

## Chapter Six

### PROPHYLAXIS AND PROPITIATION

This chapter is concerned with the various prophylactic (i.e. preventive), protective and propitiatory measures used in connection with illness and health and with misfortune and fortune. Indeed, it seeks to evaluate illness in the wider context of misfortune, rather than regard it as an isolated phenomenon.

The first section is concerned with the use of charms, either worn on the person or (to a lesser extent) placed in the household area, as a *preventive* and thereby *protective* measure against affliction of various kinds. Moreover, the majority of charms are dual or multi-purpose in character, in that they also seek to promote fortunate circumstances. Section two concerns propitiation, which in the case of the Ovambo involves votive offerings to the ancestral clan spirits. Such sacrificial offerings (conducted on a small and large scale) are performed either as a means of promoting good luck (ie success, health etc), or as a placatory measure (in cases where affliction has already occurred, and where those affected wish to stop the process by appeasing the spirits). Propitiatory measures, therefore, are not so prophylactic in character as are the charms. Section three deals with Ovambo social norms and values expressed and reinforced through the observance of certain prohibitions and precepts. Violation or neglect of these (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) is believed to invite illness, misfortune or death, unless the protagonist(s) undergoes ritual purification. The latter is in itself a kind of healing, with the emphasis on becoming cleansed and 'whole' again.

Of course, in actuality the above three sections cannot be strictly demarcated, and the interrelationships between them will be examined in the final section, where I will also consider how the above 'coping' measures relate to illness/misfortune, and what an analysis of the former can tell us of the latter.

#### CHARMS: PREVENTION, PROTECTION AND PROMOTION

Charms are very commonly used, and for almost all aspects of life, with a view to warding-off misfortune and to influence 'fate' favourably. The Ovambo are quite realistic about the longevity of good fortune and

have a proverb about it (Estermann 1976:164). Much of the available literature on charms tends to be vague about precise usage, but this may be because their purpose is, after all, quite general. The German missionary Sckär, who has written an early ethnographic manuscript on the Ovakwanyama, has named three types of charms: *oiketi*, *odimbo* and *oshiva*. *Oiketi* are little wooden twigs and claws of birds, wild animals etc, threaded on hide thongs. These are supposed to help against "anything unpleasant". They also help the *odimbo* (knob-kerrie stick) and *oshiva* (whistle charm), in all likely and unlikely situations (Sckär 1916:3).

Charms are usually made for individuals by a diviner-healer (*ondudu* or *onganga*) on request, to suit a person's needs at the time. Such particular needs may be, as we have seen in chapter 5, additional strength and protection following illness; alternatively, special protection may be required during pregnancy, or for a dangerous journey, and so forth. A great number of the Ovambo charms incorporate the dual purpose of preventing: protecting, whilst simultaneously inviting good luck, health, happiness and so forth. Charms of this nature may be used for more than one kind of situation, as I hope will be shown below. There are some charms which are used by people who find themselves already in unfortunate circumstances, and who wish to manipulate the situation towards a more favourable outcome; debtors are one example.

Basically, then, charms can be said to deal with the following (not in any special order):

- [a] the promotion of general fortune: health, happiness.
- [b] the prevention of illness and misfortune (including witchcraft and sorcery).
- [c] the prevention of negative social relations; promotion of good ones.
- [d] protection in vulnerable situations: journeys, initiation, manufacturing.
- [e] the protection of household, inhabitants and livestock, crops etc.

As mentioned earlier, any one particular charm could deal with more than one of the above, if specially constructed and imbued with the necessary 'power' to do so.

As well as manufacturing charms for people, the *endudu* also wear a great many themselves. On completion of their initiation into the profession, they receive certain charms that serve to signify the wearer's status in the healing hierarchy, and act as visual symbols of power and healing ability. Often these charms are used in the healing of the sick, and may even be lent to patients to provide strengthening or

protective qualities (A.Powell-Cotton 1936b:5).

### **The Promotion of Happiness and Good Fortune**

Some charms are quite general in their purpose, and may be used either on a daily basis, or prior to a given situation.

[a] *Omupja* (chalk-of-happiness): Chalk is used on the body each morning, to stave off general unhappiness and bad luck, and to draw happiness to a person. Warriors and hunters also use it for this purpose when in the forest. Used by Ondonga people, obtained through trade with the Ovakwanyama [Angola] (NMF.MRC:113)<sup>1</sup>

[b] *Ositi selago akuiseta mosipala*: This charm (3 short twigs threaded on hide thong) is used to stroke the face in order for luck to follow (NMF.MRC:118).

[c] *Oonondo*: Lemon-smelling roots, on a thong around neck, are worn for their pleasant aroma and for good luck (NMF.MRC:122).

[d] *Omumakani* (big-stranger): If one carries a stick of this tree (***Rhigozum brevispinosum***) it will bring good luck (Canon Gabriel Nameuja, in Rodin 1985:52).

[e] *Omufiati/omusati* (***Colophospermum mopane***): Good luck charms are made from this tree, and worn by women at fishing parties, and by herdsboys at cattle round-ups (Loeb et al 1956:150, in Rodin 1985:96). The Powell-Cottons also mention that men wear strings of **C. mopane** leaves down their backs at the Cattle Ceremony, *engobe tadidane* (see Plate 7).

[f] Sckär records two charms made from oxen skin, known as *omia*. Those made from the neck of a bull impart strength to the wearer, whereas those made from the hide of an old cow are thought to promote longevity (Sckär, 1916:3).

[g] A leather thong, bearing the claws of a large bird of prey, is worn about the neck. It is believed that just as the bird catches plenty of prey, then the charm will ensure "much property and wealth" for the wearer (FELMM.OC:51)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> National Museum of Finland (Helsinki), Martti Rautanen Collection (1870).

<sup>2</sup> Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Museum, Ovambo Collection.

[h] *omupena* (the-one-that-is-given): This amulet influences exchange in a positive way so that goods will accrue to the wearer. It consists of woods hanging on a leather thong and is worn around the neck. The Ondonga explanation for its use is: ‘if you go somewhere you will be given things, or if exchanging you will give a small item but receive a large one’ (NMF.MRC:117). If the owner of an *oshiva* goes to ask a favour of someone, the eating of a little *oumwifo* (leaf ash and fat) contained in the *oshiva* horn is believed to make the other person more amenable and likely to grant the request (Tönjes 1910, in Turvey 1977).

[i] *Ekakata/ekanjatela*: This herb is used to make one rich or to preserve and increase ones growing riches; obtained from a diviner (Tomas Uukunde, ELC 1932, item 90 page 219)<sup>3</sup>.

[j] *Ositi somagono* (the-stick-of-gifts): This charm, two roots on a leather thong, influences other people to feel concern, so that when a person needs it they will receive it without hesitation on the part of those offering help. The name refers to the act of giving (NMF.MRC:119).

[k] *Omapeua ouala*: This herb is given by a diviner to someone who cannot support himself. The latter gives all he has to the diviner then, having acquired the herb, no-one will refuse his requests - be they for grain, cattle or anything else (Tomas Uukunde, ELC 1932, item 90:219).

[l] *Nyolotola*: On the day on which a creditor summons a debtor, the latter holds a piece of *nyolotola* root in his/her mouth. The creditor will then let the debt slide (P-C.A37/1037)<sup>4</sup>.

