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Female Initiation or School? Practicing Culture in the Kalahari

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from 2011 to 2012, this chapter addresses advocacy tacit within local cultural practices of Ncoakhoe (San) in Gantsi District, Botswana. It focuses on a female initiation dance, Du Xgo Tcna, which is carried out at a girl's first menstruation and signifies a transition from girlhood into womanhood. It is both a rite of passage and a way of conferring womanhood on to older women who were not able to undergo their own initiations when they were younger. Typically, girls who complete this initiation drop out of school because the school does not give permission for them to have time off. This absence – often causing them to miss key exams – makes it more difficult for them to return to school. The assumption is that choosing initiation automatically means not choosing schooling and the cultural values and assumptions that are associated with it. However, this is an oversimplification. The notion of advocacy (illustrated in this chapter by the actions of a prominent Ncoakhoe family) promotes the cultural practice of initiation within the community, while at the same time supporting children throughout their schooling.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses advocacy tacit within local practices of Ncoakhoe¹⁾ in D'Kar, Gantsi District, Botswana. It focuses on a female initiation dance, *dùù* (eland), which is carried out at a girl's first menstruation and which signifies a transition from girlhood into womanhood. Usually, girls are not permitted time off school to attend this ceremony, so parents are forced to choose either this cultural initiation, which affords Ncoakhoe status within the village, or formal schooling. Typically, many of those who have had this initiation drop out of school soon after, which emphasises the importance of this issue. Advocacy offers a way out of this conundrum.

Having to choose either female initiation or school strikes at the heart of issues facing Ncoakhoe in Botswana, and this situation is redolent of wider

processes that affect Ncoakhoe. An assumption held by the authorities, in this case represented by formal school, is that parents choosing initiation are not choosing schooling or the cultural values and assumptions associated with it. This is an oversimplification, and many Ncoakhoe recognise this. In the context of this chapter, advocacy is about Ncoakhoe promoting the cultural practice of initiation within the community, while at the same time supporting their child through school.

Drawing on my fieldwork between 2011 and 2012, I interviewed Qoba (36, Naro speaker), a singer who performed at an initiation that took place in D'Kar, as her parents had negotiated time off school for her to attend *dùù*. This chapter reveals that, while there are international interventions and national lobbying for and on behalf of Ncoakhoe, there are also strong local forms of advocacy that are directly impacting and benefitting young people. Such forms of advocacy need to be foregrounded in academic research, as it reveals the agency of Ncoakhoe to affect their own futures.

ISSUES FOR *DÙÙ* AND FORMAL SCHOOL

During the nine months I lived in D'Kar, a village of 1,688 residents (Republic of Botswana 2012), I attended two Ncoakhoe *dùù* initiations and heard about a further two that I did not attend. All women in the village may be initiated at different times, as it depends on the time of their first menstruation. In Naro language, female initiation is described as *dùùm kg'ài koe si ko qōò* (she is going to the *dùù* place). *Dùù* is an eland, a large, fatty, and usually solitary antelope that is an important symbol in this ritual. The ritual marks *dxae guu* (lit. female grown), the passage from adolescence to adulthood. Undertaking the initiation supports her steps into womanhood through teaching her about relationships.

Dorothea Bleek (1928: 23) and Isaac Schapera (1930: 119) called Ncoakhoe initiation the 'eland bull dance'; however, Lorna Marshall (1999) explained that the male role was given less priority than the female role during female initiation, so she called it the 'eland dance'. While Alan Barnard (pers. comm.) explained that in the 1970s the dance was referred to as *dùù gxoo* (eland bull), during my fieldwork neither 'male' nor 'bull' was used by Ncoakhoe in D'Kar when referring to the initiation. Like Lorna Marshall (1999), I too have omitted 'male' and 'bull' here. Within D'Kar, the initiation was frequently only referred to as *dùù*, and this is the convention I use in this chapter.

