In the spirit of Uganga - inspired healing and healership in Tanzania

Erdtsieck, J.

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Preface

As guides, spirit forces may play an ambivalent role in the life of an individual. I give the example of Zawadi, a young man of 17 years old. In 1991, he lived near the large indigenous clinic of his aunt, the spirit healer Nambela whom I was studying at the time in Mbeya region, Southwest Tanzania.

Last year, when I was still attending primary school (7th grade), I was suddenly taken over by some strange power. This happened during day-time at school. I felt a burning sensation around my heart and the urge to stand up. I shivered and started to stagger, having no more control over my will. Some force took over and made my body move and run a long way. I knew I was going to fetch a plant, to be used as medicine for someone in pain, who had recently arrived at my aunts’ healing compound. Nothing could stop me and I was completely sure of where I was going. I felt strong and full of energy, just like I do nowadays when this happens to me. Ever since then my pepo has awakened. It can surprise me at any time of the day or night. While I am asleep, during my dreams, I may suddenly become aware of this force as it makes me react to it. If I do not submit myself to act upon this force, I know for sure that it will turn against me. In that case I could get ill or be in pain. I wish this had never happened to me, because it always occurs so unexpected. Eventually, I had to quit school out of lack of concentration. [Account from March 1991]

Ever since his experience with spirit forces, Zawadi began to join the daily healing interventions at his aunt’s compound. These were primarily musical sessions composed of and directed to patients who suffered from spiritual symptoms, also known as ugonjwa ya pepo (spirit illness). The healer Nambela had told Zawadi that, in contrast to most patients, he was under the influence of good spirit forces (mapepo mazuri sing. pepo nzuri). The positive nature of these forces became manifest as, during the musical sessions, he regularly acted with great visionary insight. He would regularly run off in a state of trance to fetch parts of medicinal plants or to trace magical objects. These were hidden objects placed purposefully by people who intended harm to the community. In contrast to the patients who suffered from bad spirits (mapepo mabaya sing. pepo mbaya), Zawadi did not feel ill or in pain. He did feel, however, that in reaction to the sessions his sudden spirit attacks became under his control. Also the frequency of the attacks reduced. This beneficial outcome was no doubt related to the fact that Zawadi was familiar with the songs and the responses of patients to the musical sessions.

Though Zawadi showed a great deal of inspiration and compassion on account of his spiritual forces, he was neither a healer nor a patient in treatment. In fact, his special capacities ceased when he left the premises of his aunt to seek new challenges in life. Generally, the healing process of spirit affliction – when an intrusion of spirit powers
causes agony to a person – entails social and religious obligations. No matter if the afflicted is Christian, Muslim, or otherwise, a transformation will occur in the afflicted. Occasionally spirit affliction, marked by a process of transformation, may become a source from which a healing vocation emerges. An example of how personal and physical sufferings can transform into a powerful vocation comes from a female spirit healer called Nuru N’hangachallo. She is a Cwezi healer born in Tabora region, Northwest Tanzania. Since 1987, at the age of 26 years old, Nuru runs the popular NESI traditional clinic in the coastal city Dar es Salaam. Her narrative is as follows:

When I was a little girl, the grandmothers of both my father and mother were both traditional healers in Tabora. During his childhood, my father learned many healing skills from his mother. But, in his strive to be a good Christian my father renounced traditional beliefs and practices. He began to study Christian theology and became a leader in the Moravian church. As I grew up, my father was compelled to reduce his active participation in the church when he started to suffer from bodily tensions, confusion, and a lack of energy. In that time, in 1969, I lived along the shore of Lake Victoria in Mara region when a strange event happened to me. I had gone to fetch water from the lake and decided to take a bath together with my girlfriend. Suddenly, I felt a force pulling me into deeper water and the next moment, I had vanished. For five days fishermen went searching for me to no avail. On the sixth day, while my family was in deep sorrow about my loss, they found my body lying by the side of the lake. I was rushed to Musoma Government Hospital but doctors could not help me and sent me home. My condition was weak due to significant weight loss. Furthermore, I had no memory of what had happened to me, and, I could not hear anything. My condition deteriorated until I woke up one day with my body paralysed on one side, unable to move my left limbs and facial muscles. My parents took me to several hospitals but nothing could be done. Consultation with several traditional healers revealed that ancestral spirits were behind my affliction. Apparently, the spirits wanted to communicate with my family through me. In fact, they wanted my help to restore traditional religious rites in the family. Before my father became a leader in the Church, the spirits had already tried to pass their wishes on through him. Since he declined their wishes, they sought another medium in the family. Eventually, in 1975, my family decided to organize a healing ceremony incorporating traditional rites that would help to bring an end to my sufferings. Indeed, soon afterwards, I recovered from my paralysis. The recovery impressed my father a lot and made him decide to embrace traditional religion again. From 1975 up to 1981, I often remained with my two grandmothers to familiarize myself with their healing work. During this period, I began to experience spiritual guidance in dreams that allowed me to diagnose and heal certain diseases. From 1981 until 1986, I began to treat people under supervision of my stepbrother, who was also a healer. In 1987, after I got married, I was ceremonially initiated as a healer, taking an oath in the ways and codes of conduct. In the meantime, my father had also prepared to be a healer. We both received guidance by ancestral and territorial spirits. A few years later, two Arab spirits wanted to work through me, provided that I would convert to Islam. Since my husband was Muslim I was not opposed to this. From then onwards my role as spirit healer became more varied. My father never had any Islamic spirits and, in that respect, our work differs. With the help of the different spirit guides, I have learnt to cope with physical and mental problems of a mixed urban population, including those originating from overseas. Many of them are women who seek help for female and sexual problems. [Account from July 1994]

