Chapter Five

MATERIA MEDICA

Remedies derived from plants form the basis of Ovambo therapeutics. Such remedies may be employed as a form of treatment in their own right or, as is often the case, in conjunction with mechanical healing devices (i.e. a cupping horn), or non-botanical healing substances (i.e. animal dung, blood). The administration of remedial substances is usually accompanied by the ritual healing actions of the *endudu* (healers) - the extent and elaboration of these depending largely on the character and severity of the illness in question.

The Powell-Cotton Collection contains 103 annotated botanical specimens which are used by the Ovambo for medical and pharmaceutical purposes. I am aware that in all probability the complete number of plants used therapeutically will actually exceed the number I will be dealing with here (for example, see Rodin 1985). Nevertheless, I believe that although the situation is far from ideal, there are sufficient data to allow for basic analysis which will serve, hopefully, as a stimulus for further research into this much neglected area of Ovambo culture.

In addition to medicines proper, small portions of plants are included in the construction of prophylactic devices (charms) that are worn on the person to ward off illness and promote health and wellbeing. On another, though related, level, plants are employed for propitiatory purposes in certain ritual circumstances, such as potting or the mining and smelting of iron - details of which can be found in Chapter 6 (D. Powell-Cotton 1936e, D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1937f).

For the present my concerns in this chapter will be primarily with: 1) analysing Ovambo plant nomenclature and classification principles, and 2) examining the different ways in which plants are actually prepared as remedies, together with the various forms of administration. With respect to the second objective, a separate section (Part III) will be devoted to the treatment of specific recognised symptoms, in order to demonstrate the interrelations between plant-derived remedies , mechanical healing devices, charms and

the ritual actions of the *endudu* that combine to form the healing process.

PART I

Plant Nomenclature and Classification

The preponderance of medicines which are plant-based necessitates some discussion of Ovambo classification of the plant domain in general. The purpose of this section, therefore, will be to describe some Ovambo principles of plant nomenclature and taxonomy in order to provide a background against which the use of plants in therapeutics can be examined. In particular, the names of plants, plant parts and properties and plant-based medicines will be analysed with attention given to both generic and specific terminology.

In many respects this exercise is limited by the character of the secondary source materials available. For example, the few botanical studies of Ovamboland rarely, if indeed at all, include the equivalent Ovambo terms. Conversely, ethnographic sources tend mainly to discuss plants in a fragmentary, rather than systematic, manner: i.e. in terms of subsistence, or therapeutics, or ritual employment, though nevertheless both Ovambo and botanical identifications are often recorded.

The Powell-Cotton material falls somewhere between these two data types: the collection of plant specimens by no means represents the entire range of plants in Ovamboland, yet there is a significant variety of medicinal plants with botanical identification obtained for most types. The Kwanyama-English Dictionary, compiled by Turvey (1977), has proved useful in providing Ovambo and both European vernacular and systematic botanical nomenclature for the plants and plant parts/properties discussed in the following two sections on generic and specific terminology. Turvey's work also provides the translations given here for the Powell-Cotton information on medicinal plants.

The presentation here follows the guidelines recommended by Jaques Barrau (undated), and draws on the pioneering work of Conklin (1967) and Berlin et al (1964). The work of Conklin has been found to be especially useful, though of course the objective here is not to attempt a detailed and extensive ethnobotanical investigation for its own sake. Rather a basic understanding of plant classification is sought in order to cast more light on the employment of plants in the medical domain.

GENERAL ETHNOBOTANICAL NOMENCLATURE

General Categories:

It appears that a single category, *oimeno,* denotes vegetation, all green plants and flora; this is then followed by a three-way subdivision into: a) *omiti* - trees, b) *oimbodi* - wild herbs, plants and weeds[1] and c) *omaidi* - grasses. These basic uninomials may on occasions be adjectively qualified to describe certain ecological, phenological or morphological characteristics of the plant(s) in question. Some examples include:

omti omindume: male or pollen bearing trees

omti haudi yaumuka: deciduous trees

omti ondjololo: conspicuous trees

omuti omhwelele: tall, solitary tree with long bare trunk

oshimbodi shiyahameka: noxious weed

It has been possible to elucidate from Turvey's dictionary (1977) at least 14 terms defining the habitat or situation of the above categories in the landscape; terms, in other words, indicating vegetation types such as:

elundu: savanna, conspicuous grassland on rising ground.

omwiidi: grassland, grazing area.

omufitu: mixed tree and shrub savanna/sandveld, dense bush.

oihapo: the green tree covering of a landscape.

engade: thicket, dense growth.

ofuka: general expanses of shrub, wilderness, woodland.

Furthermore, these general descriptive categories can be more specific in their designation, as shown in the case of *omano:* thorn bush thicket, *oxuluxwa: omufyati* (Mopane) thicket.[2]

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[1] No general term for cultivated flora yet found.

[2] Scientifically, these are not regarded as plant categories as such.

Plant Parts and Plant Properties:

Comparatively more information is available for this area of Ovambo ethnobotany. A rich vocabulary exists for the various parts of plants and for their particular properties, most terms (143 out of 155 specified in Turvey) being entirely restricted to use in relation to the plant world (i.e. plant-specific in linguistic terms). In order of predominance, classification is made on the basis of shape and form, texture, colour and other properties. Following Conklin, the terms have been arranged for explanatory purposes, under four headings: stems, roots/parts underground, leaves, fruit and flowers (1967:98); a full alphabetical list can be found in Appendix 3.

By and large, terms relating to parts and properties can be said to comprise 4 broad types:

(1) Those terms offering a most basic, general description of parts and properties:

omudi: root

efo: leaf

oiimati: fruit (collective term)

onemo: flower

ekiya: thorn

epeta: cortex/rind/bark

(2) Those terms that are specifically descriptive in that they indicate particular properties or characteristics (i.e edibility, sex, colour etc):

oshipapula: strand of green cortex or bark

omatonda: pollen bearing or male flowers

ombuto: collective name for edible bulbs; it precedes the specific plant type name, thus: *ombuto yanamukuto* **(Ceropegia pygmaea).**

omaxuku: general name for soft kernels in fruit stones.

(3) Those terms denoting parts or properties of specific plant types:

oshadi: bark of *omushadi* tree

eeshendje: root of *omushendje* tree

ombalavande: leaves of *omulunga* palm tree

ondunga: nut of *omulunga* palm tree.

(4) Those terms which are concerned with expressing plant and plant part morphology and growth stages. Altogether some 38 terms provide detailed formal distinctions between form and between various observable stages, the majority pertaining to fruit:

engongwa: unripe fruit

enghulya: partly ripe fruit

oshipele: shrivelling of fruit or corn by drought before fully ripe

ombeo: new leaf buds on trees

ombolo: decaying, rotting wood

eshinga: first cotylydon of *omulunga* palm tree.

NOMENCLATURE AND CATEGORIES FOR SPECIFIC PLANT TYPES[3]

To use Conklin's terminology (1955:114-118), Ovambo names of specific plant types are what could be defined as single, full word, basic names (appearing from the *data available* to possess no full word attributes), comprised of "simple units" (i.e. as opposed to "compound units": two hyphenated full words). Specific plant names occur predominantly in the form of "root morphemes": *-fimba, -kwiyu* (82[4]), and to a much lesser extent as "doubled disyllabic bases": *-kopakopa* (4), or "partially reduplicated bases": *-kenkena*

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[3] In addition to specfic plant nomenclature, Ovambo have some collective terms for groups of related plant types. I have so far been able to elucidate four, listed as follows:

endobo: the general name for aloes

eno/enghono/omunghono: the general name for all thorn bushes or trees (mostly **Acacia** spp)

omboo: the general name for various balsam/balm bushes **(Commiphora** spp)

omushe: General name for raisin bushes **(Grewia** spp; also the specific plant-type name for **Grewia flavescens).**

[4] Number of occurences.

(3).

Conklin has also drawn a distinction between what he has called "unmotivated" and "motivated" plant names: unmotivated names having no other basic meaning, as opposed to motivated names which describe morphological, ecological, phenological characteristics of plants, or else compare them with other objects (Conklin 1963:132, in Barrau pp.92-94). In the Ovambo case, specific names tend to be unmotivated, whilst general terms tend to include some motivated examples.

With regard to the latter, Conklin has argued that: "no true synonyms exist in a narrow sense, but that terms with overlapping areas of associated meanings are common in all languages". His examples from Hanunoo plant nomenclature indicate religious taboos and ritual and literary usage (1962:299-300). Of the 89 Ovambo specific plant-type names assessed here, only one appears to have a synonymous meaning: *omufimba* is the specific name for the tree **Dialium engleranum,** yet the term also designates a pregnant woman. The remaining 88 names seem to be unique to the plant world. Of the 155 terms listed, on the other hand, 12 at least can be seen to overlap in other contexts not defined as botanical (see Appendix 3), for example: *omuno,* which means germinating bud, but also embryo, or *omashini,* which means both latex and milk. The obvious semantic or symbolic association between the various meanings of one particular term is clearly evident.

Finally, a brief word regarding some examples of affixation, in particular some prefix types. Of the specific plant type names, the vast majority are distinguished by the prefixes: *omu-* or *omw-*. Both belong to what have been classified as Class 3 nouns, to which the species names of trees belong (Turvey 1977:92). Other prefixes worthy of mention relate more to the generic terms and are not neccessarily confined to plant designations as such (mind you, neither are *omu/omw):*

oka- : denotes smallness (e.g.okana:baby), plant examples include *okamufi:* grove.

olu- : generally a prefix of tall, slender objects, thus used of stems or tall, thin plants: *oluhati:* thin stick; *olumbunga:* reed,rush.

oshi- : a prefix of Class 7 nouns and indicative of: a) objects, instruments, b) perjorative or derogative of persons, c) languages e.g. *oshikwanyama*. I would say that plants bear

oshi- prefix type (a).

Nomenclature of Medicinal Plants

The ideas contained in this sub-section are very much working ones at this stage. The Powell-Cotton collection of Angolan (and Namibian) plants used therapeutically is examined in the light of information contained in the previous sub-section on specific plant nomenclature. Of the 103 specimens (see Appendix 4), 74 are complete with at least one Ovambo name, and botanical identification has been obtained from Kew for just 28.

An examination of Ovambo plant terms has shown the majority of them to be unique to the plant world (i.e. not used in other contexts), with the small group of overlapping terms expressing explicit symbolic or metaphoric association. On the other hand, however, names for medicinal plants reveal quite a different picture. For instance, the majority of names relate to the realms of illness and healing, or to (seemingly) dissociated phenomena, and not to the plant world as such.[5] The following examples may generate some notion of the kind of patterns emerging:

(a) The name is identical to that in the botanical context.

