

INTEGRATION, STATUS REDEFINITION, AND CONCILIATION AT
 TSONGA BEER-DRINK SINGSONGS

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The Tsonga are a dispersed, immigrant Bantu-speaking people numbering about 1,200,000 in Mozambique and 700,000 in the Northern Transvaal. They are patrilineal, practice virilocal residence, and to a large extent still worship ancestor-spirits (Christianity affects only those living near the missions). They are primarily maize growers, but also keep cattle, and a large number of the men are away in the mines of Johannesburg at any given time.

In suggesting that they are a "dispersed" people, I refer to the fact that they are split into large groups, one on each side of the international border between Mozambique and South Africa. The groups are not separate cultural and linguistic units, as might occur where an international border is drawn through a peaceful sessile population whose affinal and consanguinal relations and language dialects are territorially defined. There was a westward migration bearing the characteristics of a panic evacuation, as the nineteenth-century Zulu marauders pillaged Tsonga villages. Hence clans were divided haphazardly down the middle, becoming spatially separated as other refugees followed the first wave across the Lebombo Hills. Colonial governments later froze them into their chance locations.

Two years (1968-1970) of fieldwork among the Tsonga revealed that unusual emphasis is placed upon maintenance of the folklore heritage, particularly the traditional songs: "We, the Tsonga people, have many folklore stories... it is our duty as Tsonga to preserve this treasure, more especially to preserve the songs which accompany the stories" (Marivate 1959:341). I received the distinct impression that this emphasis stems from a perceived threat to cultural identity, particularly among those Tsonga surrounded by a Shona, Venda, Lovedu, Ndaou, Swazi, Pedi, and Tswana polyglot: "The standard Venda opinion is that they /the Tsonga/ are rude, ill-mannered, and eat atrociously" (Blacking 1967:31).

As maize growers, the Tsonga utilize this crop extensively for brewing beer. Among the Tsonga, the social and ceremonial beer-drink is the most important integrative institution, serving as it does the function of marking births, initiation coming-outs, marriages, deaths, other life-cycle crises, and occasions when individuals are leaving one group to join another. It is an institution wherein statuses are redefined: the infant becomes human at one year, the boy becomes a man possessing new allegiances as he leaves behind his childhood name and associations at initiation, the bride deprives her family of her horticultural labor as she transfers to her husband's village, the widow is purified before again "belonging" in terms of the levirate. The crop and the custom thus go hand-in-hand to elevate the beer-drink to intense social significance, and it should further be pointed out that Tsonga beer, with its heavy sediment and low alcoholic content, is a nutritious complement to the diet.

The Tsonga beer-drink is also the time and place where most Tsonga music occurs (40%), the other 60% of musical performance taking place in such diverse social environments as the initiation school, the drumming school, and the exorcism rites. Tsonga beer-songs have a special role in the integrative and conciliative

function of the beer-drink, for their content reflects Tsonga anxieties, and the cultural prescriptions and proscriptions surrounding their performance vary with the severity of the cause of those anxieties.

There are fourteen major types of events celebrated by beer-drinks, with fourteen major types of beer-song subject-matter related to those types of events. The word-content, and the various cultural prescriptions and proscriptions governing the musical performance of 335 beer-songs, were carefully noted in the field by the writer. Textual analysis of the tape recordings revealed that there were only 140 different beer-songs in general use (the recordings contained duplications).

Post-performance impromptu committees of the writer, singers, and village elders helped to establish which were the preferred and most complete versions of the 140 beer-songs, and what were the cultural meanings and implications of the archaisms and linguistic ambiguities contained in many of the texts. Data noted included the method of song delivery, who should ideally deliver the song, whether personal names should be mentioned or introduced into the song lines, whether the song contained messages which could not be spoken, and what the audience was supposed to do in response.

