

Chapter Three

SPIRITS OF THE EAST AND OF THE WEST

Body and Soul

In order to understand the spirit world of a given people it is necessary to say something about their notion of the "person". This can be achieved in two ways: (a) by looking at the various components of a person, and (b) by looking at a person's personal development, in terms of marked stages (as presented in ritually marked stages) - from conception, through life and death, to transformation into a spirit (La Fontaine 1985:132, 137-8). It is also essential to look at how individuals, in their varying stages of personal growth, socially relate to each other, since personal identities are constituted through relationships with others.

Beginning with conception, the Ondonga say that during sexual intercourse: "...the germ of the man joins with the blood of the woman. In the blood there is the egg of the woman. The embryo grows out of the blood and the germ" (Tuupainen 1970:50). The implication here, is that the *essense* of an embryo is to be found in women, but that this remains dormant or inert until activated by men's sperm. Indeed, infertility (*ongadgi*) is unquestionably regarded as a specifically female condition, with sexual impotence being attributed only to men (M. Shamena, personal interview, FELM, Helsinki 1989). Similar ideas have been expressed by other African matrilineal peoples, such as the Bemba of Zambia (Richards 1982) or the Akan of Ghana (Osei 1975).

Yaw Osei (1975:35), drawing on the research findings of Hohegger (1965), has highlighted the fact that many African peoples express a dualistic conception of the "soul" (free-soul and body-soul). Taken in conjunction with the physical body, the African concept of "person" can be said to involve: "...a triune of a visible-perishable structure and the invisible-immortal dual "soul"". Osei goes on to say that this view of "man" underlies African traditional, social and political institutions, and also their medical practise. Osei uses data relating to the Akan of Ghana to illustrate his point of view, and very briefly his main argument is

that the body and the two souls need to exist in a state of relative balance in order for health and harmony to be achieved. Imbalance caused by any one of the three leads to overall disruption, commonly manifested as illness.

Among the Ovambo, a person (*omunu*: human being; *omunamwenyo*: living soul/living person [Turvey 1977]) is essentially composed of *oluto* (the physical body) and *omwenyo* (body-soul) and *omhepo* (free-soul). In addition to these three fundamental components are two others which deserve mention. The first is *omutima*, which is often described as the ego-soul because of its association with emotions and thought. The second is *omuzizimba*, which is effectively an individual's mystical extension: footprints, shadow, excreta, exuvai, personal name, reflection and personal belongings.

Omwenyo is best described by Ondonga as 'life,' or 'drive', or 'vigour' or 'vivacity' (Tirronen 1986). For the Kwanyama it means 'soul', 'spirit', 'mind' and 'life' (Turvey 1977). *Omwenyo* is the centre of physical life - indeed the very source of it according to Savola (1916:70-71). Hukka (1954:103) has described it as the spirit of man - the personality, whilst Aarni (1982:66) firmly identifies it as being the bodily soul - that which principally activates the physical body. This spiritual element of the person is in fact the only one recorded by Loeb (1955a:39). He makes no mention at all of *omhepo*, except to say that the latter is a form of ancestral spirit. Furthermore, Loeb states that *omwenyo* is not confined to humans alone, but rather constitutes a fundamental composite of each and every animate being.

Omhepo, in contrast with *omwenyo*, is the 'free-soul'. The same word can be used when referring to air, wind, breath and ancestral spirits, as well as to insanity (Turvey 1977). This particular element of the person is thought to be able to wander freely from the physical body, especially when dreaming or in a faint. A person's *omhepo* can meet other *emhepo* in the context of dreams. These other *emhepo* may be living or ancestral, and the nature of the encounters might be either positive or negative, depending on whom exactly is met. Also, not only does a person's *omhepo* travel out to 'socialise', other *emhepo* can come to visit a person's *omhepo* whilst it is still attached to the physical body. This happens mainly in dreams and is usually an encounter of a negative type - for example, with a witch or other spirit of the west, so that special charms to prevent the entry of spirits to the sleeping hut are widely used (Turvey 1977).

Savola (1916:70-71), has described *omhepo* as "...the external manifestation of life" (i.e. as opposed to the inner manifestation, *omwenyo*), and further states that it is "...the 'blowing' of god in man which gives him life". This last point would appear to indicate that the source of *omhepo* is *Kalunga* ('God'). Certainly *Kalunga* is regarded as being the ultimate source of generative power - the most powerful creator (and destroyer). The source of *omwenyo*, on the other hand, remains somewhat elusive, since the information in the documentary sources is rather vague on this point. One possible explanation, based on Akan (Ghana) data, is that the *omwenyo* is derived from either one, or both, of the parents. For example, in Akan thought, the *okra* comes from God, whilst the *sunsum* is believed to be transmitted from genitor to embryo at the time of conception via the semen (Osei 1975:36). The Ovambo certainly regard semen as vital to the activation of the foetus, however no express mention of soul-spirit transmission at this stage has been made. Loeb (1955a:38) writes that a child gains a 'soul' four days after birth (i.e. when named), although I would be inclined to suggest that this is more likely *recognition* of the soul, and incorporation of the new person into the fabric of society.

Although the body and the two souls are essential 'person' criteria, two other important components deserve more detailed mention from the point of affliction and well-being. The first, *omutima*, Savola calls the centre of spiritual life (1916:70-71). The same word refers to the physical heart, which is believed to be the seat of the emotions. Depressive symptoms are commonly diagnosed as 'illness of the heart', and the conscience is the 'child of the heart'. *Omutima* has been described by Aarni (1982:66) as the ego-soul. The second component is *omuzizimba*, an Ondonga name stemming from the root *za*, meaning 'to go from', or 'to leave something behind' (Tirronen 1986). It refers to what Aarni has termed a person's "mystical extension", and includes footprints, shadow, name and reflection (Hukka 1954:103). When elderly people no longer see their own reflection, it is said they will soon die (Loeb 1955a:39). Also the appearance of one's spiritual double (an *osipumbu*) is regarded as an omen of imminent death.

As will become apparent later in this chapter, all the various elements of a person are important, both from the point of view of affliction in all its manifestations, and of healing. Prior to this discussion, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of Ovambo kinship and descent, since it would be misleading to portray the Ovambo concept of person simply in terms of the individual. Every Ovambo person is linked to

certain others within the society (and sometimes beyond it) during his or her lifetime, and following death all persons who are transformed into *ovakwamungu* (ancestral spirits) remain socially active.

The Person in the Context of Social Structure

The Ovambo are organised into matrilineal clans, *omupata*,¹ which are themselves further sub-divided into numerous lineages (or sub-clans). The clans are distinguished by symbolic emblems or totems, and accompanying observances or prohibitions (e.g. food taboos). Some clans are accorded specific social, economic or political roles as well. The emblems are predominantly animals, however there is also a small number of plants and trees (Estermann 1976:109, Williams 1988:Appx. III, Loeb 1948:20). Two Ondonga clans have professional skills as their emblems: carpentry and smithery (Williams 1988: Appx. III).

The emblems are not totemic in the sense that descent is traced directly from them - that is to say, the animals/plants are not mythical ancestors (Loeb 1948:20, Estermann 1976:1-8). Rather, each clan traces descent from a common apical ancestor - usually the founder of the clan. The clan might be named after the apical ancestor, especially if a royal clan (hence *Ovakwanamakunde* - *Namakunde* being the founder of the hyena clan which became royal in Ukwanyama), but more often than not the clan name was derived from the actual emblematic character (hence *Ovakwanime*: *onime* (lion), *Ovakwanangobe*: *ongobe* (ox)) (Estermann 1976:109).

A clan acquires its emblem as a result of a significant 'first act', undertaken by the clan founder in relation to the animal or plant in question. That is to say, whether the founder picks it up, kills it, eats it, or whatever, he becomes related to it and it in turn becomes the emblem of the clan (Pettinen 1925-27:78, Williams 1988:48, Estermann 1976:109). With respect to the ruling clans, there is also some degree of choice involved in the acquisition of an emblem. For example, the Ovakwanyama rejected the lion as their royal clan emblem in favour of the hyena, on the grounds that the former was too aggressive whilst the latter was cunning and sharp (Williams 1988:50).

The royal clans particularly like to emphasise a line of descent that can be traced back to Kalunga (God). According to Ovambo mythology, Kalunga created Amangundu and his wife from a termite hill,²

¹ This is the Kwanyama term; the Ondonga name for clan is *omuzimo*.