(b) The name relates to the body part affected, for example: *omutima,* meaning heart (cf below).

(c) The name is used in other contexts to denote certain material objects: *oshikomba:* broom, brush; *oshiumbo:* name of dwelling when owner has died; *eposha:* wire.

(d) The name implies a desired effect of the cure, or else perhaps indicates a characteristic of the illness, for example: *odiva* means speed or haste (four different plants used as remedies bear this name and they treat different illnesses also).

(e) The name is also that given to an insect, for example: *omhuka* is the general name for an ant.

(f) The name describes a physical condition, for example: *onhunda:* hunchback, hump; *onghadi* is derived from the noun stem *nghadi* implying ‘female’, and is usually used in relation to mated or bearing females (Turvey 1977). Interestingly, this particular remedy is used to treat pregnancy pains.

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[5] The exceptions here are names for medicine in general. These are strongly plant associated: *omuti* = tree and medicine, *omeva omuti* (tree water) = tree sap and medicine.

(g) The name describes a 'psychological' experience: *omhumakani* refers to conflict, clash of personalities, or disagreement. Used in the context of therapeutics, this term may be refering to the experience of illness itself, to the *cause* of the illness, i.e. a dissatisfied ancestral spirit, or perhaps to the anticipated conflict between the illness and the treatment.

The above list is thus far being regarded as open-ended, as it has not yet been possible to obtain translations for all 74 names. The problems encountered with translation attempts can be summarised as follows:

(a) I only have access to Kwanyama and Ondonga vocabularies and so am unable to check and translate other Ovambo (i.e. Dombondola or Ombandja) terms, unless these are offered in secondary sources elsewhere.

(b) It is quite probable that equivalent translations may not actually be possible (cf Conklin 1962, who has stressed the dangers of forcing this).

(c) Some of the plant names may in fact be those of neighbouring societies, with whom the Ovambo trade - such as the Tchokwe of mid-Angola who trade *mutololo* (medicinal powder) with the Ovakwanyama.

(d) Another possibility is that the names of medicinal plants may represent a kind of ritual or sacred knowledge used only by the *endudu*. More likely, perhaps, all members of society may attribute medicinal names to therapeutic plants that are quite different from the names used in botanical or other contexts. An example of this might be the medicinal plant part, *omutima,* mentioned earlier. *Omutima* actually means 'heart', and the plant part so named (a palm nut), is known botanically as *ondunga;* the palm nuts are used to treat lack of appetite due to depression, which is defined by the Ovambo as 'illness of the heart'.

In this regard it is useful to turn to Conklin, who has shown for Hanunoo plant classification that hierarchies of generalisation exist within the structure of plant nomenclature. Thus, depending on the context in which a question is asked, and the degree of specificity required, a whole range of answers may be offered about one particular plant (1962:299). This is the situation that may in fact be operating in the Ovambo case, whereby the Powell-Cottons, enquiring about plant names in the context of therapeutics, perhaps

received the medicinal name of a particular specimen but failed to record names at other levels. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the dictionaries used in this analysis are by no means complete in terms of plant vocabulary; no doubt a great many 'hierarchical' terms have been unintentionally excluded.

PART II

The Use of Particular Plant Parts

Ovambo medicaments basically comprise the following: the whole plant (including fungi), leaves, stems, roots, root skins, bark, pods, nuts, flowerheads, and fruit. A survey of the data shows that on average the whole plant and the roots are those most frequently employed.

Most plant parts are used singly to create remedies, although there are some symptoms which require treatment based on a combination of two or more parts (either from the same or from different plants). To give an example, the type of treatment for *oudu odila* (febrile convulsions) involves use of the whole plant *oghnanyadila,* whereupon the various parts are grouped into three definite therapeutic stages (distinguished by the *ondudu's* methods of preparation and administration).

Plant Preparation

The chosen plant parts are prepared using a variety of methods, which may themselves involve a number of stages. Briefly, initial preparations include: drying, cutting, peeling, breaking, pounding, crushing and crumbling. The resulting pieces, skins, powders and pulp, may then be either roasted or added to liquids such as water or beer. To a lesser extent the substances can be masticated, reduced to charcoal or ashes, or added to foodstuffs (porridge, butter).

The following section consists of an inventory of Ovambo medicine types, based on the Powell-Cotton botanical data for Ovamboland, Angola, together with summaries of the preparatory and administrative procedures pertaining respectively to each. For each medicine type the plants used will be listed, against the symptoms for which the remedy is designed (following Conklin 1955). The Powell-Cotton evidence is supplemented in Part III by information from secondary sources.

Medicine Types

There are at least eight different kinds of medicine used by the Ovambo (recorded in Turvey (1977)): *omuti wokukofifa* (sedative), *omuti wokupanuna* (laxative), *omuti wokupanukwa* (purgative), *omuti wokukoleka* (tonic), *omuti wombundu* (medicinal powder), *omuti wokuvelule* (curative medicine), *omeva omuti* (liquid medicine), and *omuti uokuvaua komunaudu* (embrocation). For analytical purposes, the various medicines will be discussed according to the form in which they are administered to the patient. Very broadly, medicines can be divided into two main groups: internally administered and externally applied.

Internal Administration

(a) Enemas

Enemas are undoubtedly the most popular form of administered medicine. They may be employed as part of regular health practice (i.e. a 'wash out'), or as an enema proper, wherein the liquid is retained for some length of time in order to: a) allow beneficial herbal properties to permeate the bowel walls for therapeutic effect, or b) induce purgative action (not neccessarily of the bowels, for e.g. the genitals). The liquid is administered using gourds and cattle horns in the case of adults (see Plates 20, 21), or small hollow reeds in the case of children (see Plate 22). The Powell-Cotton catalogue notes for enema appliances A37/357, A37/924, A36/351 and A36/352, suggest that adults administer their own, although the medicinal contents are normally prescribed by an *ondudu*.

Although no precise details are yielded in the Powell-Cotton material, Turvey does provide us with some insight into the procedure. To give an enema is known as *xupila omoodimba: xupila* = enema, whilst *omoodimba* indicates a crouching or kneeling position with the posterior uppermost (Turvey 1977). Both the *ondudu* and the child's mother administer enemas for children. The child lies face down across his or her mother's lap, and the mother inserts a tiny reed into the rectum. She next fills her mouth with medicated fluid from a gourd container, and proceeds to blow the fluid through the reed into the child's bowels. Soon after, the enema takes effect (see Plates 3, 4). Constipation is perhaps the most common reason for the employment of enemas, though a wide range of other symptomatic disorders are also treated.

The use of enemas does appear to be a pre-missionary practice. The Finnish missionaries were incredibly anti-enema, regarding their use as dangerous medical practice - particularly in the case of babies and children. Since the Finns were always the main missionary contingent in northern Namibia (the Germans were expelled early on) it seems unlikely then that enema-use was inspired by other missionary groups. There is no eveidence pertaining to French missionary attitude regarding enema-use in Angolan Ovamboland. The use of enemas seems to be very deep rooted in Ovambo culture. For example, enemas are the most popular way in which medicines are administered, for treatment of a whole variety of different conditions. Enemas also fulfil an important role in ritual: for example, ritual purification and ritual strengthening which are a necessary part of rites of initiation, large scale hunting, cattle raiding and so forth. In the ritual context the transmission of *enghono* ('positive energy') is facillitated by the use of enemas.

The Ovambo are by no means alone in esteeming the enema. Elsewhere in Africa, the enema has been used from "comparatively early times" (Lillico 1941:55). Lillico writes the enema-use is common to much of western, central and southern Africa. She discusses the various types of enema appliances, held at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, from West AFrica and the Belgian Congo. These wooden, ivory and gourd appliances were gradually being replaced by European syringes (1941: 56, 57). This would suggest that enema-use in these regions pre-dates any possible missionary influence, though nonetheless aspects of European enema-use were clearly being incorporated into the existing 'traditional' usage of enemas.

The Zulu were keen users of enemas for health maintainance, having recourse to about thirty different kinds of appliance (Bryant 1909). Loudon (1975: 4) also notes the Zulu's predisposition towards enema-use for health reasons, personal hygiene and sometimes to encourage an aphrodisiac effect. He states, however, that a link between African enema-use and the Victorian influences of missionaries regarding the bowels is unlikely.

Preparatory Methods

29 different plants are used to make enematic liquid. Aside from the whole plant, specific parts used include: roots, root bark, wood, wood bark, leaves and flowerheads. These are almost all pounded first, then

added to water which is normally hot to produce an infusion. Should the liquid be boiled (a decoction), it tends to be left to cool before administering. Some plant parts may be 'cooked' a little in water in order to release their properties successfully (see Appendix 5, Table 5.1).

(b) Oral Remedies

These can be broadly divided into two groups: (1) therapeutic beverages, and (2) substances which require chewing and/or ingestion.

(1) Therapeutic beverages:

These consist of:

(a) Tisanes (boiling water poured over plants to release extracts)

(b) Infusions (plant properties extracted by soaking in water)

(c) Decoctions (plants added to cold water and boiled to release extracts)

(d) Macerations (plant parts added to alcohol).

Some beverages are used either to soothe or fortify, having general beneficial effect. Most, however, display particular functions, such as emetics (causing vomiting), and purgatives and febrifuges (abating fever). Emetics and purgatives can be mild or strong, depending on requirements.

Preparatory Methods

28 plants are used to make beverages. In addition to the whole plant, specific parts include: roots, root skin, wood, wood bark, and twigs. The preparatory procedure is very similar to that for enema fluid, with the majority of plants being initially pounded. Exceptions include fungus, which is crumbled, and the twigs, which are used as they are - tied in a small bundle and added thus to the water. The plants are predominantly added to water, followed to a lesser extent by millet beer. In one instance cow's milk is added to the water, and the 'milk' from palm nuts is drunk as it is. Whereas most enemas seem to be of warm/hot liquid, beverages tend to be cool, and are administered under the supervision of the *ondudu* (see Appendix 5, Table 5.2).

(2) Chewed and Ingested Substances

10 plants are used for this type of remedy, the specific plant parts being mainly roots and wood. Some require little or no preparation prior to use, for example wood may be eaten dry, roots eaten when fresh and raw to release juices. Others may be specially dried or require soaking prior to eating, whilst there are those that are pounded and mixed with butter or millet or sorghum porridge (see Appendix 5, Table 5.3).