Key issues for *dùù* included contradictions and pressures in respect of the initiation, between the normative and 'civilising' pressure for Ncoakhoe to attend school, which ran alongside a perception that Ncoakhoe were not really equipped for school. In Botswana, there is a general perception of Ncoakhoe as troublemakers, illiterates, truants, thieves, and generally as a group of 'backwards' people who ultimately hold back the overall development of the country. They are often perceived as being 'in need' of being civilised, but since their so-called

'traits' are viewed as 'inherent', the perception is that Ncoakhoe are ultimately unable to participate properly, which holds back their own development and the development of the entire nation. This tension underlies the experience of Ncoakhoe and tends to threaten their efforts to make effective and distinguished contributions to the wider social and public life in Botswana. Moreover, it hinders the development of their own practices and the maintenance of their culture and language, as their low social status means that more socially and politically stronger groups, such as Setswana-speaking groups, are likely to have their own languages and cultural traditions respected. These tend to be repeated by lower, socially weaker ethnic groups, such as Ncoakhoe. This process can be described as acculturation.

Some Ncoakhoe have bought into the normative pressure and wanted to attend school, to access their rights as Ncoakhoe and as citizens, in order to 'modernise'. Yet many Ncoakhoe want to attend *dùù* while, at the same time, maintaining their school careers. In these cases, the school must give permission for the child to take time off for the *dùù*. However, from the perspective of the school, giving permission for a child to leave only supports the perceived pattern of behaviour of Ncoakhoe as illiterate, 'backwards' people who do not want to develop or progress.

For schools and for many Batswana, the best place for Ncoakhoe children is at school, where they will learn to read and write and become incorporated and included in the (Tswana) nation.²⁾ If Ncoakhoe girls leave school without permission, it strengthens the perception of them as troublemakers who are not respectful of the rules. In these cases, returning to school means that the girls face punishment from their teachers and bullying from their peers. This is not a very appealing prospect for Ncoakhoe girls who may already find school a difficult and challenging place to learn (le Roux 1999). It is common for initiated girls to drop out of school, especially if they miss their end-of-year exams, as they would fail that year and so would not progress through the normal government school system.

A further issue is that Ncoakhoe are pejoratively distinguished from ethnic others within the nation and do not have their own rituals and traditions recognised as part of the broader cultural landscape of Botswana. This lack of recognition, both on a formal (school) level and on an informal (interpersonal) level, means that it is often hard to negotiate for girls to have their *dùù*. Being seen as lower and lesser than other ethnic groups means that their cultural traditions are not widely accepted, so gaining permission to attend their own rituals is more difficult as there is no common understanding within the broader society.

However, in the case that I discuss in this chapter, Qane, the young Naro-speaking initiate, was allowed by her school to complete her end-of-year exams while secluded within a hut, a common part of the *dùù*. This made it possible for her to return to school after being initiated, as she was operating with the

permission of the school. Crucially, perhaps, the father of the initiate was Jude, a man who held a relatively high position in the community as a ‘leader’. In this position, he was able to advocate on behalf of his daughter in order for her both to attend her *dùù* and to continue with her formal schooling.

In this chapter, I will contextualise *dùù* as a rite of passage. I also draw on interviews with Qoba, one of the female singers, Jim, a male kin relation of the initiate, and Ncisa, who is married to Jim, to reveal the implications for girls who have to choose between either attending *dùù* initiation or staying in formal schooling. A local form of advocacy has a positive effect for Qane and the broader Ncoakhoe community, as her father is able to advocate for her to both stay in school and be initiated.

A RITE OF PASSAGE

Mathias Guenther (1986: 278–281; 1999: 164–179), Dorothea Bleek (1928: 23), Alan Barnard (1980b: 117–118), Isaac Schapera (1930: 118–122), Lorna Marshall (1999), David Lewis-Williams (1981: 41–53), and Winifred Hoernlé (1985) have written about female initiation practices amongst different groups of Ncoakhoe and have described their symbolic and mythological meanings. However, there have been few detailed reports on the initiations that may reflect their private and intimate nature (Guenther 1999: 165; Silberbauer 1965: 87).

