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Dagga use among the Shangana-Tsonga of Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal *)

By

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Shangana-Tsonga men play a competitive game called "Crossing The River"; this game involves dagga-smoking within the context of the social beer-drink, therefore a brief background of the beer-drink and the social system of which it is a part will be given.

The Shangana-Tsonga are a Bantu-speaking people numbering about 1,200,000 in Mozambique and 700,000 in the Northern Transvaal; they are linguistically and culturally distinct from the Tonga of Zambia, Rhodesia, and the Inhambane area. A patrilineal, virilocal society who still largely worship spirits of their ancestors, the rural Shangana-Tsonga practice horticulture (maize, squash, groundnuts, sugar-cane) and keep a few goats and cattle.

The Shangana-Tsonga are unique in many ways because they are a divided group, split into two halves by the South Africa-Mozambique international border, which ignores the fact that about a third of the Tsonga migrated westward into the Transvaal at the time of Shaka's incursions into their homeland in the early 19th century, and now reside there cut off from their original clans.

The Social Importance Of Beer

By far the most important horticultural product of the Tsonga is maize; it is the food staple, and also used for the production of beer for use in social gatherings. Beer, for the Shangana-Tsonga, possesses a somewhat religious significance, one aspect of which may be seen as men tip a portion over their crooked arm as they drink, saying "that is for the ancestor-spirits". It should also be noted that beer is an important negotiable commodity among the Shangana-Tsonga, and a considerable proportion of the economy is founded upon its transfer. It serves as remuneration for labor, tributary tokens to rulers, and, because of its high percentage of sediment and low alcoholic content, a nourishing "food" with which to entertain guests during the various ceremonies marking the life cycle.

The communal consumption of beer, and consequently the prevalence of its attendant dagga-smoking activities, is governed somewhat by the Shangana-Tsonga horticultural year, for beer is most plentiful in May when the maize crop has been newly harvested. This season is called *ritlhavula* — "first fruit" — and beer brewed from the first maize is called *xikandza-malembe*.

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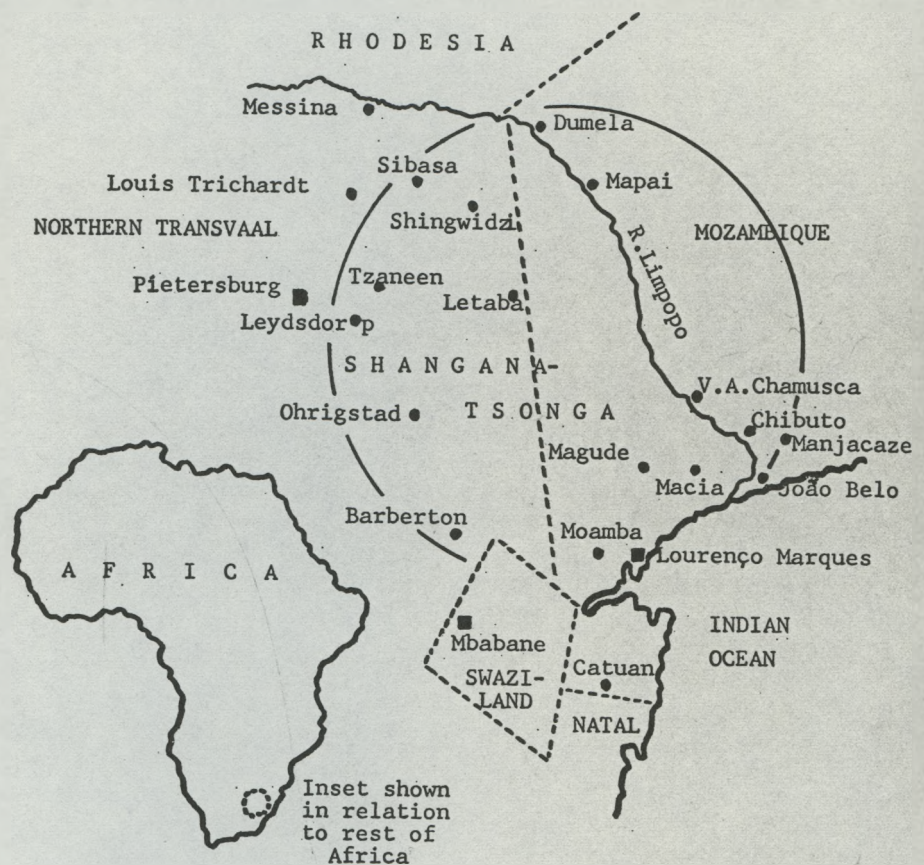


Figure 1. Area of dagga use among the Shangana-Tsonga. It apparently originates around Moamba and Macia and "finds its way" west and northwest.