Externally Applied Remedies

This broad group includes ointments, pulps, powders and other mixtures used externally on the body. They are used particularly for visible disorders such as wounds, sores, swellings and rashes. Treatment is applied either specifically to the area affected or to the body as a whole. In addition to the whole plant (including fungus), specific plant parts used include: stalks, twigs, wood, bark, flowers, roots, root cortex, leaves and pods.

Preparatory Methods and Administration:

24 plants are used to create a variety of dressings - 6 main methods of preparation being distinguishable:

(1) The plant/part is pounded to powder or crumbled, then mixed with either a small amount of water (cold or warm) to form a paste, or a larger amount to be used as a 'wash'.

(2) The plant/part is pounded to powder and this is used dry to cover wounds, or is applied to wet skin.

(3) The plant/part is roasted until rendered to charcoal, then this is used. If rendered further to ashes, these are used.

(4) The plant/part is chewed to a pulp (by the *ondudu)* and spat onto the patient (usually into orifices).

(5) The pounded plant substance may be mixed with butter to form an ointment.

(6) The plant/part may be crushed or pounded slightly, then soaked until supple and rubbed over the body or affected area (see Appendix 5, Table 5.4).

Fumigants and Vapourisers

28 plants/parts are used as treatment in the form of: (a) smoke fume baths, or (b) vapour steam baths. The

patient receives these aromatic forms of treatment either by inhalation, or by absorbtion through the skin, or envelopment of the particular body parts affected (head, eyes, limbs and so forth).

Preparatory Methods and Application

Aside from the whole plant, parts used include: leaves, roots, stalks, pods, and twigs. Of the 28 plants/parts used for this type of healing, the majority (26) are used to create smoke fumes and the remaining 2 for steam baths.

Fumigants

The plants/parts are normally left whole, but may be pounded or broken up somewhat. Twigs tend to be added whole, tied in a small bunch. Next the plant substance is placed on a large pot sherd (or redundant hoe blade) together with glowing embers. The plant matter naturally smoulders, thereby producing the desired fumes (the fact that the plants are usually fresh helps to accentuate the density of smoke produced). The fumes are primarily inhaled by the patient, however they can also be used to envelope or be 'absorbed' by an affected body part. In the case of the latter, the ondudu holds the sherd with smouldering herbs below or near the area concerned, e.g. under an aching knee joint. Many of the plants/parts are aromatic.

Vapourisers/Steam Baths

Here the plant parts (stalks) are pounded initially before being added to a large clay pot containing water, which is then boiled. During the boiling stage the pot is normally kept covered, in order to contain the steam. The patient sits over the pot, head covered with skins to form a steam tent, allowing vapours to penetrate the area of concern. Incidently, both vapourisers are used to treat disorders of the eyes, probably because they are rather more gentle than smoke (see Appendix 5, Table 5.5).

Mechanical Medical Devices:

Plant-based remedies are administered with the aid of certain receptacles forming part of every *ondudu's* essential paraphenalia: enema gourds and reeds, gourd ladles, tortoise shell containers, bivalve shells and clay pots (and sherds). Other material objects seen to feature in healing sessions include cupping horns (for *sata,* blood-letting), snake-skin headbands and smooth, round pebbles. *Endudu* are normally adorned with

various objects embued with power and denoting ritual authority. All the above items are refered to further in Part III, in the context of specific treatment procedures for illness; for a list of objects see Appendix 4. Charms are frequently employed in healing and will be discussed briefly in the following section, and more fully in Chapter 6.

The Powell-Cotton material contains no reference to any form of surgery, other than the extraction and chipping of teeth (see Plates 5 & 6) for purposes of bodily adornment, and the secondary sources have yielded nothing in this regard. The absence of any surgical techniques, or at least the dearth of evidence in the available source material, is quite unusual for a cattle-owning culture. There is also, as far as I am aware, no available information to say why this is so.

Prophylactic Charms

In the case of certain types of illness, the healer may think it necessary to provide the patient with a 'charm' which will afford protection against the recurrence of illness, or perhaps impart strengthening qualities. Such objects usually take the form of wristlets or necklets: leather thongs, threaded with chosen pieces of roots or wood, together with feathers, claws, animal teeth and so on. Other charms take the form of belts made from flowers, or from strips of cattle hide folded over and sewn containing medicinal herbs. Another example is a type of hair ornament constructed from wildebeest mane. The *ondudu* will usually construct the charm to suit individual requirements at the time of healing, and the patient will wear it continually thenceforth for a specified length of time (anything from a few days to permanently). Alternatively, the *ondudu* may offer one of her or his own personal devices on the basis of short term loan.

The main use of charms, however, lies not in relation to illness as such, but in relation to the wider sphere of misfortune and fortune. Briefly, such charms are material objects - usually worn or carried upon the person - imbued with certain forces believed capable of generating particular favourable results for the bearer. They are commissioned from *endudu* by individuals, usually at a high price (i.e. one head of cattle), and fall broadly into two types: (a) those concerned with the prevention of misfortune, and (b) those concerned with the induction of fortune.

A more detailed discussion of these types of charms can be found in the following chapter, where I

examine the relationships between misfortune and fortune, and propitiation of the spirits in the context of social relationships. Those preventive or protective charms used specifically in association with the treatment of illness will be included in Part III, which deals with the treatment of specific symptoms.

PART III

The Treatment of Specific Symptoms and Illness

Having described the distinctive medicine types and material objects used in healing, I now propose to situate this information in the context of specific illness. This is primarily to demonstrate the variability in types of remedy that may be employed to treat one particular illness or set of symptoms (Part II dealt with the various symptoms/illnesses treated by one particular type of remedy). Furthermore, it may allow for some insight into the ways in which the plant-based remedies, ritual objects and actions of the healers combine to be operative.

As the treatment of illness appears to be predominantly curative in character, these remedy types will be presented first, followed by any prophylactic measures taken. The therapeutics relating to each particular illness are organised according to the Ovambo sub-group employing them, beginning usually with the Kwanyama since it is on these people that this thesis is predominantly focussed. This way the reader may achieve some notion of the variety and availability of therapeutics within Ovamboland.

References in the Powell-Cotton material on symptoms/illnesses are not always very specific, for example there may be a remedy recorded for 'chest illness' which could be anything from influenza to tuberculosis. Where specific illnesses are identified, they are provided with the equivalent Ovambo name. As mentioned earlier, it should be borne in mind that the following are essentially *symptoms,* as opposed to *diseases* in the biomedical sense of the word. Following an umbrella term, i.e. 'stomach illnesses', 'chest illnesses', is a list of possible recognised and named symptoms/illnesses. Not all Ovambo illnesses can be neatly equated with European definitions of illness, e.g. *oudu odila* or *akwamungu*. In the case of the former, a number of symptoms from different diseases (epilepsy, malaria etc.) are classified as one illness.

Chest Illness: Taiveli Ohnulo (Also Disorders of Nose and Throat)

Kwanyama:

[a] The root *oshidumisadumb* is chewed by patient when fresh, both day and night, allowing the juices to relieve cough symptoms *(omukolo)*.

[b] The root *omhumakani* is chewed by the patient, and the juices swallowed to cure coughing *(omukolo)*.

[c] Dung *(etudo)* is roasted by an *ondudu* and the smoke fumes *(omwifi)* are inhaled by the patient for illness of the chest *(taiveli ohnulo)*.

[d] To cure sore throat, an *ondudu* may proceed to whirl animal skins (usually that of **Genet genet)** above and around the patient, and to mark the latter's face and limbs with chalk. *Ominda* tusks of the wart hog are then clapped together over various parts of the patient's body. Next the *ondudu* begins to 'dance', shaking her gourd rattle *(osashi)*. The patient is given yellow powder, *emova,* or wood, *makindu,* to eat.

[e] The claw of a chicken is made into a charm *(oshiketi)* by an *ondudu,* to be worn by a woman with difficulty in breathing. Medicinal wood (not named by the Powell-Cottons) is given to her as well, together with the marking of her temples with chalk.

Ombadja (kambaja/Kwamatwi):

[f] A healer takes the root *omhukuludi,* from which a small piece is removed and pounded. A glowing ember is placed on the piece and the resultant fumes inhaled by the patient to aid difficult breathing.

[g] To cure a severe case of sore throat which prevents swallowing, an emetic may be administered. The plant chosen is not named in the Powell-Cotton notes, but it causes the patient to vomit *(osiundo)*. It is possible that the purpose of the emetic is to re-open the throat.

[h] A charm, *ochikeli,* consisting of a small wooden piece on a hide thong, was made by an *ondudu* for one man with a chesty cough *(taiveli ohnula),* to be worn around the neck.

[i] Ordinary water may be drunk from a large bivalve shell *(okamboo ko komolonga),* as a remedy for chest illness.

Dombondola:

[j] A bivalve shell *(onholo kofia)* is used to administer water, containing herbal medicine, to children with chest complaints.

Oudu Omtwe: Illness of the Head/Headache

Kwanyama:

[a] The plant *okaunjaghuti* is toasted with embers and the smoke fumes *(omwifo)* inhaled by the patient.

[b] The plant *omjaleli* is broken up into small pieces, then placed on a pot sherd with embers and roasted. The smoke is inhaled and is regarded as a cure for both adults and children.

[c] A small, round smooth stone *(emanya)* is soaked in cold water, then the solution is daubed by a healer on the forehead and temples of one suffering from headache.

Kwanyama/Evale:

[d] Two plants *(omti wovimbungo* and *ochowa sinika)* are used to treat problems of the head. In both cases the plants/parts are smouldered with embers on a pot sherd, the patient inhaling the smoke fumes.

Ukwambi:

[e] The root of *omohongo* is pounded, then added to cold water and drunk by the patient.

Dombondola:

[f] The plant/part *okafetati*/*okatati* is broken up somewhat then burnt; the smoke produced is inhaled by the patient.

[g] A cupping horn (see Plate 26) may be employed by an *ondudu,* if it becomes necessary to release pressure from the head region. Small incisions are made in the temples and the horns applied.

[h] A head band of snake skin *(omwia ombomi),* bearing also protective woods against lion, may be tied tightly around the patient's head (see Plate 27).

Omukota: Nasal Haemorrhage, anaemia (Ancylostomiasis.)

Kwanyama:

[a] The plant/part *okadimeti* is pounded and given in water, then a pod is roasted and the fumes inhaled

by patient.

[b] The pod *omkornati* is burnt, and the smoke inhaled.

[c] The leaves of the plant *okimadali*/*okundali* are roasted and the smoke inhaled by the patient.

[d] The plant *om'londeka* is roasted with embers on a pot sherd, the patient inhaling the smoke. Similarly, *omkor* (pod) and *omtutu* (twigs), are burnt and inhaled.

