

# THE CONCEPTS OF GOD AMONG THE SAN (NARO) OF BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the concept of God among the San (Naro) of Botswana laying down clearly the theoretical framework adapted in the analysis and arguments presented. The concepts of power and ideology tied to human understanding of God become the ground on which the paper is based. The article begins by giving a summary of the concepts of God in the Western world and then moves to the concepts of God in Africa. Problems of interpretation begin to emerge at this level. Basically it is argued that for the San, the God they believe in, is the foundation of all the rituals performed in their society as they dance around the fire which is the light impossible to extinguish. The paper also looks at their rock art as the basis of human will propagated by the ideological effect embedded in the eland's spiritual potency. It concludes that among the San (Naro) God is the omnipresence of power that can be experienced through nature and human will.

**Keywords:** God, trance dance, ideology, rock art, spiritual potency, interpellation, hegemony, human will.

## 1. Introduction

The word “God” is a word with which one can have a dialogue in writing, orally, loudly or silently. It is a word on which everyone is able to say something either positively or negatively and in any language. There are two approaches to the discussion on concepts of God in Africa. The first one is the one taken by Mbiti (1970). He discusses the concepts without reference to Western concepts of God. This approach believes in the universality of the concepts but at the same time welcomes the idea that there can be African concepts of God that are purely African. The second route begins by accepting that the Western concepts of God have had their toll on African ways of thinking and therefore discusses the concepts in the present context. This second route accommodates a Mosarwa who dances trance dance with a cross on his/her chest; a globalised Mosarwa who participates fully in the affairs of Botswana, Africa and the world. As soon as one says “God” he or she is already on slippery ground. I have taken the second route. There is nothing that is culturally purely African frozen in heritage. The word I have selected to use is an English word which from the outset shows its attachment to the colonial experience which Africa passed through and to Christianity especially in Anglophone countries. The art of writing (the orthography) shows that the mission to educate and globalise

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the “native” African was successful. But the orthography itself has proven wanting in writing African languages that have clicks.

Most of the San people we interviewed at D’Kar in Ghanzi had Christian names attached to the traditional one. It is therefore for the reasons given above that a proper understanding of the concept of God has to start with Western concepts of God as the ground. Since the concepts have been mainly discussed by theologians and philosophers, I will mention briefly some of them and the books in which these concepts are developed.

A deeper understanding of these concepts is available in the following selected books: Adam Morton (1996). *Philosophy in Practice: An Introduction to the Main Questions* (Chapter 1,2,3,4 and 13), John Hospers (1967) *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (Chapter 7), Paul Edwards and Arthur Pulp (1973.) *A modern Introduction to Philosophy* (Chapter V).

The reader who wishes to go deeper into their thinking is advised to read the books they have written cited at the end of this paper. The concepts of God in Africa come immediately after these thought provoking deliberations of the Western world before embarking on the main discussion of the paper.

## **2. Research design and methodology**

This paper results from a research conducted by the Department of African Languages and Literature titled “Assessing the current patterns of Language use culture and identity in Botswana” The research was quantitative and qualitative in nature. The data on which the paper is based was collected in Ghanzi New Xade, D’kar, Bere, Makunda and Charles Hill during the first phase of the project and in Kasane, Chobe, Gweta, Pandamatenga and Nata during the second phase. The San languages covered in this area were mainly Shuakwe, G//ana, Naro and !Xoo. Research questions designed for myths and legends, rites of passage, oral poetry and cultural transformation were used during oral interviews. Interpreters were used on interviews with Basarwa. Interviews were done in a mixed gender group of 5 to 10 interviewees. This gave the opportunity for interviewees to differ in opinion or expand on what other speakers said. Questionnaires were given to those who could read and write and those who preferred to do so. Library research, Websites and visits to cultural performances yielded helpful information. Published collections of folktales were good sources. The main books found useful were: Bleek and Lloyd (1911), Bieseke (1993), Lewis-Williams and Dowson (2000) Kilian-Hatz (1999), Mbiti (2012), and Schmidt (2001)

a. *Objectives of the study*

Objectives of the study were mainly three:

- (i) To understand the concepts of God among the San (Naro) of Botswana within a global context.
- (ii) To analyse trance dance, rock art, paintings, and show how they relate to the concept of God and human will.
- (iii) To discuss how concepts of ideology and power, and the overall concepts of God point to the future of present-day Basarwa with particular reference to the Naro.