² Some sources maintain they were created simply from earth.

and they subsequently produced two sons and a daughter, Janoni, who was to become the ancestral mother of the Ovambo. The two sons, Nangombe and Kathu, led the migratory clans from the region of the Upper Zambesi River. Upon reaching the *omomborombonga* tree, in the area which is now known as Ondonga, the brothers parted company. Nangombe remained in Ondonga, and founded the Ovambo, whereas Kathu continued travelling south, and subsequently founded the Herero (Hahn 1928:1-2).

The migratory clans who originally settled in the region, continued extending the limits of their boundaries in search of suitable land for cultivation. According to one of Liljeblad's informants, writes Williams (1988:42), occupied and cultivated land was actually owned by the clan during this early period of Ovambo history. However, with the gradual emergence of ruling clans and the formal establishment of kingdoms, these land rights changed quite dramatically.

Land ownership thus became superseded by a system of land usufruct, whereby all land was regulated by the monarchy (or those acting on the monarchy's behalf), in return for revenue (usually cattle) - the amount payable depending upon the amount of cultivated land granted. It is important to recognise that this system of land administration, which is fairly widespread across sub-Saharan Africa, is not feudalism - as has been claimed by Loeb (1962). The difference between the two is that under feudalism, a vassal renders certain services to the Lord in return for control over land, whereas in Africa all persons can *claim* sufficient land as an inherent attribute of 'citizenship'. The African system of land holding forms an essential part of the organisation of social relations, from the king or queen downwards through the political units of villages, and into the hierarchy of kinship relationships, with an "estate of production" at the bottom of the series. The monarch is the owner of the land only inasmuch as he or she is a trustee for the nation (Gluckman 1965:40).

Thus, in the case of the Ovambo the monarch distributes land rights to district heads, *mwene omukunda* (lit. 'holder of the district'), who in their turn would administer sufficient cultivating land to each *ehumbo* (household). Household heads, *mwene ehumbo* (*sing.*), would then allocate land to their respective wives, and the wives of their sons living with them, who are responsible for the cultivation of various crops. Grazing land, fishing pools, hunting grounds and water sources remained communal (Williams 1988:43). However the calendrical organisation of such activities (i.e. hunting seasons) rested with the monarch (Loeb

1962:58, based on Sckär; Williams 1988:107).

The king or queen, as the paramount 'holder of the land', was identified with its fertility and prosperity. If the king was healthy, then this fared well for the land, the cattle and the people. The king's ill-health, by contrast, signified national catastrophe. Not surprisingly, rulers were thus highly protected and highly honoured. The royal sacred fire, symbolic of life itself, was similarly always carefully tended (Aarni 1982:87). The king is the guardian of the kingdom, charged with defending the rights of his subjects, and with increasing the cattle reserves of the kingdom to the ultimate benefit of all. It is the royal clan which is responsible for the main political and socio-economic welfare of the kingdom as a whole: creating stability and prosperity in general terms. All other clans were responsible for maintaining stable economic and social relations at a more local level, with some fulfilling additional roles: oral historians, diviners, blacksmiths, and so forth (Williams 1988:52).

The Kwanyama term *epata*, refers to both the matrilineal clan and to a demarcated area of the *ehumbo*, with its food stores and cooking facilities, occupied and managed by a woman and her very young children. Thus an *ehumbo* can contain a number of *omapata*, depending of the number of wives living there. *Epata* can indeed mean family, generation, clan or kin (Turvey 1977). All members of a particular *epata* are equally members of the same matrilineal clan, fellow members being found in neighbouring or distant *ehumbos*. Those belonging to an *epata* are referred to as *ovakwapata* (lit. 'those of the *epata*') (Estermann 1976:90).

The word *omukwao*, is also used to describe one of the 'family circle', viz. cousin or sibling (Turvey 1977). The same word may also mean the stomach, as well as the actual kitchen area, in Oshindonga (Kuusi 1974:168). *Ovakwetu* ('our people') is yet another, albeit more general, way of referring to uterine relatives (and may even include colleagues and companions) (Turvey 1977; Estermann 1976:90). The Ondonga also use the terms *omukwao* and *ovakwetu*, however their name for matrilineage/clan is *ezimo* (Tuupainen 1970:38). According to Pettinen (1926:77), Ondonga matrilineages are called *onzikua* (Loeb 1948:20), although no other sources lend support for this. On the basis of the above examples, then, it is fair to say that the clan, sustenance, fertility and women, are all very closely associated, both in conceptual and actual terms. Kinship ties are recognised with members of the father's clan, but never descent. There is

complementary filiation with patrilineal kin.

Marriage among the Ovambo is characterised by clan exogamy and preferably sub-group endogamy (Estermann 1976:91; Loeb 1948:20). Tuupainen's (1970:29) research has shown that marriages between kingdoms (i.e. sub-groups) were becoming more commonplace by the 1960s, although the practise of clan exogamy continued to be strictly observed. The rule of exogamy stipulates that no two members of the same matrilineal clan are allowed to marry, irrespective of the distance of consanguinity. Inter-clan kinship ties are thus created through marriage, and likewise ties between individual *ehumbos*.

The preferred types of marriage appear to be those between ego (male) and a member of his father's matrilineal clan (Estermann 1952:208). In Ondonga, for example, the preferred unions are between ego and his father's sister's daughter's daughter, or ego and father's sister's daughter's daughter's daughter. Also popular is the mother's mother's brother's daughter marriage. Most popular of all, however, is the marriage to the father's sister's daughter - cross-cousin marriage - which accounts for fifty per cent of all Ondonga marriages (Tuupainen 1970:37). Among the Ombadja, Dombondola, Ukwambi and Ombalantu cross-cousin marriages are also preferred, since they "...keep the cattle from going away" (Estermann 1976:93). Unions between mother's brother's daughter and mother's daughter's son are acceptable, as the mother's brother's daughter is not a member of the mother's brother's matrilineage or clan, but of the mother's brother's wife's. Despite this, the Ovakwanyama do not readily condone cross-cousin marriage on the mother's side because the protagonists are classificatory siblings (Loeb 1948:20). Such marriages do occur among the Ondonga, but are not nearly so popular as the cross-cousin marriages on the father's side (Tuupainen 1970:38).

It has originally been suggested that Ovambo people inherit membership of both their mother's and their father's clans at birth (Estermann 1976:109; Loeb 1948:20). However, whilst it is undoubtedly the case that children born within marriage are the product of two different clans (i.e. because marriage is clan exogamic), I would concur with Williams (1988:52), on her point that children do not by extension possess actual membership of both. Women do not become members of their husband's clan following marriage, and neither do the couple's children. Because the Ovambo system of descent and inheritance is matrilineal, and lineages are simply sub-divisions of matrilineal clans, children are fully members of their mother's clan

and not of their father's.³

This is not to say, however, that the relationship between the children of a marriage and their genitor and his kin, is without importance. On the contrary, a system of mutual rights and obligations exists between children and their patrilineal kin. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, preferred marriages tend to be contracted with members of the father's matrilineage and clan. Children may inherit property (namely cattle) from their father whilst he is alive (Estermann 1976:81). He is responsible for the welfare of all his children, and is obliged to donate cattle at the time of his daughter's *efundula* feast (Powell-Cottons 1937a:23; Williams 1988:52). Children may also inherit their father's ancestral spirits (Tuupainen 1970:30). Moral and jurial responsibility rests with the mother's brother (i.e. the maternal uncle). In short, then, strong kinship ties exist between children and their genitor, but these are fixed by complementary filiation rather than by descent.

Following marriage a woman goes to live with her husband in the *ehumbo* of his family. She spends about two to three years in her husband's home, residing in independent living quarters and managing her own grain fields. During the early days of marriage it is quite common for women to return to their natal *epata*, in order to spend time with members of their own lineages (Estermann 1976:76-77), and especially to give birth. After about three years, the couple are usually able to establish an *ehumbo* of their own. However, if the husband is an only son - or the youngest - then the couple will live permanently with his matrilineal family (Williams 1988:52).

Whether the new *ehumbo* is located near to either the wife's kin or the husband's kin is somewhat difficult to ascertain. This is due mainly to the fact that *ehumbos* are not grouped into a 'village' as such, but are scattered throughout a demarcated area known as an *omukunda* (district). Each *omukunda* contains on average 15-20 *ehumbo*, with the distance between each *ehumbo* varying between 500m and 3km (Williams 1988:46-48). Given this type of settlement pattern, and the principle of clan exogamy, it is practically impossible for many lineages to enjoy corporate existence in geographical terms, let alone the clans. The clans are very widely dispersed across district boundaries and kingdom (sub-group) boundaries, with

³ Women do, however, adopt their father's clan name when they enter the post-menopausal stage of their lives (Estermann 1976:110; Lima 1977:145). This may be symbolic of their inability to further contribute to the extension of the lineage.

the result that no particular clan member would ever know all the members of his or her clan. Nonetheless, one could expect hospitality from fellow clan members in a different district or kingdom when travelling (A. Powell-Cotton 1936/7b:3) regardless of the fact that no other ties might have existed.

