scars." Slowly, very slowly, she turns over and exposes the upper part of her back, lined with little scars.

"These scars on her back are from the sicknesses I've pulled out from her," Kaha points out. "I've been healing her for many years."

"He's been pulling me for many years," Nukha adds, "but the sickness refuses. The sickness started when I was pregnant with her." She points to her late adolescent daughter sitting a short distance away with a small group of other girls, stringing beads. "It started with her birth, and my husband has been pulling me ever since."

"When the sickness refuses like that, what do you do?" I wonder.

"I pull," Kaha replies, the weariness from his concern and his exhaustive pulling invading his voice. "If the sickness refuses, I keep on pulling for a long time. One year I pull and pull, and then she gets up. Another year comes, and I pull again and again."

"What do you see when you pull?"

"I pull little pieces of metal out of my wife's legs and hips, like little pieces of wire. These bits of metal are tying her leg ligaments up. I pulled her dead father's testicles out of her heart. Then I told her dead father not to pursue her anymore."

"Can she see what you remove?"

"No. I tell her what I see." Kaha's response is affirmed by his wife's nodding head. "My wife tells me where it hurts, then I remove things from that place."

My concern for Nukha's suffering takes away my words. We sit quietly. I try to begin again. "Kaha, what happened when you were pulling your wife yesterday?" I direct my words to Kaha, but look at them both, partners in suffering.

"Yesterday I pulled her to take her father's testicle out." Kaha's face is tired, and when he talks of his pulling, the tiredness seems to be expressed more deeply.

"What can you do when you're so tired from so much

pulling?" I am reaching out to Kaha, trying to offer some understanding, not expecting an "answer."

"When you are so tired, you pull," Kaha replies simply. When somebody is seriously ill, perhaps with advanced tuberculosis or failing health due to old age, loss of blood, or infection through an animal wound, the dance takes on a particularly intense quality. The singing and dancing are strong, the *kia* profound, and the healing prolonged and penetrating. The focus of the healing is the ill person, who has become what would in the West be called a "patient." The healers return continually to heal the patient and stay with him for long periods. All others at the dance are healed as well, but the healing energy is focused on the patient. Gau puts it this way: "In those dances where no one is seriously ill, we are sometimes playing at dancing. The *num* is weak. But when there is someone ill, *num* is much stronger, because we pull and pull him."

When the *num* is hot and heavy, the pulling power is strong. But healers have off-nights. There are times when their *num* is weak. Gau talks about a dance which has just ended the night before: "I was thinking that this dance wasn't going to be a good one, because for it to be a good one, you've got to have lots of people singing, and last night we had only a few." When I ask him how his *num* was that night, he replies: "You mean I've gotten any *num*? I haven't gotten any *num*. Last night I did only a little."

There are times when the *num* is so weak that a healer seems merely to be "going through the motions." I ask Dau if there are times when he heals and does not pull all the sickness out. He reflects, with some sadness: "There are times in *num* when I say, 'I haven't got anything today.' There are times when I'm weak, when my body feels lousy. I just don't feel right."

"Do you heal during such times anyway?" I ask. "Yes," he says, with resignation. "I still lay on hands."

In their ordinary everyday behavior, the Kung keep their distance from the gods. Although they tell stories about the gods' stupidity and foolishness, laughing heartily at their

human frailties, the Kung do not often speak of the gods, and when they do, they speak in a quiet tone, implying a respect for the gods' power. During *kia*, the healer may not only talk directly to the gods but also bargain with them, insult them, even battle with them. At stake is a sick person's health or life, and the healers, enhanced by their boiling *num*, struggle with opponents they normally would not even look at, much less approach.

In their contest with the gods, the healers usually confront *Kauha*, the lesser god, and the spirits, whom the great god *Gao Na* sends to carry a sick person away. *Kaha*, the experienced healer, tells how he chases the spirits away so a sick person can get better: "I cured *Tankau*. He had a strained back. *Tankau's* father, who was dead, appeared to me as a spirit and said to me, 'My son must stop digging the well.' *Tankau* had been digging a well. His father, the spirit, had made him strain his back. Then *Tankau* said, 'How can I quit that job of digging the well. We need the well.' Then I said to the spirit, 'How can you chase this man from his work?' and I refused the spirit and took out the pieces of metal embedded in *Tankau's* back. I pulled the pieces of iron out and gave them to his father, the spirit, and said, 'Take these pieces of metal away! Are you stupid? You worked in your day, and now your son follows you. You can't take someone from his work. Go away! Go away!' "

An experienced healer can see the spirits hovering around the edge of a dance; they remain invisible to all others. After diagnosing the source of an illness, healers may plead with the spirits to make the illness go away. They may chant their appeal to the spirits:

Why do you bother with this [sick] one?
Go away and don't trouble us!
We love this man.
What have we done to you?

(quoted in Lee, 1968)

Though the lesser god and the spirits may inhabit the darkness outside the dance because they enjoy watching

the dance, the ever-present danger is that they will also bring sickness or death. The healer's job is to drive them away, thereby preventing sickness from striking anyone. Usually the healers' friendly overtures to the gods or spirits and their appeals for leniency become more assertive: "Get out of here. You are a bad thing." "Go chase yourself. You will not take this child. I will beat you." Often healers yell out insulting and profane phrases to the gods and spirits. They scream at them, calling them "Big penis," or "Elephant-penis," or "You will shit," or "Filthy face," meaning a face covered with excrement (Marshall, 1969). The healer often becomes aggressive, even violent, toward the gods, gesturing menacingly and hurling sticks into the darkness to drive away the spirits.