Beer-drinks Marking Childbirth

Many songs mentioned the Tsonga fear of bearing twins. Others alluded to barrenness by witchcraft, protective devices (bangles, drug-taking) designed to counter barrenness by witchcraft, and return of the cattle to the husband's people upon discovery of infertility. When a birth does occur the songs are sung as special rites are performed (the tying on of a waistband, inspection of the fontanel) and are led by the infant's mother. There are thus two prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Establishing A Courtship Period

Many songs mentioned betrothal protocol such as the preliminary visits to the compound of the bride-to-be's family. There were many allusions to that well-known (in southern Africa) Tsonga phenomenon, formal in-lawship (vukon'wana). Those songs not sung by the boy are sung by the girl, and the presence of a particular audience -- the in-laws -- if necessary. Again, there are two prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Celebrating Weddings

Many songs consisted of slights directed against one side by the other ("Your girl is as idle as a caterpillar"). Others made reference to the bride's initial week of hard labor in her in-laws' compound, where she must clear all the ashes from the hearths and smear all the floors with dung, and where she owns no pots and has planted no crops the previous year. Still others mention the ceremonial exchange of snuff and firewood, while others tell of the illegality of elopement. The songs must be sung by one side to the other (in a symbolic contest asserting kin-group superiority), and they must be accompanied by various forms of mime (the bride's 'escape' in the bush and formal 'capture'). There are thus two prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Settling Co-Wives' Differences

The Tsonga institution of vukwele -- co-wifely jealousy -- is renowned throughout southern Africa. Some songs tell of Great Wife's envy of the new young wife's monopoly of the husband's bedtime hours, while others tell of the young wife's envy of the status of the Great Wife's children. Other songs refer to the custom of making complainers sleep outside in the compound, others tell of co-wives' eavesdropping and subsequent gossiping. The songs must be sung by the accuser to the accused, personal names must be specified, the husband must

be present (to adjudicate), and evidence must be musically presented by each of the co-wives' kin-groups. In this case, there are four prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Held At Time of Illness (for propitiation and enlivenment purposes)

Many songs made reference to various kinds of native remedies, such as 'putting' the illness into an ant-hole to be carried away, the attachment of various kinds of animal bones to the invalid, and certain food taboos. The songs must be sung by the invalid's kin in a group around him or her, and they are generally accompanied by some medicinal act such as rubbing. Here again, there are two prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Held At Time Of Death

Many songs alluded to water (the 'crossing-over' of the deceased to the other side) and the purifying, cleansing property of water. Other songs mentioned the chiefly prerogative to execute constituents, Tsonga fear of owls, the destruction of the deceased's hut, and the removal of metal buttons from the deceased's clothing before burial (metal "fails to make the journey to the beyond"). The songs must be sung by the surviving kin, they must have been preceded by certain ablutions (which formalize the new status of the bereaved), and they must be accompanied by certain propitiations (which start the deceased on the first stage of his or her long journey to the spirit-world). There are thus three prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Formalizing Widowhood

These occur some time after the death, and are primarily to establish the revised status of the widow and to regularize her re-entry into everyday social relations. Many songs mention the practice of the levirate, others refer to the widow's purification ablutions in the river. One strange custom alluded to is the practice of having sexual intercourse with a stranger before being acceptable to the husband's brother (the "song of the deceiver"). The songs must be sung to the assembly by the widow, they must have been preceded by the necessary ablutions, and they are accompanied by certain self-humbling postures and the "widow's dance." There are thus three prescriptions.

The foregoing seven categories of events constitute life-cycle crises and have been given in life-cycle order (initiation songs are largely secret and are performed at the river-bank or in the secret lodge). The ordering by severity of prescription will be extrapolated later, when the review of song types is completed.

Beer-drinks Marking First Fruits

Many songs mentioned such items of Tsonga horticultural production as maize, sorghum, millet, pumpkins, squash, watermelon, sugar cane, and groundnuts. Also mentioned were edible varieties of locusts and ants, the whistling taboo in the fields, bird-chasing activities to protect crops, and food taboos such as that pertaining to eating hawks. These songs, when added to those of the next category (songs concerning rain), constitute over 20% of the total beer-song repertoire, reflecting constant Tsonga anxiety over the crop yield. This constant anxiety should not be confused with the anxiety produced spasmodically. A distinction must be drawn between anxiety incidence and anxiety rate. There is an underlying seedbed of constant anxiety derived from drought and culture clash, but the prescriptions we are measuring will be seen to measure mainly that stress caused by increases in the rate of perceived intimidation -- threats to social cohesion (co-wifely jealousy and witchcraft accusations) and diminution of the social group (death and widowhood). There also appears to be an indigenous distinction between those perceived intimidations which originate from humans located within the community and which can be controlled, those perceived intimidations associated with the afterlife and which cannot be controlled, and those perceived intimidations originating with the environment (natural and, in

the case of culture clash caused by whites) and which cannot be controlled.

First fruit songs, which are now sung freely, at any time of the year and at any beer-drink as well as first fruit beer-drinks, carry no cultural prescriptions or proscriptions.

