

Joseph Jordania (2011). In: *Why do People Sing? Music in Human Evolution*. The publishing "Logos" programm.

## *Rhythm, Battle Trance and Collective Identity*

August of 1839 saw possibly the fiercest fight that the war-torn Caucasian Mountains have ever seen. The military forces of the mighty Russian Empire were finishing off the prolonged resistance of the legendary Dagestani military and religious leader Imam Shamil. Shamil was leading armed resistance against Russian forces for many years. After the epic 80-day-long siege at their mountain stronghold Akhoulgo, and after about 7000 were killed from both sides, a small group of Shamil supporters were surrounded by overwhelming number of Russian troops. Neither side took prisoners in this battle. The death of all Shamil fighters, including Shamil himself, was imminent. In this most critical situation Shamil suddenly started singing and dancing a traditional dance, gradually involving all his fighters in the dance. The speed of the dance was becoming faster and faster. Russian soldiers were in amazement hearing sounds of singing and dancing from their encircled and doomed enemies. When the tempo and the vigor of the dance was raised to boiling point, Shamil suddenly stormed out with his sword in the hand and with a fierce war cry attacked shocked Russian soldiers. All his fighters followed, and despite the overwhelming number of Russian troops, a few of the fighters including Shamil himself and his family escaped and continued to fight for many more years.

If you think that this kind of history can only happen with the members of conservative traditional societies, you are not correct. Even now, as you are reading this book, it is very likely that a group of American soldiers, positioned somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan (or any other dangerous zone), are together singing and dancing to the loud sound of heavy rock song. Why are they doing this? Because in a few minutes they will be going in combat zones where they can be ambushed and killed, so they are preparing for their dangerous mission by singing and dancing to a loud rock song. It is not easy to prepare yourself for such a hard task. According to recent research by Jonathan Pieslak, many American soldiers confess that it would have been impossible for them to get into the required combat spirit if they did not listen to heavy and rhythmic rock music. I hope we all can agree that, when a combat unit goes out for a combat mission, it is of paramount importance that they all are feeling the strength of their unity and an utmost trust towards each other. This feel comes from being in a state of *collective identity*, in a state of *battle trance*, and rhythmic music and dance are the best means to put soldiers in the state.

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I propose that *the central function of the rhythmic loud singing was to put our distant ancestors into a very specific altered state of consciousness which I call the 'Battle Trance.'* This is a very specific state of mind designed by evolution for the most critical moments of life, when the total commitment of every member of the group was needed for a life-or-death fight. This state has several characteristics:

- (1) Humans in a state of battle trance do not feel pain. This state is known as 'analgesia';
- (2) In this state humans also do not feel fear. This state can be called as 'aphobia';
- (3) In this state humans may totally neglect their individual survival instincts as they are fighting for something bigger and more important than their own life;
- (4) In this state humans sometimes demonstrate supernatural strength; lifting cars and doing other things that are beyond their usual physical capabilities;
- (5) In this state humans lose their individual identity and acquire a different, collective identity, and as a result every member is acting in the best interests of the group, even neglecting the powerful instincts of self-survival.
- (6) Going into the battle trance may happen instantly, fully instinctively, or can be induced by special ritual-like activities.

The classic example of the instant appearance of the battle trance is when a child is suddenly attacked in the presence of a parent. In such a critical situation parents often instinctively start an all-out fight against the aggressor, despite the fact that the aggressor might be much stronger and can easily kill both the parent and the child. In such critical situations a momentary switch happens in the mind, and a human turns from a logical, thinking being, which it usually is, into a furious bundle of nails and fists without any fear or feeling of pain.

This kind of self-sacrificial dedication and neglect of self-survival interests must have had its origins in the mother-child relationship of the mammalian species. When a survival of an offspring became totally dependant on the mother, evolution re-designed the hierarchy of instincts, and in many species the instinct of saving an offspring became a higher priority than the concern for its own safety. Hunters often remark that the most dangerous animal to encounter during a hunt is not a huge male, but a mother with a cub.

Among humans this motherly instinct of utmost dedication towards the offspring turned into something different: the total dedication of all members of the group to the interests of the Group they belong to. Like in a well-established combat unit, where in the heat of the battle one can sacrifice his own life to save friend's life, human ancestors developed the feel of *group identity*. The feel of group identity is based on the total trust and dedication of each member of the group to the common interest. Group identity kicks in when there is a critical situation, a mortal danger for survival of the group or any of its members. In such moments the noble principle of 'One for all, all for one' rules any individual self-preserving instinct, fear and pain. Such human sentiments, like patriotism or religious belonging, are primarily based on this ancient instinct, and the feelings of group identity are becoming particularly strong in the moments of big national or religious upheavals, wars, natural disasters.

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Going into the battle trance and acquiring group identity can be viewed as a classic example of altruistic behaviour, although I want to maintain that humans go into group identity not because of their feeling of duty towards others, but mostly because the powerful forces of evolution designed this mechanism as a better survival strategy for a group and every member of the group. Evolution supplied powerful neurological mechanisms to make this feeling a positive experience. Going into group identity brings the most exhilarating feelings to every member of the group. Every member of the group feels bigger, feels stronger, and virtually feels immortal. You can only become truly immortal if you do not fear death. Group members in such an altered state of mind, when they share total trust with each other, emotionally believe that the group cannot be defeated (see also the box: "The Battle Trance and the Origins of Religion")<sup>1</sup>. This unique altered state of mind is supported (and most likely caused) by the powerful neurological substances such as endorphins and oxytocin, which are momentarily released in the brain when a critical survival situation arises. As the neurological substances are released into the brain, feelings of pain and fear are blocked, and total trust and exhilaration of being a part of a supernaturally strong unit becomes overwhelming.