Dùù takes place at the time of a woman’s first menstruation (or as with new practices it can now also be their second), and it mainly involves women, with a few roles for older men and for the father of the initiate. There are slight variations in the way *dùù* can unfold, which seem to depend on the group leading it. However, Van Gennep’s (1960) tripartite structure of separation, then margin or liminality, and then finally reintegration, offers a structural tool to understand this menarcheal rite (Guenther 1999: 166; Silberbauer 1965: 87). According to previous scholarly work, the initiate is first secluded in a hut away from the rest of the group, where she is not able to leave for the duration of her menstruation (Guenther 1986: 278; Silberbauer 1965: 84; Marshall 1999: 189). This is a frightening experience for the girl (Hoernlé 1985: 62), and sometimes the hut where she is secluded is far from the village (Barnard 1992: 112). In the hut, she is attended to by two or three old kinswomen (Barnard 1992: 155), who bring her food and water and who teach her the ‘many food taboos that she must observe for varying lengths of time’ (Guenther 1999: 166). Above all, she is told about the danger her current menstrual state holds for men and their hunting weapons (Silberbauer 1965: 84–86; Guenther 1999: 166; Schapera 1930: 119, 121).

During the second, liminal phase, women perform an eland (*dùù*) dance at night time. Women bare their buttocks (Schapera 1930: 119), as they dance in a circle or in a figure of eight around the girl’s hut (Guenther 1999: 166).³ Bearing buttocks violates a defined standard of ‘public decency’, which subverts normal standards of behaviour in this period of liminality (Guenther 1999: 174). The

dance steps of the women are reminiscent of the eland, an animal that is symbolic of plenty, and of being fat, which is also a rich compliment and a sign of beauty and health in people (Lewis-Williams 1981: 48). Moreover, the women wear a 'tail' while they dance, which is a further symbol of the female eland. The eland is highly revered by Ncoakhoe as the largest and fattest antelope in the Kalahari. Usually an elderly male relative will be the 'eland bull', and he joins the dance by chasing the dancing woman while putting his hands or small sticks to his head to imitate bull horns (Barnard 1992: 155). Buttocks are associated with sex (Marshall 1976: 244), and indeed, the way the eland bull dances, in a 'hunched-up position behind the woman... simulate[s] eland mating patterns...' (Guenther 1999: 174; Guenther 1986: 280). Ambiguity is expressed as normal gender relationships and relationships between humans and animals are inverted. For instance, old people act like young people, and gender is inverted as the initiate may handle men's weapons and medicines (Guenther 1999: 174).

During the final phase, reintegration, the girl is brought back into the community as a new woman. She might perform 'womanly tasks', handle men's weapons (Guenther 1999: 166-167), hit adolescent men with a stick, or touch adolescent boys' testicles to protect them (Schapera 1930: 121). On reintegration, she is given a number of gifts such as bead necklaces and skin blankets from relatives (Schapera 1930: 120; Guenther 1999: 167). She enters adulthood in a relationship of obligation towards the women who attended to her during her initiation and may have to return some of the objects that she was given. As such, 'she is embraced by the spirit of communalism of her society, and its underlying ethos of sharing and reciprocity' (Guenther 1999: 167). As an initiated adult, she is now allowed to have sex and can marry. Giving birth to children will add to her new social status as a woman.

MAIN FUNCTIONS OF *DÙÙ*

Qoba (36), a Naro-speaking Ncoakhoe woman and D'Kar resident, explained that the most important thing about *dùù* was that the girl was taught what kind of man to accept as a partner and how to get a husband: he must give her presents, and in turn, she must look after the fire and do the cooking. Qoba foregrounded how *dùù* prepared a woman for her roles in relation to men. However, as Lewis-Williams (1981: 52) wrote, the implications of *dùù* go beyond fertility and marriage partners, as the initiate has the power to renew the balance of life.

I asked Jim (32, Naro speaker), the initiate's half-brother, about initiation, and although he explained that *dùù* was the most important thing for a woman to do, he also explained that male initiation was no longer practised. According to the literature, men practised initiation in 1928, 1930, and 1966 (Bleek 1928: 23-25; Schapera 1930: 122-126), but in 1980, Barnard noted that male initiation rites no longer took place in the same way as described by previous ethnographers. He reported instead that 'they [Naro-speaking Ncoakhoe] do have a simple and

optional ceremony to bring success to young hunters', known as hunting magic (Barnard 1980: 117). In this ritual, small cuts were made between the eyes and on the arm. However, I never heard of a male initiation or about hunting magic during my fieldwork. Neither did I note any scars on men's bodies, suggesting that it is only women who continue to be initiated.