### 3. Western concepts of God

An article by Morley (2002) in the internet encyclopaedia of philosophy gives a good summary of the concepts of God in the Western world from Plato to Christianity down to Wittgenstein. In the Western world God is seen as the creator and sustainer of the universe and has power that is unlimited. Scholars like St. Augustine and St. Aquinas stood for this view.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-420) states that God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, morally good, creator (*ex nihilo*), and sustainer of the universe (Morley 2002). He also argues that God exists outside time. Other philosophers to name only a few, posit that God is *causa non causata* (a cause that has not been caused (Leibniz 1961, Aquinas 1971), God is the source of perception (Berkely 1975), God is the essence of rationality (Hegel 1977), and that God is a projection of the human mind and a product of wishful thinking (Freud 1951). Wittgenstein (1967) focuses on languages and argues that because of the limits of language God cannot be explained. One must therefore be silent. Most of the San whom we interviewed kept quiet about God and only said a few words after probing them.

The Western definition of God that comes close to the approach taken in this paper is the one given by Jung. He says:

To this day “God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my wilful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or for worse”(as quoted by Beach 2002).

For Jung, God is immediate experience; not a being out there in the sky. This quotation is relevant because for the San, God is immediate experience “violently and recklessly”. To them God is a duality of good and evil. They believe that there is a god of illness who comes from the east and a god of goodness who comes from the west. Although they believed in these lesser gods, their belief system is generally

based on the supremacy of one God. This will be discussed later in this paper.

#### 4. Concepts of God in Africa

Discussions on concepts of God in Africa often take off from John Mbiti's seminar book *The Concepts of God in Africa* (1970). A good summary of Mbiti's findings on the topic is given in Tony Musings (2007). The book was expanded and published in 2012 as a second edition. Research for this book was done on 550 African languages. 1430 African names for God were collected. Mbiti calls this "the standard list of African names for God" (p. 8 and p.453). He points out that God is worshiped during periods of rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage and death). God is also worshiped at harvest ceremonies, at planting time, in time of war and rain, in times of drought when people desperately need rain (pp.393-407). Most of these names are general attributes of God. He discusses the attributes under four headings: intrinsic, eternal, moral and dynamic attributes (pp.17-159). These attributes show that God is immanent, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, all seeing all hearing, transcendent, eternal infinite, immutable, incomprehensible, mysterious, invisible, pre-Eminent and great, self- Existent, spirit, First and Last cause, faithful, holy, love, and kind.

It is the anthropomorphic and natural attributes of God that show that God in the African context is not far from us. Mbiti discusses them with examples from various African ethnic groups (pp168-175). The Akamba and Lunda for instance think of God as the *Father* who fathered the universe, owns it and cares for it. Patrilineal societies tend to take this route. The Ndebele and Shona call God the *Great Mother*. Matrilineal ethnic groups fall under this category. To them God gives birth to people, the world and earth. To the Ashanti, Akan and Bavenda, God is looked at as *Grandfather*. They believe that there is an intimate relationship between human beings and God; the kind of excessive care that normally exists between a grandfather and his grandchildren. The Nuer and the Zulu address God as a *Friend*. The Zulu traditional doctors address God as "The greatest of friends". There are some ethnic groups that address *God as body and bodily parts*, where God is seen from two sides as spirit and from the front and back as body. The Ganda for instance speak of God as "the great eye" using one part of the body. The sun is regarded as the "Eye of God". This perception of God is also depicted in works of art especially sculptures and carvings. The Bachwa believe they were the first people on earth and therefore think of themselves as "*the children of God*". The Lughara address their elders as the "children of God" when they are praying at the shrines. The Chilluk consider their King to be the "first born of God".