Dombondola:

[e] *Omukota* is treated using *omti hatuli* - a kind of wood. Firstly, the bark is bitten off by the patient and chewed (it is not made clear whether the substance is swallowed). Twigs are then added to the fire and the smoke is inhaled.

Ondonga:

[f] The *onganga* (healer) makes small incisions (1-1.5cm) over the whole, or part, of the patient's body. This procedure is carried out at regular intervals so that the blood is allowed to seep out slowly. This method of treatment is known in Ondonga as *sata*.

[g] The plant *okazimeti* may also be used in conjunction with *sata* treatment. Branches of the plant are either chewed or else pounded, mixed with water and then drunk by the patient[6]

[h] Nosebleeding, quite often *omukota,* may be cured by cupping (Justina Shivuta 1981:9).

Eye Disorders (Often symptoms of conjunctivitis, measles, gonorrea)

Kwanyama:

[a] A small bundle of twigs is added to a ceramic pot containing glowing embers; the smoke produced is used as a remedy for sore eyes (the patient sits over the fumes).

[b] For eye-related problems the plant *oluweti* may be used by the healer in two stages of treatment. Firstly, the healer chews the green leaves and stems to a fine pulp, which he then proceeds to spit into

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[6] Both (f) and (g) from Dr. Aino Soini 1953:33-34.

the eyes of the patient. This part of the treatment is carried out morning and evening for one day. Secondly, the remainder of the plant is pounded and then boiled in water. The patient sits over the pot, head covered, to allow the steam to penetrate or envelope the eyes.

[c] The plant/part *omte kauki* is used in a way similar to (b) above. The plant is pounded, added to water and boiled (with the pot covered to contain the steam). The patient sits over the pot, head covered, allowing the steam to penetrate or envelope the eyes. Next the eyeballs are felt (by the healer) causing "tears to fall" and the eyes thus become better.

[d] An *ondudu* uses the plant/part *omtentati* to cure sore eyes. The plant is smouldered and the smoke allowed to envelope the eyes.

Vale:

[e] The scented stalk, *odiva,* is pounded and added to water. This liquid is used by an old woman for sore eyes (the Powell-Cotton notes unfortunately do not record any method of application).

Dombondola:

[f] When a person suffers from sore, weeping eyes (conjunctivitis), duck bones or small pieces of finely woven cloth (worn around the neck on a hide thong) are used to wipe away any matter.

Ondonga:

[g] People who had sore eyes as a result of measles *(okakuenjene)* used various cures to alleviate the problem: soap, juice from aloe leaves, milk and cow dung (Dr. Aino Soini 1953:25).

Earache:

Kwanyama:

[a] A fibrous type of wood (no Ovambo name recorded) is pounded and added to a little cold water to form a paste. This is then inserted into the patient's ear(s) by the *ondudu*.

[b] A creeping plant may be used to cure earache: the white juice it produces is dripped into the ear hole (Erastus Shamena 1989, interview with author, FELM, Helsinki).

Ombandja:

[c] The bark *ompopo* is pounded and added to cold water. No details regarding method of administration have been recorded by the Powell-Cottons.

Dombondola:

Female potters observe certain ritual procedures prior to the first potting session of the season. These prophylactic or propitious procedures involve the use of herbs to ward off illness, including deafness among others. For more on this see the section below dealing with charms and prophylaxis and propitiation.

Ondonga:

The following sources relate details of the curing procedures for earache used by *Oonganga;* the first is by Justine Shivuta, an Ondonga woman of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, in Helsinki, and the second by Närhi, a Finnish missionary writing in the late 1920's.

[d] "Earache: it is cured with the axe and the stick of the diviner. The sick one sits with his brother by the fire. The diviner strikes the ground in front of the sick one with his axe and stick, watching the latter carefully. Then the diviner takes some ash and some water and smears the palm and index finger of his right hand. He points to all four directions and says: 'Did you notice? Your neighbour cursed the spirits of your mother, and made them rise from their graves to harm your sister'. Then the diviner locates the person who has caused the earache and tells him that 'gravy' has to be prepared from cakes of the oil plant. When the diviner receives the gravy, he throws it to the east saying: 'Take, the spirits of the east, take your food!' He then throws some to the west saying: 'Take, the spirits of shortage of the west, take your food'. When he leaves the place the diviner strikes the ground and says: 'You great spirits of the ground, take your food'! Finally, he takes gravy in both hands and throws it over the head of the sick one, so that it is running on his face and neck, saying: 'Spirits, take your food!' In this manner it was believed that the bad spirits of the disease would leave the ears and the diviner could return home. If, however, the earache continued then another diviner would be consulted and different treatment applied (Shivuta 1981:8-9).

[e] Närhi has recorded a procedure almost identical to Shivuta's latter account, only with the following additional details: If the first cure (i.e. like that above (d)) has no effect, then the patient is seen to have *iipakua* - a terrible animal that the spirit has left inside the patient's body. The healer proceeds to suck this from the patient - it may, for example, be a snake. A neighbour is accused of this by the *onganga* and is enticed into the home of the afflicted the following day. The neighbour will then be accused of being a witch and then killed if he does not flee (Närhi 1929:86-87).

Problems and disorders of the skin

Kwanyama:

[a] For a spotty skin disease, two types of treatment may be employed: (1) the stalk of a low plant *echip-cenda,* is pounded to powder and mixed with salt and *aejelala* (the rind of wild pumpkin: **Curcurbita moschata).** This mixture is soaked in cold water, then the resulting paste-like substance is rubbed over the patient's body by the healer. Alternatively, (2) the stalk of the plant *eumbua dambuda* is pounded with wild pumpkin *aejelala,* and added to cold water. The paste is then rubbed or massaged over the patient's body.

[b] For the treatment of pustules a knotty type of wood is employed (no name has been recorded). First of all this wood is charred before being rubbed over the affected area(s).

[c] For a swollen arm, a thorny twig of *okumin ninowa* is used. First of all the twig is chopped up into small pieces, then pounded. The powder is added to a little warm water to form a paste, which is applied to the swollen area.

[d] Swollen sores *(oshipute)* are treated with *shiveta,* a plant with tiny leaves and fruits. It is toasted whole until rendered to charcoal. This is then rubbed into the affected area to reduce the swelling; it is used best when dry.

[e] Open wounds or sores *(oshilonda)* are treated with the root of *oshikomba*. It is pounded slightly and added to warm water, before being carefully applied directly to the wound or sore. Finally the affected area is covered with a little fine, dry powder.

[f] Unbroken swellings require the use of the plant *okaghono*. This is roasted with embers on a pot sherd owned by the *ondudu*. The resulting smoke fumes are held under, or up to, the swollen area. When the plant remains have been reduced to charcoal, they are then massaged into the affected area.

[g] In the case of head sores *(ombole:* contusion on the head, *oufuma:* ringworm of head), *okundali* is roasted on a pot sherd with glowing embers until reduced to ashes; these are then applied to the sores.

[h] For swelling of the face *(ompindiowa),* a particular root (no Ovambo name recorded) is crushed when fresh, soaked in water, then rubbed over the swollen area.

[i] *Enongo,* a species of aloe, produces a white sap which is used to treat wounds *(oshiveta)* (E. Shamena 1989).

[j] Aloe pieces are used to heal gums after extraction of lower incisors.

[k] Sores may be covered with powder made from pounded twigs, *lulu*.

[l] *songo,* a prickly type of flowering plant, is used to heal very swollen feet (most likely the result of stepping on thorns - a common hazard in Ovamboland).

Ombadja:

[m] For skin sores the root of *opapa,* is chosen by the *ondudu*. The cortex of the root is removed, dried and pounded to powder. The skin of the patient is wet with water and the powder applied.

Dombondola:

[n] One particular *ondudu* carried *omwifu wendudu werokulia,* a yellow tomato-like fruit, which was kept in a tortoise shell (see Plate 23). He used it for sores in general, but in particular he split and squeezed the fruit into his own cracked heels *(olufindja)*. The fruit leaves a yellow stain behind *(etululu)*

Ondonga:

Certain mechanical devices may be employed in the healing of wounds. The following examples are from the Martti Rautanen Collection, National Museum of Finland, Helsinki (NMF.MRC), and the Ovambo Collection of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Museum, Helsinki (FELMM.OC).

[o] *Omuti guosilalo* is ‘wood that heals wounds’. In this case a few are strung on hide thong and worn on some part of the body. The twigs are believed to possess a healing ‘force’. The spirits of witches are blamed as the cause of people injuring themselves against objects, and in order to remove their effect powder, scraped from the wood, is placed in the wounds until the danger passes (NMF.MRC:115).

[p] *Ositi siilalo* are ‘wooden pieces for wounds’ having the same effect as (o) above, although the method of use is different. Wooden pieces such as these are heated in the fire, then pressed into the wound to cauterize it. They are used especially for spear or arrow wounds (i.e. small but deep). (NMF.MRC:124, FELMM.OC:50).

Internal Aches/Pains in Bones

Kwanyama:

[a] For internal pains in the leg *(haivela omaulu)* the plant/part *oshingokoto* is roasted. The leg is positioned over the smoke fumes to allow them to envelope the painful area. The charcoal remains of the roasted plant are then massaged *(fula)* into the skin.

Dombondola:

[b] The plant *ohomo* is roasted for "pain in the bones", the smoke fumes being allowed to penetrate aching legs, knees and groin.

[c] For pain in the lumbar region *(haivela ombuda)* flowers, *etope,* are first of all warmed by the fire before being masssaged over the painful area. Any remaining flowers are worn around the waist with some hanging down behind.

For prevention of *emhiakani* (illness of the knee joints) see the section on ‘prophylaxis and propitiation’; for stomach ache and menstrual cramp and pregnancy pain please see relevant sub-sections below.

"Illness of the Heart": Omutima and Ondurudi

There are a number of symptoms: lack of appetite, depression, lethargy, fatigue, that are known as "illness of the heart": *omutima*. The heart is recognised as the seat of the emotions - both good and bad. Physical heart conditions and hypertension are also not uncommon among the Ovambo (Odendaal Report

1962-3: 133, 135, paras 524-529), thus "illness of the heart" may refer either to emotional or to physical pain (including palpitations and heart burn).