Jim explained that, if a woman did not have a *dùù*, she would not be allowed to do a number of things. For instance, an uninitiated woman was not allowed to touch berries and wild foods in the bush, and if she did, the berries would go bad and become inedible. Moreover, the berries and other wild foods would not grow well in the coming season, and this would affect everyone, as they would no longer be able to eat them. An uninitiated woman was not allowed to touch a new-born baby: if she did, she may kill the baby. According to Jim and his wife Ncisa (32, Naro speaker), who were due to have a new baby in the coming months, this was the reason so many babies in D'Kar died in infancy. An uninitiated girl, especially a girl who had 'been up and down with boys' – i.e., not just having one boyfriend but having (or thought of as having) many – would not be allowed to touch their new baby. Jim and Ncisa explained that they would be very strict about this rule in order to protect their child. For this couple, the impact of *dùù* for the community was a matter of life or death.

Indeed, Lewis-Williams (1981: 51–52) wrote that the benefits of *dùù* affect the whole community, including the general safety and 'harmony' of the community in relation to water, land, and food, as well as fertility and womanhood. Jim and Ncisa explained through the death/life of babies what problems multiple sexual relationships between uninitiated women and men and the poisoning of fruits have for the balance and harmony of the community. Interestingly, though, Lewis-Williams (1981: 50) never specifically referred to the health of babies or specifically about women having multiple sexual partners. This suggests that, although harmony still remains central to the practice of *dùù*, there were different ideas about what 'harmony' meant and how it could be achieved.

Looking towards the broader literature on non-Ncoakhoe (i.e., Tswana) practices in Botswana, there are rules about sexual activity between men and women that help to contextualise those described above by Jim and Ncisa. Julie Livingston (2005: 191) explained how child disability for Setswana speakers was understood as a sign of moral transgressions on the part of the child's parents. Specifically,

[w]omen who depended on a series of boyfriends to provide food for their children reluctantly accepted the risk of mopakwane [a disease caused by breaking the sexual rule after the birth of a child, and which causes impairments of the child] as the price (Livingston 2005: 54).

Here child disability was attributed to the mother's sexual behaviour, in having multiple partners after giving birth, and to parents not 'following the

rules'. Jim's warning about the health of babies echoed this non-Ncoakhoe, Tswana rule, a reminder that *dìù* practices do not exist in isolation from wider 'African' or, more specifically, Tswana beliefs and practices and the moral rules of the wider society in Botswana. *Dìù* practices added to and also reflected close cultural contact with Setswana-speaking groups and some of the shared ideas that exist between groups.

Not only is initiation about teaching young women about their womanhood, but Jim and Ncisa also revealed the importance of this practice for the wellbeing of the entire community. Women are in a potentially powerful position to maintain and continue their cultural traditions (or not). Ncoakhoe women are recognised from within the community as carrying this power. The ritual can be understood as both carrying meaning within its particular practices and also being salient in advocacy by and for Ncoakhoe who wish to continue to teach and learn their culture, which exists within the broader society.

SCHOOL OR INITIATION?

Qoba was one of the singers who attended and performed during the *dìù*. In an interview, she explained that the main problem of *dìù* was that girls were not allowed time off school to attend them. Thus, they either leave school completely to attend the *dìù* or else miss their *dìù* and stay in school. Yet, it is noted in the literature that difficulties in attending *dìù* are not a 'new' phenomenon. Guenther (1986: 278–279) wrote that the white farmers for whom Ncoakhoe worked, or other non-Ncoakhoe neighbours of Ncoakhoe who lived in government settlements, often did not like the ritual and could make it difficult for Ncoakhoe to attend *dìù*. While this reveals that there have been struggles to maintain this ritual for years, the current challenge comes from schools. This is redolent of the current social situation for Ncoakhoe who have access to formal schooling and a desire to attend.

Qoba explained that she had been one of those girls who were not able to have their *dìù*, as her government boarding school did not give her permission to leave:

For us [Ncoakhoe] it's free [there is nothing stopping people from attending *dìù*] but the treatment from the government is the problem for us [as there are rules and practices that make attending *dìù* difficult for all those girls who want to]. For example, myself... I was supposed to write the exams for the end of year examinations for Standard [Primary] 7. But they [the teachers] refused [to let me leave school] and so I didn't even go into *dìù*. I was just writing my exams. So I didn't be there [did not attend *dìù*].