The calendar given in Figure 2 shows the usual period of performance of the game "Crossing The River".

One of the links between Shangana-Tsonga dancing and the maize harvest becomes evident in the *ku sesa* dance, performed at the "first fruit" beer-drink. Daniel da Cruz describes *massessa* as a "danca das donzellas (dance of maidens)"¹⁾, and Cuénod translates *sesa* as "to make a small hole with the foot, drop in a seed, and cover again with the foot"²⁾. The latter description matches the actions of women in the "first fruit" *ku sesa* beer-drink dance, for they bend alternately to the left and to the right, shuffling the dust with their toes.

Formality At The Shangana-Tsonga Dagga-Smoking Beer-Party

Considerable formality is observed at a Shangana-Tsonga beer-drink, and seeing that the principle actors are likely to feature prominently in the dagga-smoking and the "Crossing The River" game, a brief account of their role will be given.

¹⁾ da Cruz, Daniel, *Em Terras de Gaza*, Gazeta das Aldeias, Porto, 1910, p. 177.

²⁾ Cuénod, R., *Tsonga-English Dictionary*, Swiss Mission in South Africa, Johannesburg, 1967, p. 185.

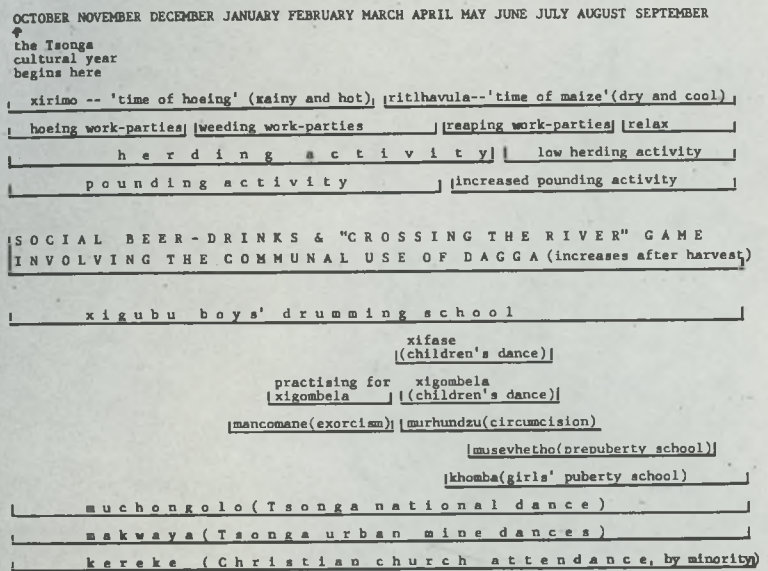


Figure 2. A cultural calendar of the Tsonga, showing periods of proliferation of social beer-drinks and dagga use.

After the guests have been invited (*ku widza*, "to invite formally"), the host, known as the *n'wengi*, apportions beer into several vessels. This is known as *ku tsangulela*. The first draught of beer (called *xiungu*) is drunk by himself to show that it is not poisoned, this act being known as *ku susa vuloyi*, "to dispel witchcraft". The second draught of beer (called *xiwidzo*) is taken by the wife of the host to the village headman as a sign of respect. The third draught of beer (called *xihlutwa*) is offered to the next-in-line senior elder present. If it should be a woman there may be some dispute over the question of seniority, and it is usually settled by referring to the year of her *khomba* initiation (this illustrates part of the significance, to the Shangana-Tsonga, of undergoing initiation rites).

The Relative Seating Positions of Participants

The relative seating positions, in the courtyard, of the old men, the young men, the old women, and the young women is conducive to the emergence of certain features of both the dagga-smoking, the Crossing The River game, and the dancing during "crossing over" under the influence of the dagga-smoking.