The story of Nuru shows that she had initially received lessons in traditional medicine and healing from her two grandmothers who lived in Tabora, in Northwest Tan-
zania. They were each guided by ancestral and local spirits and ran a small practice at their homes. Later, when Nuru was back in Dar es Salaam and had converted to Islam, male Arab spirits brought her more specialist knowledge. This competence increased her potential as a spirit healer. Interestingly, the Arab and Swahili spirits with healing powers are often males that have a preference to guide female mediums. They can be very powerful and demanding guides, which can pose a problem for the mediums. Female healing spirits are usually helpful guides. Since they are less demanding, they give lesser problems to the mediums. In Nuru’s case, the various newly gained spiritual forces gradually allowed her to deal with divergent problems of people, be it of physical, social or spiritual nature. In addition to the many responsibilities and obligations Nuru has in her popular urban practice in Dar es Salaam, she has become the voice and face of the National Association of Traditional Healers and Midwives of Tanzania (see chapter 2). In the course of getting to know Nuru better, I have witnessed her struggle to become the first female representative of the Association. Though this role has brought her authority, independence and status, Nuru has to manoeuvre between personal ambitions, daily family duties, and ethical working codes set by her various guiding spirits. Her story and position therefore, is a good example of how gender is interwoven in the healing vocation of spirit healer.

Arab and Swahili (male) healing spirits do not always inflict illness or crisis in the individual or his/her family. Nor do they only manifest in people of the coastal regions. During my first research period, from 1990/91, I interviewed Mama Ali, a Muslim spirit healer who works through the guidance of Arab and Swahili spirits.¹ Mama Ali comes from a Christian Tumbuka family whose origin is from Northern Malawi. For many years now she is running a small practice in the Southwestern town of Mbeya. A Tumbuka man, who also lived in Mbeya, introduced me to Mama Ali. Though this man knew Mama Ali quite well and thought highly of her, he had never bothered to ask her about the source of her healing skills. He reasoned that spiritual encounters of healers are common phenomena. If not, they would not make competent healers. Yet as Mama Ali told us her story, he was as visibly intrigued as I was. We were seated next to her on the ground of her mud brick cooking space while she was preparing food. She said:

My ‘calling’ started at the age of twelve, while I was bathing in a pool. All of a sudden I felt a force that pushed me under water. As I drowned, I had the experience that my body was lifted. It went up all the way to the seventh heaven.² There I was faced with a big modern city made entirely of glass. I was taken on a grand tour and visited other heavens also. Afterwards, I was confronted with two kinds of objects from which I was to choose one. One object looked like the branches of a tree and the other looked like an egg. Without knowing, I chose the first ob-

¹ Clients call the healer Mama Ali since ‘Ali’ is the name of her Muslim tutelary spirit.
² In antique cosmology the seven heavens indicate the various layers in which God is actively involved. From the Koran, soera 2, verse 29 (cf. Platti 1996).
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Next I was told that in the future, I would be a healer. Through my dreams I would receive instructions from the spirits about the healing properties of plants that were to help people in pain or distress. The dreams would be very clear to me so as to differentiate them from normal dreams. The spirits told me that at a certain stage of my life I would be able to test the information by helping relatives and friends. Six months after this strange encounter, I showed up again unaware of the time lapse that had occurred. To me it seemed like a short time span only. Meanwhile my family had gone through great emotional turmoil to find me without any success. So, when I showed up again, they believed they were seeing my spirit. I had no sufferings after the experience and by the time I was around fifteen years old, I was using my special powers to bring relief to people’s multiple problems. My parents and I were astonished with this competence, especially since nobody else in the family was a healer, or knew about effective plant remedies. There was one condition set by the spirits who interceded, I was not to work for money and only to accept gifts after recovery. [Account from January 1991]

By the time Mama Ali was ready to help other people with her special gift, and began to practice as a spirit healer, she had to convert from Christianity to Islam. It was one of the conditions set by her spirits that allowed her to treat complaints of Christian as well as Islamic clients. Until today, Mama Ali takes her role and responsibility with great pride, abiding strictly to the conditions set by her spirits. On account of this, she feels that serious illness or crisis has, and never will, occur to her.

The three exemplary cases demonstrate that spirits may intercede with people in different ways, and also, be a means towards gaining knowledge and power. Yet, the subjective experiences of people who encounter, interpret, and express spirit forces are translated through a cultural lens. If spirits become regular guides, as in the role of spirit healers, certain conditions can be imposed. These conditions may, to a certain extent, take affect on close relatives and clients of the healer. What does it actually mean to be influenced by spirit forces, and why is it that some individuals have to confront illness or a life crisis, when others experience no sufferings? And, what about the authority and nature of spirits? Sometimes they involve ancestor or territorial spirits who may exert their authority, at other times, they are divine or nature spirits who wish to help people, whereas other spirit powers bring disease and misfortune. How different are people’s encounters with spirits (mapepo), and how do these affect the process of affliction, healing and vocation?

To my opinion this domain of study has been academically much understudied. A great deal of knowledge can be gained, however, by carefully assembling contextual information of inspired healing practices - drawn from illness histories, life- and working conditions, therapeutic interventions, and the interaction between healers and their clientele. In this study I have selected a number of spirit healers (waganga wa pepo) whose life and work I have explored and compared. A major objective is to reveal the relationship between social or individual imbalances on the one hand, and spirit affliction, healing and vocation on the other. In this manner, I hope to add an
extra dimension to the information I present on the cultural, sociological, historical, religious and artistic features of spirit healing practices in Tanzania.