

**IS IT A HEALING CONTEST?**  
**THE DEVILS MUST BE ON THE RUN**  
**Some ethnographic material**

(Dr. Patrick Mumbi)

**Introduction.**

Some weeks ago our youths from a nearby parish were having a beauty contest and the one with the power and beauty to attract the audience won the beauty contest. So many churches are involved in healing or claim to have the power of healing people from many of their sicknesses. You can hear from their many names like the Miracle church, Redeemer church... They cast out demons, pray for people and heal them. One wonders where devils go as there are driven from all these churches. For many of these churches, including the charismatics, devils are seen everywhere and as soon as you have a psychological problem you have to be prayed for and your devil driven out, 'toka wewe', 'go out of him' and the devil would leave you? If your wound has not healed it is because of the devil who has come to stay on your wound. One may be visited by ancestral spirits (*imipashi*), have cerebral malaria, psychological depression, trauma all these can be zeroed to down to being possessed by evil spirits or the devil and so in need of being exorcised.

It is much easier to take the devil out of somebody than to take away the devil that lives in you. Healing is a crucial part of human life and so many people are wounded nowadays that they go either from one church to another or from one traditional healer to another. It is a pity that even in our Catholic Church the healing ministry has not been fully addressed and at times it is left to the monopoly of the charismatics and sometimes without even guidance. So many people are in need of healing such that tomorrow as a catholic priest I can stand in the street with a bucket of holy water for curing people, and people will line up the whole day. Sometimes so much physical healing is sought that the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of the patient is neglected.

Traditional healers respond to the problem of suffering in many ways. Some are pastors and at the same time herbalists. Some are diviners/fortune tellers; others practice spirit mediumship/ traditional psychotherapists, diviner- herbalists, traditional psychiatrists to name but a few. Many see their talents to be rooted in a Christian world view.

The traditional healers I have interviewed do not agree among themselves on the nature of healing, namely by what or with what they heal. Let me ask this question which you should keep in mind while reading this text: Is anybody who has a psychological problem, possessed with a devil or an evil spirit or satan? Don't some people need counsellors, psychotherapists, psychiatrists or even traditional healers? In the olden days traditional healers were good counsellors who helped people with their own problems.

1/ I began my research on healing with the **CHURCH OF ELIYA**, a pastor of Mutumwa church but also an herbalist. He has helpers who claim to have received the holy, pure spirit and so have become herbalists and traditional exorcists. In his church they conduct healing at some stage of their service. When this time comes, some of his church leaders begin to shout aloud, while praying, others are groaning, belching, moaning, and crying. Any idiosyncratic behaviour, spontaneity in singing, yelling, twitching, raising up arms is welcome provided it is geared towards healing. Some participants fall down, begin to roll, convulse while others

hold them so that they don't injure themselves. At this time Eliya begins to pull people up and down, especially those suspected of falling into trance-like states. At this time the whole church becomes frenzy. Eliya does this to enhance sort of possession. He also strokes them with a wooden pointed stick which he told me was a root of a medicinal tree with which himself was healed. When he strokes the people with this pointed wooden stick, the evil spirits feel afraid and run away, he says.

**His vocation:** He told me that when he was young he was constantly sick of headache and lost his sight until he was taken to the traditional healer *Mutumwa* who diagnosed that he had a spirit (therefore set to be a healer) and from there he regained his sight though not completely. He also said he had a dream in which he saw a woman dressed in white while the sun was shining. This woman in a dream told him to go and take some leaves from a certain medicinal tree, pound it and drink it for three days. So he was cured. He was also advised to dig the root of that tree and use it for healing of other people.

**Eliya's theory of healing:** Eliya states that a person has one pure, holy spirit which must be allowed to come and possess that person. This is the spirit which is used for healing when all others spirits like *amashabe* or *ingulu* are removed. These *ingulu* spirits or demons as he calls them are the ones which prevent the real spirit to come. And he adds that these *ngulu* or *mashabe* can bring bad medicine. But once these are purged away, the real pure, holy spirit comes in the person and he or she can become a healer, prophet or medicine man or woman. When the pure spirit comes, Eliya including the leading members of his church claim that they feel dizzy or headache and that this spirit can prevent them from doing anything bad. Others also said that they feel something like electricity in the body and at this time a person can see everything like in a mirror. The spirit can also show which medicine to use for the patient. During prayers they pray for this spirit to come in each one of them but sometimes it comes by itself and then they begin to sing songs while some asking this spirit to lead each of them in finding out the cause of sicknesses or problem in the person who has come to consult them. The common song they sing goes like this:

*'Kalola ndilimwana, kalola ndilimwana ciwera. Secha mutupi mose mwe batata, kalola'*. Kalola is a spirit. The song means that: *Kalola I am your child lead me, I want to know what is the problem of this child of yours who has come to consult me.*

Members claim that when this spirit becomes strong in the member or is well grounded one can begin to control his or her behaviour, speak in tongues and hold fire without being burnt. Before digging medicine or administering medicine they read the Bible and pray. The last time I went to visit them, they had just come from the mountain. They claimed to be fasting there and were making incisions around their heads and above their eyes to prevent witches from harming them. Special medicine was being put in these incisions while blood too was dripping from their heads.

2/ The second Traditional Healer I interviewed was **MAMA JOSEPH**: There are not many people in her church. She belongs to the Paradise Spirit Church which is registered. The highest turn up could be 30 and so far she is the only preacher and doctor in her church. She says she has three spirits in her, namely Joseph who is a doctor and then Jeremiah a preacher and Daniel a pastor. She has also two wooden sticks and a mental one made from an umbrella nicely decorated in red and white which she uses as a pastor. She said to me that: *'even your bishops use sticks /inkonto as a sign of power'*. She mocked me for not having a stick as a priest. One wooden stick is for Jeremiah and when she got it she was told to fast for three days. Joseph's stick is for chasing away witches at night. The stick of Daniel is made from munkolobwe tree. All three stick are placed at different places in the house. Jeremiah is placed horizontally while Daniel and Joseph sticks stand vertically.

**Her Vocation:** "Mama Joseph" is a prophetic name with which she diagnoses sicknesses and administers medicine to the people. She told me that she was called to be a healer when she

was young at the age of 15 years but she refused. Then in 1979 she got very sick and in 1985 she accepted to do God's work.

**Her practice:** She explains: *“when I put on my uniform and begin to pray and read the bible, I begin to prophesy and the holy spirit comes. If I place the bible on the head of a patient, this spirit which has come can tell everything the person is suffering from and the medicine to use”*.

During prayers she puts on a blue uniform and begins prayers first before beginning to read the bible. There are also songs which they sing during the prayers services such as:

Song: *Mizuze wene dada, wandetela mazozzi, mizuze wene dada wandetela mazozzi or kwene kwene dada kwandetela malanda. Nalila x4*. Verse by verse she makes comments and so the prayers can go on for long hours. She also asked me to preach in their church and she appreciated it. After preaching comes the time for praying for the sick people. It is when people can fall down as she prays for them through her spirit Joseph.

Bana Joseph also added that she can tell the problems of the people, and what ever she foretells happens. She told me that she can treat Aids, fits, barrenness, blood pressure, schizophrenia, chest pains, frigidity, give love portion, retrieve lost property, give medicine for promotion, medicine for manhood enlargement etc. She told me that when someone has stolen something she can put some medicine on the fire and wherever he is, his chest will start burning until he brings back what he has stolen. At the back of the house is storage of medicine. People consult her especially after prayers.

**Her theory:** She does not agree with Eliya's method of healing. She accuses him of using *Mashabe* in healing. *She says: why do people in his church fall down, convulse, yell, and Eliya encourages that? This is mashabe completely and he is just lying to the people.* According to her, Eliya does not have the right spirit. For her, when she prays for people, the evils spirits go away and the holy spirit comes. For her, if the person is possessed by evil spirits, she prays for him and the spirits will speak and then she will tell them to leave this child of God in peace. When a person has a good spirit it will come and speak its wish.

Mama Joseph says: *‘In my church, I just pray for the people and the evil spirits go away and the holy spirit come. But I can as well give medicine to somebody to go and wash’*.