Beer-drinks Held When Rain Is Needed

Many songs mentioned the Tsonga fear of the Bird-Of-Heaven, which, in Tsongaland, is the Bateleur eagle, which flies in a zigzag (lightning-like) pattern across the sky. Other songs refer to rain whistles made from its leg bone; these whistles are reputed to serve as protection from being struck by lightning, a valid fear on the open plains. Still other songs refer to the sighting of black millipedes, reflecting the Tsonga belief that black objects are rain-related ("black sheep bring black rain-clouds," goes one song). The songs have mainly lost their original use, and are now generally sung at any time. There are no performance prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Marking An Individual's Departure Or Return

Alluded to here was the Tsonga association of a leg-rattle's seeds with the completion of a "fruitful" journey (literal translation verified with informants). Some songs mentioned the gods-of-the-bush (swikwembu ra nhova); one referred to the necessity for two people to travel together "so that one could tie any menacing lion's tail to a tree while the other escaped." The songs have moved into the domain of solo instrumentalists' strolling songs (with hand piano accompaniment) and are performed anywhere at any time. Again, there are no cultural prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Celebrating The Nineteenth-Century Migration

The Tsonga keep track of historical events by reciting genealogies and by counting the number of gardens they have planted since a certain event: "the Tsonga...have a remarkable knowledge of their family genealogies" (Blacking 1967:31). In some areas there is a periodic beer-drink, ostensibly dedicated to the memory of the westward movement of the clans. Many of the songs describe the 'thieving' of Tsongaland by the Venda, and refer to the many Tsonga who get "lost among the hill-dwelling foreigners (Venda)." Other songs refer to the bringing of Chopi zyllophones westward, the communal carrying of roofs across fields when Tsonga have to move "further away from the Venda cannibals" and "the great crossing-over of the Ritavi River." The songs have largely moved into the domain of the strolling hand-piano player and carry no prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Marking The Commencement Or Termination Of A Kinsman's Period Of Labor In The Mines

Many songs here mentioned the standard plaid clothing issue in the mine compounds, the loss of menfolk in "the white man's jungle," the evils of the train which "carries our men away," the use of sacks (brought back by men) as women's shawls, and the necessity to carry one's work permit at all times. The songs are sung in the town as well as in the rural area, and carry no prescriptions regarding performance.

Beer-drinks Called When The Bone-Thrower Comes

A song here mentioned that "journeying must wait till the antelope jumps" (i.e. the antelope's astragalus must fall inverted on the ceremonial mat onto which the set of sixty-four divining bones are thrown by the aged woman who predicts the future). Others referred to the hyena-tail whisk used as a pointer by the bone-thrower, and to the fruitshell leg-rattle which she shakes to secure satisfactory choral responses from her singing audience. The songs must consist of a call by the diviner, answered by a choral response from the audience, and must

contain references to the predicted future of each adult in the assembled crowd, which is gathered in a circle about the ceremonial mat. There are thus two performance prescriptions.

Beer-drinks Called To Air A Witchcraft Accusation

Many songs contained accusations of the theft of cattle from kraals. Others referred to the bewitchment of crops, the souring of a brew of beer, and the wanderings of various disliked individuals who supposedly transfigured themselves into hyenas (who eat human flesh from fresh graves), crocodiles (who eat human flesh), and owls (who are nocturnal). The songs may not mention personal names directly but the accused may be pointed out in the crowd by means of a waved baton. The accusation cannot be spoken, it must be sung. Supporting evidence must be forthcoming from the accuser's kin-group, with alibi or counter-accusation coming from the accused's kin-group. The headman or a senior elder must adjudicate. There are thus five prescriptions.

Substantiation Of The Hypothesis

Among the Tsonga the worst crime is that of bewitchment, for bewitchment almost invariably comes from social enemies and may kill: "The great crime of the baloyi is that of killing. They are murderers, and all the more to be feared as they act unconsciously, without being seen or known. Two motives inspire their crimes-- hatred and jealousy" (Junod 1927, 2:510).