Williams maintains that production cooperation is arranged on a clan-lineage basis, and that certain *ehumbos* cooperate with regard to weeding, harvesting and herding. In Ondonga, this practise of enlisting the aid of neighbours in return for food and drink, is known as *ondjambi* (Williams 1988:47). Such cooperative links between households tend to be established between the female members especially, since agriculture is labour intensive, and may be kin or non-kin based. The subject of female extra-household relations has been recently discussed by Henrietta Moore (1988:59-62). She highlights the fact that traditionally anthropologists have tended to view extra-household relations as a feature of the public/political domain, in which only men were believed to operate - women operated within the domestic domain (i.e. within the confines of the household itself). Moore draws on the emergent feminist anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s, which shows that extra-household relations between women are cross-culturally both prevalent and important, in order to point up the inadequacy of traditional anthropological kinship analysis in this respect. As regards the Ovambo, inter-household cooperation between women represents the maintenance of kinship ties and the creation or maintenance of non-kin links beyond the household, which are based on reciprocity in the form of agricultural labour and/or food and drink. Men's extra-household ties are formed mainly in relation to long-distance cattle herding, raiding, and large-scale hunting.

On the basis of available evidence, it is not easy to be specific about the precise character of extra-household relations. More information is needed about settlement patterns in relation to prescribed residence rules, for example, in order that we may determine actual and likely cooperative households.

Returning to the issue of clan affiliation, it appears that members are not incorporated solely on the basis of descent. People can change their clan affiliation, be it voluntarily or involuntarily. For example, any person accused of harming the king through witchcraft, will be expelled from the kingdom along with his or her clan members. Thenceforth this clan is labelled the clan of witches. Williams (1988:108) describes how this forced exile of people directly contributed to the decline of one kingdom's population, to the increase of another - in which the accused clan sought refuge. Moreover, such witchcraft accusations

effectively caused the demise of particular clans, because accused members renounce membership of their tarnished clan and either adopt another clan or found a new one.

Domestic slaves are normally absorbed into the lineages/clans of those owning them (Clarence-Smith 1979:69). However, war captives sometimes introduce new clan lineages to an area, as well as new clan roles and professional skills (Williams 1988:110). David Lan (1985:23) has described dynamic clan affiliation among the Dande of Zimbabwe. He maintains that people express their clan affiliation by referring to their clan emblem (or prohibited food) rather than to their line of descent. The first, Lan calls "incorporation by common substance"; the second, "incorporation by descent". In the Ovambo context, those incorporated by substance includes those who have shifted their clan alliance, although those incorporated by descent may also view their membership from the point of view of shared common substance. Incorporation into the mother's clan obviously involves some recognition of common descent; but with regard to alliance with the father's clan, recognition of common substance is sufficient.

Physical Death and Burial

Now that I have dealt with the concept of person, and with essential social structure, we can move on to the major life-crisis event which transforms persons into a non-corporeal state. When a person dies, the physical body ceases to function and proceeds to decompose. By contrast, the spiritual components of a person continue to survive, albeit in an altered state of existence by transcending the world of the living. As Aarni (1982:62) remarks, death for the Ovambo represents not so much annihilation as transition.

The mortuary rites, especially burial (*efudiko*)⁴, clearly reflect this notion of transition. The corpse (*oshimhu*), naked and anointed with red *olukula* grease, is placed in the grave in a foetal position with the head turned to face the east (Estermann 1976:85): now he or she is ready for 'rebirth' into the realm of the spirits. Graves are normally located within the confines of the *ehumbo*, with the exact position being determined by the deceased's age, social status and gender. Thus, for example, the householder (usually male) is buried in either the main cattle pen or the hearth area of the main meeting place (*olupale*), depending on his clan. His body is also wrapped in a pure black cattle skin. Married women are buried in their own *epata*;

⁴ Kwanyama dialect: Turvey (1977).

whilst unmarried girls are placed in the corn stamping area of the *ehumbo*. Graves of adolescent males are located in the cattle enclosures, and those of babies and very small children in the sleeping huts of their mother. Finally, visitors, if a considerable distance from their home, are buried amongst the thorn hedge which surrounds an *ehumbo* and its gardens (D. Powell-Cotton 1936h:2; Estermann 1976:85).

Circumcised kings of Ukwanyama were always buried within a dense grove of trees, near the *ombala* (royal residence), which was regarded as sacred. Presumably other members of the royal family were buried within the *ombala* itself, just as commoners were buried within their own *ehumbo*. In Ondonga, kings were buried in a grave which was surrounded by a pyramid-type structure of wooden stakes, and known as *ompampa* (Salokoski 1987a:9).

Proper burial is absolutely vital to the successful transformation of a person into an *omukwamungu* (essentially benevolent spirit) following death. But not everyone, however, is eligible for burial. Such unfortunate people are merely deposited in the surrounding bush, and are subsequently transformed into *oilulu* (*iiluli*: Oshindonga) instead. The kinds of people who fall into this category will be discussed in the following section.

John Mbiti (1969:84) has pointed to the fact that in Africa, graves are paradoxically symbolic of both separation and communication. The Ovambo believe that the spirits of buried persons linger near their grave sites - especially during and following the period of mourning. As such, graves are focal points for communication between the living and the departed (Aarni 1982:72). Propitiatory offerings are placed on graves, for example. Yet at the same time, graves are viewed with a certain amount of ambivalence, since they remind the living of physical death and the kind of separation this entails. Contact with the dead, whilst necessary, can be upsetting and perhaps disturbing.

Following the first *epena* (Spring festival) to occur after the householder's death, the *ehumbo* is relocated, with the result that his grave (originally in the cattle enclosure or meeting place) now lies in the new gardens and crop fields, and becomes a place of sacrifice (Loeb 1948:79). Of course, his is not the only grave in the garden area - those of earlier ancestors exist as well. It is imperative that new households are not established on the site of a grave, therefore *endudu* are required to survey the prospective area in advance. In the same vein, 'kraal openers' make sure that spirits remain tied to the old household structure

and do not visit the new place (Loeb 1955c:306).

Spirits of the East

When dealing with the world of the spirits, it is imperative at the outset to distinguish between worship of the ancestors and recognition of the dead. Following Gluckman's (1937) pioneering lead, most scholars of African religion accept that ancestors and the dead are not necessarily co-terminous (Uchendu 1976; Middleton 1960; Fortes 1987). Having said this, however, it may be equally apparent that some kind of unity exists within diversity. For example, in his analysis of the Nuer concept of spirit, Evans-Pritchard (1967:109-110) found that the Nuer conceived of a range of spiritual beings; yet at the same time, he was aware of being confronted with a single conception: namely that all spirits are *kwoth* (i.e. all have the same essence) (1967:109-110).

It would seem from the available evidence that a similar situation exists among the Ovambo. It is believed that every person is transformed upon death into a non-corporeal being of some description. But as with the Nuer case, it is readily apparent that whilst spirits may be of the same essence (*omhepo*), well defined spirit categories are also operative. Generally speaking, Ovambo spirits are categorised as being either of the East or of the West. Those of the East are believed to be essentially benevolent, and are typified by the *ovakwamungu* - the so-called ancestral spirits. Those of the West, by comparison, are essentially malevolent, and are associated above all with madness and misfortune. This group is typified by the *oilulu* - the restless, bitter dead (Estermann 1954:2). This section will be concerned first with the spirits of the East.

Transformation into an *omukwamungu* at death is contingent upon possession of two critical qualifying criteria: (a) descendants of one's own, and (b) proper burial rites. Certain sources indicate that all persons, provided they fulfil the above requirements, can join the ranks of the *ovakwamungu*. Thus, *ovakwamungu* have been described as "ghosts" of the common dead (Loeb 1955a:38), or else as "...souls' of deceased members of the tribe who in their lifetimes were not possessors of any magical power" (Estermann 1976:189; Lima 1977:159). However, the somewhat tacit assumption that all *ovakwamungu* are ancestral (Loeb 1955a:38) needs to be examined. The reason for this is that it is fairly clear that the *ovakwamungu* are not an homogenous spirit class, although there are obviously certain shared elementary characteristics (e.g. basic qualifying criteria). Hierarchical levels can be discerned. Loeb (1948), for example,

writes that in Ukwanyama 'ordinary' people are soon forgotten after their funeral, except when their spirits haunt the living or speak through the mouths of "medicine-men". By contrast, householders and kings become important ancestors: "...they alone continue to aid for their family and country" (1948:79). In a later paper Loeb (1955a:38) states that sacrifices have to be made on the graves of powerful ancestors, especially kings.