In support of the above example, Estermann noted that great respect was held for another persons property within the community. The main exception was cattle raiding but this was practised on neighbouring communities, or else within the community as a form of retribution. *Oufonya* (meaning ‘poverty’), says Estermann, served as a justification for transgression of laws regarding stealing, and people would turn a blind eye. Alternatively debts would be waived, as above. A number of proverbs refer to the pitfalls of avarice and excessive wealth, for example: *Uuyamba okambwa, ka lumata mwene*, ‘Wealth is a dog that bites its master’ (Wealth brings worry and sorrow) [h217]; or *Hima nando toola, itadhi pu po*, ‘Though you pick up turtles they will not end’ (Don’t be too greedy). Those less fortunate than others are not denigrated: *Ohima ji nuukali, omagundji jaa na*, ‘The turtle has genitals but no breasts’ (Poor people do have

<sup>3</sup> Emil Liljeblad Collection, Helsinki.

<sup>4</sup> Powell-Cotton Collection, Angola 1937.

kindness but no resources)[L1188:92,P68,R50] (Matti Kuusi 1970:96, 118).

[m] *Oshiti soku engulita* (surprise-stick): If someone is robbed of something, then this charm helps to catch the thief and ensure the return of the lost goods (FELMM.OC:67).

*Male-Female Relations: Lovers, wives and husbands*

[a] A Kwanyama man wore a thong around his wrist bearing pieces of tortoise or ant-bear shell. The wrist-let was given to him by an *ondudu* so that all the man's wives might stay and never leave him (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:114).

[b] Men may wear the wood of the *omteholi* tree (no scientific name) bound in a piece of cotton fabric and thread and attached to a thong, in order to attract women as wives (D. Powell-Cotton 1936a:154).

[c] Scented seeds and cosmetics are worn by women to allure men as lovers and husbands. Such powders etc may also be used to mask perspiration resulting from heavy work in the fields. Prospective brides are given a small basket containing scented powder during the *efundula*. Some examples used by Dombondola women are as follows: *ochidimba* a fragrant plant (P-C.A36/2088), *masambala* seeds from *omulavi* tree (P-C.A36/2178), *ochilopi* scented seeds from Namibia, and *omwadi* a scented fungus (P-C.A36/2175).

[d] Wart hog tusks (*ompinda*) are worn by women to make themselves appear more desirable (FELMM.OC:34-38).

*Favourable Social Relations*

[a] The plant, *onjiolifi*, is pounded to a fine flour. A little is eaten at social gatherings by Dombondola people, and is said to cause immense popularity amongst friends. The stalk can also be chewed. It is known elsewhere in Ovamboland as the 'laughing plant', and eating it will cause crowds to flock to one's house with pleasure! (P-C.A36/2524 & 2563).

[b] The bark of *oehadi* is chewed and partly spat out. The remainder is rubbed on a man's face so that he may go to any feast and not become involved in a brawl or any other similar trouble. (P-C.A37/1038).

[c] In addition to the precautions taken by individuals, as above, an *ondudu* may ritually protect the assembly as a whole from discordant behaviour at gatherings. First of all the plant known as *etalaleka* is collected

by the *ondudu* early in the morning. Then a piece of the plant is broken off and some placed in the fire of each *epata* (living area) of the women of the household where the feast is to be held. The remainder of the plant is pounded and added to cold water, then sprinkled throughout all the corridors, meeting places and the main entrance (*onu*). These procedures are thought to protect against fights and bad relations between people when under the influence of alcohol (P-C.A37/1033).

#### *To Counteract the Wrath of the King*

[a] *Ositejandjahi* herbs are used to counteract the king's wrath, should someone have transgressed a law. An *onganga*<sup>5</sup> collects it. Similarly, use of the herb *osihoni* aims at making the king (or chief of a *mukunda* [district]) feel shame and thus refrain from executing punishment against a person. The herb is obtained and administered by an *onganga*. (Tomas Uukunde, ELC 1932, item 90:218).

#### **The Prevention of Illness/Misfortune**

Illness is regarded as a special kind of misfortune.<sup>6</sup>

It is believed to be predominantly caused by the ancestral spirits, by witchcraft and by sorcery. To a lesser extent illness is attributed to Kalunga (the supreme deity) and then it is usually of the incurable kind. Somatic symptoms are generally cured at the time of occurrence, on the whole using plant-based remedies. However, in order to *prevent* illness, or at least the recurrence of illness, certain prophylactic and/or protective measures are deemed necessary if health is to be ultimately achieved and maintained. In addition to the use of preventive and protective means, propitiatory measures and ritual purification are also regarded as important in this context, as will be seen below.

Charms used in connection with specific ailments are as follows:

[a] Fever: To prevent fever a seed necklace may be worn of the type prescribed by an *ondudu* for an Ondonga woman living among the Ovakwanyama near Mupa, Angola (P-C.A36/2066).

[b] Chesty cough: A piece of wood on a leather thong was worn by an Ombandja man for sore neck (?throat) and a chesty cough [Olutula mukunda (district), Angola], (P-C.A36/2392).

<sup>5</sup> Ondonga for 'healer'.

<sup>6</sup> See sub-section: Illness Terminology, Chapter 2, Part 3, for more on illness as a special kind of misfortune.

[c] Stems of *ekoka* (thing-which-drags) are worn around women's waists to prevent them from getting backache whilst hoeing (Rodin 1985:51).

[d] For the prevention of madness caused by the restless and avenging spirit of a dead enemy (killed during a cattle raid/battle), a warrior will be treated with a plant known as *yakanhoni*, *kadilahono* or *ekwatadiba* (**Liliaceae Asparagus sp.**) (P-C.A37/1042).

Loeb et al (1956:150) record that the plant *okanautoni* (little-of-hyena-call) (**Dissotis debilis**) is mixed and chewed with *eyakanhoni* (see above), then swallowed. Neither Loeb nor Rodin collected *eyakanhoni* so we have no scientific name; Estermann (1976) identifies it as a species of **Asparagus**. The Powell-Cotton material contains information about the actual method of preventive treatment, as used by the Kwanyama, though it unfortunately fails to scientifically identify the plant(s) involved. The notes say that a plant root is pounded, added to water, and given as a beverage (or alternatively as an enema). Such treatment acts against the "spirit blood of the dead man", which will cause madness (*tavele outon*) to befall the living warrior if the liquid not taken (P-C.A37/1042). For more on the protection of warriors from illness see the section below dealing with ritual purification.

[e] Poisoning: Usually this is presumed to be the result of sorcery. One Ovambo man encountered by the Powell-Cottons wore a necklace comprised of the small bones of cattle feet and some wooden pieces (not specified). In the event of him falling ill as the result of drinking poisoned beer, nibbling the wood would induce vomiting (thus cleansing of the system). Indeed, he maintained that even the mere wearing of the charm would induce vomiting (A. Powell-Cotton 1937c:40).

[f] Bewitchment: To prevent the recurrence of illness thought to be caused by witchcraft, pieces of twigs, *omuandu*, are worn on a thong around the neck. Firstly, the suspected witch's influence is 'removed' or 'driven out' by an *ondudu* who fumigates the victim with smoke from burnt bark shavings from the charm. Thenceforth, the wearing of these same twigs affords protection against re-affliction (NMF.MRC:121).

According to Hiltunen, charms are invested with protective 'power' by *Oonganga* (healers) to resist influences of witchcraft. Charms serve to counterbalance what she terms "evil force". Hiltunen also states that the very act of "casting a protective spell", as she puts it, reveals to the assumed witch an awareness of her skill and aim. Thus the protective action itself works as effective counteraction (Maija Hiltunen

1986:69).

*Pregnancy and Birth*

[a] Among Ukwanyama necklaces of *onuhanana* are worn by women during pregnancy, and thereafter by their newborns, for strength and protection from danger (P-C.A36/995).