During the second year of the writer's field work in southern Africa, a valuable informant and friend -- in the person of a professional herbalist (i.e. practitioner or native doctor) -- was lost due to a highly unfortunate incident deriving from the Tsonga belief in and fear of witchcraft. The diviner had identified to a client the cause of the death of the child of the client. The cause was stated to be bewitchment emanating from a neighbor -- a left-handed recluse musician known as a nwarimatsi (Child-Of-The-Left-Handed-One -- a social outcast, for the Tsonga use the left hand in attending to excretory functions). The client then attempted to burn the hut of the accused (a common way of settling scores) and caused the accused to suffer severe burns. Identifying the originator of a bewitchment is an offense against the constitutional law of South Africa, and the diviner, who was in the midst of a series of explanatory interviews with the writer concerning his healing system, was arrested by the white police and incarcerated. This incident is fairly typical of the kind of thing happening with a degree of regularity throughout most of Tsongaland today; the pattern has not changed much in the last fifty years, since the law was first introduced.

Studies made of witchcraft accusations present findings purporting to indicate that most accusations occur between close kin, rather than between distant kin or non-kin. These studies often fail to take into account the amount of interaction experienced in the restricted social environment of a rural community, by close kin. It is to be expected that the more the interaction, the more the latent social friction. One can hardly develop intense personal antagonisms (i.e. those likely to crescendo to a point where the only recourse is a witchcraft accusation) with people one does not meet very often and has but a nodding acquaintance with.

Witchcraft accusations incur severe performance prescriptions precisely because of their potential disruptive effect among those who ideally should coexist with a minimum of stress; it is within this range of individuals that every Tsonga finds the social group to which he must turn regularly for support and assistance. Tsonga institutions such as the horticultural work party presuppose a high degree of personal compatibility and amiability. When this is not found then stress tends to run high.

In one beer-song bewitchment is associated with cruelty:

The villagers are cruel
It is the people therein
Who accuse, accuse of witchcraft!

In another beer-song the witches have supposedly caused the death of a child:

My children
Have been finished
By the witches.

Situations where bewitchment is believed to have occurred, then, show the highest degree of social stress, and, upon counting up the number of performance prescriptions surrounding the delivery of musical accusations of witchcraft, and after evaluating their nature and severity, it is found that, above those of all other song types, the prescriptions associated with witchcraft accusations are the most severe.

With regard to songs of co-wifely jealousy, these also possess strong prescriptive concomitants. A husband standing between two irreconcilable wives stands to lose not only peace of mind but the cattle exchanged in his affinal transactions (should a wife justifiably return to her people).

Junod conveys the social import of co-wifely jealousy when he relates how "Vukwele.. also means the special spot between the courtyards, where the wives of one man go to insult each other (rukutelana)...a despised wife sings this song to excite a quarrel, after which she hopes she will obtain her rights" (1927, 2:285-286).

Likewise Merriam, in discussing "the therapeutic value of bringing a repressed thought into the open", states of Dahomean songs that "Such release is also given to co-wives who sing songs against each other" (1964:202-203). In both instances, musical action is a vehicle of transition between states, providing passage from a state of disequilibrium to one of equilibrium. The open forum of the beer-drink and its beer-songs constitutes a mechanism for the resolution of interpersonal conflict.

In one beer-song two junior co-wives are accused of grumbling, lying, and quarreling:

Grumble, grumble, other wife!
The Daughter-of-Gwayimane
Is argumentative
And you, Daughter-of-Maxalani
Are a liar
And a quarrelsome one.

In another beer-song, the complaining co-wife is told that she ought to sleep outside in the compound:

The complainer has arrived
She will even sleep outside
Let "it" wait for "its" husband
Dumalizwe the Complainer!

In another beer-song, a co-wife is accused of conspiring, eavesdropping, and being jealous:

A conspiring wife
 She sleeps along the wall in order
 to overhear the secrets of her
 mother's husband
 She has Jeaaaaa--lousy!

Physical harm resulting from co-wifely jealousy, however, is infrequent, and the threat is one lesser than bewitchment. There is a lesser degree of social stress, and an examination of the prescriptions surrounding the performance of co-wifely jealousy song reveals that they are less severe than those pertaining to witchcraft accusations, but more than those governing any other beer-drink song-type.

The Tsonga realise that death is irreversible ipso facto. From early childhood the Tsonga are accustomed to viewing death resignedly -- they see infant corpses (infant mortality is high) and they see much death resulting from the illnesses which plague the Tsonga: bilharzia, tuberculosis, and other subtropical ailments. The songs reflect this:

Child of mine
 We remain behind
 Mourning for you.