This is a very short observation of how God is perceived in Africa. Looking at it carefully it can be observed from a Jungian perspective that these are basically archetypes and are not particularly African. Archetypes have universal

characteristics. What is to be noted is the idea of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (for Western concept); Father, Mother and Son for African concepts in which the extended family is also projected

The beliefs that God is grandfather and elder, and the dual perception of God as body and body parts are very close to the San conception of God. The grandfather and children relationship mirrors the behaviour of the trickster San called */kaggen*. The consideration of God as bodily and parts is close to the east and west duality of the supreme God and lesser gods among the San. The nuclear Family of Father, Mother and Son approach of defining God does not seem to feature clearly in the traditional San address to God.

## 5. Theoretical framework: Problematising interpretation

Concepts of God in the Western and African world views circle around the idea of power. The main one being the power to create and being in control of all that has been created. Having established this ground, what follows are interpretations and questions covering all the three areas of contention: What? How? Why? The Western (Judeo-Christian) world centres mainly on the Holy Trinity while the African centres on the Father, Mother, Grandfather and friend. All these are perceptions that lead to varied interpretations. There are no correct interpretations outside the individual. As Ricoeur (1974) has observed, conflicts of interpretations emigrate from differences in discipline and philosophies. It is the conflict of interpretations that propels production of meaning forward and makes the meaning of truth unattainable and interesting. Theory then comes into the picture as an enabler, and a temporary ground to stand on. There is no static theory.

Because of the centrality of the idea of power in perceptions of God, I have decided to use Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony and Louis Althusser's ideas of interpellation and ideology<sup>2</sup>. Interpellation is a ritual response or gesture to a call which makes the individual a subject to the caller. In the case of Basarwa, the call is made the spiritual potency and the response is the collective or individual reaction to it in a trance. The concepts of power and ideology will shed some light on understanding the San concept of God.

Culture and ideology deal with values, laws, and worldviews that control and guide human behaviour. To the San, God is power and it is this power that controls and sustains their lives. How is this achieved? Using Althusser's concept of interpellation, it can be argued that God's power through ancestral spirits and nature makes a recognisable call to which the San respond. This call is so strong and

<sup>2</sup> The ideas of Antonio Gramsci (1980) on hegemony run through his voluminous works. But the concept is introduced in Prison Note Book Chapter 2 "state and civil society (pp 206-275). Louis Althusser's ideas are in Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays".

irresistible that it makes them subjects to the caller. In this case of the San, the call and response are collective. According to Gramsci power is the ability to influence the Other. This influence is persuasively ideological and creates an imaginary relationship of an individual to the real conditions of existence.

It is through interpellation and ideology that belief and actual action come together and the individual thinks that he/she is a free subject. This as we shall see is what happens in trance dance when individuals are healed by the power of God through ancestral spirits. The healing becomes a possessive ideological construct that does not use coercive force. The persuasion is done through dialogues in forms of songs. There are four ways through which interpellation and ideological conditioning take place. These are trance dance, the eland, the trickster god and rock paintings. I will now discuss them pointing out the roles they play in understanding the San concept of God.

## 6. Trance dance and happenings

Bieseke (1993:70) describes trance dance among the Ju/'huansi group of the San as follows:

“Though dreams may happen at any time, the central religious experience of Ju/'huan life are consciously and, as a matter of course, approached through the avenue of trance. The trance dance involves everyone in the society, those who enter trance and experience the power of the other world directly, and those to whom the benefits of the other world- healing and insight- are brought by the trancers.”

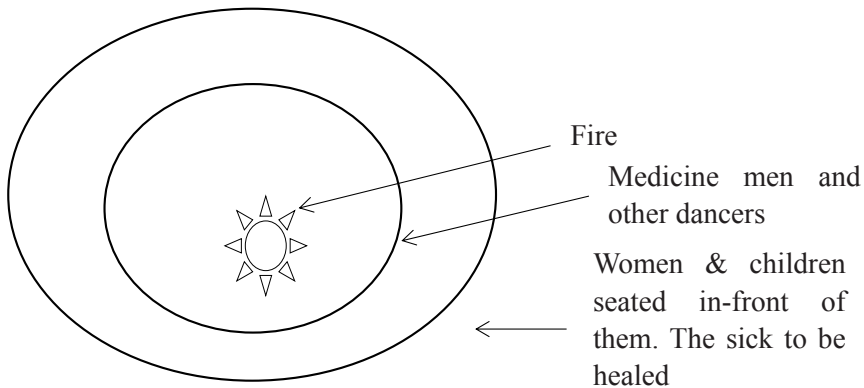
The origin of trance dance is rendered by narrator *Kxao* Giraffe in a fascinating dream story. He narrates how he was taken by a giraffe to the village of the gods in the sky. There he was taken to a river by *Kaoxa* the god. He saw spirits having a dance. He was taught how to dance like them. He was then pressed down into the water of the river until *njorn* spiritual power was put in him. He was taught the song of medicine and danced with them till daybreak. *Njorn* is activated by singing (Bieseke (1993:70-72). It can be noted that the immersion and pressing of the heads of initiates into the water is almost similar to the baptism of Christ. It is a universal archetype in rituals of initiation.