[b] During lactation, a wristlet bearing medicinal wood, *ehangi*, is worn by the mother (P-C.A36/1136).

[c] Adultery by women during pregnancy is believed to invite harm to the foetus, hence women make use of a plant charm (not named in source) to save the child's life at the time of birth (P-C.A37/989).

[d] Following parturition the afterbirth is normally buried in a chosen spot within the household. In order to ward off malevolent spirits from this site, two plants: *oshinanganamwali* (look-after-the-mother-with-the-newborn-baby) [***Kleinia* sp. cf *Kleinia longiflora***], and *okatendadikwa* (carrying-skin-for-children) are grown there (Canon Gabriel Nameuja, in Rodin 1985:63).

[e] Among the Evale, women wear coloured trade beads (yellow and green) as some sort of charm (specific use not recorded in source) during pregnancy (P-C.A36/880).

[f] Ombandja women wear a hide belt, *oshipunduka*, decorated with charmed woods, ostrich eggshell beads (*enjeva*) and iron beads (*oputo*). The belt is made by an *ondudu* for the woman's use during pregnancy and whilst her child is young (P-C.A36/777). Alternatively, a tapered piece of cattle skin decorated with five plaques of fibre and *enjeva* discs may be worn. As with the *oshipunduka*, this is worn for protection whilst the child is very young (P-C.A36/774). The significance of these charms lies in the supposed transference of strength to persons more vulnerable than usual.

[g] Children themselves wear protective/preventive charms, commonly tiny 'ladders' of reeds, fibre string and *enjeva* beads. Large iron beads, *oputo*, are also worn in order to repudiate sickness (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:111).

Among the Ondonga, the Finnish missionary Martti Rautanen observed that:

"A mother hangs amulets around the neck, on arms, around the waist and ankles of her new born baby to guard him from the destruction of the *aalodhi* (witch)" (Rautanen, MS 1902:45, translation in Hiltunen, 1986:68).



Another protective measure against the vulnerability of very young children is to be secretive about their personal name. Loeb states that among the Ovakwanyama a baby's name is not revealed to strangers, as a person's true name reveals their soul and as such renders them vulnerable to witchcraft and sorcery. Without knowledge of the baby's name the latter cannot be bewitched (Loeb 1948:25). I will be returning to the importance of names and protection later in this chapter.

#### *Protection of the Household*

[a] According to Rautanen, night is the time when witches become 'spirits' and conduct their evil. Therefore at sunset Ondonga people ritually 'close' the passages of their living areas, in order to prevent the spirits' entry. Additionally, charms are hung in the entrances of sleeping rooms which are also fumigated with smoke to "...make the spirits of witches afraid" (M. Rautanen in *Suomen Lahestyssanomia* [Finland's Mission Journal, Finnish Missionary Society], No.5, 1895:5; translation in Hiltunen, 1986:69).

[b] A branch may be placed on the top of a house in Ondonga, to dissuade malevolent spirits from entering (FELMM.OC:39).

[c] *Omupopola* [**Maurua schinzii**] is one of the plants placed over the entrance gate of the kraal (*onu*) to keep out evil spirits (Loeb et al 1956:147, in Rodin 1985:51).

[d] *Omudime* (to-destroy-thing) [**Euclea divinorum**] stems are placed on the cross-beam of the main entrance gate to ward off evil spirits (Loeb et al 1956, see Rodin 1985:73-74 for more on this).

[e] *Etilovalodi* [**Leonotis nepetifolia**] branches are hung across the main entrance gate for good luck. Stems of this species are also placed behind the husband's sitting place for good luck (Loeb et al 1956:147, in Rodin 1985:57).

[f] The plant known as *eposa* in Oshikwanyama is grown in households for good luck (Canon Gabriel Nameuja, Rodin 1985:113-114).

[g] *Ekoka/eschilulua* [**Orthanthera jasminiflora**] is planted by Ovakwanyama in or near their households in order to invite good luck (Simon, informant of Rodin, Rodin 1985:51).

[h] Branches of *omulavi* [**Gardenia spatulifolia**] are placed on hut roofs as protection against lightning<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Lightning is a very frightening phenomenon because it is perceived to be the wrath of witches. People struck dead by

*Travelling and Herding: Protection and Invitation of Good Fortune*

[a] When travelling the Ovakwanyama keep a piece of the plant *mwenda nanjola* (no scientific identification) in their mouth. This ensures that the traveller will always receive a friendly welcome as well as sustenance along the way (P-C.A37/1037 and A37/1147).

[b] Dombondola herdsboys wear a piece of the plant *ohawn ho dodui* on their heads, to ward off lion attacks (P-C.A36/2221).

[c] Ondonga herdsboys use *omusindilo* (sticks or staffs that are ritually imbued with protective forces by *oonganga*). These sticks are used when herders and cattle are far from the owner's household - i.e. in the grazing pastures northwards. Being far away they are particularly at risk from raids by neighbouring Ovambo communities, or other groups. Herdsmen, therefore, attempt to protect their temporary camps by encircling them, swishing the *omusindilo* from side to side in order to drive away misfortune. Once complete, the area within the 'circle' is insured against malevolent forces (NMF.MRC:114).

[d] Bundles of leaf fibres obtained from the plant *ongushe* [**Sanseveira pearsonii**] are worn with the aloe costumes by female initiates during the *oihanangolo* phase of the *efundula* ceremony. According to Loeb the costumes are "...specially symbolic protective plant armour" (Loeb et al 1956:152, in Rodin 1985:109). Presumably, although Loeb does not say so, the costumes protect against the spiritual and physical dangers of the bush.

*Hunting and Cattle Raiding*

Cattle raiding and organised large scale hunting expeditions were most definitely regarded as hazardous, in that both required entry into wild bush areas and into possible 'enemy' territory. Hunters and warriors were therefore rendered vulnerable, and for this reason the wearing of protective charms, together with the performance of certain empowering and propitiatory actions, became regarded as vital for both safety and success. The charms used in this context are often multi-purpose, in order to afford benefit that is all-encompassing.

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lightning are not given normal burial, so as to prevent their spirits from returning (Loeb 1962:260). During a storm people take care not to reveal their teeth, as their whiteness is thought to attract lightning (Erastus and Magdalena Shamena, interview at FELM, Helsinki 1989).

### *Hunting*

[a] The Powell-Cottons observed that Dombondola hunters made use of wooden "wands" (not named in source) to ensure an abundance of meat. The stick, bearing yellow 'medicine' (not specified) is slept on overnight by the hunter, the idea being that in the morning dead beasts will be lying all around camp (P-C.A36/2204). In other words, the hope is for an easy and profitable hunt. This same object can be used to frighten away lions, by waving it at them (ibid).

[b] Ondonga hunters use an object similar to that used by the Dombondola above, known as *omiziza-akongo*. This stick has a dual purpose according to Rautanen's information: firstly it draws quarry to the hunters, and secondly it is supposed to allow hunters the power of 'seeing' animals straight away - a kind of mystical heightening of perception (also used during raiding) (NMF.MRC:116).

[c] Loeb has recorded that *onyongo* (clenched-fist) [**Geigeria schinzii**] or *okashishilila* are used as charms to improve marksmanship by Kwanyama hunters. An *ondudu* powders the plant, adds a beak tip and the brain of a duck, a humped black-billed goose, or a red-billed goose, then roasts the mixture. Five perpendicular cuts are then made on the upper and lower sides of both the hunter's wrists, as well as on the upper right shoulder and under each of his eyes (Loeb et al 1956:149). The empowering aspects of this treatment are very explicit indeed, focussing on clarity of sight, surety of aim and steadiness of limbs.