According to Aarni (1982:16), the Ondonga distinguish between "remembered" and "forgotten" ancestral spirits: *ooheenooyina* and *aathithi* respectively. I am rather reluctant to accept the term *oohe yooina* ('their fathers and mothers'), since it is one which Aarni has himself coined, simply because he finds it so "typical" of the situation. Indeed, he openly admits that the Ondonga themselves use no such term at all! This aside, however, I can nevertheless appreciate Aarni's desire to highlight a distinction which the Ovambo themselves make.

I would like to suggest that what we are in fact observing, is the perceived existence of a collectivity of immortal parents,⁵ a proportion of whom are elevated to the status of true ancestorhood. For whilst death, descendants and mortuary rites might serve as the necessary criteria for successful transformation into a socially acceptable spirit, they do not automatically guarantee ancestorhood, in the sense of the term as it is used elsewhere in Africa. In order to achieve ancestorhood there are additional qualifying conditions which need to be met. And what is more, only certain prescribed persons are deemed capable of fulfilling these requirements. It is usually the case for Africa that ancestors tend to be the spirits of formerly prominent members of society. For example, among the Lugbara of Uganda, all "ghosts" are ancestors, but not all ancestors are "ghosts" ⁶ (Middleton 1960:34). Similarly, among the Igbo of Nigeria all ancestors are immortal parents, but not all immortal parents are ancestors (Uchendu 1976).

So, what are the key criteria defining ancestorhood cross-culturally? Fortes (1987:68) posits that ancestorhood in Africa presupposes geneonymy - that is the commemoration of ancestors by their personal name(s). The corresponding notion, therefore, is that unnamed dead are not ancestors. Newell's (1976) examination of various Chinese and Japanese data reveals a markedly similar situation: true ancestors are

⁵ A term borrowed from Uchendu (1976).

⁶ Middleton here uses the term "ghost" to denote the more important spirits - i.e. those I would call ancestors.

named individuals, and also their exact connection with the worshippers should be made clear (Newell 1976:20).

Another major distinguishing criterion of ancestorhood is the formal politico-jural status of those eligible for entry into this spirit class. Fortes (1987) is most emphatic with regard to this aspect, and writes:

"Ancestor worship is a representation or extension of the authority component in jural relations of successive generations; it is not a duplication, in a supernatural idiom, of the total complex of affective, educative and supportive relationships manifested in child-rearing, or in marriage, or in any other form of association, however long lasting and intimate, between kinsmen, neighbours or friends. It is not the whole man, but only his jural status as the parent (or parental personage, in matrilineal systems) vested with authority and responsibility, that is transmuted in ancestorhood" (Fortes 1987:76).

In matrilineal societies, jural authority normally rests with the mother's brother. But as Fortes shows, in relation to the Ashanti of Ghana, the rule of entry can be even more stringent, in that not all mother's brothers may become ancestors but only those vested with authority - i.e. lineage heads and holders of office in the external politico-jural domain (Fortes 1987:73-74).

Contrary to the positions offered by Fortes and Newell, Uchendu (1976) argues that a person's character and moral behaviour are the important determinants in the achievement of ancestral status. The Igbo, says Uchendu, are a highly moral people. Minor transgressions can be dealt with ritually, but *nso* (abominations) automatically deny the dead burial. Non-burial results in public humiliation, which in turn means the dead cannot qualify for ancestral honour. Indeed, if major transgressions are detected by the diviner, not even a "lavish funeral" would ensure the transition to ancestorhood. Thus, in Igbo society only the morally upright can qualify for ancestor status, and even these persons must endure a lengthy process of selection as well (1976:293-294).

To summarise at this juncture, then, ancestors can be said to be dead who: (a) have received proper burial, (b) are named, (c) held politico-jural status whilst alive, (d) were (are) morally upright, and (e) have descendants or successors. Those dead who do not attain ancestral status, are consigned to the ranks of the collective dead, and may still be socially active nonetheless.

Turning now to Ovambo evidence in relation to the above arguments, Fortes' (1987) proposition that vested politico-jural authority is a requisite for the attainment of ancestorhood means that in matrilineal societies:

"...ancestor worship is a lineage cult - of the basic politico-jural unit, not of the domestic unit in which both parents count (1987:73).

Thus, in the matrilineal context a son might honour his father's spirit, but it is the spirit of the mother's brother who becomes an ancestor. As the Ovambo are matrilineal, this principle observed among the Ashanti should similarly apply to them. But the main problem with Ovambo source material is that the authors appear to misconstrue or ignore the basic principles of matrilineity. One result of this has been that ancestors are said to function at the level of the elementary family - a situation which is more accurately a feature of patrilineal systems.⁷

One case in point is Loeb's claim (mentioned earlier in this discussion) that household "owners" become "important ancestors" and "continue to aid for their families" (Loeb 1948:79). The quite separate roles of biological father and mother's brother are apparently being confused here. Household owners, if they are to be classified as ancestors following their death, are ancestral not to their own biological offspring living in the same premises, but to their sister's children residing in a household elsewhere (albeit probably nearby). The kinds of "aid" provided by living fathers and by mothers' brothers, whilst arguably both important, are nonetheless notably different in substance: fathers are involved with the practical welfare of children within the elementary family context, whereas mothers' brothers are responsible for these same children in a jural sense and operate within the context of the matrilineage.

Another case of apparent misrepresentation is to be found in Aarni's discussion of children and ancestors (1982:63). Even though the Ondonga reckon descent matrilineally, so that succession goes from a man to his brother or to his sister's son, Aarni still presumes that a man would be "finished" without sons of his own. He does not even properly consider the position of women, seeming surprised by the Ovambo claim that people can become *aathithi* if they have daughters. Again, the two distinct statuses of ancestor

⁷ It is possible that the contrary data may represent local shifts or trends in matrilineality, the result of colonial government and missionary influence over time.

and immortal parent are being conflated. Issue of one's own (biologically speaking) is important from the point of view of entry into the *ovakwamungu/aathithi* spirit class as an immortal parent, but successors in the lineage (issue of one's sister) are needed for the achievement of ancestorhood - at least from the male perspective.

The position of women in Ovambo society is such that they can often hold positions of authority, especially women of the royal lineage. Among the Ondonga in particular, there have been female lineage heads, district heads and queens. This situation is somewhat less pronounced in Ukwanyama, but evident nonetheless. If we accept Forte's argument, then these women must achieve ancestorhood, whereby their own direct offspring become their worshippers. Unfortunately, the notion of female ancestors seems to have escaped mention in the Ovambo documentary sources by and large. No explicit recognition has been accorded them, as compared, for example, with Audrey Richards' (1952) study of the Zambian Bemba.

It is the matrilineal ancestors who are the object of worship, in the strict sense of the term. It is they who are the focus of formal annual rituals, celebrated by everyone (e.g. New Year and Rainmaking). A good example is provided by Loeb's (1962) description of the annual planting and rainmaking rites, performed by each *ehumbo*. Shortly before the rains are due (October-November), members of an *ehumbo* (i.e. householder and head wife, followed by other wives) take seeds to a grave on the north side of the household. The head wife buries a few seeds in the grave, whilst the householder smokes his pipe and blows the fumes as an offering. Next the householder faces east and invokes the ancestor buried there:

"Phuh! Tatekulu jetu uli mombila, tukufa tumone oilia neudo. Tambulajo ove utufile onghenda. Omahangu etu amene, fia tumone oipaluifa juana neudo".

Spit! Our Grandfather who is in this grave, help us so that we get grain this year. Take this so that you (will) have mercy on us. Millet (come) out, spring up, (so) we may get enough food this year.

As he speaks, the householder scatters seeds of grain over the grave site. All the graves in the vicinity of the household's crop fields and gardens are then visited in the same manner, accompanied by requests for rain and a successful harvest. Planting may only commence once all the graves have been visited (Loeb 1962:152-153).

There are numerous other important calendrical rites performed at the level of the household, with the householder and his head wife acting as ritual specialists. In the light of what has already been discussed, we might safely assume that the householder invokes his own matrilineal spirits, and perhaps those of his wives as well (i.e. see Richards 1952:228). Alternatively, husbands and wives may honour their own matrilineal spirits - as do the Ila peoples of north Zambia (Richards 1952:237). In either case, the visiting of graves in the gardens deserves closer attention because one's matrilineal ancestors are not always going to be present in one's own garden area - in fact they are much more likely to be in someone else's. Even where *ehumbo* sites are in relative proximity to graves of the householder's ancestors, those of the wives will be found elsewhere. The participation of both the husband and the head wife may be significant in this regard. People may also travel, or else the wife's brother most likely honours the lineage ancestors on her behalf. Unfortunately there are not enough data in relation to this.