Trance dance is the main healing session through which interpellation takes place. I have attended four sessions. Two were actual healing sessions and two were performances done during the yearly celebration of San culture. In one of the trance healing sessions I was accompanied by two university of Botswana students. One was my MA student who was writing on trance dance. The other was her friend but a born-again Christian and a sceptic of the whole idea of healing during trance dance.

Permission to attend was given by their leader. This is what we saw (witness would be a heavily loaded and judgemental word to use at this juncture).

When we arrived, a big fire was being prepared. In the meantime medicine men, other dancers and the sick were preparing themselves to take their respective spaces in the arena around the fire that was still being lit (see figure of arena below):

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When the fire was lit to their satisfaction, women took their positions with children and the sick in the outer circle. In one of the sessions women took the inside circle near the fire. Women started clapping hands rhythmically accompanied by a song. The women were wearing long skirts, long blouses and their heads were covered with cloth. Four medicine men then entered the arena in traditional skin shots each with a stick in their right hands. They wore strings of broken ostrich egg pieces around their necks. They were bare-breasted. Above the waist they wore belts to prevent brief-shorts from falling. The four medicine men wore a band of cloth around the front part of their fore heads. One of them encouraged women to clap hands harder. Then in slightly leaning forward postures, with sticks in their right hands, they started dancing. They moved forward clockwise but sometimes backwards. Another rhythmic sound emanated from soft bells known as *matlhoa* tied on both legs. Both legs moved up and down in quick succession following the rhythm of the claps.

Two more dancers entered the arena and started dancing with two children behind them. These two dancers kept the fire burning all the time by adding or pushing the half-burnt firewood into the fire. Those without sticks danced spreading their arms sideways like flying birds.



It took some time for the potency to start working in the heads, arms and bellies of these medicine men. When it came their faces changed and behaved like possessed men. Then the healing started. The medicine men put their sticks down. The medicine men touched the sick with both hands standing behind them and stretched their shoulders and massaged them. The two students who had taken positions among the sick were also touched and massaged. One sick man had problems with his legs. The medicine men stretched them forward and backwards. One had stomach problems. His abdomen was touched by one medicine man using both hands.

When the potency did heat up, the medicine men themselves were overpowered. One of them was overwhelmed by the potency and fell down. He was immediately treated by other medicine men. Another behaved almost like a mad man. He walked into the fire but was quickly held by other medicine men. One dancer who had eland horns on his head fell down and behaved like a dying eland. He was healed and continued dancing. Two women got the spell and started behaving like they were possessed. One medicine man healed them with a touch of his hands. After a short while they fell on the ground again. Two medicine men went fast to heal them. The healing trance dance continued on and on. We left at midnight.

This is what we *witnessed*. When we were on our way back to where we stayed, I asked my student what she felt when she was touched and massaged. She said “*I felt something in my body, but will have to wait to see whether I have been healed*” The born again sceptic said “*what I saw was the work of the devil. I have witnessed what devils can do to innocent people*” These two responses raise very important questions. Does healing really take place? Where does the power to heal come from? Later my student confessed that she had come to this healing trance dance not only to get data but also to get healed. She had a problem of begetting children. I then remembered that the medicine man kept on touching her abdomen. I have not followed or traced what happened later, for even if she did beget children it is hard to prove that it was the work of the medicine men. It can be interpreted that what takes place around the fire is metaphorical truth.