[d] Similarly, Ondonga hunters may be ritually marked with lumps of chalk, *omupya* (stave-off-unhappiness), by an *onganga* before they set out in order to promote hunting luck. The chalk bands around the arms and the eyes also serve to protect them against accidents whilst away from the home area (FELMM.OC:64).

### *Cattle Raiding:*

There are predominantly three charms used on raiding expeditions for protection and to promote victory and success. These charms form part of the mystical 'war' power known as *oupule*.<sup>8</sup>

Tönjes documents several kinds of *oupule* (*pl:omapule*) used by the Ovakwanyama:

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<sup>8</sup> There are references to *uupulile* (war sorcery) in the Emil Liljeblad Collection, whereupon *omusindilo* branches, horns of antelope (*ombambi*) and cannibalism are mentioned (source:Gideon Iitule, Ongandjera, item 105: 238).

- 1) The power which renders an individual invulnerable to bullets (this power was sought after most of all, and the possessor was called *omule*). This same power could also render incurable the wound caused by a bullet fired by an *omule*.
- 2) The power to raise a strong wind for the purpose of aiding assault on an enemy area.
- 3) The power to provoke panic among the enemy.
- 4) The power to make oneself a good marksman (Hermann Tönjes 1911: 225, translation in Estermann 1976:205).

Estermann adds two other forms:

- 1) The power to acquire an abundance of provisions and cattle.
- 2) The power to assume a physical appearance that inspires respect (Estermann 1976:205).

The main charms used in *oupule* are ritual ‘wands’ or staffs known as *omusindilo*, and necklets bearing horn whistles and protective charms known as *oshiva* (*ochia* in Ondonga). To a lesser extent protective waistbelts were worn, and the practise of ritual chalking with special lumps (*omupya* [*Ondonga*]) should not be forgotten.

### 1) *Omusindilo*

These objects are attributed various, though similar, names in the source literature. According to Rautanen, the names are derived from the verb *sindila* (Ondonga), meaning:

- a) To make a line, to circumvent, to draw, and
- b) To chase away evil caused by sorcery, as well as drawing luck to the bearer (Rautanen NMF notes with artefact 114; his information is compatible with the definitions given in the Ndonga-English dictionary by Toivo Tirronen (1986); *Omufindilo* in oshikwanyama means household god, amulet or charm (Turvey 1977)).

*Omusindilo* may be in the form of short lengths of bark-covered wood on thongs worn around the neck or wrists, they may be ‘wands’ (20-25cm long), or they may be decorated ritual knob-kerries and walking staffs.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sckär mentions ritual knob-kerries known as *odimbo* (in Kwanyama) which he says act as charms, and I’m assuming that *odimbo* and *omusindilo* are one and the same thing.

[a] *Onzimbo jomusindilo* are made by prominent *Oonganga* in Ondonga from a particular type of wood (not specified in the source). They are ritual staffs, rather similar to the knob-kerries of everyday use except that they are decorated with valuable cowrie shells and strips of cattle skin. One of the specimens held at the FELM museum<sup>10</sup> is covered with notches denoting the dry and rainy seasons - evocatively powerful information indeed. Rautanen's accompanying notes state that such staffs were used: (a) to drive out the spirits of dead persons from the living, and (b) for protection during war and hunting expeditions. If swung around the head, the staff can render persons invisible or else disguise them as a bush or termite hill (FELMM.OC:23 & 26).

[b] *Omusindilo* 'wands' are used by Ondonga warriors, and in particular by the raiding party leaders (*ond-jai*), during cattle raids. The leaders stride ahead of the main party, waving the *omusindilo* from side to side in order to dispel dangerous obstacles (?spirits or forces). Two short accounts regarding the powers of *omusindilo* have been recorded by Rautanen:

1) Once an Ondonga man was being pursued by a man from Uukwambi. The latter had almost reached the former when the Ondonga man waved his *omusindilo* around his head, he was thus turned into a bush and saved.

2) A man, waving his *omusindilo* about his person, was changed into a tree stump and his pursuer searched for him in vain.

These objects are regarded as incredibly valuable and are normally inherited down the matrilineal line. Having been 'fed' with powerful forces by an *Onganga*, each *omusindilo* can hold a transaction value of one head of cattle (NMF.MRC:125).

[c] A 'wand' known as *odimbo yomfindilo* is used by a Kwanyama grandfather (i.e. father of the household owner). He waves the stick around his head, then places it in his mouth when raiders are approaching. This action is designed to make the raiding party divide and pass by the household in question, without fighting. The same procedure is used in attempting to protect a herd of cattle, when grazing away from the home area (P-C.A37/963).

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<sup>10</sup> Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Museum, Helsinki.

[d] A cattle-raiding charm (*ompunga*) made from wildebeest tail, and decorated with basket-work discs, shells and twigs, is worn by men for protection against rifle shots (P-C.A37/387, see Plate 37).

## 2) *Oshiva* (*Ochia*)

The *oshiva* (*eeshiva*), as it is known in Oshikwanyama (*ochia* in Ondonga), is a charm generally consisting of small wooden pieces (3-4cm), a small duiker horn and sometimes pieces of cattle skin threaded onto hide thong which is then worn around the neck.<sup>11</sup>

[a] Tönjes writes that an *oshiva* (*eeshiva*) is an amulet or charm made of bull's hide, which is:

"...hung around the neck so as to hang at the breast and keep the wearer immune from attack by enemy weapons. But in flight it is reversed so as to hang down the back and so keep off pursuers. On its end is a small antelope horn filled with *oumwifo* - a mixture of leaf ash and fat" (Tönjes 1910, translation in Turvey's Kwanyama-English Dictionary, 1977).

[b] The Ondonga use *eeshiva* to stroke the faces of warriors before they set out on a raid, with the aim of invoking strength and courage. The particular specimens held at the FELM museum use woods that provide protection from arrows and bullets if worn down the front or back of body (i.e. in relation to the position of the enemy) (FELMM.OC:46,47, & 48).

[c] One of the female *endudu* met by the Powell-Cottons wore a leather waistbelt decorated in cowries, formerly worn by a warrior when raiding. According to the *ondudu*, the belt afforded protection, so that if the wearer's head was fired at the bullets would just fall to the ground. Similarly, if the stomach was about to be speared the belt would render the spear as harmless as water (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:57).

[d] It is possible for an *oshiva*, like an *omusindilo*, to render a person invisible. This is achieved by blowing into the duiker horn (FELMM.OC:45 & 46).

[e] Estermann describes most cattle raids as surprise attacks, with the emphasis being on the capture of cattle (and slaves) rather than violent conflict between raiders and raided. If surprise attacks are to be successful, winds are needed in order to whip-up a sand storm as camouflage. Hence *eeshiva* horns are used by Ovakwanyama in order to "raise the wind" - *ompepo* - accompanied by the warriors' song to invoke it

<sup>11</sup> A *Colophospermum mopane* leaf whistle used at weddings is also called *oshiva* according to Rodin (1985:97).

(Estermann 1976:185).

[f] Tönjes describes another function of *oshiva yokutukula omhepo* (the amulet-to-raise-the-wind): the leader of the raiding party carries the whistle with him, so that when those that are robbed raise the alarm their cries will be drowned by the rising wind (Tonjes 1910, in Turvey 1977).

