

Medicine and Magic*

BY

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I pray that my audience to-night will not gain the impression, after they have listened to my talk, that this is what I learnt when I was a student at U.C.T. and that I am a specialist in magic or even a witchdoctor. Indeed, when I qualified I do not think I had the vaguest conception of what the witchdoctor stood for, except that he was a terrible man, greatly to be feared and one who had an uncommonly strong grip on a superstitious people. I would then have fully agreed with the views expressed by General Smuts when he delivered his Rhodes Memorial Lecture at Oxford University in 1929. He referred to the powerful grip of the witchdoctor upon the primitive masses who were held down because of his stern influence. He was so feared that no one would dare rise against him or tamper with his power. He was linked with evil and practised witchcraft, and there was little hope for the African people as long as they continued to believe in his magic.

Whilst no one will deny that the tribes throughout Africa, as a whole, believe in witch-

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craft, it does not follow that the witchdoctor himself is feared or that he is the evil person that many people depict him to be. Indeed, amongst the Shona people he is a much respected and, I might add, a much beloved person, and—if I may be permitted to make the comparison—he is even regarded with the same attachment that the doctor enjoys in European society. It follows that his people must think him capable as well as necessary and, further, they must consider him a great help in overcoming their ailments. My experience confirms that many of my patients see a witchdoctor first and only seek my aid when they find that they do not improve under his ministrations. It is equally true that if I fail (and there are many disorders I must admit I have little success in alleviating) my patients ask to leave hospital to consult a witchdoctor. The witchdoctor continues to play an enormous role in medicine in Africa where, to-day, there is a constant to and fro movement by African patients from witchdoctors to hospitals and also in the reverse direction. In the rural areas as well as in the African townships many Africans receive treatment only at the hands of their witchdoctors.

How does the witchdoctor operate? What is the basis of his art or skill? In essence we could best define him as a magician. But it is on the definition of magic that argument may turn. Some authorities would define it as a quality inherent within the person, enabling him to alter the course of nature, and this, I think, is the general consensus of opinion. But in my experience the magician is no different from any other person, except that he owes his ability to a spiritual endowment, i.e., to a guiding spirit which permits him to manipulate the forces of nature. It is not he who does it, but the spirit which possesses him at different times and causes him to perform his remarkable cures. Remove the supernatural influence and he becomes the same as any other person. The many witchdoctors I have interrogated declare that they owe their talent to the spirit of a dead relative, who during life was a witchdoctor and who after death was desirous that he should continue with the calling. Moreover, this spirit appears in dreams to the person who can, perhaps, best be described as a medium and who sees his dead relative instructing him in the use of herbs and how to cast the bones. This claim of learning through dreams, not only in Rhodesia, but even as far afield as Zululand, is made so constantly that one is forced to believe that this observation is worthy of further

investigation. It is possible that the traditional African can think or reason with his subconscious mind and so in that way arrive at an answer to some of his problems. There are, I believe, Europeans who, when confronted with a problem, like to "sleep on it" and reach a satisfactory conclusion in the course of a day or two. Now I do not wish to infer that the African possesses a better mechanism than the European to deal with his problems—all I wish to do is to draw your attention to what these men of good intelligence and respectability claim.

Most Africans believe in the existence of the witch, and to most people the witch denotes a person with an evil spirit capable of causing untold misery, tragedy and death upon any innocent victim. Again, to the Shona people the witch, like the witchdoctor, is spiritually endowed, but with a spirit which operates against the interests of mankind. The witch, like the witchdoctor, also inherits a spirit, generally from the mother, and this trait is handed down in the family. The witch practises witchcraft and is able to manipulate occult forces to the detriment of man—quite the opposite to the witchdoctor, who operates the forces for the good of mankind. Thus the only difference really between the witchdoctor and the witch is the eternal difference of good and bad. There were men and women in Europe recognised as white witches who were also known to practise witchcraft, the only difference from the proper witch being that the white witch was of service to the people and was much sought after to cure their diseases. Therefore the white witch really corresponds to the African witchdoctor and in essence there is no difference between the witchdoctor and the witch except in their handling of the powers of Nature.

Thus it must be clear to you that the witchdoctor practises an art. His approach is not on rational lines. He is no scientist. Medicine, as we know it, is both a science and an art, in which the scientific approach is looming more and more to the fore, with consequently less emphasis perhaps on the art. The witchdoctor is the artist *par excellence*. He uses every means—his dress, his horns, amulets, decorative beads—all to win the confidence of his clientele, and in this way, I must admit, he is a success. The patient-doctor relationship is a strong one—amounting, indeed, not only to high regard, but to great affection as well. The witchdoctor tries to give a service and in this way enjoys the confidence of his public. But in the management and control of disease he is of little effect

—indeed, by the delay entailed in consulting him first when the disease can be treated effectively with specific drugs—he is indeed a handicap. On the other hand, he fulfils a useful function in the treatment of simple psychological disturbances by suggestion.