### 6.1 *The Fire as Metaphor*

Bieseke (1993:79) describes the role of fire in trance dance as follows:

The fire at the centre of the dance-circle is invested with great power. It is considered to be one source of the heat required to heat up the *njorn*, or power, which has been placed by C//acan in the curer's bellies so that it may be used for curing. Trancers seem to flirt with the dangerous heat of the fire coming as close to it as they possibly can in the effort to make



the *njorn* boil within them. Some pick up hot coals in their hands and rub them over their hair. Others actually walk through or roll in the fire.

This kind of performance takes place when there is a conflict between the real and the imaginary. Fire is the main symbolic signifier in trance dance. The meaning of fire an interpretively be summarised as follows:

- (i) Fire is the interpellant signifier that calls the spirits to the scene to enter into the bodies of medicine men. Fire is the metaphor of healing. I saw the medicine men touch and massage the sick with their arms/hands and palms then went to the fire and threw the removed diseases into the fire. This is a gestural interpretive sign that shows that the hands sucked out the diseases. Fire is then seen as the consumer of diseases.
- (ii) Fire, like the Christian fire *lumen Christi* (light of Christ) is to the San the light of ancestral spirits. This is why it has to keep on burning throughout the healing event. It is not a performance in a theatrical sense. It is a metaphor of truth realised through ritual.
- (iii) Interpretively the fire is an ideological signifier that connects the San to their ancestral spirits and to nature in general. This burning fire is hard to put off. That is why it is not easy to move them from nature to a place which they consider to be outside the environment of healing nature that sustains their being. It is this ideological construct that needs to be deconstructed and smoothly place their being in time.

## 6.2 *The Eland and spiritual potency*

The San believe that the eland was the first animal created by */kaggen* the trickster deity. Due to variation in San languages and the problem of orthography of clicks Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1989, p.13) writes it */Kaggen*, Bieseke (1993, p.79) writes it *C//acan*, Mbiti (2012:481) writes it *Cagn*. The Naro call God *Dxama* while other San languages around them call God *G//ama* (plural *G//wa*). Manifestations of */Kaggen* are in the eland, mantis, hare, louse, snake, and vulture. The role of tricksters in folktales as mediators in the natural environment is significant in understanding the San world view. It shows the centrality of nature in their lives. This is evident in Schmidt (2001) about the Nama and Kilian-Hatz (1999) on the Kxoe in the West Caprivi. Among the San, */Kaggen* can assume these forms (Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1989, p.13). The San also believe that all other animals are like servants to the eland. The eland in one way or another is used in four rituals: trance dance, boy's first kill, girl's puberty and marriage (Biasele 1993: 81). In all these rituals, it is a symbolic sign of potency. It is enacted in trance dance because of its connection

to spirituality. It is believed that its meat opens up doors for a successful future. That is why it is used in rites of passage. Its fat is used as anointing oil. Its meat is eaten with respect thanking it for giving the meat for their survival. The body of Christ can be indirectly evoked here. This is another archetype. Since it has religious symbolic meaning, medicine men seek its potency. It increases their power in the healing of diseases during trance dance. This essence of the eland is known as *N!um*. The eland has human characteristics. It can shed tears when attacked and buries young ones using hind legs when they die (Seloma, personal communication, 2017).

### 6.3 *Rock paintings, engravings and willing*

Traditionally the San people were hunter-gatherers and had homes in caves and rocky overhangs (Bieseles 1993, Lewis-Williams and Dowson 2013). It is in these caves that they painted elands as trance dance visions and as symbols of supernatural power to express their wishful expectations through willing.

The potency of the eland in rock paintings was visualized through images of speed, galloping, twisting a neck and flocking a tail (Bieseles 1993, Lewis-Williams 2013). The potency of the eland in actual life was and still is enacted during the girl's puberty and marriage rites. Women perform the eland bull with horns and imitate its mating behaviour (Bieseles 1993).

Rock paintings are symbols of supernatural power which can be linked to San perception of God through the eland as a trickster god known as */kaggen*. They also depict the relationship between the San people and their natural environment. Lewis-Williams and Dowson (2013, p.11) observe that the Basarwa we see now are not rock painters. The painters were pushed out from caves which were in farms owned by white farmers. The San people moved to the Kalahari and started living in temporary shelters. The centre at D'Kar is reviving the art of painting among the San (Naro). It can be observed that ideas expressed in the modern paintings are symbols of human will. Although the idea that */Kaggen* is the Supreme Being that provides is still in their minds, they are beginning to blend the past, present and the future as observed in the painting discussed below.