Grave sites are, on the whole, viewed rather ambivalently, hence it is not really surprising that the noun for grave mound, *owii*, can also mean: wrong, evil, vice, ills and wickedness (Turvey 1977).

It is usual for the most senior ancestors to be addressed first, as described above. Another example is the master-blacksmith's invocation of his clan ancestors during *osimanja* (mining and smelting expedition). He begins by invoking the ancient, pioneering Kwanyama blacksmiths: Nanjembo, Shekuhungama, Shafahaula and Hauwidi, then concludes with his own, more recent lineage ancestors (D. Powell-Cotton 1937b:18).

Lineage ancestral spirits are almost always referred to in the plural (Turvey 1977), which suggests that they are believed to exist and as a corporate body, in much the same way perhaps as do living elders (*ovakulunhu*). It must be emphasised, though, that elderhood and ancestorhood in Ovambo culture are entirely separate social statuses. I am in firm agreement with Brain (1973) and Uchendu (1976), in their rejection of Kopytoff's (1971) theory that the two are no less than one and the same.

When *ovakwamungu* communicate with the living, they express themselves either through natural phenomena: wind, the calls or behaviour of birds or beasts, or through actual possession of individuals. With regard to the first method, the bird/animal cries or particular actions are each accorded special significance, and are known as *oipo* (omens). The substance of *oipo* can be either good or bad, and is believed to

be an expression of the will of the ancestors. In the main *oipo* tend to be warnings of pending misfortune: death, domination by women, defeat, and so on (Loeb 1955c:308-311, based on information in Brincker [1899] and Lebzelter [1934]).

Ancestral spirit possession is usually signified by the onset of illness, the symptoms of which are peculiar to spirit possession and are therefore easily recognised as such. The illness is taken as a sign that the ancestral spirit wishes to convey a message of some importance, be it a warning, a complaint, or a request. Such messages need to be interpreted by a spirit medium ⁸.

Generally speaking, the *ovakwamungu* are regarded as being essentially benevolent. They are the spirits of the East: East being the direction from which all good things originate, and to which all good things pertain (A. Powell-Cotton 1988 ⁹; Loeb 1955a:38; Estermann 1954:2). The ancestors' primary concern is with the welfare of their descendants, in terms of economic prosperity, social harmony and political stability at the local level (i.e. lineage level). However, ancestral benevolence is not automatically guaranteed, but rather dependent upon the meritorious behaviour of descendants. Disharmonious social relations, particularly between close kin or lineage members, are believed to incur ancestral indignation (indeed, living elders may similarly decide to curse offenders [Hiltunen 1986:109]). Also, transgression of any established precepts or prohibitions is liable to cause affront and result in some form of ancestral reprimand.

The kinds of illnesses caused by ancestors tend to be debilitating rather than fatal in character: deafness, blindness, and arthritis, for example (D. Powell-Cotton 1936c:1; Tönjes 1911). To intentionally kill descendants would of course be counter-productive to the ancestors' existence - seriously jeopardising in fact. As such, all incurable conditions or fatalities are ascribed to either Kalunga (God), or to the work of witches (*ovalodhi*) and other spirits of the West.

A dynamic, reciprocal relationship exists between the living and the ancestral living-dead/spirits, just as mutual ties and obligations serve to bind certain living individuals and sets of individuals. The *ovakwamungu* are only benevolent so long as they are remembered and honoured by their descendants, in both everyday and ritual affairs. Regular propitiatory offerings act as a prophylactic against ancestral

⁸ See the following chapter for a detailed analysis of spirit mediums.

⁹ Personal interview, Quex House, Kent.

indignation. Special placatory offerings need to be proffered when things have actually gone wrong, in order that harmonious relations might be restored.

Royal Ancestors

The king, or queen, is the ultimate jural authority - responsible for the entire country (*oshilongo*). Thus it is the king who appeals to his ancestors on behalf of his subjects, just as a lineage head would on behalf of his lineage members. Fortes (1987:67) writes, with regard to the worship of royal ancestors in Africa that:

"...its national significance is derived from the political rank of the worshipped ancestors, not from their ancestral status".

A point which is worth remembering, he advises.

Royal rulers in Ovambo each claim an unbroken line of descent from the apical Ovambo ancestors created by Kalunga (Lima 1977:61-69; Williams 1988:113, 116-120). Ritual regicide is practised, whereby the dying monarch is either smothered with a lambskin, or strangled¹⁰. This task is normally undertaken by the successor, acting under formal instruction from the royal elders and the dying king's principal wife. The primary purpose of regicide is to ensure that the king's soul' (most probably the body-soul, *omwenyo*) is not 'lost' at the point of death, but rather directly transferred to the body of the successor - an incarnation of divine ruling power, so to speak (Loeb 1962:28; Hango Nameja [Ongandjera], ELC 1932, in Salokoski 1986:25).

In Ondonga, the royal graves are distinguished by a roughly pyramidal type structure of wooden stakes. In Ukwanyama, the graves of circumcised kings are located within a special grove. Sckär describes the grove as situated on an *etunda* (raised piece of ground between *murumbas* [swampy pools]), close to the *ombala* (royal residence) (Sckär, in Loeb 1962:25). Loeb (1955a:40) refers to the grove as a deep and dark landmark.

It is precisely because of the royal graves that the grove is regarded as sacred. Because spirits are believed to linger near their graves (Aarni 1982:72; Loeb 1955a:38), it is therefore amidst the grove where the royal ancestor spirits can be contacted. The site is thus the focus of major propitiatory rites, performed

¹⁰ Royal blood can never be shed - extreme misfortune is believed to befall the country if this happens.

by royal priests on behalf of the whole community. Until King Haimbili's death (1859) (Williams 1988:113), male circumcision rites always took place within the shelter of the grove (Loeb 1962:236). A number of royal cattle and oxen were permanently kept among the trees, functioning both as symbols of the country's fertility and prosperity, and as vehicles of communication between *ovakulunhu eehamba* (royal elders) and the royal ancestor spirits. Finally, the grove was known as a place of sanctuary for those being persecuted, or else wishing to be pardoned for transgression of societal norms (Loeb 1962:74).

Ordinarily, the grove was prohibited to commoners, and especially to persons originating from outside the kingdom. The general belief, was that intruders would be attacked with invisible switches by the *oilulu* spirits dwelling therein (Tönjes 1911:200; Estermann 1976:190). King Ueyulu always refused Herman Tönjes permission to enter the grove¹¹; and some fifty years later, Maria Lima offered to pay anyone who would accompany her into the grove, but none would accept (Lima 1977:159).

It is from the grove that the *oilulu* send signs, which are interpreted by the royal priests of the *ombala* (royal residence). These signs are characteristically similar to the *oipo* (omens) sent to descendants by lineage ancestors, the only significant difference being that the former are predictions concerning the population as a whole, as opposed to particular individuals. In short, public rather than private portents.

Arguably the most important omens are those concerning the ancestors' withholding or bestowal of rain. All ancestors, not just the royals, are credited with the capability of allowing or intercepting rain at their sole discretion. However, if the double threat of drought and famine looms large, then it is the royal ancestors - the national ancestors - who are approached. At the domestic level, rainmaking rites are performed by the occupants of each *ehumbo*. At the public level, major rainmaking rites are directed at the royal ancestors in the sacred grove. In the event of a severe, prolonged, drought, expeditions from Ondonga and Ukwanyama (and other, smaller Ovambo kingdoms) are despatched to the most northern Ovambo kingdom of Evale, in order to 'obtain' rain and bring it back¹² (Loeb 1962:64), and in prayers to the spirits of the grove, frequent mention is made of Evale (Mittleberger 1968:270).

¹¹ Loeb did however enter it in 1948, accompanied by a Catholic Father (1955a:40), although it is not known whether the Ovakwanyama acknowledged or approved of his action - Loeb does not say.

¹² Evale has more rivers and lush vegetation. The Kingdom is regarded as the source of the *efundja* (flood waters), whereas Ondonga is semi-desert by comparison.

It has been argued by Clarence-Smith (1974:2) that the power-base of the living rulers rested squarely on their ability to guarantee the eventual arrival of rain. Indeed, once kings were themselves the actual rainmakers, but during the colonial era (at least) the rainmakers were ritual specialists working for the kings (Salokoski 1987a:13-14). What is important is that the initiation of national rainmaking rituals was the prerogative of the king or queen, and theirs alone (ibid.).

