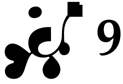 9

Bright Night of the Soul

Ju/'hoan healers recount stories to each other afterward of the experiences they have had while traveling out of their bodies. They travel on the threads of the sky in trance to heal people, and they also travel in dreams, at night, to check on faraway relatives and friends. From the many travel experiences of many healers over time, a structure of belief about what that other realm is like—the realm of spirit travel—comes into being. Yet this structure built of stories remains alive, open to additions from each healer's new experience. It is a story belonging to no one and to all, an endless story about human ways to access the power that lies beyond human understanding.

This never-ending story is full of particulars and of concrete details, but it is devoid of dogma. It is always open to ambiguity, to mystery, and to change. It involves the *n/om* substance in people's bodies, its ability to boil up their spines, its arrows of sickness and arrows of healing, its threads to the sky—and how people, working together, can use all of these to do things that in everyday life are beyond human power. It is a story of seeing inside the bodies of sick people to know what is troubling them, of the touching of skin to skin to sense what is within, of healing by laying on of hands, and of healing and communicating from afar.

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Men and women healers alike routinely share their stories of healing travel in the days after a dance. In this chapter I describe three memorable healing dances I took part in over the years during and after my first fieldwork, each of them involving both men and women healers. At an outsider's first glance, men healers can seem dominant at Ju/'hoan dances. A longer look, though, can be very revealing. Women too are fully salient participants in healing dances. They use their strengths and their imaginations, as men do, to create joint beauty and bring about healing. The chapter ends with a long episodic story about the strong Ju/'hoan heroine, G!kun//'homdima. Like men, and working with men, Ju/'hoan women have the power and the responsibility to effect community healing and transformation.

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My language teacher !Xuma's younger brother, G=kao, had an ordinary Ju/'hoan name, but he was also known by the Herero name Karembuka, given him by the cattle herding family he worked for. He was frail and suffered from tremors. I wondered whether he might have a neuromuscular illness: there was no way to know. He was shy and self-effacing, with a sweetness to his nature that stayed in my mind even when I did not see him for long periods of time.

Once, arriving at night at his village, Mahopa, we found a dance in progress. It was not at all affected by our truck's noisy arrival. We could see from the Land Rover that Karembuka was dancing and already in a trance.

He stood in the center of a circle of women, standing inches or less from the fire. As we approached from the edge of the clearing, I stopped to watch from a distance. Karembuka dancing was barely recognizable as his daytime self. Usually a wobbly and insubstantial presence, he appeared this night like a resolute flame, a pure, yellow, upward-flowing column of power and joy. His body in the firelight was itself a fire, one fed from a boundless source seeming to lie deep in the earth below. His flame flickered to the exact rhythm of the music. I saw this slight, delicate person take on energy from the music of the singing, clapping, stamping, and staccato rattling of the other men and women, and concentrate it in his own body as he assumed for a time the central position of healing. After some time had gone by, other healers stepped inside the circle to join him in healing. The power then grew palpably bigger from Karembuka's sharing it with the others. The bodies, hands, and voices of everyone there moved in unison. I moved closer. I and the group I had been traveling with were absorbed into the flow of the evening as if we had been there from the start.

The dance went on for many hours. I sang and watched, thinking of the fine synchrony of bird flocks I had seen in Botswana. I often waited alone near wells and waterholes, for instance, watching *g/ui*, the red-billed quelea, small, nervous birds that travel in huge flocks and are compelled to drink water at least once every day. Predators in the Kalahari, including human ones, know this water necessity of the quelea and lie in wait near water sources to kill them in large numbers. Their flocks move in vast but narrow horizontal columns, inscribing what look like sine curves on the air, flashing in circles of fright and changing course in a fraction of an instant when disturbed. Then they rise as one organism, their thousands of tiny wings catching the air and causing the atmosphere in the immediate neighborhood to vibrate. I found that watching them, as they thus "stopped time," gave my mind a chance to breathe. I found almost identical succor in watching and