Appendix A (fig. 1) is a painting by a Mosarwa at Kuru Art Centre. His name is Jan Tcega John, born in 1968. The painting depicts his vision of the future Mosarwa. The attire of the rider of the bicycle is traditionally unchanged. The bicycle is competing with the speedy galloping elands. The front wheel of the bicycle is almost flying. The bicycle rider is riding side by side with the baboon which represents */kaggen* the trickster deity. */Kaggen* is also running at high speed to keep abreast with the bicycle. The bicycle rider is almost leaving behind the traditional grass hut. Flowers of nature, stars, the moon and the sun grace the environment. Among the

San, the sun is male and the moon is female (Bieseke 1993). In the coloured original painting, the national flag of Botswana is clearly visible. The background is yellow, the fat eland is guarding nature. Observe the panting signifier in the mouths of the rider and the two elands in front. Their mouths are wide open. The race to the future is on--the will to be.

Appendix B (fig. 2) is a rock painting depicting trance dance in a cave (demarcations shown by circular line). Observe the bending forward posture of the medicine men. Probably spiritual power is beginning to work in their abdomen. One of them has the head of a lion (power) and the other one is probably a medicine woman. Observe the startled sick man and his sitting posture as the medicine man approaches to lay hands on him. Observe also the sitting postures of the dancers clapping hands while singing. See the lines which look like sticks. These are the diseases coming out from or attacking the sick man. These performances are confessions of “innocent people”. (fig. 67b in Lewis-Williams and Dowson, 2013, p.141)

## 7. Conclusion: The will to be

In Appendix B (fig. 2) we see a Mosarwa who is basically spiritual in nature; one who is frozen in the past by the hegemonic *njorn* of ancestral spirits. In Appendix A (fig. 1) we see a Mosarwa who is galloping to the future in a globalised world. This is a Mosawa who is willing to change, but within his spiritual world in which /Kaggen through manifestations of nature, provides the healing word. This is a Mosarwa who has also space for Christianity. His name is John. A good number of the San have joined ZCC probably because of the dancing aspect (Seloma, personal communication, 2017).

All these deliberations lead to the ideas of interpellation ideology. Interpellation makes the San ideologically conditioned to nature. Once this ideology comes into contact with modern ideological state apparatuses, a conflict of interpretation on the meaning of life ensues. Perhaps the “best way” is to try and understand this ideology and use the same ideology de-constructively to reorient them to the new without pushing them to the limit of “willing not to be”. God (/Kaggen) to them is power. It is this power that guides their will to be. Willing is dynamic power that comes from within the human mind. It is the centre of being in the world. Without willing nothing can change.

The title of the painting is “Guide in the Kalahari”. It is oil on canvas and was painted in 2015. In the book by African Crafts-market (2016), the painting was slotted for the month of July. July is the coldest month in the Kalahari. The normal general interpretation would say that animals and people are fleeing from the cold winter to an unspecified destination. But why are we given the bicycle? Why the elands, the sun, the hut, the brief-short, and the baboon? Such questions lead to

deconstructive thinking. Deconstruction helps one to go deeper into what is in the mind of the artist and comes out unconsciously in the painting. I have come out with the idea that nature, ritual potency, the concept of God and human will are central to “Being in Time” of the San (Naro).

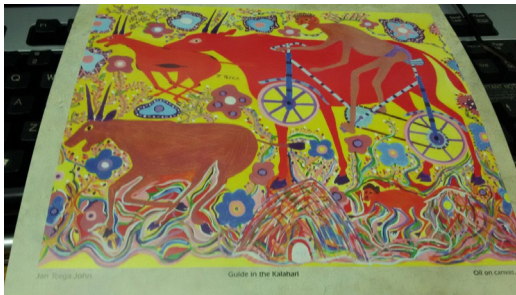
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## Appendix A

**Fig. 1**



## Appendix B

**Fig. 2**