Kwanyama:

[a] Lack of appetite, due to the 'heart', is treated by pounding the root of a ground creeper *oshikanda shefuma,* and adding the powder to water. The liquid is heated in a clay pot, then added to more warm water and drunk by the patient. The liquid acts as an emetic, thus causing the patient to vomit. If the remedy is administered in the morning, the patient will be well by the evening. This could be a form of depression (e.g. *eudifonya:* meloncholy, low spirits, depression), or perhaps heart-burn *(xuex-uema, oshingulila).*

[b] The plant/part *dindilula* is pounded and added to water. The herbal liquid is then used to wash the patient's body, and some is administered as an enema. This remedy is employed to cure people feeling run-down or depressed.

Dombondola:

[c] For "heart sickness", two palm nuts, *omtima,* are taken and cut in half by the *ondudu,* who hands them to the patient so that she or he may drink the 'milk' they contain. Following this the *ondudu* taps the patient's body from head to toe with the nut shells. The Powell-Cottons also record that ordinary water may be drunk from the palm nut shells as a remedy.

[d] A certain root (Ovambo name not recorded) can be either chewed, or taken in hot water (presumably as a beverage), by a person suffering from *ondurudi:* 'heart'.

[e] The plant/part *omwifo* is pounded and mixed with butter; this mixture is then eaten for the 'heart'.

Fever: Oludi, Epupialo:

Usually fever is treated in association with other illnesses (i.e. *oudu odila);* nevertheless, the following cases stand out:

Kwanyama:

[a] A female *ondudu* collects grass, *omwatagnwota,* which is burnt and the smoke fumes inhaled by the patient.

[b] *Matiunto* wood is used as a febrifuge: it is added to water and drunk by the patient in order to reduce feverishness.

[c] The plant/part *elwiai/elwidi,* is pounded and added to hot water. The medicated liquid is then administered as an enema to feverish babies.

[d] A necklace made of seeds and prescribed by an *ondudu,* was worn by an Ondonga woman living among the Kwanyama near Mupa.

Oudu Odila: 'Bird Illness' - Febrile Convulsions

The treatment of *oudu odila* in small children is rather intensive and involves a number a different curing procedures, both curative and preventive.

Kwanyama:

[a] *Ohunda,* a species of aloe, is chosen by the *ondudu*. It must be the main plant growing (i.e. not one of the plantlets growing nearby). First, the leaves are stripped from the stem and pounded to a pulp which is added to hot water. Using an enema (a hollow reed) the medicated liquid is administered to the child. Next the root is separated from the plant and chewed by the *ondudu* until soft and pulpy. This pulp is then spat into the nostrils of the unconscious child, who then hopefully sneezes *(ontwanhisa)* and revives. The enema and liquid are left with the child's mother.

[b] The plant *oghnanyadila* may also be employed. To begin with, the *ondudu* places some of the plant on a pot sherd together with glowing embers; the smoke fumes are inhaled by the afflicted child. Next some of the plant is chewed to a pulp by the *ondudu,* and this is placed in the ears and nostrils of the child. Finally, the remainder of the plant is pounded and added to warm water to be used as a purgative enema.

[c] *Oshikanda shognoshi* is pounded and added to warm water. Some of the liquid is administered using

an enema, whilst the rest is given to the child to drink.

[d] The plant/part *musengi* may be used to treat *oudu odila,* but unfortunately the Powell-Cottons have recorded no further information about this.

[e] *Kapata* is added to boiling water in order to create vapours, which are inhaled by the child. When the same liquid has cooled somewhat, it is administered using an enema.

[f] The plant named *odiva* (meaning 'quickly') is pounded and placed on a pot sherd with glowing embers; the fumes are inhaled by the child.

[g] A protective charm embued with prophylactic qualities can be constructed for children by *endudu,* in order to protect them from *oudu odila*. For example portions of the plant *ohunda,* together with feathers of the *onghombe* bird (Ground Hornbill) are bound together and worn at the neck on hide thong.

A male *ondudu* named Kaweda (from the Kalondo district near Onjeva), divulged that many forms of remedy are used to treat *oudu odila,* and that it is often necessary for an *ondudu* to employ several before achieving therapeutic results (D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1936/7a:7).

Dombondola:

In the event of a child becoming afflicted by the *onghombe* bird, an *ondudu* will be requested and the following healing procedure employed:

[h] First of all the thick, knobbly stalk of the *omatwi okalimba* plant is selected. When green this is chewed by the *ondudu* and the pulp spat into the child's ears, nostrils and mouth. If the stalk is dry, then it would be pounded first, then chewed as above. Next, *om'pindo wongali* and *ombada* (meaning 'paralysis') are roasted together in a clay pot, the child inhaling the smoke fumes. Finally, a pair of wart hog tusks *(ominda)* (see Plate 29) are placed in the pot containing the smouldering plants. The *ondudu* then removes the tusks and, clapping them together, passes them over the child's body saying: "*Oghombe pitamo mokana!*" (Bird, leave the child!").

[i] The single claw of a river bird, *onyundu* (stork), may be used by the *ondudu* to gently scratch the afflicted child's face, whilst at the same time whistling softly with a small duiker horn to cure.

Evale:

[j] Wart hog tusks *(omaj/ominda)* are used to treat *oudu odila*.

Ombadja:

[k] Wart hog tusks are used by the *ondudu,* also the claw of an *onghombe* bird. The claw is gently stroked down the cheeks of the afflicted child.

Ondonga:

The following information comes from Finnish missionary sources relating to *onzila:* "illness of the cramps". It is possible that *onzila* is a different illness from *oudu odila*. However, it is discussed within the same section because of the profound similarities:

[l] Justine Shivuta relates that when a child has 'cramps', a diviner is called to the household. He will arrive the following day since he has to have intercourse with his wife that night. If he has no wife then the parents of the ill child must have intercourse. According to the diviner, the illness called 'cramps' only fears sexual intercourse. Arriving at the household the diviner announces that meat cannot be eaten because this exacerbates the problem. He then proceeds to take the ill child and throw him/her many times into the air, catching as he/she falls. Next the child is thrown on to the roof of the sleeping hut, so that he/she will slide down the thatch to be caught at the bottom. The diviner then takes the child with one hand, and with the other he holds the 'cramp whistle' into which he blows. In addition he spits high into the air.

Furthermore, the diviner takes palm leaves ("...there is a belief that spiritual power resides in palm leaves"), and waves them in front of the child; at this very moment, the spirit of convulsion (the cramps) is leaving the child. When the diviner stands at the outer entrance to the household, he lets the child pass twice between his legs before handing him/her over to the parents. Finally, the child's face is covered with ashes, then he/she is given an enema of water that has been boiled with herbs (Shivuta 1981:7-8).

[m] Närhi (1929) reports the curing of *onzila* in almost exactly the same way as Shivuta, with one noticable difference: tobacco and some kind of strong herb (not named in the source) are placed on a pot sherd and roasted; the smoke is allowed to waft over the child's face.

Okandongo: syphilis and Oshinena: gonorrhea

Kwanyama:

[a] For males with venereal disease, the root *omohongo* is powdered and mixed with porridge. This is then eaten by the patient.

[b] For men with urine containing pus *(otuila),* the root of the creeper *om'popola* is pounded, added to water in a clay pot and then boiled. The liquid is left to cool a little before being administered via an enema. This remedy acts as a very strong purge, draining out all the pus.

[c] For men "ill in the penis", the tree root *omdiku* is dried, pounded to powder and mixed with beer. This maceration is then placed under the sun for an entire day and drunk by the afflicted man in the evening. The remedy is reputed to purge well.

[d] The root of the plant *onolulu* is pounded and added to hot water. It is administered using an enema, to women suffering pain from 'blood in urine'.

'Blood in urine' (hematuria) need not necessarily be a symptom of venereal disease, as it can also denote Bilharziasis and Ancylostomiasis - both common in Ovamboland, particularly near the *oshanas*. Another symptom of Bilharzia is the presence of blood in the stools, a symptom which the Ovambo recognise and have a name for: *oshingholokwa*. However, no curative procedures for this have been recorded by the Powell-Cottons, despite the fact that the occurrence of these symptoms is quite common.

Menstruation, Pregnancy and Childbirth

Kwanyama:

[a] A woman who has suffered many miscarriages *(epitililepo)* and who is about to bear another child, will go to an *ondudu* for help. At the household of the *ondudu* the following treatment is received. Firstly the pregnant woman is given some medicated water, from a clay pot half sunk into the floor area. The liquid contains the following herbs or plant parts: *imodi* and *omfikamekia* (leaves), *omolifia* (root) and *ombongululu* (the wood of a spreading ground plant). Alongside the sunken clay pot, two fairly large holes had been dug, joined together by a narrow channel. In one hole burns a fire, whilst

in the other sits the woman with her legs apart, facing the former. The smoke from the fire travels along the channel, enters her womb, and thereby effects a cure (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:86).

[b] For pains experienced during pregnancy, the plant/part *onhadi* is pounded and added to warm water. An *ondudu* leaves the plant with the woman, with instructions for it to be used with an enema when she wakes with pains. *Ngola* may also be used in a similar way; it is added to cold water and administered via an enema.

[c] If the foetus *(omtelefi)* is found to be malpresented in the womb, then the root of *omhilo yoghnadi* is pounded and added to water. The liquid is drunk by the pregnant woman.

[d] If, following the birth *(edalo),* the placenta *(oshitungo)* is slow in discharging, the plant *edulumwifi* is chosen. The root is pounded, then added to cold water and drunk by the new mother. The placenta should then be quickly expelled from the womb. Estermann (1976:58) also mentions the use of dried aloe blossoms for hasty expulsion of the placenta, together with the fact that the infant's navel is 'washed' with the roasted fruit of the shrub *omupeke* **(Ximenia americana)**

[e] For menstrual cramp *okatululu* may be pounded, added to hot water and given as an enema.

Ombalantu:

[f] Hahn recorded that if the placenta is not expelled satisfactorily, the mother is given a therapeutic beverage containing the outside or underbark of the green Kameeldoorn tree. The bark is first pounded and stamped before being soaked in hot water. The resulting sap-based infusion is drunk, causing coughing and "billious heavings of the stomach". The root-bark of the Kameeldoorn tree may also be used for the same purpose, according to the choice of the midwife, *omlungeri*. There are also alternatives to the Kameeldoorn tree, but Hahn was unable to obtain any information relating to them (Hahn, Abortion MS:3-4).

Ombadja:

[g] For a young girl with abdominal pains (menstrual cramp), an *ondudu* made a necklet *(eshundu)* consisting of a leather thong, bearing a fibre-bound wooden piece smeared with red *olukula*.

[h] Saheus Iikutu (one of Emil Liljeblad's informants) states the following names of plants used to make a powder to expel the placenta: *enongo* (wood), *nisinys* (tree root), *ompundu* (tree root), a type of aloe, and *omugola* (tree root). (E.Liljeblad Collection 1954, item 262:606).