3/ BANA **CHAMA** is a traditional healer who also administers spirit possession dances, or what can nowadays be likened to dance therapy. She treats people suffering from spirit possession, depression, stress and trauma, using traditional means or what was formerly called spirit medium-ship. She says; *‘those who don't want to dance, we give them medicine to go and wash and those who want to dance we perform the dance called, ‘bringing out spirits’, ‘ukutundula ingulu’ in Chibemba or amashabe in Cinyanja..*

**Her life history and vocation:** As I found her, she was fat and putting on a lot of beads around her neck. She said there are 30 beads around her neck in accordance with the 30 spirits which have possessed her. Each spirit tells her the colour of the beads they like. She does not eat Zambian staple food called nshima. And she rarely eats Kapenta (small sardines) but she only survives on cooked chickens. She was married and got divorced and is not interested in marriage any more, as her age of menstruation has passed. Her former husband just got upset as she got overly involved in spirit possession, and many times refused him sex following the order of the spirits. When her husband wants to sleep with another woman he becomes impotent. She never had children because she always had miscarriages.

She got possessed with spirits when she was 15years old, without knowing. The spirits who were 30 told her not to get married. She was constantly sick, suffering from headache. She was prayed for by the former archbishop of Lusaka Milingo, without recovering. She got paralysed for one year, and her sister was looking after her by washing and clothing her. At Milingo's prayers she was told by the Charismatics that her *mashabe* prevented the spirit of Mary to come out. When she returned home she was again attacked by the spirits. When she got married in 2001 the spirits came to tell her that: *‘Are we not men that you have refused us*

*and got married'? Her spirits don't want children because the sucking of children is like the beast eating another animal. When women are sucking their children, she tells them to go away from her sight.*

**Her practice and theories:** She argues that even if you have a foreign spirit, that of Moses, Eliya, Peter etc, you must first of all have an indigenous spirit because one is born in the cultural context. She further added that some of the healers are cheating us because they have and use the local indigenous spirits, and yet they claim to be possessed by a foreign spirit. Jesus was also accused by the Pharisees that it was by the Beelzebub that he cures people or drives demons. The point of Mama Chama that the indigenous spirits come first, was also supported by another leading traditional healer Mr Sithali who said that even if spirits travel at a supersonic speed they cannot surpass those which are indigenous. *'Before the foreign spirits arrive, surely those who are indigenous must arrive first'* he said.

**Divination:** She told me that when somebody is coming, she feels something like electricity in her body or when somebody powerful is coming she could start belching. At that time she goes into her house to pray to her spirits to calm down.

**Dreams:** She told me a powerful dream she had. While she was asleep, the spirits came in a form of a lion. Her sister Mrs Phiri is the one who came to her house in a dream. She came to tell her that visitors had come and were outside to be met. She came outside but saw no visitors; then her sister told her that they were behind the house. She asked why; but she was told to go behind the house. There she saw a lion and the lion said: *it's me*. And her sister was no more there. She woke up shivering; her husband who was sleeping next to her, listened to all what she was saying. She said it is the *mashabe*, the ancestral spirits.

**The organisation of Therapy:** She explains that a long time ago, when somebody was visited by ancestral spirits, they would go and consult the old people who could expedite on that. These elders would call the names of these spirits which revealed themselves at the initial seizure. They would stand at the back of the house while the patient was sleeping inside the house. The spirits would be asked what they had come for and they could speak their intention. These elders, when carrying out the ceremony or ritual, would put on either white or blue cloths, as demanded by the spirits. Then they would be beating drums; and then, the sick or patient would come out of the house and begin to dance violently. They should hold him to prevent him from injuring himself or herself. From there the spirits would reveal who they were and what they had come for. Water was prepared to dip in the patients to make them calm. Sometimes they demanded that the healed person became a healer by showing him or her medicines, provided he follows their instructions. Failure to follow instructions or refusal to take upon this profession could result in being mad and even death.

**Animal photographers:** She told me that there are animals which take picture of people before they capture them. One of them is a crocodile. When you are standing close to the water or on the beach and the crocodile sees you, it just takes your image reflected in the water. It would know your features and upon capturing your image it would struck and you fall into the water. Then it would catch you. Another is a snake like fish, a sort of mermaid, half human and half fish. In the traditional language it is called Insunguni. This insunguni can be like a woman with breasts or a man with beard. This also comes like a spirit to possess people. When it dances in the ritual of possession, it does not stand because the lower part of it is like a fish. If it admires someone it can push him or her towards the river without realising where he is going until it captures him and pushes him towards the place or hole where water is not sufficient. It can copy one's image and be just like that person. Mama Chama says, it can keep someone there, even for a month and people will be looking for you as if you have died. It can make you cold from your waist to the toes with the hope of becoming just like a mermaid. Insuguni spirit, it is said comes from the people who have died

on the lakes or seas or rivers. But some expert like Mama Chama can retrieve the person and even retain one's image by undergoing the ritual dance.