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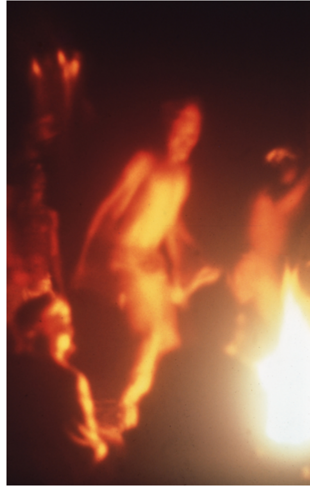

Figure 9.1. Nighttime dance at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

participating in the Ju/'hoansi's healing dances. As the dances repeated, and innovated upon, old patterns of movement and mind, the bodies of the dancers became exquisitely attuned to each other and went into synchrony, creating the power for them—and even sometimes for me—to get beyond ourselves.

The morning after Karembuka's dance, we left Mahopa and proceeded to G!o'oce, east of !Aoan. Hoping to fulfill my responsibilities to the National Institutes of Mental Health, I had planned a special subsection of work there with women healers. Women as well as men healed at most of the Ju/'hoan camps I visited, but I knew that at G!o'oce there was a concentration of young women, who aspired to be healers, learning from several elderly women healers. G!o'oce was where Richard Katz had worked with /Xoan N!a'an, the woman with thrown-back head and open mouth on the cover of his wonderful book, *Boiling Energy*. I learned that /Xoan N!a'an, now dead, had been the teacher of a woman named Tcoq'a N!a'an, Old Tcoq'a, herself in turn now teaching the large group of young women there. People told me that if I went to G!o'oce, I would see plenty of women's dances and could ask Tcoq'a N!a'an any questions I had about them. Tcoq'a and the young women she was teaching specialized in the Elephant dance, different from the Giraffe dance. Elephant was also known as the drum dance or the *g!oa* dance (*g!oa*, an aromatic shrub said to cause fluttering in the midriff, was chewed by women dancers to help them on the road to trance). Tcoq'a N!a'an was also a well-known storyteller, so I resolved to ask for

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her versions of as many of the folktales I had been collecting as possible, chief among them the stories of the python or elephant or aardvark heroine that so intrigued me. I planned for the visit to last a week or two or more, depending on how things worked out.

The first time I had been to G!o'oce, in mid-1971, I was surprised at how different it was from the more Bantu-acculturated Ju/'hoan lifestyle in the east, at Kauri. G!o'oce had an archaic quality compared to Kauri, where there was a much closer association, and more intermarriage, with agricultural and cattle-owning people; where more store-bought or hand-me-down cloth clothing was worn; and where "town" goods in general were more available. Though I was actually on my way from Kauri to Dobe, not planning to stop at that time in G!o'oce but to drop Tcoq'a Matse there (a young woman who was traveling with us), I found the place irresistible.

June 20, 1971

It was so . . . sort of wild, on the hillside over the !Aoandom valley, and [the people] so unknown to me—I hardly recognized a soul from up Dobe way. . . . I became very interested in pinpointing the combination of smells there that took me back to dark, wild afternoons in the Dobe rainy season. Suddenly here were [bare] breasts again and intricate beads, the smell of *sa*, and skin clothing, women's wild heads full of head ornaments, shaking [as they danced]. I remember being struck by the bright yellowness of the faces of some of the women—at first I thought they were jaundiced, then I realized I had gotten quite used to a darker skin tone at Kauri, [and many of the G!o'oce women had also powdered their faces with bright yellow *sa*, lending a festive air to our arrival].

G!o'oce is a village composed largely, it seems, of women, many of them quite old. As such it is very interesting, especially because of the vibrant women's drum dance tradition which has grown up there. This tradition is famous all over Ngamiland. I had been planning to stay some time at G!o'oce to look into this tradition, see who were the originators of it, how it came about and developed. . . . I'd like to interview all the women there on how it got started, what the songs are, who trances, and how they feel about it.