At most beer-parties (but not all), the old men sit in the shade on the raised mud platform surrounding the headman's hut, listening to one of their number perform on the *mqangala* hollow cane-bow (one of four musical bows used by the Shangana-Tsonga — the *mqangala* is not the most important), and sometimes singing the refrain in bass voices.

The young men stand in the sun opposite the old men, making light-hearted remarks to the women and waiting until the old men have been served with beer before claiming their share.

The old women spread goatskins and sit on the ground along a low mud wall, watching one of their number (a specialist) throw the Shangana-Tsonga set of sixty-four throwing-bones from a pouch, and waiting for portentous signs to be indicated by the thrower, with her hyena-tail whisk. On the ground by the side of the headman's wife is sometimes a long antelope horn (*mhalamhala*), which is her symbol of authority as supervisor of the girls' postharvest puberty school.

The young women with infants tied to their backs stand opposite the old women, and busy themselves pounding maize (mainly for beer-brewing) in the upright mortars, and sifting it in large, flat winnowing baskets.

Dagga-smoking

Dagga is grown by the Shangana-Tsonga on the Mozambique coast and smuggled to their clansmen in the Northern Transvaal across the South Africa-Mozambique international border via the Limpopo River and the Lebombo Hills. Supplies are stored by both the herbalist (*n'anga*) and the exorcist (*dzwavi*), for it is used as a medicine by the former and as an aid to trance-inducement by the latter. One or both of these individuals arrive at the scene and take a place alongside the headman and the other men.

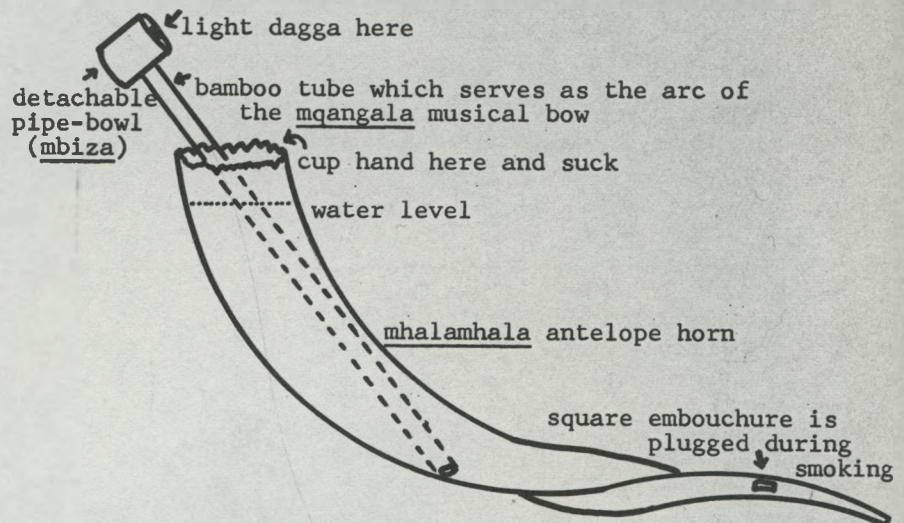


Figure 3. Shangana-Tsonga Apparatuses For The Inhalation Of Dagga Smoke

Taking a large wooden pipe-bowl (*mbiza*) from his pocket, the musical bow player fixes it firmly (via its side socket) over one end of the *mqangala* hollow cane-bow, places a quantity of dagga into the pipe-bowl, and lights it with store-matches. The headman takes his wife's antelope horn, plugs the embouchure (located on the side near the thin end) with beeswax, fills the horn with water from a large calabash, inserts the lower end of the cane-bow into the water with the pipe-bowl high in the air over his shoulder, and takes the first inhalation (*xiungu*). This is done by cupping the hand (enclosing the stem of the immersed bow) around the open end of the horn, sucking vigorously through the fingers at the air-pocket between the water-level in the horn and the cupped hand, and thus filtering the dagga smoke through the water in order to cool it (Figure 3).

Only the old men, sometimes followed by the young men, share in this smoking arrangement (i. e., not the women, who generally sniff snuff), passing the horn and bamboo tube one to the other and back again over a period of several hours, talking and drinking beer meanwhile, listening to the singing and drumming of the women, and watching the athletic dancing (mainly *muchongolo* dancing) of other men. Similar behavior is to be observed at the gatherings of old men on the final day of initiation schools — at the coming-out parties (Figure 4).

