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Health and Healing: New Developments in Spirit Mediumship in Malawi

Joseph C. Chakanza

Abstract

This chapter discusses the transformation of the practice of healing and mediumship in Malawi. It notes that while traditional healing practices have always been associated with spirit possession recent trends demonstrate striking innovations among traditional healers. Part of these innovations have been the use of prayer, the Bible and the singing of hymns as part of the healing process. Part of this transformation was necessitated by the misconception and mistrust of traditional healing within Malawi's Christianised society.

Introduction

There are misconceptions and distrust concerning traditional ways of healing in Malawi. The very idea of possession by a spirit, ancestral or otherwise, provokes skepticism. The swing from possession by ancestral spirits to possession by spirits of saints and Biblical personalities among the spirit mediums has made a great impact. Although it has not yet been positively endorsed by some sections of our community as an alternative system of medical practice contributing to health care, traditional healing is still sought after by many people. Traditional healers claim success in treating such diseases as cancer, diabetes, insanity, asthma, epilepsy, sex-

¹ This paper was first published in ATISCA BULLETIN no.5/6 (1996/1997) as J.C. Chakanza, "Health and Healing: New Developments in Spirit Mediumships in Malawi" in *Theology Cooked in an Africa Port*, edited by K. Fiedler, P. Gundani and H. Mijiga, Special Volume, pp. 101-105.

ually transmitted diseases, conditions of impotence in males and infertility in females. Official government policy has been to encourage traditional healers to improve and update their healing techniques.²

Spirit Mediumship

A recent innovation in traditional healing in Malawi has been detected among some of the spirit mediums (*asing'anga a mizimu*) who have incorporated some Christian elements in their healing ministry (Chakanza, 1997, p. 24f). It is this category of spirit mediums that I discuss in this article. The conventional spirit mediums are healers who deal with ancestral spirits and carry out their work of mediumship only when possessed by the spirits. Otherwise, they are normal people. Possession constitutes an important means of communication with the spirit world, a world of invisible beings, which can influence people either for good or for evil. Spirit possession, then is a cultural term, which gives expression to the belief that a person who displays certain behaviour has been taken possession of by an invisible being or power (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 231). In Malawi, spirit possession, which is understood literally as *kugwidwa* or *kulowedwa ndi azimu* is known by different names among various ethnic groups, such as *malombo* (Mang'anja, Sena), *mabsyoka*, *ichikwangwali*, *mazinda* (Sena), *mpwesa*, *mtume*, *nantogwe* (Lomwe), *majini*, *mutu waukulu* (Yao, Nyanja), *vimbuzi*, *virombo*, *vyanusi* (Tumbuka-Ngoni).³ Although spirit possession is regarded as *matenda* (illness), it may be useful to distinguish between possession cases requiring the permanent expulsion of an undesirable spirit through exorcism, and those, which aim at establishing some sort of lasting relationship through accommodation. This distinction will separate the phenomenon of spirit mediumship from that of spirit possession of an undesirable spirit requiring expulsion through exorcism, and those, which aim at establishing some sort of lasting relationship through accommodation. This will also separate the phenomenon of spirit mediumship from that of spirit possession in general. In the latter cases (spirit possession), the behaviour of the individual con-

² Traditional healers in Malawi have formed the "Herbalists' Association in Malawi" with its sister wing, the "Traditional Birth Attendants". The ministry of Health has appointed a doctor who liaises with them.

³ On spirit possession among the Sena and Mang'anja, see Schoffeleers 1968, Soko 1987 and Nazombe 1988 and Soko 1988.

cerned does not necessarily convey any particular message to other people. It is primarily regarded as the bodily expression of spirit possession by the possessed person, whereas in the case of the former (spirit mediumship), the emphasis is on the communicative aspect.⁴

The Call to the Healing Ministry

There is no doubt that changes in our society have had an impact on traditional ways of healing which have adjusted to new circumstances and influences. To illustrate this point, I shall confine myself to the influence of the Christian religion on spirit mediums. The point I want to emphasise briefly is that there has emerged a number of spirit mediums who claim to heal not by being possessed by ancestral spirits, but by personalities mentioned in the Bible as well as by Christian saints, thereby giving their healing ministry a Christian flavour. Usually they are church-going members and their healing techniques entail the use of prayers, Bible readings, hymn-singing and other Christian practices together with some traditional elements. They are not to be confused with faith healers or ordinary herbalists, and neither are they to be considered prophets or founders of new churches. Like the traditional spirit mediums, they did not choose to become healers, but, at a crucial point in their lives, they found that they had no alternative but to accept the “call” to the healing ministry. Usually, a critical and protracted illness, which did not respond to any cure, was recognised as a sign of the ‘call’. Once the sign was accepted, the illness ceased, but when this sign was neglected or refused, the illness worsened. In the traditional setting, the ‘call’ comes from an ancestral spirit while in this new manifestation, it originates from the spirits of saints and persons mentioned in the Bible such as Mary, Lazarus, John the Baptist, James, Thomas, Noah, Melchizedek etc.