Amazingly, there was a dance the very night we got there. We had camped a little ways beyond G!o'oce, intending to go to the !Aoan store for supplies first thing in the morning. But the stars came out bright and frosty over the ridge, and we heard first the usual dance-clapping and then the drum, and decided to go over. There was a large group of women standing around a fire, clapping the *g!oa* song I had heard about, and *tara*-ing [shaking in trance]. Almost as soon as I got there, N!hunkxa . . . went into

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a trance and fell down on the cold sand, shivering and moaning. (I had seen her do this once before, at Dobe.) Everyone seemed excited and very happy and sure. I didn't see any curing, however—but then soon the men wanted to dance, and so the women's dance turned gracefully into a men's [Giraffe] dance: the women who had been standing in a circle sank down and sat on the sand, and the man who had been playing the drum (was it a black pot upside-down?) retired. Men came one by one and started to dance around the women. It was exciting to see again men dancing in *coanasi* [loincloths]—I realized I hadn't seen that since leaving Dobe. I am amazed at the number of changes from here that are evident in Kauri, that I hadn't really consciously made note of. The most intriguing thing though was the smell, compounded of *sa*, I think, and skin clothing—a musty, archaic odor which brought back to me the wet, weird afternoons when I first got to Ngamiland and everything was new and very strange. When we dropped Tcoq'a Matse ["Little Tcoq'a," a namesake of Tcoq'a N!a'an] at G!o'oce, the women crossed her face with yellow sa from tortoise-shell powder boxes, that she might be welcome. It made her look gay, and be the center of the group that was receiving her.

On that visit Tcoq'a N!a'an told me some of her stories of the heroine, who in her elephant-focused milieu always appeared as an elephant. She also described nights when elephants came to G!o'oce, drawn by the sweet sound of the people's singing and drumming. Once, she said, an elephant lifted her and cradled her gently in his tusks as the singing and dancing went on below. I was so drawn in by her account that it took me a few seconds to realize she was describing spirit elephants she saw in trance. One of the mournful, impossibly sweet songs of the dance was called "Da'ama N//obo," or Orphan Child, and that child was a baby elephant.

The second time I went to G!o'oce, some months later, I interviewed all the women, old and young, who were dancing, learning, and healing. I learned that there was much less emphasis on active trancing and healing than there seemed to be among male dancers, and more on just dancing for its own beautiful sake. I learned that the tight constriction of the abdomen that accompanies trance is thought to be dangerous for women of child-bearing age. This constriction is conceptualized by the Ju/'hoansi as small, potent, invisible arrows of *n/om* shot from the fingers of expert healers into the solar plexus area of a novice. Once inside the novice, the arrows are thought to multiply, causing the pain and constriction of trance. I learned that Ju/'hoan women could dance and sing all they wanted in their younger years, but after menarche should wait until menopause before seeking *n/om*, for which they might have

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been preparing years beforehand. I realized that all the women I knew who were healers were older women, and I was told that women, once past bearing children, could awaken in themselves immense *n/om* that was respected by men and women alike.

So that second time I stayed at G!o'oce for some weeks, at her invitation pitching my tent near Tcoq'a N!a'an's hut, and did a lot of dancing myself. It was during that visit that I became aware what an overwhelming feat of athleticism each all-night dance was for a seeker of *n/om* and of healing power. I knew that not only was I not brave enough, but I was not in the physical shape needed to become a healer. Also, I had missed out on spending decades of my early life immersed in the dance and its music with adults as wise guides, as Ju/'hoan children did. I had already missed my chance of absorbing its rhythms by osmosis and developing a complete belief in the transforming power of *n/om*.

Because I was far from fit enough, and had not been participating in the dances since birth, I was actually a bit relieved to learn that Ju/'hoansi felt women of child-bearing age should not try to develop their *n/om* but should bide their time until later. I was also told by Tcoq'a N!a'an's husband that people who wanted to learn to heal—men as well as women—should remain in one place, with the same group of people, while learning. "People need to play together (*kui*) for a long time in order to learn to heal," he said. "But if you travel around as much as you do . . ." Before he finished his sentence, I knew he was right about my chances. Again I came up against the reality of being an arbitrary transient in their community. I had to content myself with being an ordinary person, a nonhealer. But I resolved to bear witness to the deep power of the trancing and dancing among people who clearly had depended on it, for health and happiness, for millennia.