[g] The Ondonga warriors may in fact use a cow horn, complete with hide handle and finely decorated around the rim with cowries, tail of wildebeest and *oputo* (iron beads), to raise the wind. In fact, this object seems more likely to be the kind of *oshiva* used by the ritual war leaders (*ondyai*), given its prestigious nature. Rautanen's notes reveal that the cow horn was used by raiders to raise a storm during a raid, but it could also be used to alert people and gather them together if a raid was approaching (FELMM.OC:49).

[h] Hahn mentions the use of duiker horn whistles but fails to record any Ovambo name. The whistles are apparently used in times of 'war' and are filled with ashes, obtained by burning the wing feathers of a bird known as *inane ya m'koakoa*, which Hahn describes as "...a very nervous member of the Roller family". When the whistle is filled with this 'medicine' and blown, it will cause the enemy to "become nervous and shaky". Further on, Hahn also mentions the raiding whistle charm, *ochia*, stating that it is something given to sons by their father on the occasion of their first being able to walk, so that they may be clever cattle raiders when grown (Hahn 1928:22, 27).

[i] An *oshiva* charm necklet of duiker horns threaded on a hide thong, is worn by men on raids to protect them from bullet wounds (P-C.A37/389, see Plate 36).

[j] Finally, with further regard to the contents of some *eeshiva*, Estermann describes the (quite rare) situation when the whole of a raiding party is annihilated:

"This is the occasion for proceeding to prepare a powerful amulet with the hearts of the dead, removed from the bodies by a *kimbanda*.<sup>12</sup> For this purpose he roasts the flesh of the organ in question and puts it into duiker horns which the warriors hang around their necks (Estermann 1976:129).

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<sup>12</sup> Estermann prefers to use the general S.W. Bantu word for healer-diviner instead of the Ovambo words *ondudu/onganga*.

## PROPITIATION

Propitiation, whether performed in its own right or in conjunction with the use of herbal medicine and/or amulets, primarily serves to promote fortunate circumstances and personal well-being. In short, it invites fortune and seeks to discourage misfortune. The promotion of fortune is effected by the appeasement or placation of the ancestral spirits (living-dead), who are believed to be instrumental in causing illness and other kinds of misfortune as a result of being neglected or offended in any way.<sup>13</sup> As we have already seen in Chapter 3, the ancestors are thought capable of wielding considerable influence over the lives of their descendants - so much so that they can even intervene to prevent the highly desired rains sent by Kalunga, thus causing serious affliction in the form of drought, famine and illness (Shamena 1989).

Propitious acts involve the presentation of votive offerings (usually accompanied by some form of verbal address) to the particular ancestral spirits concerned. Through such acts people hope to either maintain existing favourable relations with their living-dead (whereupon a reciprocal benevolence on the part of the latter is desired by the former), or else the offerings aim to placate angered living-dead who have subsequently sent misfortune, in the hope that the latter's benevolence will resume swiftly. Thus, in the words of Aarni, there is a dual purpose in offering sacrifices, namely: "...to make people feel calmer and to pacify threatening powers" (Aarni 1982:45).

Places chosen for propitiation vary, however a common site is the grave of a deceased householder<sup>14</sup> (Loeb, 1948:79). Grave sites of kings, as well as sacred groves harbouring spirits, are also favoured. Propitious acts can be performed by household heads or by ritual specialists such as *endudu/oonganga* (healers-diviners) or *alokithi* (rainmakers) - depending on the reasons for performance. Propitiation is performed for the benefit of people both at the individual and corporate levels. The offerings or sacrifices presented to the living-dead are classified by the Ovambo communities as belonging to one of two main groups:

1) *Esaagelo/Efiawilo* (blood-less offerings), and

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<sup>13</sup> Small propitiatory measures are used to ward off "evil eyes" according to Aarni, but although witchcraft and sorcery are causes of misfortune, they are more usually dealt with at the time when trouble actually occurs - by divining sessions etc. - as opposed to being prevented in advance. See Maija Hiltunen (1986) for more on this.

<sup>14</sup> Male householders are buried in the main cattle kraal, however when the entire living structure is moved and rebuilt (every 2-4 years because of white ant destruction) the grave site is found in what has now become the gardens or crop fields (Loeb 1948:79).



2) *Ohula* (blood offerings/animal sacrifice) (Albin Savola 1916:182-183).

Although two separate kinds of offerings exist, they are by no means mutually exclusive in terms of use. Certainly, there are occasions when only one of the two will be chosen, however many of the more complex situations requiring propitiation seem to show an overlapping of the two to varying degrees. For the purpose of evaluation I will discuss each type separately, including examples of the circumstances requiring their use.

### **Esaagelo/Efiawilo**<sup>15</sup>

These are non-bloody offerings comprised of materials such as leaves, twigs, sand, chalk, ash, beer, human saliva, tobacco, snuff, porridge and cooked beans. The normal procedure is for small individual portions of the above to be taken by the officiator, spat upon (in itself construed as an offering), then thrown in the direction of both east and west. The ancestral spirits residing in the east and west are addressed as the offerings are thrown to them.<sup>16</sup>

*Esaagelo* offerings are generally more common than those of *ohula* and, unlike the latter, are not usually proffered in connection with crises (serious illness, drought, pestilence etc). Rather *esaagelo* may be offered:

- a) for the daily invitation of good fortune in general,
- b) for the invitation of success when manufacturing or producing,
- c) as thanks to the ancestors for their benevolence in terms of the provision of abundant subsistence - healthy crops, and
- d) during the healing of minor illness.

Primarily, then, *esaagelo* offerings serve as regular and formal acknowledgement of the living-dead. That is to say, the ties between the living and the ancestors are publicly consolidated, constantly re-affirmed, in many cases on a daily basis. It is hoped by the performers that the ancestors, thus remembered

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<sup>15</sup> Ondonga and Kwanyama dialects respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Very briefly East is the side of the good spirits, and west is the side of bad ones. This is fully discussed in the final section of this chapter.

and *included* in the everyday social affairs of their descendants, will continue to bestow benevolence, prevent misfortune, and so help maintain order. Having described the content of *esaagelo* it is worth elaborating on some of the contexts in which it occurs:

#### *Daily Invitation of Good Fortune*

Each morning, according to the German missionary Sckär, a Kwanyama man rises then goes to stand at the entrance of his homestead. Firstly, he spits in the direction of the rising sun, then throws a handful of leaves and grass the same way, saying aloud his hopes and desires (the nature of which are not documented by Sckär). This done, he takes a second handful of leaves and grass into his living quarters, spits onto them, and throws them into the fire. As the organic matter burns he holds out his right hand over the flames, and with his left he strokes his face, saying his hopes as before. Finally, he goes to an earthenware pot of water, spits into it, then washes himself asking aloud that all misfortune might stay in the water. Sckär states that the Ovakwanyama expected bad luck everywhere, hence the offerings hoped to repel it and invite good luck instead (Sckär 1916:1-2). Unfortunately Sckär does not say whether women performed early morning rituals as well, or whether the husband performed them on behalf of all the occupants of the household.

The Finnish missionary Martti Rautanen noted that the Ondonga rubbed their bodies with *omupja* (the chalk of happiness) each morning, in order to stave off unhappiness and draw to themselves happiness (NMF.MRC:113).

#### *Invitation of Success in Work*

*Esaagelo* offerings are considered important for ensuring the successful results of work, and are normally presented to the ancestral spirits prior to its commencement. Offerings range from one simple act up to a whole variety of procedures, depending on the nature of the task. Failure to offer *esaagelo* before working results in either the spoiling of goods made or produced, or the affliction of the worker with some form of illness. In some instances both are experienced at one time. Two of the most important and complex manufacturing processes involving *esaagelo* are potting and the mining, smelting and forging of iron.