...All my sisters are having that [*dìù*] except me and the younger children from our family. My child and her [sister's] child haven't been [in *dìù*] because of [due to] the same problem I am facing (Qoba 2012).

Bihela Sekere (2011: 83), a G//ana-speaking Ncoakhoe man and the author of the cited academic article, also mentioned initiation as an issue that Ncoakhoe faced in succeeding at school, presumably because of the difficulties for Ncoakhoe girls who want to return to school after *dùù*. If Ncoakhoe girls are not given permission, they can be bullied by teachers and students for being ‘troublemakers’. Moreover, if they missed important exams or lessons, the schools were unsympathetic in helping the girls to catch up on missed work. In Botswana, missing exams means that the student must re-sit that year before they can progress through the school years. The school could refuse to allow a child to retake the year, such that she would then have to pay to re-sit the exams through a distance-learning course or attend an expensive private school in order to re-sit the exams. Most of the time these alternative paths are difficult, as the costs are too high. Often, Ncoakhoe girls simply do not re-sit their exams and never return to school.

If Ncoakhoe girls remained in school, it meant they would probably experience their first menstruation without the guidance of their parents or wider kin. They would not attend *dùù* to learn about what new behaviours were expected of them, how they were to find a husband, and how to behave as a woman. At a school hostel, adult guidance was likely to come, if at all, from a Setswana-speaking adult whose customs, traditions, culture, and ideas about adulthood would differ. It has been very difficult for Ncoakhoe women to be initiated as well as educated in a formal school.

Qoba was not permitted time off school, which meant that she did not attend her own *dùù*. Qoba’s sisters sometimes explained that Qoba’s bad luck in life was due to her not attending *dùù*. For instance, Qoba was once married, but this had not lasted, and moreover, she was a melancholy kind of character. Both of these things were thought of as symptoms of her not having had *dùù*. Qoba’s other siblings who did have *dùù*, but whose marriages had also broken down for various reasons, were not spoken about as being unlucky in the same way, and they were not as melancholic as Qoba. The wellbeing of the individual and the luck or bad luck that she would face were tied into *dùù*.

Qoba explained that, since she was not initiated herself, in the past this would have meant that she would not have been allowed to take part in initiating other women. However, she explained that she was now able to claim that she was old enough to participate, as she had borne a child, and moreover, she had learned the *dùù* songs and dances. This reveals the importance of the ongoing maintenance of *dùù* practice in conferring womanhood upon Ncoakhoe women, both young women experiencing their first menstruation as well as older women who missed their own initiation.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF QANE

Even though it was exam time at school, Qoba explained that Qane was allowed

time off school and could also write her end-of-year exams while in seclusion. As such, she was a special case:

Qoba: Qane, she was lucky because her parents asked the teachers to give her the [exam] papers to do while she was just there [in the seclusion hut during *dùù*]...but what is happening [normally] is that they [the girls] have nothing to do with the papers [i.e., if the girl leaves school to attend her *dùù*, she does not write her exams] and the teachers are refusing [to allow her to sit the exams]...because what they [the teachers/school] know [think] is that sometimes the sister [of the initiate] could help them answer that [exam], which is why they [the teachers/school] are refusing [to allow the girl to take the exams home with them].
...If the teachers say no [when the parents ask to take the exams home, or for time off school] but still the parents will take the child [home] and put her [in *dùù*]. And she won't even write anything [she will not write her exams and so will fail the year].

Jenny: So she [Qane] was lucky.

Qoba: She was lucky. That was the first time for that to happen [for a girl to be given the exams to write at home]. Sure sure.

Jenny: Why were they [Qane and her family] the people to have it [exams given to the girl to write at home] first?

Qoba: I don't know whether [it is because] he [her father, Jude] is the leader of the community or what, but it hasn't even happened to his elder children. This was the first time (Qoba 2012).

Qoba suggested that Jude's high social profile as a 'community leader' led to the successful negotiation of his daughter's *dùù* with her school, so that she could write her exams while in seclusion. Jude was identified by other residents as a 'community leader', and although he never used this term to describe himself, he often fulfilled roles that suggested that he took this position seriously. He was a member of the church as well as the NGO that are both part of the structured makeup of the village. By understanding Jude's position as a community leader, his attempt to negotiate for his daughter ended up being successful, whereas in the past, families have struggled to advocate for their children. This suggests how advocacy can occur on a local level, through a local 'elite' member of the community.