***

The communally built Ju/'hoan story of the ways and power of *n/om* is but one of what must have been thousands of such stories told in human prehistory and into today. The *n/om* story of the Ju/'hoansi is an example of the skeins of meaning generated about the unknown and tried out for efficacy by every culture. These are all well-honed artifacts built of the imaginings of generations of people sharing their ideas and experimenting with them on one another. These ideas grew and became embedded in the consciousness of various cultures as people performed acts related to them, and as they saw—and valued—what achievements came out of their mysterious networks of meaning. Healing, peace, social harmony, ecstasy? Millions of us human beings around the world

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still live by such stories today—or want to. Each such story is a cultural jump beyond human limitations in the direction of what some call God. Each culture uses its own contemporary catapult of meaning to make its jumps. Not every jump succeeds, but those that do can become part of a specific canon, at least for a while.

As in biological evolution, each story, each idea is a random existential experiment. Stories that work, that enable social cohesion, are among the most important intellectual achievements of humankind. The story the Ju/'hoansi told themselves over and over about their dance—ringing the changes on its basic theme of healing—remains, by constant renewal, the powerful engine that made it possible for them to get along with each other. They told and danced and sang the story, incorporating the flashes of insight that occurred to different individuals in the process. The story lived in its never-ceasing variants, born of its enfranchisement of each participant, of each new generation. It was always contemporary—or it was nothing.

Westerners of the late twentieth century have largely lost their connection to such powerful, jointly lived, and jointly constructed stories. Thus I felt deeply privileged to witness, and even to participate in, this still-living, still-breathing, ancient human process of meaning. It was a means of social control, through shared joy, that stayed ever contemporary because it valued each person's contribution. It contributed to the unspoken, as well as the spoken, consensus that made a reliable fabric out of the contentions and contradictions of their lives. Even my watchful outside-observer's presence could not interrupt the flow of this powerful synchrony; its strength tossed me aside like a twig washed up on the banks by a river torrent.

The synchrony had at its core the excitement of improvisation. Anything, anything could happen as the people took up the tools, each time, of their voices and their hands, their legs and their feet, their knowledge of each other, and of their reliable power to create, with each other, a force for health and peace. As the voices blended in a polyphony of endless incremental variation, as the powerful stamping of the men's feet took them in measured, inexorable progress around and around the dance circle, I felt the waves of energy linking the bodies through my own body: it was impossible not to become linked to the process myself. As the process took over at each dance, people seemed with each movement, each note of singing, to call out to each other and to receive instantaneous response. As I mentioned before, people said that at its start a dance was *cui* ("light" or insubstantial), and only later, when each person in his or her improvising became synchronized with the others, became *tih* ("heavy" or powerful). Once "heavy" in this

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way, every dance would reliably culminate in healing. Every dark night could become a bright night of the soul.

After the healing overtook a dance, many sorts of sounds would begin emanating from the mouths of the healers and mingling with the singing and clapping. These sounds ran the whole gamut from a low, deep, harmonic rumbling in the chest to discernible words that were either conventional, such as "I am imitating my father!" or "Aiye gu mi!" (Mother, lift me in your arms!), or spectacularly inventive, created for the occasion. Sometimes they went into a light glossolalia, explained for me later, when I asked, as "the unknowable speech of God."

***

Most of the dances I took part in during those years (and indeed over the nearly fifty years that followed) were said to be Giraffe dances. The Giraffe dance had its own songs, all stemming as I said from the original inspiration of Be N!a'an, who received the first song while watching giraffes running in a thunderstorm. Kxao Giraffe of !Aoan was an inheritor and further innovator of this tradition. There was a sense in which Giraffe was seen as the classic healing dance of all the places it had traveled to and touched. "Anyone with sense would know" the healing power of its songs, as !Unn/obe said to me, and as Lorna Marshall's informants also had said.