### *Potting*

Estermann maintains that potting is not tied to possession by ancestral spirits, therefore initiation into the art is not required (1976:143). He also makes no mention whatsoever of the numerous propitiatory rites preceding the first potting session of the season. By contrast, the Powell-Cotton data (D. Powell-Cotton 1936e:1) strongly suggest that whilst there may not be any rigidly defined initiation as such, there are definitely certain rules governing those who may wish to become potters, and also that the ancestral spirits feature much more prominently than Estermann would have us believe.<sup>17</sup>

The manufacture of earthenware pots is the domain of women, with skills being passed down from mothers to daughters or aunts to nieces. Women may not become potters until they have had their first child. As far as spiritual dimensions are concerned, female potters are often in communion with an ancestral spirit who was a potter when living. Moreover, propitiation of potting spirits/ancestral spirits in general is a highly central aspect of rituals performed prior to potting sessions in order to invite success.

The Powell-Cottons observed the potting process among the Dombondola people,<sup>18</sup> and I will recount the associated propitiatory procedures in detail below, since there are many elements worth discussing. It is regarded as essential that *esaagelo* offerings are presented before potting begins, because failure to do so is believed to invite illness (and possible death) together with the cracking of all pots manufactured. The observance of certain precepts and prohibitions is also necessary and these will be dealt with further on in the chapter.

When taking the first clay of the potting season a number of rites are performed by the potter at the edge of the clay bed, involving the use of specially obtained plants. The provenance of the plants must be acceptable and not tainted with portents of danger (i.e. a snake skin lying across the roots). The potter, having chosen a plant (*onjo'wela*), digs gently around the roots with the shaft or loose head of an axe. When pulling up the plant she says quietly:

<sup>17</sup> Having said this, however, Diana Powell-Cotton writes that the Kwanyama women performed no rites when taking the first clay, unlike the Dombondola (D. Powell-Cotton 1936e:1). Yet this might be due to the fact that the Kwanyama potter was actually just giving a demonstration of her skills for the benefit of the photographic record (i.e. out in the open instead of the usual designated 'cave'), so may not have included all aspects of the process. Alternatively perhaps the Dombondola methods are evidence of things as they were before missionary/colonial influence discouraged ancestral respect.

<sup>18</sup> The potter was named Shanika and was of Dombelantu parentage, but at the time lived among the Dombondola into whom she married. She was a medicine woman as well as a potter, as was her mother before her.

"*Atu ende hatwi kokuti tu'kakongi oimbodi yetu yoku hongifa embia detu.*"

(We go to the bush to find remedies to make our pots.)

When she has collected all she needs, and having thanked Kalunga, the potter binds the plants into small, thin bundles using strips of young green palm leaves. She then travels slowly to the bed of clay she will use, and nearing the edge she begins to prepare her 'remedies' needed for the performance of the rites. In addition to her plants she pauses to collect some cow dung, which will be added to the fire. This apparently must be collected from the bush, not carried from one of the homestead cattle pens. Next she stops at a bush known as *ombu* (no scientific identification), and breaks from it three sticks. These in hand she steps over the bush, and then round it three times, saying:

"*Atu hendepo, atu kaiyeta edu letu, atu kanninga embia detu, atu kahonga dembia detu.*"

(We walk about, we fetch our clay, we make our pots, we smooth our pots.)

Then together with some dead palm branches as extra firewood, she makes a fire of the *ombu* twigs on the edge of the clay bed. She breaks off a sprig of leaves from a branch of *omwandi* tree, and places it at the edge of the clay bed (if the clay patch is dry then the sprig will be placed on the clay itself). This rite must be performed each time clay is collected for potting, otherwise all pots made will crack and spoil.

The potter returns to her fire. She breaks off the silvery flowers and leaves of the plant *omepo* (meaning 'wind', 'breath', 'spirit') and after smelling their fragrance deeply, she places some in each ear. This is done so that she might not be smitten with earache which would lead to deafness. The dung she collected is thrown into the fire as she refers aloud to the spirit of her cow/ox. She is a medicine-woman who has passed the cattle stage of initiation and drunk cow's blood - hence the reference to her spirit beast here and the need to offer cow dung. Following this she scrapes into her gourd red embers from her fire of *ombu* wood (supplemented by quickly burning palm leaves). Over the embers she breaks her little bundle of *onjo'wela* and also adds the remains of the *omepo* plant. The smouldering contents of the gourd are held out towards the east and the west, as she says:

*Tu! Oko talidi. Tu! Tali oke.*

Holding the gourd up to her face, the potter inhales the fumes with deep breaths. She opens her eyes

as wide as possible, until they stream with tears, so that the smoke covers them well. This is done in order that she may not go blind.

She then sits with her left leg crooked and her right leg outstretched (the position for potting), and passes the gourd three times under the crooked left knee and three under the right knee, saying:

"*Tu! Hitukili akwamongwo.*"

(Spit! I do not speak ill of akwamongwo.)

Each foot is then held over the gourd, then both her hands, and this is done lest she (or any woman taking clay after her) be afflicted with illness of the legs, feet or hands - that is, the parts used in digging and working the clay. The pre-potting rites are now complete. When she is actually manufacturing a pot, the potter places a piece of *omepo* plant in each ear and also puts a sprig of *etalaleka* into the water used during potting. Some of this water is taken into the mouth and spat out, saying:

"*Tu!*"

Her finished pots will crack if she does not do this.

#### *Osimanya: Mining, Smelting and Forging*

The striking parallels between master blacksmiths (*Tchivinda*) and healers (*endudu/Oonganga*) have already been noted (Estermann 1976, Powell-Cottons 1937f, Salokoski 1987). Both professions regard spirit possession as a calling to their vocation, and the initiation procedures for both are virtually identical. Blacksmiths and male healers are exempt from the normal male pursuits of hunting and cattle raiding. Even the mining and smelting process itself is referred to explicitly as "the curing of the stones" (*osimanya*).<sup>19</sup>

Estermann has recorded some of the propitiatory procedures involved in *osimanya* at the smelting stage. The Powell-Cotton field notes (1937f) are rich in examples for the entire process of *osimanya*, including preparations for the expedition. *Osimanya* is regarded as a decidedly risky venture, necessitating travel through wild and potentially dangerous bush and forest areas. Exhaustive manual labour in conjunction with skillfulness and concentration are then required during the lengthy smelting process. The spiritual

<sup>19</sup> The term *osimanya* is used to denote (a) the metal itself, (b) the site of iron ore, (c) the expedition to mine and smelt ore, and (d) the total smelting process (Salokoski 1987:5 - based on ELC information; Turvey 1977; Tirronen 1986).

assistance and benevolence of the ancestral spirits during this period is believed to be crucial if the operation is to be successful.

According to the Powell-Cottons, acknowledgement of the living-dead begins with the preparations the evening before departure for the 'mines'. After the master smith's tools, himself and his assistants have been decorated with chalk (*omia*) obtained from the mining site, the mining party sing whilst several of the men venture out to cut logs of *oifonono* (the 'sacred' wood)[p2].<sup>20</sup> The master-smith prepares the spot in the *epata yakula* (first wife's area) where the logs will be placed, then he goes into the *oluvanda* (open meeting area near entrance) with his digging tool and axe, singing and calling. Here he collects a species of grass, *ombwidangowolo*, and a small plant, *ekatadidi*, as the men bearing *oifonono* logs advance towards him, also singing. The master smith calls on them to halt, then striking the ground with his digging tool (*epanda*) he springs and darts around the group, stopping from time to time to throw soil over his shoulders. He then repeats this scene, cutting the ground with his axe. Finally, he gives a branch from the *omwhandi* tree to his young son, after which the whole assembly moves into the *epata yakula*.