Abortion

Although not an illness, abortion requires certain medical supervision and various plants and mechanical devices are employed in the process of procuring miscarriage. The most comprehensive documentary account of abortion has so far come from the unpublished work of the Native Commissioner for Ovamboland, C. Hahn. The practice of abortion was actually quite a secretive one, usually taking place in a neighbouring district or even sub-group area (i.e. Kwanyama girls going to Ondonga). The secrecy is especially crucial in the case of pre- *efundula* women, because of the fact that inclusion in the transition rite depends on their having had no pregnancies (the *efundula* 'legitimises' female generative power). It is not untoward to suppose that abortion is rather a last resort, given that: a) mothers impart much information to their daughters on how to evade pregnancy whilst sleeping with men, and b) that female fertility and offspring are so highly regarded in the Ovambo matrilineal system.

Ondonga and Kwanyama:

> "A sharp stick was inserted and as soon as contact was established with the foetus it was prodded and pierced. This operation was generally undertaken after the foetus had formed and was about four months old, but often before reaching that age according to its development. If it did not come away of its own accord after this operation, the patient was given herbs to drink" (Hahn, Abortion MS:2).

Hahn is of the opinion that the above method is perhaps one of the oldest (although he gives no clear indication of how old), and that women often suffered detrimental after effects. More satisfactory, and certainly less hazardous, was the method practiced among the Ombalantu described below.

Ombalantu:

When pregnancy is in the third or fourth month (or more) the following steps are taken:

> "1) The patient is at first starved for approximately one day. She is allowed to take a little water only

and is then examined by the *omulungeri* (abortionist) so as to ascertain the position and state of development of the foetus. For this examination she must lie on her back with her knees drawn up. 2) After the *omulungeri* has satisfied herself she commences massaging and pressing, the fingers of both hands held stiffly and closely together. This always in an upward direction. This pressing and prodding gently becomes harder and more severe. The patient remains lying in the position already described. After this the *omlungeri* employs her thumbs on either side of the patient working from the outside, namely from the liver on the one side and the spleen on the other towards the regions around the navel. This operation is at first employed gently but more and more pressure is gradually exerted. The object being to work and massage in such a way so as to procure the foetus, if this is palpable, between the thumbs and to squash it. This operation is repeated at intervals and the patient, while in the hands of the *omlungeri,* is not allowed to eat. She is kept under close observation at the time. When the patient is attacked with severe pains and there is bleeding, the *omlungeri* prepares to assist the patient to abort by further rubbing and massaging of the abdominal parts. A patient is sometimes in the hands of the *omlungeri* for one to five days" (Hahn, Abortion MS:2-3).

Birth

During a normal birth, a woman would be attended by her mother, a close matri-kinswoman and perhaps a 'midwife' (these have various names from group to group). Hahn records that prior to and after the confinement, expectant and new mothers are placed in a hole in the ground filled with hot water. Bunches of grass are made into a rough sponge then dipped into the water and held around her abdominal region and other parts of the body. This is done in order to soothe and strengthen her (Hahn, Abortion MS:5-6).

Charms are frequently used by women during pregnancy and during lactation; they are also worn by the newborn. The majority of the charms appear to be for strength and protection, as well as for ensuring the prevention of illness. Unfortunately, the information pertaining to these objects is not more specific (i.e. what exactly do they seek to protect mothers and babies from? What kind of illness do they attempt to prevent?):

Kwanyama:

[a] The root of *onuhanana* is worn by women during pregnancy and then by the new born child for strength and protection.

[b] A wristlet *(ehangi)* is worn by mothers for the duration of lactation (hide thong with wood threaded [P-C.A36/1136]).

[c] Women may use a certain plant during labour to save their lives should they have slept with another man during pregnancy (Loeb 1956:151).

Evale:

[d] Women wear coloured beads *(oshilanda)* during pregnancy as some sort of charm. However, the specific purpose is not recorded. Yellow and green trade beads decorate one end [P-C.A36/880].

Ombadja:

[e] Women wear a belt, *oshipunduka,* decorated with medicinal woods, eggshell beads *(onjiva)* and iron beads *(oputu)* etc. It is made for a woman by an *ondudu* for her to wear during her pregnancy and while the child is young [P-C.A36/777].

[f] Hide belt tapering from centre towards narrow ends. It is decorated with five fibre plaques and *onjiva* beads and discs. Made for a pregnant woman by an *ondudu*. She may also wear it while the child is young [P-C.A36/774].

Oudu Medimo: Disorders of the Stomach

Perhaps the most common of all Ovambo illness complaints relate to the stomach; the remedies are numerous and equally variable in character.

Kwanyama:

[a] For severe constipation *(enjadja)* and distension of the stomach a bi-part remedy may be employed. Firstly *m'dime* (the root) is dried over a fire. The cortex is then peeled away with a knife and pounded in a mortar. Next the powder is added to a little warm milk and water, then drunk by the patient. This

constitutes a half dose and acts as both an emetic and a purgative. When the patient has been thoroughly purged, the second part of the treatment is administered. Here the root *katadidi* is used. It is a root that pounds well and the powder is added to cold water, stirred, then drunk by the patient. This liquid contains no purgative qualities, perhaps being employed to counteract those of *m'dime*.

[b] For a more gentle purgative for constipation *(enjadja),* the plant/part *andu* is pounded and added to hot water, then administered via an enema. Alternatively, the plant powder can be added to warm water and drunk.

[c] The root of *onjangwa* can be pounded whole and added to hot water. The liquid is administered via an enema, and exudes a mild purgative effect.

[d] The bark of *shifuku* (root) is pounded and added to hot water. This is administered using an enema, having a mild but not purgative effect.

[e] The plant *okatululu* is pounded whole and added to hot water, the liquid then being administered as an enema. The notes say this remedy is for both an enema and for menstrual cramp.

[f] Another mild purgative is obtained using the root of the creeper *omnyangashe*. The root is initially pounded, then added to hot water and given as an enema.

[g] For constipation in children the plant *efeta* is pounded, added to hot water and given as an enema.

[h] For lack of appetite *oshikanda shefuma* (creeper root) is used as an emetic.

[i] For constipation in children the small plant *onjangwa* is pounded, added to hot water and given as an enema.

[j] Babies that are especially thin are given a purgative enema of the root *oshimham'tende*. The root is pounded and added to warm water. Next the leaves are pounded and mixed with butter to form ointment, which is then massaged over the child's body.

[k] For stomach ache *eposha* (wood) is pounded and added to hot water to be given as an enema. It is not a purgative, so perhaps relieves pain.

[l] For stomach trouble a bundle of *ochitenda* roots are boiled in water and taken (?drunk) as a purgative.

[m] Medicinal powder, *mutololo,* was obtained from Tchokwe traders in the Mupa/Evale area. It is eaten for stomach ache *(kesaulua),* though it does not contain purgative properties.

[n] A necklet bearing two *endow* roots, fruits and eggshell, *onjiva,* beads. The roots are nibbled for sickness when required. Such necklaces are made for people by *endudu*. (P-C.A36/826).

Ukwambi (Namibia)

[o] A plant root (no name in the notes) is cut slightly, then added to millet beer and drunk when sick in the stomach *(ekishi nananga)*.

Dombondola

[p] Illness in the sides (as opposed to centre) of the stomach is treated by an *ondudu,* who scratches the patient's sides with a clawed foot of the *ekakala* bird. The foot is then given to the patient to wear for a few days.

[q] *Omhuka,* a fungus-like hard crumbly substance, is found near the site of a river. A piece is broken off and crumbled into a palm of water. Some of this mixture is supped, the remainder is massaged into the abdomen. This treatment is for pain from 'cold food' or from overeating (?indigestion, *onondodo)*.

[r] Small pieces of wood and roots worn on thongs around the neck are very popular among the Dombondola. Used especially by herdsboys and travellers, the medicinal pieces can be nibbled when suffering from stomach sickness - notably constipation (Powell-Cotton specimens: A36/1433, A36/808, A36/804, A36/813, A36/1122). These necklaces bear other objects such as duck bones for cleaning weeping eyes (conjunctivitis), or tweezers for the removal of thorns, splinters etc.

Akwamungu: (spirit affliction/possession)

Treatment for this varies greatly depending on the scale of affliction. Symptoms vary also with the circumstances in which *akwamungu* occurs. For instance, those people who manufacture pots and iron will be at risk from deafness, blindness, arthritis etc. Neglect of calendrical rites can invite *akwamungu* in the form of arthritic knees. Most domestic and economic tasks run the risk of being disrupted by either ancestral or

malevolent free spirits. In this case the water pot would be upset, rather than the person made ill. All of the above mentioned are normally dealt with using *preventive* means: propitious acts, the wearing of charms, maintaining appropriate behaviour and so forth. Serious spirit possession, requires *curative* treatment. Because spirit possession is also regarded as a sign of being chosen as an *ondudu,* the full process of treatment-cum-initiation is discussed in Chapter 4. For those afflicted who do not wish to become *endudu,* the healing procedures will be presented below. Preventive measures employed against *akwamungu* are dealt with in the following chapter.

Akwamungu can affect women during labour, causing difficulty with the birth. An *ondudu* is engaged to divine the cause of the problem and name the displeased spirit. In one case, witnessed by the Powell-Cottons, the spirit of Hamunjungo's father had entered the former's wife. As soon as the child was born, Hamunjungo said: "*Tu (ritual spit), akwa mungu*", and named his baby son *Kaiyamiso,* after his father. No mention is made in the field notes of any herbal medicines being used, yet the possibility that they are should not be ruled out.

The curing of actual possession involves the type of offering to the ancestral spirits known as *ohula*. *Ohula* is literally a blood offering, as opposed to the inanimate, grain-based, offering known as *esaagelo*. *Ohula* is the ultimate in 'food' for the ancestral spirits, and is normally offered only in cases of serious illness or misfortune. Curing of *akwamungu* for non-initiates involves the sacrifice of a fowl only as *ohula*. Those who welcome the call to the healing profession, and who pass certain preliminary tests (i.e. perceiving the hidden monkey-nut), must embark on a four-part healing/initiation sequence involving four types of *ohula:* fowl, dog, goat and ox. The ox, pure black in colour, is the the most prestigious animal offered, and certainly someone aspiring to this level of initiation would be regarded as exceedingly powerful, enjoying similar status to the rainmakers *(alokithi).*

Returning to the curing of non-initiates, the procedure runs briefly as follows. The *ondudu* is requested to divine the spirit's identity and determine the reason for affliction. This discovered, there follows a complex ritual involving the administration of herbal medicines, trancing, and animal (blood) offerings. The *ondudu* draws the spirit out of the afflicted person (not in control) into herself to be controlled and dealt with (appeased and returned to the spirit world). Mediumism allows for *exposure* of the spirit, the

ondudu 'miming' the character for the benefit of observers (usually kin and close neighbours).