Recent research carried out by Bernadette Banda (1996), a Bachelor of Arts student at Chancellor College, on two such spirit mediums at Namitete in Mchinji district, illustrates what I have been saying about this ‘call’ (Mulanje, 1996). The first one, a man whose name is Potifals, is a member of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). He had been critically ill for years and all efforts to cure him through western and traditional

⁴ For a brief discussion on spirit possession, see ter Haar, Moyo and Nondo's (1992), *African Traditional Religions in Religious Education. A resource book with special reference to Zimbabwe*, Utrecht University, pp.117-127.

medicines were to no avail. In early 1979, he became possessed and the possession spirit spoke through him saying: "I am the spirit of Lazarus and have come to stay permanently. I want Potifals to become a healer". First he ignored the 'call' and thereafter his illness became even worse. Later, he became unconscious and the spirit reiterated its demand. He felt he had no choice but to yield. He was then twenty-five years old. He came to be known as 'Lazarus' after the spirit.

The second case-study is that of a Roman Catholic lady, Alfonsina, who became seriously ill in 1987 and was brought to a certain spirit medium called Maria. During one of the sessions for exorcism, as people said prayers, she became possessed and a spirit spoke through her saying "I am the spirit of John and have come to stay permanently. I want Alfonsina to take up witch-identification and witch-chasing as her career."

Six weeks later, when Alfonsina had shown reluctance to accept the 'call', she became seriously ill once again. She was brought to Potifals, and while prayers for exorcism were being said, she became unconscious. She became possessed and the possessing spirit spoke through her saying: "I am the spirit of John and have come to stay permanently. I want Alfonsina to take up healing as her career." Alfonsina responded to the call and she is functioning as a spirit medium until today.

In Bvumbwe (Thyolo district), the foundress and proprietor of St Maria's Clinic (Chipatala cha Maria), which opened its doors to patients on 9 July 1984, has a similar story to tell. The Spirit of Maria entered her when she became unconscious after undergoing an operation. While she was in that state, the spirit revealed to her many types of medicines for curing a host of diseases. The spirit continues to reveal medicinal herbs to her through dreams. She and her husband are Catholics.⁵

A Healing Session

Unlike ordinary herbalists who rely on their knowledge of medicinal herbs, spirit mediums rely on dreams and possessions to decide on diagnosis and treatment of illnesses. They have a special room for diagnosis and treatment, which is known as *kachisi* (spirit house). When they carry out a healing session, they wear special uniforms: white robes and hats with red crosses marked on them. The *kachisi* has hardly any furniture,

⁵ Lucy Mulanje, "Maria, the Healer at Bvumbwe in Thyolo District". B. Ed., University of Malawi, 1990.

and patients sit on mats. There are religious symbols such as crosses, pictures of saints, hymn books and copies of the Bible. Shoes and metal objects such as coins are usually not allowed into the kachisi. Their presence hinders the healing sessions.

The healing session proper starts with hymn-singing, both traditional and Christian, and is meant to invoke the healer's spirit to descend with its power and give guidance in the diagnosis of the illness and dosage of the prescribed medicine. Spontaneous prayers are made by both patients and attendants. The spirit medium asks one person to read selected texts from the Bible, usually those suited to the occasion. In the course of the Bible reading, the spirit medium becomes really possessed and the diagnosis of the patients starts. The patients do not have to tell the spirit medium what their ailments are but wait for him to establish the verdict. They may disagree with the verdict, but when it corresponds with their feelings, they gain confidence in the spirit medium's use of mirrors as a sort of video screen where past and present experiences of the patients and other suspicious circumstances can be seen. A stick is also used by some spirit mediums. It is believed that the power of the spirit is transmitted through the stick to help the spirit medium to diagnose properly and administer appropriate medicines. Some spirit mediums wear belts around their waist in the belief that this will lessen pain in the patients being diagnosed.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that these spirit mediums create a Christian atmosphere in the way they exercise their healing ministry. A prayer is said before the actual diagnosis starts; the gathered community is made to sing church hymns; Bible passages are read and heard by Christians and non-Christians alike. However, it is difficult to know what to say concerning the claims of the spirit mediums that they are possessed not by ancestral spirits, but by spirits of saints that are really at work among these people. The response from mainstream churches has simply been to reject or ignore them and, in many cases, to forbid their followers to approach these mediums while they themselves are ostracized from their churches. However, these spirit mediums are trying to blend Christian and traditional concepts of healing by using symbols from both. Above all, they are suggesting that traditional ways of healing can be changed and improved by contact with other forces, be they positive or negative towards them. There

is a misconception and distrust concerning traditional ways of healing, presumably because they lack a rationally formulated expression when compared with Western medical practice. The very idea of possession by a spirit, ancestral or otherwise, immediately provokes skepticism in many Western-oriented people.

Finally, I wish to observe that the spirit mediums do not claim to cure every disease, hence they refer some cases to hospitals. This swing from possession by ancestral spirits to possession by spirits of saints and Biblical personalities among the spirit mediums has made a great impact by replacing witchcraft and sorcery as well as evil spirits. It helps to build a sound community under Christian influence directly or indirectly by not antagonising people.

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