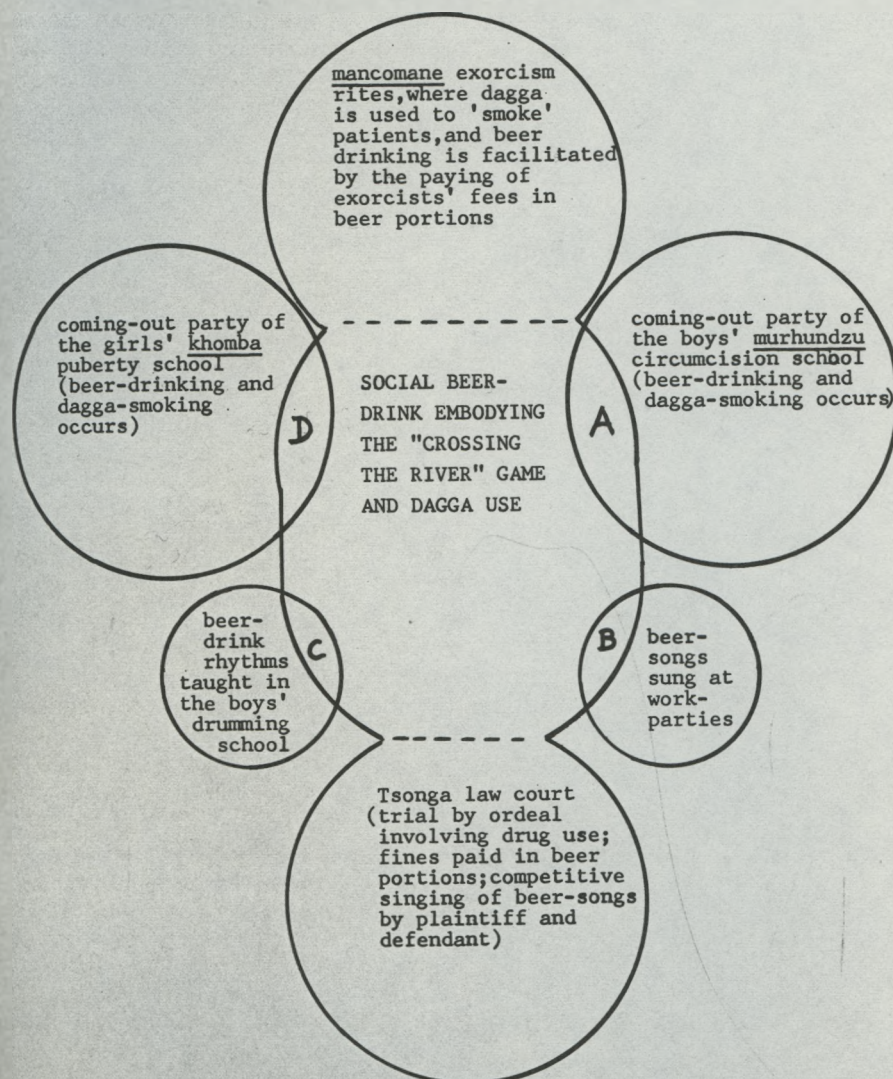


Figure 4. Diagram showing how drug use and other aspects of social beer-drink behavior "spreads" into other Tsonga social institutions. In institutions marked by dotted lines, overlap is most frequent. In A and D, overlap is once every coming-out. In B and C, overlap is small.

The Crossing The River Game

All the old men (but not the young men) make themselves blowpipes from a species of wild grass known as *xenga* (meaning literally "white hair"), seat themselves in a row along the edge of the mud platform surrounding the headman's hut, and, squirting saliva through the blowpipes, mark out a small dance-square or "territory" (*xivambo*) on the ground before them. The game then consists of squirting saliva across the area, endeavoring to outdistance one's opponents, the winner getting up and doing a "victory jig" known as *xichayachaya*.