In the same way that lineage ancestors may afflict particular descendants, royal ancestors can disrupt and seriously threaten the entire population (or at least a large percentage of it) by causing major calamities: drought, famine, pestilence (e.g. locust plagues are common) and epidemics (affecting both human and domestic animal populations). These large scale disasters constitute the counter-part to the more benevolent role attributed to living and ancestral royals, which is basically to guarantee fertility and prosperity, and safeguard the people and livestock from wanton misfortune.

Behaviour most likely to result in public calamity includes disharmonious social relations in general, and serious transgression: e.g. rape, incest, murder, witchcraft (Williams 1988:107). Since the kings are the ultimate jural authority, as royal ancestors their penalties are naturally severe and more potent than those exacted by lineage ancestors.

As drought and famine are familiar unwanted guests of the Ovambo, one might expect to find that royal ancestors are viewed unfavourably. Indeed, it might help explain why royal ancestors are so frequently named as - or closely associated with - *oilulu* spirits.

Oilulu: The Problem

The common association in the Ovambo source literature of royal ancestor spirits with *oilulu* seems somewhat perplexing initially, because the name *oshilulu* (*sing.*) evokes definite, uncomplimentary connotations. The noun *oululu*, both literally and figuratively, means bitterness. Thus, *oilulu* can mean trees with bitter fruits, whilst an *omululu* is an irascible, bitter (living) person (Turvey 1977; Tirronen 1986).

In connection with the spirit world, *oilulu* (*pl*) [*iiluli* (*pl*)¹³] are malevolent, bitter spirits - chiefly those who, for whatever reason, have been denied entry into the *ovakwamungu* spirit class. The obvious

¹³ Oshindonga dialect.

question, then, is why, and in what way, are *oilulu* associated with the sacred grove - the burial ground of royals?

Although many accounts link *oilulu* with the grove, the information is nonetheless quite vague with regard to the particular relationship between *oilulu* and royal ancestor spirits. As far as I am aware, only Estermann (1976) and Lima (1977) make an explicit connection between these two, and even then Estermann's equation is primarily supposition rather than true statement of fact. He suggests that because the *oilulu* reside in the sacred grove, and because they have also the express function of guarding the grove against profanities, then *perhaps* they are the spirits of former chiefs (i.e. kings) (Estermann 1976:189-190). Lima is much more certain in her account, stating that *oilulu* are acknowledged by people as being the spirits of dead kings, because of the latter's purported cruelty when alive (Lima 1977:158-9).

Other authors (e.g. Loeb 1955a:40; Tönjes 1911:200) tend to emphasise the role of *oilulu* as guardians of the grove, and as advisors to the elders of the royal household regarding future events (e.g. drought). Although these authors do not specifically equate them with royal ancestors, some form of connection is alluded to. Mittleberger, for example, writes that sacrifices for rain are made on the graves of kings, in the sacred forest *omulu*, where the *oilulu* live (1968:270). Loeb (1962:25) states categorically that the sacred grove houses "...the ancestral spirits of the tribe". The confusion here is extremely difficult to negotiate. If by "tribal ancestors" Loeb means *oilulu*, then he has effectively presented us with a contradiction in terms, because the main characteristic feature of *oilulu* is that they have been denied burial - itself one of the fundamental requirements for elevation to ancestral status. Conventionally, *oilulu* represent the antithesis of the *ovakwamungu*.

Yet more confusion arises from the naming of the royal ancestors. Tönjes (1911:200) calls the latter *ovakwamungu eehamba* - literally, royal ancestral spirits. Whereas Sckär informs us that the sacred grove houses spirits known as *ehmepo* ('wind spirits'), which are reportedly of a higher order than the ordinary *ovakwamungu*. Vilijo Sr. (King Ueyulu's son), an informant of Loeb's, also calls the grove spirits *emhepo* (Loeb 1962:236-7). However, *omhepo* can refer to any ancestral spirit possessing someone, as well as to the form which spirits take (i.e. as wind in the palm fronds).

In verbatim transcriptions of invocations directed at the royal ancestral spirits (i.e. performed by the royal priests), the name which almost always recurs is actually *ovakwamungu* (see, for example, the prayers in Mittleberger, 1968). Though this may simply be because the priests are themselves of the royal matrilineage, so that their reference to the kings' spirits as *ovakwamungu* (the normal term for lineage-ancestral spirits) is not necessarily inappropriate. This then means that what we might actually be observing is a situation whereby the royals naturally consider their ancestors to be benevolent *ovakwamungu*, whilst the populace may compare the royal spirits unfavourably with the malevolent *oilulu*. Technically speaking, the royal spirits literally cannot be *oilulu*, because they have received burial, they have descendants, and they held positions of authority.

The idea that commoners might identify royal spirits with bitter *oilulu*, stands in sharp contrast to the idealistic portrayal of royal ancestors - i.e. as guardians of the land - with which we are much more familiar, and as such it requires some explanation and supporting evidence. Illustrative examples can be drawn from certain major events in Ovambo political history.

Gervase Clarence-Smith (1979), for example, has shown that many (but by no means all) Kwanyama kings and their *omalenga* (counsellors) were nothing less than oppressors of their subjects: witchcraft accusations, executions and mass confiscation of cattle being fairly commonplace¹⁴. Indeed, circumstances became so intolerable during the late 1800s, that organised forms of collective action against the ruling elite began to emerge. Two popular insurrections were actually marked by the assassination of the rulers: the king of Mbalantu in the 1870s, and in 1885 the king of Ukwanyama (1979:79). For the most part, however, popular resistance proved unsuccessful against the extremely powerful and expanding elite, and so was replaced instead by large scale emigration. People either travelled to less oppressive neighbouring Ovambo kingdoms, or to European 'centres' like Forte Humbe in Ukwanyama (S. Angola) (ibid.).

Two of Maria Lima's informants from Ukwanyama, elders Mutamo and Ondyebo, bitterly recalled the numerous executions ordered by king Mandume¹⁵ - their sister being one of those killed. Lima states

¹⁴ The reasons for such behaviour are many and varied, and are closely bound up with the establishment of colonialism in the area and the particular pressures this entailed. These are all very important and complex issues, but fall outside the scope of this thesis.

¹⁵ Mandume was actually supposed to be a reformer, intent on moving away from the previous corrupt and violent reigns (Clarence-Smith 1979:79).

that it is precisely because of such deeds that people call the spirits of dead kings *oilulu* (Lima 1977:159). Later in her account, though, she cites the opinion of an elder, Nambadino, which contradicts the views of Mutamo and Ondyebo. Nambadino maintains that the *oilulu* spirits (who kidnap people) do not belong to the dead chiefs (Lima 1977:159)!

Because of the partial and disparate character of the information relating to this particular issue, I am unable to do little more at this point than highlight the apparent discrepancies and offer a few suggestions (often based largely on supposition) where possible. The important point here in relation to Ovambo affliction and wellbeing, is really that the spirits of the grove, related in some way to the graves of deceased kings, are supposed to deal with the affairs of the entire country: they are national ancestors ("...the ancestral spirits of the tribe" [Loeb 1962:25]). It is difficult to disentangle fact from inference in the documentary sources, yet to explore more thoroughly in this context (i.e. in relation to the medical domain) would be to digress too much.

Spirits of the West

In the West reside the spirits of madness - those who operate without logic and without benevolence. The spirits of the west are restless spirits of persons denied the opportunity of being transformed into *ovakwamungu* - the socially acceptable spirits. The kinds of persons who are not eligible for *ovakwamungu* status are: (a) those who die without successors/descendants (i.e. children and childless adults), (b) witches and witchcraft victims, (c) those who have led an unsatisfactory life, or who have met with an untimely death (murder, drowning, suicide?)¹⁶, death occurring during circumcision rites), and finally those who do not receive proper burial rites.

According to Warneck (1910), the Ovakwanyama believe that such people are transformed into dissatisfied, resentful spirits (*oilulu*) after physical death. They are thenceforth condemned to wander aimlessly on earth, rather than be called back to Kalunga (Warneck 1910:317, cited in Aarni 1982). In Oshindonga dialect, these spirits are known as *illuli (pl)/oshiluli (s)* (Aarni 1982:17). *Oilulu* are also resident spirits of the Kwanyama sacred grove, as described above.

¹⁶ This is a difficult one, since great honour is achieved through committing suicide and so it might not mean relegation to the *oilulu* class.