The following song mentions how the labor and the daily round of life must go on:

Ye who labor, remain behind
 Remain and reap, but mourn for me
 To be parentless is a great misfortune
 The misery of no parents!
 Reap, but cry for me.

Widowhood which does not result in being 'taken over' by an adult male in-law, results in the return of the woman to her home village and her own kinsmen:

I shall return home
 Keep silent
 I am destined for loneliness.

Tsonga belief in the ancestor spirit-world is strong. With appropriate propitiation, the spirit can later be reborn. Death, then, may not be so final after all. In any case it does not appear to produce an appreciable increase in the level of social stress, and what stress there is may be quickly resolved by ablution, purification, and the re-alignment of the statuses via primogeniture and the levirate. The stress accompanying a death in Tsonga society can legitimately be estimated at being below that of witchcraft accusations and co-wifely jealousy, but above that of any other beer-drink song-type, as can the prescriptions surrounding the performance of songs concerning death and widowhood.

At beer-drinks marking childbirth, courtship stages, marriage, and the prediction of the future of an individual, social stress is revealed by the song-words in that they allude to passage from one stage to another (in the case of divining it consists of transition from a state of being under the threat of the unknown, to being enlightened and having one's way made clear, as in the example of the antelope's astragalus indicating the right day for travel). After the beer-drink, where the social and psychological imbalance is acknowledged and resolved by formal re-incorporation into the group (albeit in a new status), the social stress is less than before.

Preparation of the unborn child constitutes a stage in its social and biological maturation. In the following beer-song, the onset of foetal movement is likened to the jumping of the baby antelope inside its mother's womb, where it learns to leap:

We were telling the child
The one who is jumping inside
About the leaping of the antelope.

As the mother goes about her daily chores, the child learns from its mother's actions even while in the womb, therefore if she conducts herself well, so will the child.

There is another song about a true-ringing well-baked clay pot, which refers to the healthy infant's having survived the critical 'firing' period, and possessing a lusty cry like the sound of a good pot rolling along the ground. Poetically enough, among the Tsonga when an infant dies, it is always buried in a broken pot (because it "is" a broken pot that cracked).

The following song reflects the fact that, nowadays, the completion of schooling is often a form of rite de passage:

Oh! My first-born daughter!
Returned from being away at school
Now she is proposed to.

The following wedding-song tells the bride of the initial week of hard labor she can expect:

Pour! Pour the beer!
You'll be encountering difficulties alright
You'll be stamping and grinding mealies (maize)!

One of the acts necessarily accompanying the singing of illness-songs is identified in the following beer-song:

Child-Of-The-Python!
I call upon you
My father calls upon you
My father is unwell.

The throwing of the divining bones is often precipitated by some form of social stress like illness, as is indicated in the following beer-song:

Throw the bones, bone-thrower!
Your chanted response, please, audience
What will happen with the unwell child?

None of these forms of social stress is associated with greatly feared supernatural phenomena such as death by bewitchment, or with immediate threats to social cohesion, as in co-wifely jealousy. Yet there is a degree of stress, paralleled with some form of cultural prescription surrounding the performance of beer-songs at the beer-drink in question. The severity of the prescriptions involved can with justice be estimated at lying fourth from the top of the severity-scale.

With regard to those beer-drinks and those beer-songs associated with first fruits, rain, migration, city-life, and travel, these five categories appear to embody the lowest level of social stress; the factors involved are environmental

ones to which the Tsonga have long acclimatized themselves, and no serious threats - - supernatural or human -- are forthcoming. There are the ever-present threats from nature, of course: drought, crop failure, and pests such as beetles, and birds which devour the seed as soon as it is spread and the maize and the fruit as it grows.

Tsonga folklore contains much reference to these hazards, and they are considered "part of the system" -- the expected round of trials and tribulations. Often the crop pests are humanized in songs and stories, and represented as cunning afflictors of the patient and long-suffering cultivator.

The following beer-song describes an occasion when all the cattle died:

A very severe hunger
The hunger came and they suffered
They tanned animals' skins
So that they could eat them.

Here is another beer-song mentioning hunger:

The scarcity of bread and a shilling!
Share, oh share!
Longing for it, you people.

The crop yield, and hence the people's subsistence level, is related to the amount of rainfall:

Rain-making, rain-making, M-mm!
Black millipede, we need rain!

The following was collected at Xigalo:

We are longing for the rain
Wet rain, hey ha!
At Xigalo, where is the rain?
Wet rain, come!