The above actions, suggest the Powell-Cottons, are performed to engage the assistance of the ancestral spirits so that ore may be found swiftly and in one spot [p2].

The singing continues as the company form a semi-circle around the master smith, who digs a small hollow in the ground with his bare hands, throwing the sand over his shoulders. In the hole he buries the grass and the small plant, then over these he forms a pile with the *oifonono* logs, some *omutundungu* logs and the green fruit bearing branch of *omwhandi*. All axes to be used, together with the large digging tool, are left to rest against the wood pile throughout the night. Finally, a small mug of beer is poured by the master smith over the wood pile, saying as he does so:

"*Ovakwamungu, tambuleni!*"

(Ancestor spirits, take!)

Then the whole company goes to the *olupale* (central meeting place) to drink beer [p3].

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<sup>20</sup> Page numbers refer to Powell-Cotton manuscript, 1937f.

During the journey to the mines the following day, the company constantly sing *okuimba oshimanya*, a song containing all the names of the previous Kwanyama blacksmiths [p4].

For the first time this particular mining season, after the evening meal in the open, the master-smith rises from the fire and goes to stand facing east. He addresses himself out loud to the spirits of his forger ancestors and to Kalunga, the Creator and all powerful. Beating his axe head on the ground to awaken the spirits, he calls out into the night, announcing his presence and the aim of the expedition, hoping to invoke the assistance of his forebears. This invocation is known as *onghava*.

On arrival at the mines (day two) the master smith kindles the first fire of their temporary seasonal camp. Theoretically, this ought to be done using a burning log taken from the main sacred fire in the *olupale* of the smith's permanent homestead, however on this occasion the log had extinguished although was still kept and used, being re-lit [p6]. In the evening, a number of night fires are kindled. In making these 'sacred' fires (*ehanangekelo*), piles of branches and logs are assembled before the places where the living huts (*onduda*) will be built. A fire is allotted to each member of the company: the master smith, his family and all his assistants. The master smith kindles his own fire first, chewing a few grains of *oidavala* millet together with leaves of *omutundungu* (Wild Seringa: **Burkea africana**). He spits the mixture into the fire, then places on the flames the usual sprig of *omtundungu* leaves and some powdered wood of the *omumonga* tree. Now he lights each fire in turn, repeating the process. The fires are kindled in this way in order that the peace of the camp may not be troubled by the inmates of the bush, and the ritual procedure is known as *ehanangekelo* [p7].

Following the main evening meal, *onghava* is performed again by the master smith. Taking his bow and his axe he stands with his back to the company, facing east. He beats the ground twice with his axe shouting: "*Watula!*" (I am here!). He calls repeatedly, addressing himself first to the spirits of the ancient, first, Kwanyama blacksmiths: *Nanjembo*, *Shekuhumgama*, *Shafhauulu* and *Hauwindi*, and then to the spirits of his own forging ancestors, that they will all bless the work he is about to undertake, that the ore found may be good ore, and that his bellows nozzle of clay may not crack. After informing his family and assistants of the work they must carry out, and receiving their assent, he repeatedly strikes the ground, calling: "*Watula!*" (I am here!).

*Onghava* ensures that the bush and all its wild inmates are now at peace because the blacksmith has placed the traditional 'remedies' on the fires; the smith's own ancestral spirits and the spirits of the ancient Kwanyama blacksmiths, whose help he has invoked and from whom he has his smelting and forging power, and who will now bless his work [p8]. Not only is *onghava* performed in the evening, it is also done at sunrise by the master smith whilst other members of the mining party still sleep [p15].

When making clay nozzles for the bellows (on day 3), the clay is first imbued with a form of protective power so that the nozzles may not easily break. Moist red powder of pounded *oshingwidi* bark is sprinkled over the soft kneaded clay and chalk lines are drawn around the nearby wooden trough [p14].

On the fourth day, whilst the smelting shelter is being constructed, the master smith charms the entire mining camp in a ceremony known as *ehnankelero l'ovanu*. Once this has been completed, the camp is ritually protected and will not be disturbed by wild animals [p16].

Day five is the day of the search for iron ore. When the company approach a likely area of iron ore, two men run on ahead to "awaken the spirits", the main group following at a distance. During the search for ore fasting is imposed (not even pipe smoking is permitted), but by evening when ore has been collected some food is prepared. Some of the meal is offered to the spirits. The master smith walks out to the edge of the camp carrying two stirring sticks: in his right hand a stick bearing porridge dripping in butter, and in his left hand a stick bearing a lump of mashed beans. Facing east he throws one stick, calling to the ancestors to accept:

*"Ovakwamungu vaoshilo, tambuleni!"*

Then facing west he throws the other stick, calling:

*"Ovakwamungu vatokelo, tambuleni!"*

Finally, he dances twice around the confines of the mining site, frequently throwing small portions of porridge and shouting out *"tambuleni!"* (take!) [p21].

The day before smelting begins two lumps of ore are kept aside from the main pile and are surrounded by a small mound of earth in the same of a horseshoe. Leaves of *ongai* and *omtundungu* are placed on the ore and set alight. The two pairs of bellows are brought into use, the master smith and his family



fanning the blaze until the leaves are consumed [p22]. Extra special invocations are made on this evening, inviting success in the smelting day ahead (D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1937f).

Estermann maintains that before the actual process of smelting begins the furnace fire is kindled and the spirits of the east are invoked. Taking a basin of "purifying water" the master smith sprinkles the bellows, the furnace and the ore. After pumping the bellows for a while, "...the old man makes the sacrifice of the white earth or chalk (*omia*)..." whereupon the bodies of those involved in smelting and the bellows are marked (1976:147).

When the bellows-operators are in full swing the master smith throws some ten grasses and roots successively into the fire, saying each time: "*tambula!*" (take!), addressing himself to a spirit in the singular. Finally, a few puffs of tobacco smoke are exhaled over the furnace and a few pinches of snuff are thrown into the flames. Estermann (1976:148) says that the spirits will now be benevolent: the stones are "cured" and the smelting will be successful.

The Powell-Cotton notes on mining and smelting enlighten us as to the actual plants used in "curing" the ore and to appease the *ovakwamungu*. First the master smith prepares a handful of small lengths of roots: *enghudi* (bulbous root), *mutana* (yellow/brown tree root) and *mumonga* (yellow tree root). These are placed on the stones at the edge of the fire furthest from the bellows. Next some white fibrous roots and leaves of a small plant, *elungulungu*, are thrown into the mouth of the furnace and into the centre of the fire itself [p25]. The following plants are also thrown into the fire: powdered red root of *omusenje* (Raisin bush), wood of *elamba*, a small chunk of root of *onanguwe*, a tiny root of *hamaindula* and a handful of sand. In addition, small pieces of the above (excepting the sand!) together with tiny roots of *omuhangi* and *enyati* and some chalk, are chewed together then spat onto the centre of the fire. The master smith then chalks his body, and whilst dancing addresses the spirits.

After this a small wooden trough is brought, holding a pounded root of *olunomo* or *omkopokopo* soaking in water. The master smith rubs some of this over his face and spits into the fire. All the assistants are then anointed with this viscous liquid, the wet root being rubbed over the face, head, tongue, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Some of the liquid is then poured on the outer edge of the stone and charcoal furnace surround, and some is poured on the bellows themselves. Next the bellows are chalked

whilst all chant:

"*Tu! Ovakwamungu, outale uhapu, uhapu, uhapu* (much!)."

