

# The Principles and Practice of the N'anga

BY

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The N'anga follows a medical cult which has its own special characteristics and he treats disease. Like those who practise scientific or Hippocratic medicine, his aims are to find the cause of the illness and remove its effects with his treatment. However the principles involved in the diagnosis and treatment of disease by the n'anga and the scientific doctor are different.

The scientific doctor accepts only objective evidence in his search for the cause of an illness. He must be able to see or perceive it through his sensory system. Thus, for example, he can show that typhoid fever is due to the typhoid bacillus, tuberculosis to the tubercle bacillus and that cancer has a particular cell that reproduces itself and spreads. In contrast to the scientific doctor's sensory perception of the causation of the disease, that of the n'anga is based on a mystical basis, rational though his argument may be. Thus he claims that disease or death may be due to the



The author at the first meeting of n'anga, held in Harare in 1956, to discuss the formation of a n'anga association. This was formed shortly after in Seke Township.

upset of one's ancestral spirit (*mudzimu*) or to the evil practices of a person (*muroyi*). By his special diagnostic procedure of divination with his bones or with his healing spirit that speaks through him, the n'anga learns not only the course of illness, but what must be done to propitiate the offended spirit or to overcome the evil of the witch. It is in the realm of the causality of disease that the practice of a n'anga and that of a western or scientific doctor becomes difficult in the same way as with a western Christian Scientist, spiritualist or faithhealer.

Not only is the n'anga a diagnostician but he is also a therapist, employing herbal medicines along lines similar to those used in ancient Egypt. The idea behind this is probably the belief that for every human illness there is a plant that possesses the property of neutralising its effect. Whilst the n'anga occasionally employs parts of the body of an animal or bird, his remedies are more often composed of at least one plant, sometimes two or more compounded together, producing a mixture which is consumed in a liquid form. Again one or more roots may be ground into a fine powder, burnt to charcoal in a piece of broken claypot (*chayenga*) and stored in horns or tins. When it is required it is rubbed with the finger into incisions (*nyora*), usually cut over the painful part of the body, as for instance over rheumatic joints, on the back or over painful chest walls or on the site of an aching head. Usually the root of the plant is employed to make

this type of medicine. It is first allowed to dry, then broken down into small pieces and placed in a mortar (*duri*) and stamped with a pestle or stout stick. It is then ground into a fine powder between two grinding stones and thereafter burnt to charcoal. The latter is mixed with a little *mafuta* oil (castor oil) and, as already mentioned stored in horns for treating complaints, such as headaches, chest pains, arthralgias and neuralgias.

Liquid mixtures are very popular and are made by grinding the roots of a particular plant into small pieces in a *duri*. These are then added to boiling water and cooked in it. The liquid may be consumed as such or mixed with porridge and taken two or more times a day. Often two or more roots are ground together to make a medicine.

Cupping is another popular treatment. The cup (*murimiko*), made from the small horn of a buck is sucked hard over the painful area, causing an increased flow into it. Often an incision is made into the skin in that area, medicinal powder rubbed into it and the *murimiko* applied over it. Instead of a cup a n'anga may suck on the painful part with his mouth to 'suck out the evil'.

Another well known treatment is in the form of inhalation, similar to that used in western medicine. Inhalations are popular for chest complaints, especially asthma and bronchitis.

A sick person is handled by an n'anga in much the same way as he is by the western doctor. If he is living in an urban area, the sick

person is usually taken to the n'anga's surgery, but occasionally the latter will visit him at home. He may be cared for in the n'anga's home until he has recovered. But it is also possible for the patient to remain at home while his blood relations (his father or brothers) go to the n'anga for him as their ancestral spirits are the same as his and therefore it would be reasonable for the n'anga to be able to discover whether any of them have been offended.

We have found that the n'anga deals with all medical problems except those related to pregnancy and delivery of the baby as these are matters for the traditional midwife or nowadays for maternity services. Thus the n'anga deals with a wide range of medical disorders affecting both sexes and all ages. He is also a preventive mediciner and is able to provide charms and talismans to prevent the infant, child or adult from contracting disease.

As might be expected the public believe the n'anga possesses special knowledge of diseases which affect Africans particularly and that it is little use consulting western doctors for these. For instance an illness, known as *chipande* is very prevalent amongst African children before closure of the fontanelle and when a baby suffers from it, the fontanelle sinks and its pulsations become poor. This condition probably occurs in any illness in which there is a poor fluid intake or loss of body fluid, which causes a high mortality, unless recognised early.

Since the fontanelle is regarded as a weak spot in the body, one of the treatments for *chipande* is to cover it with a black tarry paste to strengthen this wall and to prevent further entry of poisons. Again only the n'anga knows how to treat the often fatal disease (mostly abdominal in nature) known as *ruryoka*, contracted as a result of sleeping with the wife of another. This is because the suspicious husband planted a medicine in the bed. For rheumatic complaints (*chitsinga* and *chipotswa*), caused by witchcraft, backache and headache the n'anga is considered to have powerful remedies. He is frequently consulted about impotency and infertility. Since disease is not uncommonly attributed to the evil practices of others, the n'anga is in a better position to remove the damage than is the western physician who does not understand this branch of medicine. The family or the patient decides who should be consulted. It is not easy to make the decision as it depends on the number of factors, such as how easily available is the n'anga or a western practitioner, the likely cost of a consultation, what the patient fears is the cause of the illness and his confidence in the doctor he is thinking of consul-

ting. Thus a large stream of patients go first to the western doctor. Another large number visit the n'anga first and yet a third move between the two, consulting one then the other. (Chavunduka, 1978; Gelfand, Mavi and Drummond, 1978). For certain diseases the public have come to seek the Westerner's help. One is for the treatment of venereal disease. More and more are beginning to realise the value of antibiotics for these diseases in preference to the n'angas measures.

The n'angas explanation of the cause of disease often takes into consideration the fact that there is an upset in the patient's family — strife or strain amongst some of its members. His handling of the anxiety or stress syndrome is probably good as he goes to great lengths to try and correct the matters that are upsetting the family. Through enquiries he is probably able to discover the nature of a family dispute or of an acute problem facing the patient. For instance it may be a marital difficulty, a financial problem, a suspicion that one of the family is acting unfairly towards him. If this is resolved or even explained to the individual and discussed with him, it may assist in his recovery from anxiety symptoms. Further during his interview with the patient, the n'anga spends some time divining with his bones, administering medicines or inhalations, thus giving him the feeling that the cause of the trouble is being eradicated and restoring his confidence in himself.

## REFERENCES

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