

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

MARIUS F. VALKHOFF

In November 1954 a few members of the British and of the Dutch Society for Psychical Research and people interested in American parapsychology met at Mrs. V. Carleton Jones's Parktown residence in Johannesburg and founded the Study Group for Psychical Research. The group met monthly and aroused such an interest that it was decided to develop it into a South-African Society for Psychical Research with a constitution corresponding more or less to that of the British SPR. The inaugural public meeting took place in the Chelsea Hotel on June 28, 1955 with Professor Arthur Bleksley delivering a lecture on "The Quantitative Method in Parapsychology" which he followed with a collective ESP experiment. In this way we made history in South-African science, because this had never happened before.

It may be stimulating to note that the latest collective ESP experiment took place in the main Geology amphitheater of the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) on August 11, 1970. It was devised by our present chairman Dr. D. C. Pienaar, and conducted by him with our Research Officer Dr. J. C. Poynton and a number of other collaborators. It attracted such a crowd that we had to refuse entrance to very many latecomers. Due to the absence overseas of Professor Bleksley, the experiment was organized by the above-mentioned people on behalf of the South-African Institute for Parapsychological Research (SAIPR, established in 1969), of which he is the Director.

From its inception, the South-African SPR has always been open to all races and, for this reason, we never applied for a Government subsidy, which we probably would have obtained, but that would have tied our hands and forced us to observe racial discrimination.

South Africa with its multiracial population offers a great potential for psychical research. We have Africans, Indians, and the "Coloureds" (approximately two million descendants of white settlers and Hottentot and slave girls). We have some classical studies dealing with paranormal phenomena among them, such as Dr. B. J. F. Laubscher's *Sex*,

Custom and Psychopathology among the Xhosa (London, 1937), written when he was a physician in the Transkei, and Afrikaans poet I. D. du Plessis's books on the beliefs of the Cape Malays, such as *Poltergeists of the South* (Cape Town, 1966).

Since 1937, very little has been published from a parapsychological point of view about psi among the Africans, by far the largest population group in the Southern African racial setup (eighteen million in the Republic of South Africa alone). Therefore it is particularly pleasing that we now have with us as colleague and friend Dr. John C. Poynton who specializes in this type of research among the Zulus, our main Bantu tribe.

However, we did investigate cases reported to us. In the early 1960s, in collaboration with a few journalists, I investigated a poltergeist case in a Bantu location near Germiston, and I had a witchdoctor and herbalist, called Joshua, in my own yard for nearly a year. He and I became friendly and I will tell you something about his working methods. In 1957, my University had already accepted an M.A. thesis entitled "The Study of Ukuthwasa" by L. Mqotsi. One might freely translate "Ukuthwasa" as "phenomena announcing paranormal aptitude among youngsters and young men and women." On March 7, 1960, we presented a lecture by the African psychologist Nimrod Mkele on "Divination and Diviners among Africans"; it was published in our fourth yearbook. But I do not want to cut the grass from under the feet of my old friend John. So I will move on to experiments with the white population.

Now, when I left Holland and came to South Africa in 1951, I was soon struck by the unique opportunities for research into paranormal phenomena, as compared with my native country. One might at first ascribe the high incidence of phenomena in South Africa to the wide variety of racial and cultural groups. But when I read Dr. Laubscher's book *Where Mystery Dwells* (Cape Town, 1963) in order to write the preface, I noticed that most of the cases he presented had occurred in Afrikaner (or Boer) families. I would agree here with the famous South-African anthropologist Dr. M. D. W. Jeffreys that the Hottentot and halfcast Hottentot nurses are responsible for this. They were very prone to belief in the supernatural and very near to the paranormal and, for more than two centuries, have brought up the Afrikaner children. To this day, they are still found amongst South-West African white families. They have been absorbed by the so-called "Coloureds" and they still regularly—and secretly—pass the color-bar into the white population, usually the Afrikaans-speaking section.

This observation should not prevent us from noting the large num-

ber of Spiritualistic circles and churches in the big (mainly) English-speaking towns, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, which also offer a great variety of paranormally gifted people. Last year I took part in the investigation of two remarkable bona fide mediums, Mrs. Gertrude Harding and Miss Sheila Wahl.