In some ways, Giraffe dances seemed to foreground the male dancers: their precise steps were mesmerizing to watch, they did most of the active healing, and women only jumped up to dance briefly or to sprinkle the men with *sa* in praise. Every so often, a woman would rise in an access of enthusiasm to dance a few delicate steps with the men, sometimes throwing fragrant *sa* towards them from the tortoise-shell box hanging on a thong or from a string of beads around her neck. But mostly the women sang, and clapped joyously and resolutely, to enable the men to dance. The men said often that the song could not rise to the sky, could not help the men's *n/om* to boil in their bodies, unless the women sang it. The men encouraged the women by singing with them for a time, and by praising them in turn, with the result that the women's voices came through louder and longer, more expertly ringing the changes on each cadence, than I could have believed possible. And the foregrounding of men in the Giraffe dance I sometimes thought I saw? It was dissolved out of existence over and over again by the ways the women—especially the older women—were clearly essential to the dance, and were appreciated by all.

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One night I saw a Giraffe dance taken over completely by a young woman dancer. This dance was being held in a special clearing the community had made, some way from their own village. Drooping *=ʻangg=oa* trees ("wild coffee" Bauhinias) made the spot into a secluded grove. The moon rose just as the dance began and soon was flickering through the branches overhead.

Children ran about, chasing each other, and some of them eventually started a fire in the center of the clearing. A few little girls plonked themselves down around the fire to clap and sing, drawing their raggedy skirts carefully between their legs for modesty. They looked toward where the adults were lounging on the sand, singing out in their high little voices and calling them to join the dance. Gradually, unhurriedly, casually sharing tobacco and matches and puffs from glowing pipes, women and a few men came to sit down with the children by their fire and began to sing softly. Over the next half hour or so, men sitting on the sand away from the fire shook out their dance rattles, long strings of braided fibers holding dried cocoons filled with pebbles or seeds or bits of broken ostrich eggshell, and tied them onto their legs. They fastened the strings just below their knees and above the bulges of their calf muscles so that the rattles, descending and then ascending, caduceus-like, on their strings, were secured. Then they rose, one by one, and, joking and calling to each other, came to the fire.

A young woman at the dance shared my name, Baq'u, and so we had a special relationship. Sometimes when I went to town I brought her back some token of our name relationship—a scarf or some beads—and she in turn sewed a pretty duiker-skin bag for me and ornamented it with ostrich-eggshell beads. This night I noticed she was wearing a bright white sleeveless undershirt, so clean it must have just come out of its town wrappings. I chuckled inwardly, wondering if the new lover she had told me about had anything to do with her having a new undershirt. Baq'u sat in the circle of women around the fire, her legs intertwined with theirs, her head, like theirs, inclined to one side so she could hear the singing of her neighbor and join in the polyphony.

Hours went by as the women sang with consummate skill. Baq'u's ramrod-straight grandfather, taller than most Ju/'hoan men, was there, dancing as the women of his family and other families sang the Giraffe songs. He didn't dance very long before he showed the familiar signs of approaching trance. Sweat appeared on his torso, he bent forward at the hips, and his eyes were focused on a middle distance that

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was . . . elsewhere. There was absolutely no sign of fear or hesitation in his embrace of the transformation of consciousness. His was a commanding physical presence and at first dominated the healing, but just as Karembuka had, he shared its power immediately when other men fell into trance behind him in the circle. There was a heady sense in the air that anything could happen at any time, that one could do whatever one felt like doing: there was an atmosphere of complete equality. Old and young, men and women, the firm and the infirm, were united in purpose and rhythm.

Suddenly Baq'u sprang up and began to dance in place. Her white undershirt flashed rhythmically one way and then the other in the light of the fire. Her dance was like no other dance I had seen, at either the Giraffe dance or any of the women's dances. It was entirely her own, entirely inspired, entirely of the moment. It took everyone's breath away.

Baq'u had no spare meat on her body anywhere: she seemed in fighting trim to combat death—and indeed she soon began to die in *!aia* herself, all the while continuing to dance her stunning, mesmerizing whole-body dance. Sweat shone on her collarbone and her muscled brown chest above the neckline of the white undershirt. She trembled rhythmically and began to move around the circle of women, laying fluttering hands on each of them, caressing their babies' heads, then jumping back into her dance without losing a beat. Like Karembuka had, she seemed to flare upward like an eternal flame.