Because of his claims that he can manipulate the forces of Nature he is believed not only to be able to cure disease, but also to prevent it. Indeed, he can achieve almost anything that human flesh may desire, and it is in this context, perhaps, that he reaches his greatest usefulness. In his society he can bestow the good things in life and prevent anything unpleasant from occurring. In his role of preventive mediciner we note that his pharmacopoeia includes charms, amulets and talismans to guard against almost any emotional disturbance likely to upset people. Thus the witchdoctor always has a medicine to win or restore the love of a person, another to ensure success in business, one for passing an examination or winning a lawsuit. Much sought after is the remedy to ensure that the next baby will be one of the desired sex and there is a steady demand for the medicine which redirects a husband's attentions to his wife. For the confirmed bachelor the witchdoctor can dispense a special medicine which will bring about a change of heart. Every witchdoctor must know of a medicine which can increase the fertility of the soil. A medicine in which much faith is placed is that which builds up one's morale and capacity of retaliation—most necessary for boxers, footballers and children who are being bullied. Most effective, too, I am told, is the medicine planted around one's fields to prevent the crops being stolen. As a result of this, anyone who helps himself to the forbidden fruit develops a swollen abdomen and suffers a long lingering death. There is even a special medicine a suspicious husband can place in his wife's bed to ensure that if she commits adultery her lover will suffer from a disease too terrible to relate.

But in fairness to the witchdoctor I must not create the impression that all his treatments have a magical connotation. Indeed, in the majority of remedies it is impossible to find a magical reason for the prescription of the particular herb. There is no doubt that most of their medicines are employed empirically just as in ancient Egypt or even in the Galenic era. Therefore it is quite possible that there are some valuable preparations in the witchdoctor's pharmacopoeia that will be found to be of benefit

to mankind when proper research into their properties has been conducted.

Whilst it is considered that the witch can cause any illness, there are certain specific ailments especially associated with witchcraft in the minds of the public. For instance, she is blamed for rheumatic or neuritic pains in the legs so severe as to render a person incapable of walking. It is believed that the witch or sorcerer simply plants the medicine in the path frequented by the victim so that when he steps over the spot he is at once crippled with pain.

Some 35 per cent. of chronic illnesses complained of by my African patients are attributed to witchcraft, and I believe this is probably a true picture of the extent to which the general population believes in this logic. Since there is an almost universal belief in witchcraft, not only amongst the traditional African, but also amongst those who have adopted the Christian faith, we can rightly ask ourselves what has been the effect of its acceptance on African society. This is a difficult question, but one we should attempt to answer.

Whilst many of my patients hold witchcraft responsible for their particular troubles, in actual life very few Africans are pointed out as witches. Perhaps this is because there is a heavy penalty for calling a person a witch. Even in African society, before the coming of the European, anyone accusing a person of being a witch without adequate proof was fined. Whilst many people believe that their personal illnesses are due to witchcraft, few go to the length of naming a person a witch without clear proof. Not only did I meet with few such cases in the records of the magistrates' courts of the districts, but I found exceptionally few accusations made in the chiefs' courts. Further, when I analysed figures for culpable homicide, arson and assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm, witchcraft appeared to play a very minor role in any of these crimes. In other words, witchcraft does not seem to be a frequent factor leading to disruption of human relationships in spite of its acceptance as the cause of illness or troubles.

In this society the belief in witchcraft makes for good behaviour. The display of envy, an act of meanness or an asocial mode of life are traits linked with bad people, and anyone who shows them runs the risk of being associated with witchcraft. Most charges of witchcraft arise when someone suffers a mishap shortly after someone else has displayed jealousy or

anger or has used threatening language against him. Riches or good fortune in another awakens envy in those with a jealous streak and, as the witch is an envious person, any success is expected to attract his attention. Therefore the traditional African is particularly careful never to boast about or display his possession of worldly goods. Further, he prefers not to acquire too much wealth lest he arouse the envy of the wicked, who may cast a spell on him or on a member of his family. So the philosophy of witchcraft tends to promote contentment as well as to encourage a friendly disposition, kindness and respect towards others. The tribal African is a modest, well-behaved and pleasant individual.

The fountainhead of the belief in magic and witchcraft is the witchdoctor, and the continuance of this philosophy rests on him. As long as he exists, so long can we accept his presence as the indication of his people's belief and dependence on magic and witchcraft. Once he goes this extraordinary ancient philosophy will disappear as well.

The witchdoctor's functions thus extend far beyond the mere prescribing of a herb, albeit this be an important aspect of his practice. He is the hub around which the magical or spiritual world revolves, giving succour and support to those in need and at the same time being the means of ensuring good behaviour. I have attempted to show how, despite the fears engendered by the belief in witchcraft, its effect on the behaviour of the group is good, ensuring a pleasant and contented individual. Those who know the African will feel that this object was achieved, but at a price.