At the (Johannesburg) National Institute for Personnel Research, Dr. A. Mundy Castle not only initiated mescaline and LSD experiments with volunteers, but also started research into EEGs of spiritualistic mediums. These mediums were tested and selected by us on their bona fide, and this is to my mind the reason why this research, continued by Mr. Gordon Nelson, Mundy Castle's successor, has proved successful (see *Parapsychologica IV: "Preliminary Study of Encephalograms of Mediums"* by G. Nelson).

In the late 1950s we started a series of ESP experiments in Professor Bleksley's laboratory, with Mrs. Mary Heideman, Mrs. L. O. McKerchar and Miss Viviane Valkhoff as principal agents. We carried on for some two years with members and other interested people volunteering for it. We concentrated on a particular phenomenon: there was often more agreement between recipients, especially if closely related, than between agent (sender) and recipient (receiver), even when most of their guesses were wrong. After recording the results, we called it cross-connection. Recently Professor Bleksley has taken up the old file again, studied the rate of success of the various agents, and discovered significant differences.

A Marius Valkhoff Medallion was created for meritorious work in the field of psychical research. It was presented for the first time in 1960, to Dr. Eugene Marsh who had been the first to write an extensive doctoral thesis on a long-distance psi experiment between students of Rhodes University (Grahamstown) and an agent in Cape Town, who was completely unknown to them. Marsh's work gave rise to a long controversy with the Johannesburg Rationalist Society, which finally had to resort to the disreputable "fraud" hypothesis. This thesis on a parapsychological subject was followed by a number of others on similar themes.

Also in the 1960s, Professor Bleksley was awarded the Eighth McDougall Award for his most significant so-called "clock experiment" with a Dutch immigrant, Mr. W. van Vuurde, who could wake himself up at set times, unknown to him, indicated on a clock 900 miles away. ("An Experiment on Long-Distance ESP during Sleep," *Journal of Parapsychology*, 27, 1, 1963). This piece of research by Professor Bleksley was a landmark in the history of parapsychology in South Africa.

Another milestone was reached when the Society was invited by the

South-African Psychological Association to take part in a Symposium on Parapsychology at their September 1966 Congress. Four of our members were chosen to present papers on this great occasion.

In the late 1960s the Students Art and Science Councils of the University of the Witwatersrand invited Bleksley, Poynton and myself to organize a symposium on, and an experiment in ESP in collaboration with them. About the same time, the University Library Committee gratefully accepted a grant from the Parapsychology Foundation to set up a section on Parapsychology in the Witwatersrand University Library. This section had up to then been accommodated in the Alfred Hoernlé Collection; the late professor of philosophy had been the first to show a marked interest in this subject (he was a member of the British SPR) and to introduce it to the University.

These two events (the Students Symposium and the acceptance of a Parapsychology Book section) show both a change of opinion in favor of parapsychology and the close relationship with professors, lecturers and students of the University of the Witwatersrand. Several have been members of the Society or even Committee members (I will just add here the name of a faithful supporter, Professor L. A. Hurst, Head of the Department of Psychiatry, who was also our vice-chairman and chairman for two years).

Now most of us South-African parapsychologists—not only the University teachers—had full-time occupations and also social commitments. Every time our Society is mentioned in the press we receive fan mail relating to presumptive cases of paranormal occurrences, some of which we would like to follow up. We had to run our Society as well as devise experiments, answer letters and accept invitations to spiritualistic séances, or to meet people who think themselves psychics.

Fortunately this difficult situation was alleviated by the appointment of Dr. John Poynton (in 1964), and later on, of Dr. D. C. Pienaar, as Research Officers. Finally, in 1969, the South-African Institute for Parapsychological Research (SAIPR) was established under the kind auspices of the Parapsychology Foundation and the Directorship of Professor Bleksley, and it ought to bring relief to this difficult situation of a Society whose role should be mainly informative.

To wind up this aperçu, which may be easily elaborated on, I cannot do better than to make mine the concluding words of Mrs. Phyllis Scarnell Lean, one of our Johannesburg "first ladies" and our competent Honorary Secretary in 1969 and 1970 (see report in *Parapsychologica IV*):

"It is not for a reporter, preparing a news sheet, to say what should be the next move. Mine is a de post facto job, but on a personal note,

I have enjoyed making many new friends and have found the effort of this new approach to the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man to have been very worthwhile. One thing is certain, the conduct of the affairs of these twin societies, the SPR and the SAIPR, requires, as does any other business, money, efficiency and enthusiasm."