At one point I saw her grandfather step back from the dance circle and watch her in what seemed complete concentration. Her action had been assertive, quite beyond what I had seen from women, especially young women of reproductive age, for many months of dances. I wondered if it had seemed as daring, as edgy, to her grandfather and all her family as it seemed to me. I wondered especially whether it had been seen as a challenge to authority, or had perhaps gone too far beyond the bounds of tradition.

When the dance ended, some time later, Baqu's grandfather was sitting at ease among his family at the "watching fire" a little away from the dance circle. I went to join the group sitting around him. As Baq'u walked past, he spoke firmly but quietly to her. "Thank you for your dance, Granddaughter," he said. "That was the most beautiful dance I have ever seen."

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In dancing, and in life in general, Ju/'hoan women seemed to me to have what American women of that time period fought for and are still fight-

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ing for: an unassailable sense of their own strength, and recognition by men of their unquestioned value and power. I thought about the many stories I had collected about the protean Ju/'hoan heroine, she who could appear at different times as a beautiful python, an aardvark, or an elephant but remain "the same" heroine; could command the weather; and could, by the power of her will, transform her own heart into meat for the people.

The stories were those of the intriguing Ju/'hoan heroine G!kun//'homdima, over whom Mel Konner and I had marveled at the beginning of my fieldwork. The longest, most elaborate version I recorded, one about an elephant girl, came from !Unn/obe and ran to over thirty transcribed pages. I worked on the translation, details, and implications of this story off and on for many years. I arrived at what I regarded as its definitive transcription, English translation, and full comprehension only thirty-five years later, in 2006, after the fine *Ju/'hoan-English, English-Ju/'hoan Dictionary* had been written by linguist Patrick Dickens with the participation of the young Ju/'hoan speakers who later formed the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group in Tsumkwe, Namibia. Here is the English summary of !Unn/obe's story as I and the Transcription Group published it in 2009 (story title added by me):

The Elephant Girl

The elephant girl's husband's younger brother was still in his mother's stomach when his older brother married the elephant girl. After the marriage, the elephant girl's husband brought her to his mother's village to live, and she gave birth to a daughter there. But there were no elderly people living at that village, so the elephant girl and her husband planned to visit his older relatives at other villages to ask for gifts for the child. The elephant girl planned to leave her daughter with a woman there while she and her husband went visiting. The night before they were to leave, the elephant girl and her husband slept at his mother's village.

The mother's stomach grew, and she was about to give birth. In the morning, her older son, the elephant girl's husband, was packing to leave. His mother was grinding ochre and rubbing her stomach with it. Her newborn son jumped straight up out of her stomach, saying, "Mother, rub your hands on my head so that I can go with my older brother." Everyone was astonished, but one of them said, "This is a sky's thing, so just do what he says: let him go on the journey with his older brother." So his mother rubbed him with ochre and fat and he left with his older brother.

At one of the villages of the old people, the husband was requested to bring his daughter so they could see her. He agreed, and they were walking to fetch the child at the other village. As they were walking past a termite

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mound, the younger brother stepped on a thorn and cried, "Ouch, ouch, ouch!" Then he took off his shoes and threw them away, saying they should go off and become vultures that drop down on meat. Then the younger brother said, "Run, older brother, go see what those vultures are dropping on, and get meat for us to eat."

Meanwhile, the older brother's wife, the elephant girl, was wearing a skin apron with a metal awl stuck in its waistband. The younger brother asked his brother's wife to use the awl to pull out the thorn from his foot. The elephant girl believed what he said and came close. He took the awl and killed her.

The elephant girl had already told her grandmother that she didn't trust her husband's younger brother. She had said, "My thoughts don't agree with a thing that jumps out of its mother's stomach saying it wants to accompany its older brother. So watch well: a little wind will come to you with droplets of my blood, and will stick to your groin. Take the bit of blood and put it into something like a little bowl or a jar." And indeed the little wind with the blood came to the grandmother and stuck to her. The grandmother said in her heart, "Isn't this just what the child said would happen?" She took the blood and put it in a jar, and lived and thought. She said to herself, "If they've already completed what she told me, there's nothing to be done."