Sometimes the old men form teams (*ku tirhisana hi mintlawa*) for the saliva-squirting, and then dance in competitive groups, which practice is known as *rhabela phikezano*. This term is applied also to the adults' dance-

team which visits other villages in order to compete with rival teams for food- and beer-rewards. On these occasions, the dagga-smoking and the Crossing The River game become inter-village in nature (Figure 5).

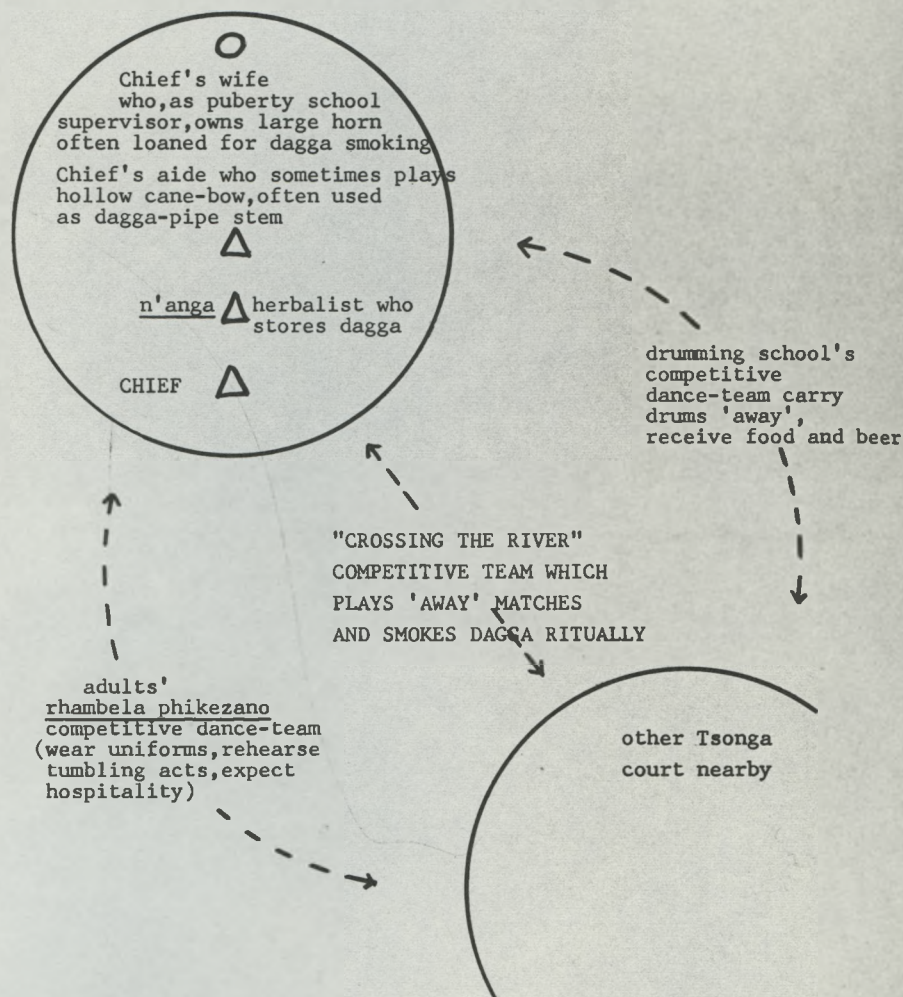


Figure 5. The "Crossing The River" Game as part of chiefly competitive display, part of the prestige-gaining mechanism.

Dagga-smoking And The Crossing River Game Within The Context Of The Competitive Dance-team Situation

In the "away match" type of competitive team-dancing, elaboration of the Crossing The River game occurs. The present writer was unable to note all the details, but the teams stand facing each other in opposing lines, mark out their own boundaries in saliva upon the ground, and are permitted to shuffle across this "no man's land", squirting new trails of dagga-stimulated saliva through the blowpipes and endeavoring to erase opponents' boundaries with footprints. This action is known as *ncuncu-ncu*, an ideophone which in other circumstances refers to the flow of river-water.