**4/ MR ZULU** is an Herbalist and Diviner: He is in his mid forties and smartly dressed. When he was a young man, he was a 'dancing king' and he used to go from town to town to dance and he won many prizes in dancing. All his friends got sick and died because they used to exchange women. He too was sick; he is the only survivor among his friends because his dead grand mother showed him the medicine in a dream. He told me that when he was young he used to divine and whatever he dreamed about would come true. He was very close to his grand mother- a diviner who died. He said she was poisoned by other people. Zulu is the only child in his family who has the gift of healing, which has come from his dead grand mother.

**His works:** He told me that when he meets someone who is sick, he is compelled to help him by giving him medicine and if he does not do that, he gets severe headache. Sometimes he even pleads with people, namely begging to treat them. He says he has only one or two medicines with which he treats people. He adds that this medicine is very powerful as it was given to him in a dream by his dead grand mother. Before he administers it to the patient, he drinks it himself. He says he can cure AIDS with this medicine because he himself has survived out of it. When I went to visit him he showed me all the medicines he uses and said they must be fetched when it is dry and not when it is raining. In the same place he also has things like dolls which, I think, he uses for divination. He cooks medicines and puts them in bottles and sometimes he can give a patient three bottles to drink. In treating people he says; *'I tell them that if you recover give me something but if you die I am sorry about that'*. Mr Zulu is a government driver and at his work there are just too many people coming to get medicine and he nearly lost his job because of that.

**His divination or dreams:** He told me that a certain man who had lost his wife came to consult him because he was about to get mad. This man came to him and explained that his wife was not properly buried. Then he consulted his dead grand mother on what to do. His grand mother told him in a dream that he should get the bark of a special tree and put money in it. He should remove all his cloths and go where the river current is heavy. He should put that bark with money on it on his head, and then sink down and let that bark with the money on it goes away with the current. Then he should shout: *'I am going to buy you relish with that money'*. The person should go home without looking behind. He said the person recovered and came to give him a goat.

According to him if a person is suffering from fits, he must be treated before he is burnt, because once he has had an injury, he cannot recover. He says what cause fits or *cipumputu* is something like a maggot which grows in his body and that this thing can come out when given medicine. That medicine which is given must be drunk at the rubbish heap.

**Theory:** He believes that he heals through the power of his dead grand mother.

**5/ PROFESSOR SITHALI** is a psychiatric Practitioner at Chainama mental hospital.

**Life history:** He married but his first wife died. Then he married a second one who was bad and disturbed his spirits. His house was burnt and he lost everything. He went back home, as his wife advised to. He then was cleansed and divorced his second wife. After that he started his profession again. He is married to another woman.

Mr Sithali is a psychiatric- Herbalist and diviner. But his wife does divination more than him. For him, even if he dreams, he does not tell anybody until it happens.

He sees himself as a middle man, a mediator between traditional and modern medicine. He promotes traditional medicine and research on medicine At some point he was even running his own research institute. At the same time he appreciates the spiritual realities involved in healing.

**Practice** How to treat spirit possession: He says you are made to sit on two pestles or stool. In front of you there is hot water and behind you there is cold water. You are sprinkled with cold water and invited to turn and while you turn you are sprinkled with hot water which makes you turn again. You are sprinkled with water so as to be brought down, to be made humble. But at the same time it will arouse the spirits in you to come out. What you have been hiding also may come, namely you will reveal it. When drums are being beaten, they will make the person excited and arouse his spirits. The people administering the treatment will invoke God and his ancestors to intervene. After that they can give you medicine. Such medicine can be put in your eyes and some in your nose.

He says that spirits like purity, e.g. white cloths like those of sisters and priests. When somebody has mental problems it is because of the spirit of the dead person (shade, see Turner). The virus can as well bring about sickness, being bewitched or it can be genetic.