At times, healers may carry on an extended dialogue with the gods and spirits. Others at the dance can hear only the healers' side of the dialogue, but they know the spirits are speaking to them because they see the healers continually respond and react as if to an opponent - nodding their heads and shaking their fists at the spirits, turning away from them, uttering sounds which acknowledge the spirits' participation in the dialogue. In this dialogue, the mood can fluctuate. There may be friendly overtures, or cajoling, or hostility - all in an effort to counteract the spirits' wishes to take the sick man from the living. Healers usually speak rapidly and intensely, so that their words are almost indistinguishable, seeming at times like mere sounds. Their words are interlaced with groans, shrieks, and fragments of singing, changing them even more into mere sounds.

Another form of contact with gods occurs when the powerful healers risk "traveling" to god's home. The description of that home - a "terrible," fearsome place - and what happens there with god and his family, is often extensive. The animals which inhabit that place, such as leopards, giraffes, elands, and zebras - all god's "possessions" - are detailed, as is the god's appearance (Bieseke, 1975). God is a big man with long hair, a horse, a gun, and big boots. Kau Dwa tells how healers climb to god's home and return: "When you go to ... (God) you climb a thread. You climb a long thread. First you have entered the sand. Up ahead

there you emerge again. When you emerge, you begin to climb the thread. And when you arrive at God's place, you make yourself small.... You come in small to God's place. You do what you have to do there. Then you return to where everyone is.... and you come and come and come and you finally enter your body again. All the people who have stayed behind waiting for you, they fear you.... You enter, enter, enter the earth, and then you return to enter your skin" (quoted in Biesele, 1975, II, 163-164). Such threads are said to be used by the spirits to descend to the earth.

During the visit, healers try to understand why the god would want to bring sickness to the people, and they try to change the god's plans to take persons away from the living. The mood on these trips can vary, and healers usually employ a variety of techniques to win their point. But only experienced healers can die to their ordinary selves so completely that they can travel to and exist in god's home. Their num can become so hot and heavy, while their control over it remains so great, that they transcend themselves to the point where they are functioning in the presence of the gods.

Healers must learn other things. They must obey a series of dietary taboos as they are learning to *kia* and throughout their subsequent experiences with num and healing (Marshall, 1976). They can also learn about medicinal herbs and roots. But these lessons emphasize a cognitive learning, a gathering and retaining of information, which makes them quite different from the lessons at the core of *kia*-healing. The essence of becoming a healer depends not on learning *about* herbs or dietary taboos, or for that matter *about* num. It depends on learning to *experience* boiling num in *kia*, and learning to *apply* boiling num in *kia*-healing. These lessons come out of a transcendent perspective and perception.

The Kung's experience of *kia* is no less "real" for them than a root to be gathered, or an animal to be hunted, or a conflict to be resolved. The Kung do not rank different aspects of their existence as more or less real than others

according to what Westerners would call their "materiality." Especially for healers, who are in direct contact with the gods, both the spiritual world and the Kalahari sands are actual parts of their lives. They try to wrest their living from both things.

This concrete reality of healing is acknowledged simply and repeatedly by the healers. Wa Na talks about the healers who used to travel at night in the form of lions of god; they were real lions, different from normal lions, but no less real. A healer's trip to god's home is an actual trip to an actual place. Num really does exist. It actually boils, and it is painful. For the Kung, there is no philosophical distinction: experiences of healing are simply one other event, concrete and real, in their everyday lives.

When Wi says, "I see the num rising in another" or "I pick the num up," he means that he actually sees num and *picks it up*. He goes on to say: "When I lay hands on a person, I take sickness out into my hands. Then I shiver from the sickness and throw it away. I pull the sickness right out at the moment of laying on hands." He means he takes the sickness out *into his hands*. To ask whether he picks up num as he would pick up a stone is to miss the point entirely. When pressed, Wi says there is a difference between picking up num and picking up a stone. But that is when I pressed him to make such a distinction. He responds to *my* framework and assumptions and, given *my* set of choices, makes his choice. It is not *his* question, not really a question for him.

This is not to say that the Kung make no distinctions between states of consciousness. They distinguish, for example, between types of kia. Num kia is different from alcohol kia. Num kia has different effects; the Kung value it more. But it is no more real than alcohol kia.

The reality of the unseen is captured in the phenomenon of num "killing" the healer, or of the healer "dying" in kia. I often hear: "You want num? Don't you know it is painful and can kill you?" I learn what those who become healers must know. To "kill" is not simply a metaphor, a statement about the overpowering strength of num, a warning about

the difficulty of getting it, a test of one's desire to receive it. Although the Kung distinguish between final death, when the soul permanently leaves the body, and the death of *kia*, when the soul goes out but then hopefully returns, there is only one *experience* of death, and the experience is what matters.

Kau Dwa is teaching me that lesson as I struggle to maintain my Western notions of reality. "Kau Dwa," I ask, "you have told me that in *kia* you must die. Does that mean really die?"

"Yes."

"I mean *really* die." "Yes."

"You mean die like when you are buried beneath the ground?" I am already struggling with my words.

"Yes," Kau Dwa replies with enthusiasm. "Yes, just like that!"

"They are the same?"

"Yes, the same. It is death I speak of," he affirms. "No difference?" I almost plead.

"It is death," he responds firmly but softly.

"The death where you never come back?" I am nearly at the end of my logical rope.

"Yes," he says simply, "it is that bad. It is the death that kills us all."

"But the healers get up, and a dead person doesn't." My statement trails off into a question.

"That is true," Kau Dwa replies quietly, with a smile, "healers may come alive again."