The wide River Ritavi seems to symbolize the Great Migration for many Tsonga:

Cross over the land of Ritavi
Hee ya! Hey ho!

A new kind of migration -- migrant labor -- is referred to in the following beer-song:

They will never return
Great is the misfortune
In Johannesburg
With the white-man's town-life
They will kill him
The city is a vast desert.

As often as not the train is blamed:

What troubles I endure!
It is because of the train.

Ordinary travel through the bush, between villages, is a common Ysonga pastime. Travellers are often requested to carry greetings, and to deliver them on arrival:

Go safely and greet my friends for me
Make fruitful footsteps.

These occasions are associated neither with major threats to life nor with threats to social cohesion. They are furthermore not associated with life-cycle crises. Perhaps because of their ever-present, "stable" character, or the accustomization of the Tsonga to their vagaries, there is little social stress resulting from these phenomena. The Tsonga are more concerned with their social environment than with their natural environment, thus the stress inherent in these last five types of situations can be placed at the bottom of the stress-severity scale. In this case, examination of the cultural prescriptions surrounding the beer-songs shows that prescriptive severity is likewise low.

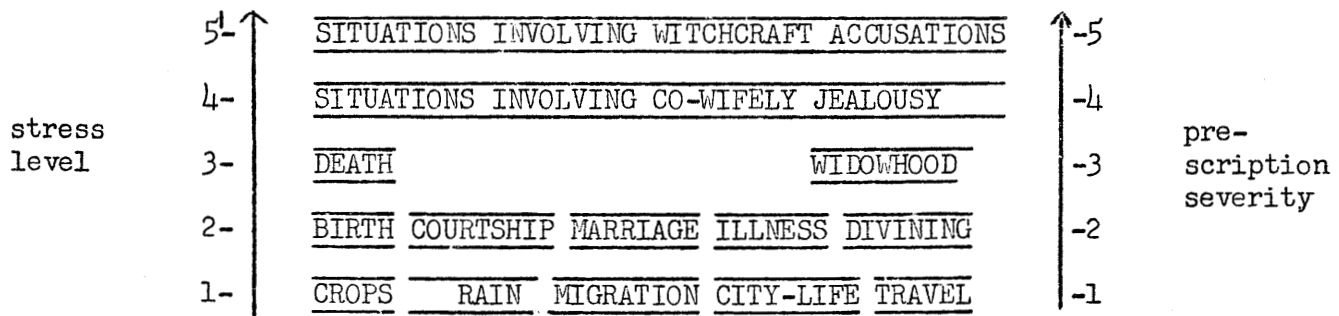


Figure 1. Scale showing that the severity of the stress present in different social situations is matched by the severity of the cultural prescriptions governing song-performance

This paper has shown that study of a society's musical system yields information which contributes toward a broadened knowledge of its human organization. Collection and translation of a society's song-texts yields data that might otherwise be overlooked in an anthropological investigation. For instance, the nature of the cultural prescriptions governing beer-song performance is often implicit in the song-lines. Co-wifely jealousy songs specifically emphasize personal names:

Yandzheya, Yandzheya!
He's your husband, Yandzheya!
But he is also mine!

Songs at time of death describe ritual acts:

We left the wax head-ring
Hanging on the nkanye tree
From which we draw life.

Wedding-songs describe symbolic acts:

We now build a pile of firewood
Then we give the bride snuff!

Songs at time of illness describe medicinal routines:

They took two bones
And ties them to Mbítsini.

The participant-observer can note these references and verify whether they are indeed current practice and not just archaisms persisting in a treasured heritage, and can then correlate them with witnessed behavior.

To conclude, it should be stated that although we have emphasized Tsonga reduction of stress within the context of the social and ceremonial beer-drink, it should not be inferred that all stress in Tsonga society is thus resolved. Other stress-reducing mechanisms include sport, games, prayer, and competitive dancing where rival teams endeavor to outdo each other, often in order to bring power and prestige to the chief who sponsors them as a means of resolving differences with potential political antagonists.

Nor is the social and ceremonial beer-drink always successful in reducing stress in Tsonga society. Stress resolutions encountered and documented by the writer include the banishment from the compound of a co-wife, the allocation of a new hut to her rival (the accuser), the exchange of compensatory foodstuffs in a case of witchcraft accusation (the accuser lost the case), the voluntary retirement from office of a headman thought responsible for much bad luck with the crop-production, and the arrest of a diviner accused of incitement to murder.

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