**6/ BANA MOSES:** This is a professional name. This means she is possessed by the Moses spirit, a foreign spirit. When she was young, she was constantly sick. She could faint while at school and they could take her to the University Teaching Hospital, when it was not yet developed. At the hospital they told her that she was not suffering from anything. Yet she could have constant chest pains and headache. They took her to many churches where they prayed for her but she could not recover. One day she found one healer at Misisi compound who discovered that she has a special spirit from God called Moses. She was tutored for six months to prove that she could be a healer.

Her husband left her because it was getting hard for him, as at times she could fast and refuse him sex. He left her and got another woman. It seems that she has another man married to her but this story was not finished.

At the back of her house, she has a church called Holy Zion Church where she prays and practices healing services with a certain number of people. When I went there, they were only 7 people. One woman is a guard of the church who disciplines people; another one who has also received the spirit is a preacher. She too has a special name.

**Practice:** When some body comes to consult her, she goes first in the house to pray. When the spirit comes, she begins to prophesy and she could tell you whatever you are suffering from; and then she could administer medicine. When she is prophesying she does not know what she is saying. There has to be an interpreter, her sister, who narrates to her whatever has transpired. Then she could interpret and look for medicine.

She tells me that if one refuses to be a healer when God has called him, he or she can be sick and even die because spirits are winds and are very powerful.

She is amazed with the Charismatic and the Pentecostal's way of reasoning. For them, if someone is suffering from *mashabe* or any psychological problem, it is considered demonic. This is where they err, she told me. She says; 'they claim that whatever the problem is, just pray for the person'. She told me that a pastor, who refused to allow one of his flocks when she was sick, brought his child to her at night at 3:00 am for treatment. The child was treated and it recovered. This pastor had told his congregation that they should not take sick people to the *mashabe* meaning to the traditional healers. She asked me that, '*if I administer medicine to the sick and they recover what problem have I done*'. She showed me a lot of medicines in her house and there is also a sanctuary, a small table with a bible on it, a red cloth with a cross sewn on it. Upon entering her house of medicine, she told me to remove my shoes. After showing me the medicines, she then bowed as a catholic priest bows at the altar of God and then we left the place.

She told me that one day the neighbour had lost a child. This child was stolen by the thieves in order to sell it to the Indians, so as to take the heart out for business. She told them that she did not know how to do that. But when she went to pray, she told the couple to stop crying, especially the woman. She said to them: *go and look for a wire and bring it to me*, which they did. She took some leaves and bound them together and she threw the medicine on the fire. The binding of the leaves was to bind the thieves, so as not to sell the child. The child was released and it said: '*they had put me in the bed and fed me with chicken and biscuits*'. It may

be due to the medicine administered by Bana Moses that the child was released. Upon being released the thieves sent the child home by putting him on the minibus up to Bauleni suburb. Everybody in the suburb was surprised to see the child. She told the parents not to do anything to the child but to bring it first in the house for prayers.

**Theory:** She says when the *on mizim* belong to the family tree, namely if there was one in the family who was a traditional healer and his spirit comes back, it must be given a place in the family and acknowledged. If it is not acknowledged, a person will be constantly sick as a punishment. For her the spirit of Moses revealed itself to her and it is through that she cures people. That spirit is strictly for her and from God and cannot be given to another person even if she died. She says this spirit does not want to be contaminated by prostitution, theft, witchcraft or sex otherwise one will lose his or her profession.

### **Conclusion**

The theory and practice of healing among the traditional healers is contested and far from being homogenous. Many follow a family tradition. Some heal with the help of ancestral spirits or with spirits that are connected to their family tree. Others see their vocation as coming from *mizimu* who are sent directly by God himself, and they practice their healing profession within a Christian setting and worldview in one of the many Mutumwa- or Zion churches.

The terminology and nature of the spirit world (*mipashi, ngulu, mashabe* or *mizimu...*) is often fluent and contested. We meet indigenous and foreign spirits, family- and nature spirits, Christian and pre-Christian spirits, as well as the Holy Spirit in the healing practices of traditional healers. We also find different categories of knowledge in regards to the world of herbs and natural remedies. Yet for most of them there is an intimate connection between the spiritual world and their own personal life-history; for many it was a serious sickness that had opened them up to the spiritual realities connected to their lives.