In the old men's "victory dancing" which follows, the participants have generally reached a mild state of euphoria/disphoria, which is known as

rendzo ra mianakanyo, *rendzo* meaning "journey" and *mianakanyo* being the plural of *anakanyo*, meaning "fantasy". Dancing falteringly (*ku khunguvan-yeka*) about the plaza in time to the drumming of women-drummers (*mabangoma*), a file of four old men is followed by an old woman carrying a carved baton (*xiqopho*), and by an old man clown known as *phuphula*. The latter deliberately kicks up clouds of dust, referred to as *tlhuthuma* ("froth of the beer") because it symbolizes the draughts of beer which the team will win.

The Women's View of Dagga-smoking

Shangana-Tsonga women say that they do not like the "madness" (*rihuhe*) of the old men, that it is a bad habit (*mukhuva*), and that the ways of the old men lead to the demoralization (*ku onha mikhuva* — a verb meaning "to corrupt") of the younger men.

Towards the end of a drawn-out dagga-smoking beer-party, convulsions may appear in one subject or another. These are known as *milombanyi*, a word which derives from *milombanye*, meaning "the gap between the skull bones of an infant". To cure convulsions in an old man, the old women take soot from inside the pipe-bowl of the smoking apparatus and mix it with maize porridge, which they then endeavor to get the old man to swallow.

Conclusion

The use, for designating the dagga-induced saliva-squirting game, of the verb *ku pela*, meaning "to cross a river", plus similar use of the ideophone *ncu-ncu-ncu*, meaning "the flow of river-water", may refer symbolically to *passage from one state to another*. It is known that, in the Shangana-Tsonga girls' puberty school (*khomba*), the verb *ku wela* ("to cross from one river-bank to the other"), is applied to the graduation of initiates, and that a puberty school coming-out song is sung — *I Khombile N'wananga* — which contains reference to "the boat lying on the far bank"³⁾.

The possibility of "passage" is suggested also by the Shangana-Tsonga use, for the effect of dagga-smoking, of the term *rendzo ra mianakanyo*, meaning "journey of fantasies", i. e., again an allusion to *transition*. Exactly how these two states — the antecedent and the consequent — are envisaged by the subjects, remains a matter of conjecture, but the use, for the after-state of the term *milombanyi*, derived from a term denoting the undeveloped condition of an infant's skull, suggests that *death of the old* and *re-birth of the new* is intended, as in all rites of passage.

On the other hand, the "river" references may amount to no more than an allegorization of the wetness of saliva, and the "infant's skull" reference to no more than a comparison of the old man's convulsions with infantile debility.

The communal, social nature of Tsonga dagga use distinguishes it from the marijuana smoking of individuals within urban environments in South Africa, against whom the anti-drugs laws are mainly aimed. It is a ceremonial act performed according to cultural prescriptions and proscriptions, in a social institution (the Tsonga beer-drink) which functions to integrate and regulate the groups undergoing a change in status. It is an act which formalizes the new social position of individuals undergoing life-cycle crises, whether they are new fathers, new husbands, or bereaved husbands, for the smoking of dagga is a usual component of the rites of passage to be seen at beer-drinks marking births, marriages, and deaths. The attainment of a state of separate reality is considered essential for the metamorphosis experienced by the person whose status is being redefined within the forum of the Tsonga social beer-drink.

³⁾ Johnston, Thomas F.: *The Music Of The Shangana-Tsonga*. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis for the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1972.

Abstract

Shangana-Tsonga men play a competitive game called "Crossing The River", involving dagga-smoking within the context of the social beer-drink. Dagga is also used by the herbalist and by the diviner in 'smoking-out' ceremonies. The drug produces a euphoric state known as *rendzo ra mianakanyo*, 'journey of fantasies', and its use is thought of as a 'crossing over'. Its communal use occurs at assemblies and social occasions when individuals are undergoing life-cycle crises; the drug thus acts as an agent and reinforcer of status redefinition, integration, and conciliation among groups whose equilibrium is temporarily disturbed.

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Plate 1. Prestigious individual shows horn in which dagga is smoked at the social beer-drink; his ten
wives stand behind him.



Plate 2. Initiation school leader shows horn on which she sends out the assembly call to novices. It also
serves for dagga smoking at the social beer-drink.



Plate 3. Chief's aide shows *mqangala* hollow cane-bow which, in addition to being a musical instrument serves as a pipe-stem for dagga smoking at the social beer-drink.



Plate 4. Chief's messenger show another specimen of the same hollow cane-bow shown in Plate 3.