Whilst *oilulu* are troublesome and sometimes feared, it is the *ounikifa* (*pl*)/*okanikifa* (*s*) who are feared most of all. The *ounikifa* are spirits of *ehmule* ("magicians"), who appear as were-beings: half human and half canine. They operate only at night, becoming visible around twilight - very liminal creatures indeed. They are purported to live in the bush and build themselves small fires there. Anyone travelling after dusk would certainly avoid any kind of fire in the bush should they see one, even fleeing from it in fact. In order to prevent *ehmule*' spirits from becoming *ounikifa*, the limbs must be amputated (Loeb 1955a:39; Estermann 1976:190). Spirits can only remain intact if the physical body itself is. All the components of 'person' must be whole. The important thing to note about *ounikifa* is that they held considerable power when they were living *ehmule*. This power is ambiguous and as such regarded ambivalently by people, since it may be used to either positive or negative ends. The power used by *oondudu* (healers) is of strikingly similar - if not the same - character, as is that possessed by Kalunga. Brain (1973:125) has highlighted this double-edged nature of spiritual power as it exists elsewhere in Africa.

The *oipumbu* are spiritual doubles (shades?), who are not really malevolent, but belong to the western rather than eastern spirit group because they are portents of death to whomever happens to behold them. For example, after seeing two *oipumbu* in his household (on separate occasions), King Haimbili committed suicide by hanging himself (Loeb 1955a:39). As well as appearing as spirit-doubles, *oipumbu* may reveal themselves as strangers - often beautiful young women (*ibid.*).

Finally, the *ovakwamungu* of others may cause harm, behaving like spirits of the west even though they are spirits of the east to their own particular lineage descendants. This conception of others' *ovakwamungu* as being potentially harmful is perhaps a natural progression from the notion that other peoples' living kin are 'outsiders', even when related to one's family by marriage, friendship and neighbourship.¹⁷ When one's own lineage ancestors cause misfortune, they may appear to be acting like spirits of the west. However, the significant difference is that spirits of the east act purposefully and logically. As Fortes (1987) has argued, their behaviour is to be interpreted as corrective and ultimately caring. Spirits of the west, by contrast, are perceived as capricious beings, who afflict the living for no other reason than to cause

¹⁷ See Kuusi (1970:59) for examples of Ovambo proverbs claiming, on the one hand, that in-laws are kin and that neighbourship is kinship, whilst on the other that wives dislike their husbands' kin, but love their own.

disruption.

Witches

A distinction is made between witches (*ovalodhi*) and sorcerers (*ovatikili, ehmule*) by Ovambo. Sorcerers are living persons (usually men) who operate consciously and who work predominantly with tangible materials (i.e. poisonous herbs, body products). Witches, on the other hand, are much more firmly based in the 'spirit' world. This aspect of witches has led some authors (for example, Loeb 1955a and Aarni 1982) towards the view that they are no less than mere figments of the imagination, and as such not worthy of serious investigation. My own view is that spirituality need not be synonymous with unreality, by which I mean that the Ovambo witches are no less real than the sorcerers, just because they happen to operate as essentially non-corporeal beings. The previous sections in this chapter have hopefully shown how the spiritual and the physical are bound by complementarity rather than by opposition and obviation. They are inseparable parts of a whole.

Witches, in fact, provide us with a good example of physical-spiritual complementarity. Witches are living persons, but they are here discussed under the rubric of spirituality because they operate primarily at the spiritual level. That is to say, in the event of a person being a witch, the spiritual component(s) of that person operates independently of his/her physical body. People do not operate as witches of their own volition, unlike sorcerers. Nestori Waananen (undated MS:58) writes that the Ovakwanyama believe people become witches whether they want to or not, and that such people may be totally unaware of their harmful power, since it can function unwillingly and unknowingly (cited in Hiltunen 1986:45). Kalle Koivu (1925) offers a rather different view with regard to the Ukwambi. The western Ovambo sub-groups are apparently famous for their witchcraft powers, and in the case of the Ukwambi either all members of a clan were regarded as potential witches, or else just a few members of a clan. Clans of the latter type were described as having *aalodhi* (witches) and *aaposi* (blind people). The *aaposi* do not know how to bewitch, and do not realise when they themselves are being bewitched. A witch would recognise and refuse poisoned food, for example (Kalle Koivu Collection, 1925: Band I, 62, cited in Hiltunen 1986:42).

According to Loeb (1955:45-46), certain clans are more prone to producing witches than others. Witchcraft itself is believed to be hereditary, passed down the matriline. It is transmitted to the child (male

or female) through the mother's blood and breast milk. Babies, however, are never accused of witchcraft, only adults.

Witches only operate at night, never by day. Thus, it is usually the case that during sleep the witch-person's free-soul leaves the physical body and goes out into the night to attack the souls - steal them, to be exact - of unsuspecting victims.

"A witch goes in her quasi body to the top of a fig tree, and from there sends an owl (*ombwa yaalodhi*: 'dog of witches') to the victim. The owl takes the quasi-body of the person to be bewitched. The real body is left. Now the witch tortures the victim at the top of the tree, and other places, until it is half-dead. When the quasi-body returns to the real body, it becomes sick and often dies until help comes in time" (Tobias Reijonen 1880:4-5, in Hiltunen 1986:63-64).

Nathaniel Iitenge of Ongandjera, offers a description of the material substance of witchcraft:

".... *uulodhi* (power to bewitch) dwells in a person's spirit. Since it is in the spirit, it has not spread into the whole body. It is said to be in a small bag that is in the breast. It is the size of a palm fruit. If that person does not destroy others over a long time, it bores and scorches her. It becomes bigger and gives her trouble. Whenever a witch wants to bewitch another person, she opens the bag and the strong bad spirit emanates from it" (N.I. in ELC 1932:1386, translation in Hiltunen 1986:44).

That *uulodhi* is located in the chest region is also mentioned by Aini Aarni in her description of Ukwambi witchcraft. She too highlights the fact that if the power to bewitch is not exercised then it can turn on the witch herself, causing her diaphragm to swell and making her vomit (AAC, Book 12:19-20, in Hiltunen 1986:44).

Alternatively, if witches do not steal the souls themselves, they send the spirits of the dead - the *oilulu* - to cause harm, according to both Aini and Teddy Aarni. These malevolent spirits fight with the spirits of the sleeping, living victims (in Hiltunen 1986:60-61). Although it is the spiritual component of a person which operates as a witch, this frequently inhabits the body of a nocturnal creature - an owl, for example - in order to travel about, as the earlier example illustrates.

In addition to soul-extraction, witches can harm people by means of intrusive objects or substances.

For example, they may shoot small, invisible, poisonous arrows into their victims (Loeb 1955a:43, 1955b:153). Ukwambi witches send lumps (*iipakwa*) into people, and these must be sucked out by a healer (Akitofel Amupembe, ELC 1932:1056, translation in Hiltunen 1986:63). Witches do not confine their practices to humans alone, but also destroy crops, afflict cattle, spoil things and wreak havoc in general.

Concluding Remarks

A major aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate the importance of 'spirit' with regard to illness causation and well-being. This need not always imply a supernatural dimension since the body-soul and free-soul form the natural counterpart to the physical body during life: they are complementary elements which together constitute a whole. The realm of the supernatural is, however, encountered when dealing with the activities of the ancestral spirits and the spirits of 'immortal parents', as well as with spirits of the 'restless dead' and witches.

The notion of 'spirit' is quintessential to the various beliefs concerning affliction and healing. For instance, spirits of the departed can intrude upon the living - invading their physical bodies. The spiritual element(s) of a living person may become detached from the physical body at night during dreams, and perhaps meet with others' spirits - on friendly or unfriendly terms. Witches operate in this way and either capture their victims' souls themselves, or else sub-contract malevolent spirits. But illness and misfortune are not always caused by external agents. They can be self-inflicted, if one jeopardises the delicately balanced existence of physical body and body-soul and free-soul. That is to say, such things as immoral behaviour, disregard for personal hygiene, and so on, may lead ultimately to the attraction of affliction. Yaw Osei's work illustrates this very well. Finally, sorcerers manipulate spiritual essence (contained in the tangible substances with which the sorcerer works) in order to achieve successful results. When acting against persons, they do so primarily by attacking the spiritual elements of a person which may be defined as mystical extension.

One of the main reasons why the concept of 'spirit' is so central might be because spirituality is commensurate with intangibility, non-corporeality, invisibility. Much of illness is invisible, especially when it is internalised and no somatic symptoms are visibly evident. Even in cases where there are definite visible symptoms of illness, these are very often regarded as mere indicators of a deeper problem. Certainly, the

causal agents are almost always invisible - and it is removal of the cause rather than the effect which tends to prove the biggest challenge for healers. The power of affliction lies to a great extent in its invisibility - its spiritual nature. This is why, as Turner (1967:302-3) has argued, a principal function of diviners and healers is to expose illness and its cause - making them visible by forced exposure (i.e. spirit transference or violent purgation), thereby making them appear less formidable and less of an unknown quantity: tangible things are far easier to challenge.