Much of the treatment following transference of the spirit seems to be restorative: the drinking of blood, massage, the wearing of protective and strengthening charms and so on. During the healing session the *ekola* is played. These are huge musical instruments used only during the curing of spirit possession, and are made from two joined calabashes acting as deep resonators for the rasp bow. No use is made of drums proper (insofar as I know), unlike the neighbouring peoples such as the Himba, Vakwandu, etc. Once 'exorcised' the spirit cannot re-possess the person, but is free to possess someone else. As stated above, the meaning and symbolism of this elaborate healing procedure has been more closely examined in Chapter 3.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

An investigation of Ovambo plant nomenclature has shown that the terms used for specific (terminal) plant names tend to be confined exclusively to the plant domain, and are not used for other categories. In the case of general botanical nomenclature, however, especially those terms describing morphological or phenological characteristics, some overlapping use of terms in other contexts does exist. However, even though a general botanical terms may be used in another context, obvious semantic association is revealed in terms of the respective designations. Generally though, the majority of general terms are used only with reference to the plant domain.

When considering the nomenclature of medicinal plants one is confronted with a rather different situation, in that the occurrence of synonymous (overlapping) terms is widely prevalent. Contrasting greatly with general plant nomenclature, and to a large extent with general ethnobotanical terms, the names of medicinal plants bear little or no relation at all to the Ovambo botanical domain (except in the case of certain 'umbrella' terms: *oshimbodi:* medicinal herbs; *oiwanga endudu:* healing herbs). A possible explanation for such an apparent discrepancy might be that which Conklin found for Hanunoo plant nomenclature: namely that hierarchies of generalisation within the structure of plant nomenclature are operative (Conklin 1962). Thus the name of particular plant may vary, depending on the context in which it is either refered to or used (i.e. domestic or therapeutic for example). Berlin et al (1964), for example, have highlighted the fact the Tzeltal may name the same plants more than once, for general-purpose and for special-purpose (e.g. medical) classifications. Until more evidence has been gathered regarding the translation of Ovambo

terms on the one hand, and the identification of specimens in systematic botanical terms on the other, the application of Conklin's hypothesis to the Ovambo data will remain largely unproven.

The body of plant data analysed here is noticeably small when measured, for example, against the wealth of informaiton discussed by Conklin and Berlin, who worked in the humid, flora-rich tropics.[7] This is the result of two main factors. First of all, the field objectives of the Powell-Cottons did not include a complete ethnographical survey of Ovamboland. Secondly, the availability of plants in Ovamboland is undoubtedly governed to a large extent by the often extreme ecological conditions of the area - south Ovamboland (Namibia) in particular is largely semi-desert and the victim of frequent drought.

Climate and topography play a crucial role in the determination of an area's flora. The Bie Plateau, Angola, for example, is rich in highland flora. It is not a high plateau, but the fact that it drops away to an Atlantic coast means that several unique species are sheltered on the ecologically stratified escarpment - two very different habitats have produced interesting flora at the point where those habitats meet (Kingdon 1990:167). Similarly, the fantastic flora of the Cape is the product of "peculiar and diverse soils, fire and relatively moderate Pleistocene climatic fluctuations" (Cowling 1992:viii), with the present day climate - interaction between dry cold from the west, moist warmth from the east and winter rain and snow in the extreme south - continuing to have effect. Only the most adaptable of plants (and animals) have ovecome the natural barriers which isolate the Cape from tropical Africa (Kingdon 1990:50).

In Namibia, the climate changes little from north to south, but rapidly from west to east: the west coast is cold and foggy, whereas inland it is hot and arid. Between these two extreme is a zone characterised by hot days and cold, foggy nights with little rainfall (Kingdon 1990:65-66). Most Namibian Ovambo live within this zone. Rainfull is crucial, and its effect on vegetation in this part of Africa means that the boundary between green areas and semi-desert are always changing from season to season (Kingdon 1990:19-20). Indeed, the effect of seasonal climatic conditions on subsistence vegetation (both wild and cultivated) is particularly well reflected in the attributive plant vocabulary pertaining to plant and plant-

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[7] The Hanunoo people (tropics), for example, have 1,879 labelled botanical taxa, compared with the !Kung (south western Africa) who have only 193 (Brown 1985:44, table 1).

part morphology and development - most notably that of fruit and grain (i.e. overripening, premature ripening, withering, scorching, wilting).

Turning to plant-based medicines, the Ovambo refer generally to medicine as *omuti* (also meaning tree) or *oshivelulifo* (literally 'that which cures'). Of the two, *omuti* occurs more commonly in the literature. There also exist accompanying attributive terms which serve to convey the specific character, or function, of a particular medicine: *omuti wokukofifa,* sedative, or *omuti wokanuna,* purgative. Seven such attributes in Oshikwanyama have been enlisted from Turvey (1977) and it is reasonable to suppose that: (a) further types may have gone unrecorded, and (b) different attributes may be used among other Ovambo peoples. For the purpose of evaluation here, the various medicine types were grouped according to their main form of administration to the patient: enemas, therapeutic beverages, fumigants and so forth.

Victor Turner has described all Ndembu medicines as being essentially symbolic (1967:343). More recently, Ngubane (1977) has highlighted the fact that not *all* Nyuswa-Zulu medicines are symbolic, but rather that a distinction exists between those that are and those that are not. Herbal remedies, for instance, used to cure somatic symptoms without ritual accompaniment are non-symbolic. Symbolic medicines, on the other hand, are prepared and administered by professional healers and are used mainly for prophylactic purposes, or "to correct the *cause* of illness rather than cure somatic symptoms" (1977:109, my emphasis).

Ovambo medicines, like those of the Ndembu, all appear to possess some degree of symbolic significance and ritual association. However, it is necessary to point out that most of the available documentary evidence pertaining to Ovambo therapeutics relates solely to the 'professional', as opposed to the 'lay', healing sphere. Thus one would perhaps expect to encounter bias in favour of symbolic content. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Turner formed his conclusion that all Ndembu medicines were symbolic from an analysis of evidence from the professional sphere only. Of course, when considering the Zulu case, it seems logical to speculate that lay Ovambo healing practices - especially for minor ailmemts - might co-exist with professional ones, given that professional healers such as *endudu* were generally expensive to engage (in terms of requiring cattle for payment), with the result that consultation occured only in relation to 'serious' illness.[8]

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[8] Not all established healers charged heavily. For example female healers in Ondonga, *Okakulukdhi,* specialised in

Such supposition is, however, rather speculative at this stage with regard to lay-healing proper. This is because the evidence available suggests that even where self-administration of medicines occurs (i.e. enemas or the chewing of stomach illness roots whilst herding or travelling), the medicines themselves have nevertheless been prescribed by a professional healer at some point; thus the treatment is not totally outside of the professional domain.

One thing that is clear from all of this is that the more severe (or serious) an illness episode or its cause, then the higher the symbolic content of the medicines employed and the more ritualised the whole therapeutic procedure (consider *ohula* healing, for example, or the treatment of *oudu odila)*. Illness, as we have seen, can represent itself as either the "*loss* of something *essential,* or the *gain* of something *harmful*" (John Jervis, unpublished MS). It is this undesirable state of imbalance or disharmony that medicines, within the formal context of therapy, ultimately attempt to redress.

A principle function of medicines is to 'cleanse' the body of illness, or of the cause of illness (or indeed both), thereby enabling the return to a harmonious state of good health and, in a broader sense, to normality. Ngubane (1977:109) has already demonstrated this to be a salient feature of Zulu 'symbolic' medicines, which seek to expel the "bad" from the body, discard it outside of the system and re-introduce good health. Such Ovambo 'cleansing' medicines occur chiefly in the form of enemas and emetics, whose often dramatic effects arguably symbolise the exposure and expulsion of the symptoms in terms of their exit from the body in the form of excreta, vomit, pus or blood.[9] Fumigants and vapourisers, as well as herbal

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treating women and children for very little in terms of actual payment (A. Ranchen 1959:266-269, in Kaarto Rakel 1976:2). There is no further information on these healers, making it difficult to assess their actual position vis-a-vis *endudu* for example. Do they belong more to the lay than to the professional sphere? Do they provide essential services in terms of treating somatic symptoms only, thus belonging to the sphere of 'non-symbolic' medicine (hence low fees)? *Endudu* do treat serious illness in women and children, though perhaps the healers are in fact *Okakulukdhi* rather than the former? The various kinds of healers need to be explored in much more depth, in order to establish their particular roles and relation to each other (if any). For a closer look see Chapter 4.

[9] Turner (1967:302-303) has drawn attention to the way in which Ndembu therapy concentrates on symbolically making invisible illness 'visible', and therefore far less dangerous and easier to deal with. This aspect of therapeutics is however more a part of healing action, than of medicines themselves, and the same can be said of the Ovambo situation.

'washes', also serve to symbolically eradicate illness (or its cause). The cathartic action of medicines complements the symbolic removal by the *ondudu,* e.g. in terms of sucking, of malign objects (witches' 'lumps' or sharp objects) or forces (spirits in the guise of beetles, snakes etc).

Not all medicines, however, engender health by means of cathartic action alone. There are a small number which operate instead by *contributing* something beneficial to the body. These kinds of medicine act either (a) by counteracting illness in their own right: in a soothing, restorative or strengthening manner (e.g. *oshikomba* paste used on open sores and wounds), or else (b) they may be employed in conjunction with particular cathartic medicines, in order to counterpoise the latter's powerful and sometimes weakening effects (e.g. the stabilising beverage of *katadidi,* taken following the results of a strong emetic of *m'dime,* for constipation). Indeed, not only do such medicines counterpoise, they also signify a crucial psychological turning point: viz. the movement away from purgation, towards the more positive embracement of recovery and ultimately of health itself.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the notion of 'strengthening' can be seen to exist in other areas of Ovambo therapeutics, as will be revealed in the following chapter. Suffice to say at this point that it is certainly evident in the healing actions of practitioners, with emphasis resting on the transference of strength from healer to patient (expressed largely in physical terms: massage, actual or simulated sexual intercourse etc).