Meanwhile, the elephant girl's brothers went to follow her husband and his younger brother, to see if they had arrived safely at the village with their sister. In fact, the older brother had gone off and had not found the vultures, and was returning to where his younger brother was. The younger brother had killed and skinned his older brother's wife, the elephant girl, and had roasted her and was cutting up and eating her fat. The older brother arrived and, not seeing his wife, asked what kind of meat it was. The younger brother told him not to ask so many questions, but just to come and taste the meat. "Why do you call that which is meat, a woman?" asked the younger brother.

The older brother was greatly upset and asked his younger brother how he would manage to remain alive if he ate a piece of his own wife. "Stick with me!" said the younger brother, insisting again that it was plain meat. Finally the older brother took a piece and ate it. At that moment the brothers of the elephant girl, having tracked the two, were seen approaching. The younger brother told the termite mound to break open so his brother could enter and avoid the anger that was coming his way. The termite mound obeyed, and the older brother stepped inside. The mound closed. The younger brother stood alone outside, and when the elephant girl's brothers tried to stab him, he perched on the points of their spears like the little bird called *//omhaya* [a kind of sparrow]. He dodged

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their spears, perching on their heads, perching on their noses, and perching on their other body parts, and eventually defeated them completely. They left him and went off.

The older brother jumped out of the termite mound and the two of them took the meat and went home to their village. The people asked, "What have you done with the woman whose child is standing over there? What kind of meat is that you are walking around with your stomachs full of? You two have done something very wrong."

Meanwhile the bit of blood stayed in the grandmother's jar and grew. The grandmother put it into a skin bag and it grew some more. It split the bag so she put it into something larger. It grew and split that too. Only the grandmother knew what she was doing and kept her intention, growing the blood into a regular big woman again. Finally the elephant girl was the size of a sack.

One day the women of that village said they would go gathering raisin berries, and they took the child along with them. The grandmother spent the day alone at the village. When the sun was getting low, she spread a reed mat in the shade and took out the elephant girl and set her on the mat. She ground ochre and spread it on her, fixed her and dressed her and hung her with ornaments, and fastened copper rings into her hair. She was the beautiful elephant girl again.

When the women were coming back from gathering, they heard the old woman speaking to someone, and that someone was laughing in response. The child asked, "Who is laughing in the village that sounds just like my dead mother?" The other women thought the child was crazy, but then the elephant girl laughed again and they all began to wonder. They arrived in the village and saw her sitting there. Her daughter cried, "It's my mother!" and dropped down and began to nurse. The other women asked, "Who has done this?" The elephant girl replied, "Granny, of course, Granny alone. The old people give you life."

Another day, the two who had killed her came back to the village, and, seeing her, got a fright. But they still wanted to take the elephant girl to visit her in-laws. The grandmother secretly gave her a magical gemsbok horn and told her how to use it when she arrived at the in-laws' village. The elephant girl then left with her husband and his younger brother and they traveled a long distance. As they traveled, the elephant girl kept asking them to let her know before they arrived at the village. She asked about mountains, and riverbeds with water, and what the distance was between where they were and the village they would be visiting. Finally they passed a hill, then a valley of soft sand, and another hill, and came to a village beyond, where small children with clean tummies were playing around and laughing. The brothers told her this was the place.

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The elephant girl told them to go ahead of her into the village, that she wanted to powder herself and then follow them in. When the two brothers had entered the village, she took out her magical gemsbok horn and blew on it, saying, "These two brothers and their village shall be broken apart and ruined!" The horn blew down the village, flattened it to the ground. Then the beautiful elephant girl walked home. (Biesele et al 2009: 69–72)

The heroine tales, as we've seen, feature the journey of a newly married woman caught in the conflict between her family of birth and her new in-laws. They explore the strengths of women by pitting a virtuous heroine against male assailants. The stories center around a marvelous girl usually named G!kun//'homdima, who sometimes, as in this story, appears in the form of an elephant. The elements of the name G!kun//'homdima are complex. *G!kun* means "termites," but it is also the respect word for "aardvark" (anteater, or antbear). This association makes sense when you think of what aardvarks eat, and when you know that the English (and Afrikaner) colonists of southern Africa usually referred to termites as "ants." *//'Hom* means "young woman," and *dima* is a reduplication, using other words, of the young woman concept, meaning "young or little female." *Dima* is a diminutive that also functions as a term of endearment. The G!kun//'homdima name is often applied as well to the beautiful python heroine of the somewhat different story in which a heroine is tricked into falling into a well. However, instead of dying and being reborn like the elephant does, she gives birth while in the water and is rescued by cooperating animals.