Because of the centrality of 'spirit', it is thus misleading with respect to healing to see medicines as being employed in relation to the physical body only. The physical body is of course important, but it cannot be regarded as separate from the spiritual constituents of 'personhood'. Indeed, the colonial European medical doctors made this fatal mistake - defining illness in inherently physical, somatic terms and refusing to acknowledge or deal with the strongly psychological aspects of affliction. Anything verging on the spiritual - or "mental" as they termed it - was not treated by medical staff of the Anglican Missions in Kwanyamaland, southern Angola, for example (Loeb 1955a:36). No doubt it was thought that this area would be more suitably dealt with by the missionaries in a religious, rather than medical, context.

The terms 'person' and 'personhood' have here been used to mean the living human being, comprised of three essential elements: physical body, spirit and soul. A human being is a single entity, though this is not to say that 'personhood' is strictly co-terminous with 'individual', in the sense of the term as it is used in the West. Individuality is very much a Western concept, and one which is not necessarily shared by societies elsewhere in the world. Ovambo society is, nevertheless, formed by a number of persons who operate as a collectivity, bound together by common interests, social ties and obligations.

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that although illness might affect a particular person directly, the effects of this may be experienced on a wider scale; with family, kin, neighbours, friends, rivals and the like, all becoming inevitably involved at some point. This wider involvement is extended into the spiritual realm, whereupon the spirits are consulted, challenged or propitiated - depending on their particular character and part in the affairs. The notion of affliction as a social, rather than expressly individual, concern, is one that is supported by the character of Ovambo therapeutics. The various techniques often involve family and/or lineage cooperation, in the form of consultation and assistance (both moral support

and 'financial' aid). In this context, it is not difficult to see how illness may quickly become a metaphor for social disorder in general, with health acting as the corresponding metaphor for social accord, stability and normality.

The contrasting notions 'health:harmony' and 'affliction:disequilibrium', can in fact be seen to be part of a wider set of dualistic categories: 'inside:outside', 'domestic:wild', 'east:west'. The Ovambo make an elementary division of space into inside:outside, which is actualised by physically and visibly demarcating inhabited from un-inhabited areas. The household and its associated managed land are clearly distinguishable from the surrounding bush. Such a division is supported by conceptions of inside:outside. Associated with the concept 'inside' - represented by the household and cultivation and husbandry - are linked notions of domesticity, culture, order normality and clarity. The concept 'outside' is represented by the antithesis of the structured household - the bush - and is associated with notions of wildness, disorder, nature, and ambiguity. At a broader level, the cardinal directions east and west are accorded special significance, with east being related to the concept of 'inside' and west to the concept of 'outside'.

Ancestral spirits and the spirits of immortal parents (those related to both affliction and wellbeing) are known as spirits of the east. They are social spirits, primarily concerned with maintaining some semblance of moral order. Although temporarily disruptive, their affliction is designed to be ultimately corrective. These spirits are lineage spirits, with vested interests in the prosperity and stability of the household, and so are unlikely to cause extensive, unwarranted damage. On the whole, lineage spirits are considered to be benevolent. The east itself symbolises goodness, wellbeing and sanity.

Spirits of the west, by comparison, effectively represent all that the spirits of the east are not. These are the spirits of unburied persons - the bodies being thrown into the bush to be devoured by wild animals. As a result, they are excluded from the 'inside' - they are deemed antisocial and thus rejected. Indeed, classification as an antisocial or outside' spirit is directly contingent upon the activities of the person whilst alive (e.g. immoral behaviour), or else unusual circumstances of death (i.e. abnormally defined). Since spirits of the west are antisocial they are not concerned with maintaining social order, or even with society's successful perpetuation. Any misfortune they cause to the living is purely wanton and capricious, and may be malicious or just simply annoying. Not surprisingly, their apparent lack of reason has meant that spirits

of the west are usually blamed for causing insanity. Mad persons signify their condition by running erratically towards the west. Witches are most definitely regarded as antisocial beings and as such are socially outcast. Not only their destructive actions, but also the fact that they are purported to operate at night and socialise with wild, nocturnal and usually despised or feared animals, means that their association with 'outside', 'wild', 'strangeness' and the like is all the more certain.

Analysis of spirit category names reveals to an extent the Ovambo classification of spirits as belonging to either 'inside' or 'outside', 'culture' or 'nature', 'domestic' or 'wild' etc. The noun prefixes tell us much about how spirits may be conceptualised by people. In this regard, Brain (1973:123-4) has emphasised that "...the assignment of words to particular noun classes in Bantu languages is not at all fortuitous and is a definite reflection of the feelings of speakers about particular objects". He demonstrates how, for example, in Swahili the name for ancestral spirits - *muzimu* - is in a noun class usually associated with natural phenomena such as trees or rivers, rather than persons.

In the case of the Ovambo, there is some information relating to the structure of the Kwanyama and Ondonga dialects. The information is limited, but it allows us some insight into how the Ovambo classify their world. The noun prefix *omu-* is a prefix of class 1 nouns, to which persons belong (e.g. *omukadi*: woman). It denotes the singular. It may also, however, be a prefix of class 3 nouns, to which the species names of trees belong. *Ova-* is a prefix of class 2 nouns - persons again, and denotes the plural form. *Oka-* is the diminutive prefix of class 12 nouns, denoting small creatures and objects in the singular (e.g. *okadona*: child). When used of personal proper names, *oka-* may be derogatory, for example, *okakwanyama*: 'little Kwanyama person'. The plural of *oka-* is designated by the prefix *ou-*, which is also the prefix of class 14 singular and plural nouns. *Oi-* is a prefix of class 8 nouns, comprising things like *oikulya*: food, *oilya*: grain, and *oita*: warfare. Other nouns with this prefix are plurals of *oshi-*, the singular prefix for class 7 nouns. Nouns comprising class 7 are: (a) things - especially implements or instruments, (b) perjorative or derogatory of persons, or (c) denotative of language (e.g. *oshikwanyama*).

Although these data are scanty, it is obvious that the various kinds of spirits have been assigned to different noun classes, and thus are thought of differently. Only the lineage-ancestral spirits, the *ovakwamungu*, possess the same noun prefix denotative of persons. This is interesting because Brain tells us that in

Swahili, the distinction between living elders and ancestral spirits is made clear by the assignation of each to different noun classes, as indicated by the different noun prefixes: the former belonging to a person noun class and the latter to a non-person noun class (Brain 1973:123-4). In the Ovambo case, a distinction is made between 'person' and 'non-person' spirits. The ancestral-lineage spirits are assigned to a 'person' noun class. However, their supernatural status is conveyed by the stem *-mungu*, which means superhuman, thereby distinguishing them from ordinary mortals. The important aspect is the conception of ancestral spirits as social beings - their continued inclusion in social affairs despite their transition to another realm of existence.

All other spirits belong to non-person noun classes, or else possess prefixes which denote diminutive or derogatory classification. Thus we have: *oshipumbu/oipumbu*, *okangawiloingawi*, *okanikifa/ounikifa* - spirits which are all regarded as belonging outside of society, to a greater or lesser extent, and potentially threatening to its established order. These spirits are closely associated with the wild bush: they are believed to inhabit landscape features such as waterholes, groves of trees and the like. The household and cultivated areas are ritually protected against their intrusion, and persons wear prophylactic devices.

Although there is evidence to support the existence of classificatory dualism in Ovambo thought, I would not argue that the binary opposites comprising any given pair are always mutually exclusive and immutable. Certain dualistic categories may be less clearly defined and more fluid-like. Such an argument has been proposed by Marja Liisa-Swantz (1986:202) with reference to the spirit realm of the Mwambao Zaramo of Tanzania. She proposes that there is no absolute division of spirits into either good or evil, but rather that spirits have the capacity to be both. Which is not to say that spirits cannot be predominantly benevolent or predominantly malevolent, because they can. What is important is that they have the ability to be either one, in much the same way as do living persons.

The notion of essentially dualistic categories being potentially mutable will be further explored in the following chapter, in which I deal with the range of healing specialists and the basic ideology of healing itself. I hope to demonstrate, for example, that the line dividing healers and sorcerers is arbitrarily rather than clearly drawn, and also that the dualistic gender category male:female cannot be satisfactorily used to describe or classify all members of the medical profession. In the context of the medical domain we see the

very firm existence of a third gender category.