With regard to isolable patterns in terms of the administration of medicines, internal disorders tend to be treated with medicines that are themselves internally received by the patient (either anally or orally). Strongly apparent are the cathartic qualities mentioned above. A comparatively similar situation is revealed as far as external disorders are concerned. Skin-related problems or inflicted injuries are predominantly treated with medicated concoctions, or ritually imbued material objects, that are externally applied directly to the affected area. Again, the notional element of 'cleansing' is strongly present, with many such external remedies taking the form of washes, or substances applied during massage (manual removal of symptoms). Internal medicines are not normally administered for external disorders, although certain external treatment - massage for example - may be employed in the healing of internally located problems such as rheumatism, headache or constipation.[10]

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[10] Gonhorrea in males is treated with internally taken medicines (beverages and enemas), though although the symp-

Indeed, when considering the notion of internal and external healing, it is worth exploring the use of smoke fumes and steam vapours. Fumigants and vapourizers are essentially external in their form of administration to the patient, but are designed to alleviate predominantly internal symptoms (the only exception here being eye disorders). What is intriguing is the apparent conceptualisation of the body as a 'porous' entity. Fumes and vapours, for instance, cannot only be seen to *envelope* an area of concern (i.e. an arthritic knee), but also to either *penetrate* or be *absorbed* by it. Such action on behalf of the fumes/vapours is, in a sense, necessary given the internal nature of the symptoms. In other words, one could only really argue for envelopment alone if the disorder was simply an external one.

Moreover, the notion of penetration or absorbtion is further supported by the fact that fumes and vapours are also frequently *inhaled* as a curative measure for internal conditions such as headache, nosebleeding, *omukota,* and disorders of the respiratory system. Penetration or absorbtion, thus, appear to occur *where no properly defined entry (or exit) to the body is available, in relation to the location of the internal disorder.* In other words, internal head and chest disorders are for argument's sake near the mouth, nose and ears, stomach disorders can be treated via either the mouth or the anus, whereas limbs, joints and muscles have only the pores.

In essence, many Ovambo medicines are found to express sympathetic, contagious or homeopathic elements of a symbolic nature. To take some of the various remedies for skin disorders as an example: gnarled, knobbly, wood is rubbed over pustules; the prickly, flowering plant *songo* is used to treat swollen feet most likely caused by thorns and prickles in the sand; split fruit is used to treat heels that are themselves cracked and split. Furthermore, the cortex of roots, bark of trees and rind of fruit and vegetables are used predominantly in the healing of skin disorders. In another sense the medicinal substance used may reflect the desired result of the treatment; thus, for example, the smoothness of wild pumpkin rind (used in healing spotty skin diseases) may represent the normal, healthy, condition of the skin to which a return is sought. Similarly, the fine powder made from the cortex of *opapa* (root) and applied over an area of skin sores, wet with water, may symbolise the overlaying of an 'unblemished skin' designed to counteract that

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toms become visible externally (i.e. pus in urine) they nevertheless emerge from inside the penis.

which is actually blemished.

Other examples in this vein not related to the treatment of the skin include, a medicinal beverage designed to expel a tardy placenta from the womb. The various components of the beverage are mainly vines and roots, the twining, clinging and hidden (in the case of roots) nature of these perhaps symbolising the retentive behaviour of the placenta. It appears that roots are the only type of plant parts used in medicines for symptoms relating visibly to the penis (i.e. pus or blood in urine). Thus it might be that on a metaphorical level, roots and penes are linked: roots being to plants what penes are to men. Certainly elsewhere in Kwanyama thought, explicit association is made between peanuts (shells containing seeds), stamens (bearing pollen) and testicles (containing human/animal 'seeds'), since they all bear the same name *omatondo* (Turvey, 1977).

As far as the colour symbolism of medicines is concerned, much more evidence is needed before any satisfactory analysis can be conducted. There are some points that are nevertheless worth making. The significant colour triad - red, black and white - is certainly apparent in medicines. However, the particular nature of the symbolic character pertaining respectively to each is rather difficult to ascertain at this stage in the analysis. Some medicines are quite literally red, black or white in Ovambo terms (including for example colours like brown or dark grey/blue, that are classified as red and black respectively). Others, however, may belong to the colour triad in a more metaphorical sense, since they have no *visual* connection with the triad, but might be conceptualized thus on the basis of their particular qualities or properties. In other words, strengthening, positive medicines may be identified as 'white' because white represents what is unequivocally good, strong and pure.

Principally, though, colour is a powerful visual medium, and through it certain features like 'order' and 'status' are conveyed. For instance, it appears that during healing sessions different colours serve to demarcate various stages, or highlight significant turning points, thereby emphasising the progression from illness towards recovery. Moreover, it is possible that the Ovambo, like the Zulu, administer different coloured medicines in a particular given relationship to each other, thus enhancing the notion of order. Yet until the symbolic connotations mentioned above are determined it is practically impossible to comment on the meaning and significance of any order observed.

As regards colour and status, the triad may be employed (to an extent) to signify certain ritual states of being (in human terms), as well as the 'value' of particular levels or stages of treatment (or indeed entire individual treatment procedures). Of course, this is an area extending outside the confines of herbal medicines, including other *materia medica* such as blood, fire, chalk, animal skins, foodstuff and so on. The use of white chalk on the body, for example, signifies the liminal and at the same time auspicious status of the bearer. In the context of therapeutics, it symbolises the interstice between illness and health and signifies the patient's position there clearly (i.e. as not so ill as to receive treatment, but not cured yet either). Additionally, white body decoration may signify ritually protected status. The lines painted on vulnerable areas of the body are in a sense barriers against invasive negative forces. Interestingly, houses, pots and other objects may also be protected in this manner.

Black is a highly esteemed colour: the verb *laula* describes darkness, gloom and blackness, and is used when talking of dark skies and rain clouds (a welcome sign: rain is equated with fertility and life generally). *Laula* means to be gorgeously coloured and dazzling. Pure black cattle are highly prestigious and valued enormously; only they can be sacrificed in propitiation of the ancestral spirits, and when used in the context of healing (i.e. curing of *akwamungu* and the initiation of *endudu)* they can be regarded as the ultimate in healing and harmonising measures. If black cattle are sacrificed, either the illness must be very serious or the patient a very important person.

Finally, a note concerning efficacy. To talk only of the symbolic aspects of medicines is to deny any actual efficacious benefit they may impart. Nevertheless, determining or measuring efficacy can be an analytical task fraught with difficulties in terms of evaluation (Young 1982:39). This is due to a great extent to the pathological aspects of disease:

(a) Visible or experienced symptoms may disappear, giving the appearance of a return to health, when in fact the disease remains strongly present (albeit outwardly 'dormant') in the body. Syphilis in women is a good example of this, hookworm is another.

(b) Many minor ailments will disappear from the body without any medical aid, given time, indigestion for example.

(c) There is the whole area of the placebo effect to consider. Turner has shown that faith in the healer and in the course of treatment provided is often vital to the success of Ndembu therapeutics.

There are some scholars who believe it is erroneous to discuss the efficacy of ethnomedicine, and that to be concerned with it is ethnocentric. Young (1982:39-40), for example, has argued that it is insufficient to limit "effects" to the impact made by medical practices on illness, since intentions to control illness are frequently harnessed to other less obvious intentions and effects (such as choice of healer and therapy, in order to avoid unwanted social consequences). Furthermore, there is the problem of specifying exactly *what* effects on exactly *whom* we ought to be talking about, because to draw the line at the healer and the patient is too limiting.

The subject of efficacy has been raised here primarily because certain confusion arising from the documentary sources concerning this aspect of Ovambo medicine needs to be confronted. On the one hand, the South African Medical Officer J.H. Loots, for all his usual negative aspersions about Ovambo health and hygiene, actually acknowledges the "clear efficacy of the pharmaceutical action of plants used to cure gonorrheal pus and the primary and tertiary skin disorders of syphilis (Loots 1930:11-12). He was, however, unable to obtain any further details of the medicines, no doubt due to mistrust of his South African government connection. The medical missionaries, on the other hand, appear from the documentary sources to have formed a downright negative opinion of indigenous medical techniques.

H. Kyronseppa has dismissed Ovambo therapeutics as "often harmful quackery" (1970:7). And indeed, it is this very notion of traditional medicines being harmful and dangerous that prevails in other accounts. Enemas are regarded as being worst of all - the liquid being thought poisonous, and the practice of forcing reeds and gourds up the anus highly dangerous (and perhaps no doubt immoral). The Ovambo, however, regard enemas as vital to health maintainance and in the eradication of illness (Erastus Shamena, interview - FELM Helsinki, 1989). It is true that some reported hospital cases do stand as examples of incidences where traditional treatment has proved rather detrimental to the patient (see Soini 1953:23). However, it should be borne in mind here that Missionary clinics were often used as a last resort after all traditional attempts had failed. Thus, missionaries would only be aware of this side of traditional medicine, seeing non of the successful results.

An analysis of the chemical components of the plants used as medicines would prove extremely interesting, in order to determine the active pharmaceutical properties of indigenous medicines. Clearly some medicines have chemical effects, even if these are is not always regarded by observers as beneficial. Medical missionary sources commonly accuse indigenous medicines of poisoning or burning the recipient, yet this may be specifically intended as a way of 'killing' the illness. The alternative, Western biomedicine, is by no means regarded as perfect by the Ovambo. In her paper on *Traditional Healing in Ovamboland,* Justine Shivuta remarked that:

> "There are some diseases for which the Ovambo people still think that western medicine has no cure for. Those are epilepsy, paralysis, the bite of a dog with rabies, poisoning and mental illness. Till this day the Ovambo people have turned to traditional healers for curing these ailments" (198l:12).[11]

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[11] Shivuta does not give a precise reason why the Ovambo believe there is no Europeaon cure for epilepsy. It may be that the drugs for controlling the condition were unable in the mission clinics, or perhaps that the drugs were available, but continuity of treatment in the rural areas was poor. There is no information in the sources on Ovambo about presentation, or possible stigmatisation, of epilepsy (except for the descriptions of febrile convulsions: *oudu odila*).

Generally speaking, epilepsy certainly appears to be extensive in Africa (Carothers 1970:136-7), with the prevalence of 1 in 200 in Botswana fitting the continent generally (brain damage to babies during delivery or the neonatal period could be the reason for such a high rate) (Ben-Tovim 1987:118, 119). However, there is a low rate of epileptics presenting to doctors in Botswana, which Ben-Tovim (1987:119) suggests may be due to the widespread belief that indigenous healing methods can cope with it (unlike schizophrenia). In any case, it is difficult for doctors to make accurate diagnosis unless a fit is actually witnessed. Epilepsy is seen to be contagious (children are excluded from schooling), and caused by witchcraft, poison, breaking taboos, contagion or alchohol.