It was the first time that Qoba had heard of the school taking a flexible and understanding approach towards *dùù*, yet she noted that Jude had been a community leader for a long time. This might suggest that schools are now

realising the importance of *dùù* for Ncoakhoe, and so are becoming more flexible in order to help girls attend *dùù* while also remaining in school. This example suggested that the school recognised Jude as a respectable community leader, and this meant that he could more easily negotiate with them.

For Qane, school and initiation became commensurable, whereas for others, including Qoba, they were incommensurable. Jude's high social status was thought to afford him the opportunity to negotiate the situation in which both initiation and school were valued, and the choice between the two no longer needed to be made.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that there is a real and pressing issue for Ncoakhoe, involving the maintenance of cultural practices (*dùù*) alongside the maintenance of formal schooling. This issue is redolent of broader social and political relationships in which Ncoakhoe are engaged. The non-recognition of Ncoakhoe cultural practices is revealed when girls are not given permission to have time off school to attend their *dùù*, which mirrors Botswana's broader ethnic hierarchy, within which Ncoakhoe are perceived as being at the bottom. This chapter described a case in which the seemingly disparate institutions of formal schooling and initiation were, as Ngwane (2004: 170) wrote, comprehended as 'constituent parts of a single, though by no means self-enclosed, world' – both school and initiation were parts of Qane's world.

Qane straddled two different forms of social institutions: initiation and formal education. The former gives status within the village and between Ncoakhoe, as it makes full members and brings health to the individual, the family, and the community more widely. School, however, is more useful for status outside the village. Employment opportunities in Botswana are primarily available to those with academic qualifications. English language skills are important for jobs, grant applications, and to be taken seriously as full and contributing citizens in Botswana.

Many Ncoakhoe girls and parents valued school and, at the same time, did not want to lose their cultural identity through the loss of this practice. There was a tension between the government schools and Ncoakhoe communities. *Dùù* is perceived by the school as exacerbating problems that are associated with Ncoakhoe as being troublemakers. In order for the practice of *dùù* to continue alongside formal schooling, schools will need to acknowledge the significance of this practice for Ncoakhoe and allow girls time off to attend. Since this was the first time that Qoba had heard of this happening, Qane's *dùù* could be seen as pioneering a new relationship that allows for both school and *dùù* to be maintained. This relationship is in the process of being rewritten by, for instance, people like Jude. Jude is perceived as being a powerful local advocate who was able to negotiate with the school so that his child could attend *dùù*.

Crucially, this chapter adds to this book volume by foregrounding local forms of advocacy that are being carried out by Ncoakhoe themselves. This runs alongside forms of advocacy that are being generated by ‘outsiders’, or non-Ncoakhoe (for instance, Melissa Heckler’s chapter, which foregrounds NGO activism in classroom pedagogy, and Cynthia Mooketsi’s chapter on activism in research methodology). Although this local advocacy is not in isolation from the broader society, ultimately this chapter reveals the agency of Ncoakhoe to advocate for themselves. This changes the terms of a debate about activism and advocacy in the Kalahari, to be about the actual residents of the Kalahari effecting change themselves, rather than being about advocacy *on behalf of* those in the Kalahari.

Part of a process of resistance against the acculturation of Ncoakhoe into Tswana culture, customs, and language is the maintenance of this ritual practice. In relation to advocacy, rituals are powerful and critical in maintaining Ncoakhoe culture, as it is this practice which is expressive of identity that is distinct from the majority and dominant groups. Ncoakhoe choose to participate in *diùù*, and this ritual is rooted in an identity as Ncoakhoe that is distinct from non-Ncoakhoe. Maintaining this practice is critical for the Ncoakhoe community to socially reproduce itself.

NOTES

- 1) *Ncoakhoe* is a Naro term which means ‘red people’ or ‘red person’. It was used by my interlocutors to describe all ‘San’ or ‘Bushmen’, and I follow this usage here.
- 2) See Richard Werbner 2004 for discussion on ‘Tswanafication’ and the ‘One Nation Consensus’.
- 3) See also a typewritten interview with ‘Mary’ by John Drearley 1997: 2 at D’Kar Library.

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