I am proposing that the mechanism of the battle trance has been designed by the forces of evolution as the highest ranking instinct in the entire hierarchy of human instincts, the instinct that rules our behaviour in the most critical situations of life.

'Wait a minute', a reader might ask here, 'this all sounds very exciting, but what is singing doing here? When a predator attacks a child with the mother present, she does not start singing, she instantly goes into the battle trance and starts fighting against the aggressor without feel of fear and pain. What has singing to do with the phenomenon of the battle trance in such situations?'

This is absolutely correct. When the aggressor attacks our loved ones, we do not start singing or rhythmic chanting. There is simply not enough time for this. Besides, there is no need for this, as our instincts can do all the required work instantly, switching our brain from the usual everyday relaxed mood into an intense self-sacrificing state of mind where we do not care for our life for the sake of a more important goal.

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### **<sup>1</sup> The Battle Trance, Altruism, and the Origins of Religion**

In the state of battle trance, with oxytocin released in the brain, humans have an exalting, spiritual feeling, a feeling of being a part of something much bigger and much more important than their own life. The concept of battle trance, when individuals virtually lose their ego and acquire a new collective identity, provides a potent evolutionary model for the emergence of human altruistic morality and religion. Feeling yourself as a part of a bigger unity, placing the interests of the society over individual interests, and caring about other members of the society is in the very core of every human religion and every social moral codex. Even when a prayer is alone, the aim of the pray is to feel yourself a part of something bigger, part of the cosmic being, the God. The battle trance model of the origins of religion supports Emile Durkheim's idea of totem and totemism being the earliest human religion where the group, society itself, was the initial symbol of supernatural deity. A highly ritualized process of going into battle trance that our ancestors were undertaking every time when total commitment of the group members was required, involving rhythmic singing, dancing, and other forms of the ancient expressive arts, must have laid a solid fundament for the religious rituals on one hand, and for the development of human arts and artistic transformation on the other hand.

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However, apart from the instant fight against attacking predators, there were other very important moments in the life of our ancestors when there was time and the need to prepare a whole group for a decisive battle, and when the mental state of the group was crucially important, as it still is today for the members of a combat unit before they go into battle.

## Hunters or Scavengers?

One of the crucially important moments in the everyday lives of our distant ancestors was obtaining food. There are heated debates on how our ancestors were obtaining their much needed protein after they started their new life on the ground. The early traditional view that human ancestors were hunters from a very early age is not considered today as strong and convincing as it was before. Instead the new idea that human ancestors were mostly scavengers, is finding increasing support from the archaeological records. Louis Binford was probably the central figure in this debate and in changing the attitudes towards the role of scavenging and hunting in human prehistory.

Scavenging in the ecosystem of Africa is not as easy as it might seem to the reader, sitting in a safe and comfortable house somewhere in New York, Tokyo or Melbourne. If a species relies on scavenging as one of the main sources of food, this species must be ready to fight for it, or to be engaged, as Blumenschine suggested, in 'confrontational scavenging.' The difficult part of scavenging is that in order to get to the coveted carcass, you must confront many other competitors. No carnivore animal, including the lion, refuses a chance to scavenge somebody else's kill. Often the kill becomes dinner not for the original predator who made the kill, but to the strongest competitor who is in the vicinity of the kill. The cheetah, for example, is probably the most successful hunter on the African savannah because of its superior speed (seven kills out of ten hunts against the three kills out of ten hunts among lions), but because of its fragile complexion which is built for speed, not for power, the cheetah often loses its kills to lions, leopards, and hyenas.

I want to suggest that our ancestors became very skillful competitors at scavenging opportunities. They were very slow and bad hunters, and they lacked natural weapons to kill a prey, but they became excellent at scaring away all other competitors, including the strongest of the African predators, the lion.

So I am suggesting that *aggressive or confrontational scavenging was the central means of obtaining food for early hominids*. I propose that our distant ancestors were targeting lions and waiting for them to make a kill. As the kill was made, after some special preparation (we will talk about the nature of this 'special preparation' very shortly), hominids would approach the feasting pride and would start scaring them away from the kill with the display of loud rhythmic group sound, stomping on the ground, drumming, clapping, threatening body movements, and stone throwing.

There can be no doubts that lions would be very unfriendly towards uninvited guests, and would try to scare them away with either fake or real attacks, just as they do today when hyenas are harassing them.

Trying to scare away a lion from its kill is a formidable endeavor that only the bravest or craziest (and definitely the hungriest) can undertake. If you remember that the competitors of the lions in this case were not some other huge and well armed predators, but primates with nothing more than stones in their hands, then the whole idea of such an attack seems even crazier. You would expect that such a group of

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primates would instantly clear the scene at the very first fake attack of any of the mighty lions, but here we must remember that our distant ancestors, in such a critical confrontation, would definitely be in a state of battle trance, where they did not feel any fear or pain, and were totally dedicated to the common aim to obtain the much needed food, even if this would require the self-sacrifice of a few members of the group.

To succeed in such a dangerous endeavor, and to become a worthy competitor for the strongest apex predator of the African savannah, our ancestors went through many behavioural and morphological changes during several millions of years of evolution. All these changes were aimed towards the same aim: to make our distant ancestors better intimidators with more powerful audio and visual displays. The result of this long and painful process with millions of trials and countless victims was the powerful system of Audio-Visual Intimidating Display', or AVID, which we are going to discuss in the next several pages.