Ju/'hoansi make a close symbolic association between pythons and elephants. I found that one of the respect words for python is, in fact, "elephant." I was never able to learn precisely why this is the case, beyond the fairly obvious observation that as meat animals both are remarkable for their delicious fat. But emotional attitudes taken toward the heroines of both sets of tales are also strikingly similar. They are always described as courageous young married women, often with a young child or children, who are beautiful and resourceful and the pride of their kin and in-laws. Portrayed as admirable and above reproach, these heroines are tricked by envious little sisters or uncanny younger brothers-in-law. They call on animal aid and supernatural recourse, and no matter what trials they are put through they get off scot-free and come up shining. Specifically, they shine with well-being and abundant fat, and they are also often anointed with oil or have animal grease rubbed into their skin—a delightful cosmetic procedure in a dry desert. In many heroine stories I heard, the girl G!kun//'homdima was

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Figure 9.2. Baby with "digging stick." © Megan Biesele.

specifically identified as an aardvark (anteater, antbear), another animal with abundant fat.

No matter how the heroine appears in her stories, the battle lines are drawn between a) the heroine wife and her people and b) her husband and his people. The tale uses the issues of the in-law relationship to probe themes of bride service, marriage, and residence, of insults, murder, and blood vengeance, of sex, giving birth, and the problem of eating meat, which involves the pain and death of sentient beings. The heroine's answer to the unexplained aggression she experiences at the hands of her in-laws, especially her husband's younger brother, takes three main forms: escaping, being magically reconstituted, and destroying her assailant and his people by magical means (*n/om*). Her actions are characteristically transformative and assertive: her blood escapes murder and grows in a bag to become the full-sized woman she was before. Cared for by her nurturing grandmother, she goes through a second period of time "in the womb." The elephant girl's regrowth in a bag or other container parallels the python heroine's fruitful seclusion in the spring. In some versions much is made of the charming babyhood of the girl as she is growing secretly in the bag and is occasionally taken out to crawl and play.

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Much is also made of the beauty of the full-grown woman when she emerges from the bag. In a sense, both child and woman emerge from seclusion, as from the python's spring in chapter 4, and make a life-enhancing return to their people. The rescued heroine is washed, wafted with *sa,* rubbed with ochre and fat, dressed freshly, hung with ornaments, and placed upon a skin mat, as a bride would be, or a girl freshly emerged from menarcheal seclusion. In the elephant girl story, G!kun//'homdima is celebrated by doting kin when she emerges from her grandmother's skin bag. Happiness reigns in the camp. The grand-parental generation has passed on its powers of regeneration to the young. "The old people, "says the heroine, "give you life."

These girls' stories, like the stories about the two boys who are the sons of the trickster, all center around healing and transformation. All of them are stories about the ability of ordinary humans, women as well as men, to access superhuman powers akin to the powers of shamans and healers the world over. These include the ability to return "from the dead," out-of-body travel, X-ray vision, prophecy, control of weather, and healing of others. I began to see the central message of these stories, like other Ju/'hoan stories, as *the ubiquity, and the very possibility, of transformation*. There is transformation by magic, transformation by community effort, and transformation by hard work and determination, but the import of them all is that growth, amelioration, and change are possible in the world by the practice of known human means. The heroine's journey on earth, and the journey on the threads of the sky undertaken by the healers in trance, is in a sense the same kind of journey, supported by the same unshakeable set of beliefs in *n/om* and its ability to allow transformation and transcendence.

!Unn/obe told me that dancing *n/om* was not just a Ju/'hoan thing but "a human thing." When I next have a chance to ask a Ju/'hoan man whether being a healer is a men's thing, the answer may well be, "It's not a men's thing, it's a *human* thing."

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