After which they chalk their own bodies. The enclosure hedge of the smelting area is sprinkled with the same viscous liquid as an offering to the ancestral spirits, so that the metal will not fuse and thus be wasted. Any visitors to the site must also anoint their own bodies for the same reason [p26].

Around mid-morning the women bring *oshikundu* beer. (Up until this time there has been fasting and a ban on talking to any new visitors to the site.) A little beer is poured over the bellows and the master smith takes some in his mouth which he spits into the furnace flames. The smith's small son repeats this. Then the master smith lights his pipe and puffs tobacco smoke over the fire and the bellows, saying: "*tambuleni!*" (take!). Beer is also poured around the confines of the smelting area (i.e. the hedge enclosure). Periodic invocations to the spirits are made throughout the day [p27]. If the smelting proves to be successful, then the evening propitiation of the spirits contains thanks and appreciation [p28].

#### *Ehumbo/Egumbo (homestead) Construction*

Owing to damage inflicted by armies of white ants, homesteads are normally moved and re-built every two to five years. Construction work, however, may not commence until after the annual *epena* (Spring) festival. C. Hahn records that when the new homestead of a king is constructed, a milk container is filled to which the *ochegona* (paternal uncle of the king) adds beer sediment and some crushed green leaves from the *eswila* bush. This mixture is known as *etalaleko*, and is sprinkled over the areas designated as new cattle pens. *Etalaleko* serves to keep the new kraal 'cool' and to fatten and bring health to the King's *mukunda* (district). The 'blessing' of the other new homestead divisions follows (Hahn 1928:12-13). Aarni notes that among the Ondonga, "prayers and invocation" were offered during the house moving rites, especially when erecting the enclosure fence and the main entrance gate or a doorpost. Addressing Kalunga, the Ondonga say: "Let satiation be inside and starvation outside our home" (Hukka 1954, in Aarni 1982:44).

Homesteads are always constructed with the main entrance way facing east: ..."the side of all good things" (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:46). When a homestead is moved good wood is salvaged from the old place, although the T-bar entrance gate (*ohnu*) is left standing on the old site until it rots or falls. Beer is

poured over the newly erected gate, with a request to the spirits that any of a malevolent nature might stay at the old, disused entrance and not trouble the new home (A. Powell-Cotton 1936b:45). As added protection from malevolent forces, 'sacred' wooden logs of (*omfiati/omusati; ombo*) are placed in two areas of the new kraal before the main construction work begins: one log is placed in the palisade opposite the main entrance gate (*ohnu*), and the second log is placed in the *olukale* (main corridor), between the *olupale* and *oshinyanga*.

#### *Ekongo: Salt Fetching*

The *ekongo* expedition undertaken by young men from Ondonga is regarded as hazardous and, indeed, forms part of the transition from boyhood to manhood. The word *ekongo* generally means journey or expedition, but is used in this context to refer to the journey south of Ondonga territory in order to obtain salt from the Etosha Pan. As with other pursuits taking people outside their home territory, the *ekongo* members desire the protection and good will of the ancestral spirits. According to Petrus Iueluele, one of Emile Liljeblad's informants from Ondonga, the ritual leader of the expedition - the *omamunganga* - performs a grain offering ceremony for the spirits of the *ekongo* (salt field<sup>21</sup>) (ELC 1932, item 291:944-950, in M. Salokoski 1986:3).

At *epeke*, the first stop en route to the Etosha Pan, some porridge is ceremoniously thrown in the directions of east and west, whilst saying: "Let the old year go, let the new one come!" (ELC 1995, in Salokoski 1986:6). Then upon arrival at the salt pan heaps of leaves and sticks (*okakulukazi*) are erected close to the edge as a way of appeasing the *ekongo* spirits (Salokoski 1986:11). The first salt obtained is considered to be rather special. Each collector must donate some of their amount to the king upon their return, who then offers the salt to the spirits of deceased kings and to protect himself from witchcraft. However, there are discrepancies in Liljeblad's source material, as there are some informants who state that the first salt was in fact presented to the old woman who cooked the *ekongo* party a ritual meal of porridge before the journey proper to the pan began (Salokoski 1986:5).

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<sup>21</sup> The word *ekango* is used to mean the salt, the salt pan and the expedition to collect it, just as *osimanya* means the mine, the iron ore and the expedition.

### *General Domestic Tasks*

Other occasions when *esaagelo* might be offered include sowing and harvesting of grain and cattle herding (Aarni 1982:46). Aarni gives no indication of the precise content of the ritual acts, but does at least mention that the offerings were spat upon before being thrown to east and west. When brewing *malodo* beer (the strong version), prior to straining (through a suspended funnel of bound grass) women fill their mouths with fresh cold water and spit this into the strainer. They do this so that if *akwamungu* (spirit influence) is in their bodies it will not spoil their beer. This procedure is carried out at the start of each new day of straining (Diana Powell-Cotton 1936d:1-3).

### *Giving Thanks: Calendrical Rites*

The source materials suggest that the most important situations requiring *esaagelo* offerings are when formally expressing gratitude to the living-dead in response to the latter's supposed benevolence. At the independent household level, thanks are expressed to the ancestors each evening following the main meal, when all the occupants of the kraal are gathered together around the fire in the *olupale* (central meeting place). Such evening offerings assume added significance when people happen to be away from their household, because in potentially dangerous surroundings people are all the more grateful for apparent fortunate circumstances (cf. mining examples above). Acknowledgement and gratitude takes the form of offering part of the evening meal to the spirits of the east and west.<sup>22</sup>

On a much larger scale annual seasonal rituals celebrating the abundance of natural and cultivated harvests are performed. There are two main ceremonies giving thanks to the ancestors:<sup>23</sup>

- 1) *Oshipe*: feast of 'new things' (new grain and new beer), and
- 2) *Omujai*: feast of *ngongo* fruit (known also as Marula Month: Rodin 1985).

*Oshipe* is a noun translating literally as 'newness' (Turvey 1977) and it designates the celebrations of new grain (*oshipe shoshifima*) and of new beer brewed using the new grain (*oshipe shomalodu*). The feast of

<sup>22</sup> Estermann writes that some of the meat (i.e. chicken or fish) is also offered (1976:192). However, such offering cannot be regarded as *ohula* because no ritual sacrifice of the animals is involved.

<sup>23</sup> Directly following the *oshipe* festival is the feast of cattle, *oshidanno sho ongombe*, where although no explicit propitiation of the ancestors occurs, the fact that the cattle are publically displayed and revered upon their return from the grazing pastures shows a high level of respect (Estermann 1976:138, D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1936g:1). This is important if one bears in mind the strong spiritual links said to exist between cattle and people (especially cattle and men).

new grain occurs very shortly after the ripe crops have been harvested. A ritual meal of porridge prepared with some of the fresh grain is attended by everyone, and small portions are offered to the ancestral spirits before 'profane' use of the harvest can begin (Estermann 1976:191, Hahn 1928:3, D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1936g:2). According to Tönjes, people believed that the ancestral spirits held power over the rain - especially the *ovakwamungu veehamba*, the spirits of dead kings. Thus, the presentation of the first food made from the newly harvested grain is given in thanks to the ancestors, for their bestowal of much needed rain (Tönjes 1910, translated in Turvey 1977). On the first day of the celebrations ('the feast of the householder') porridge is made by the first wife, then on the second day ('the feast of the women') it is made by all the in a kraal. Before everyone eats, the householder takes morsels of porridge and butter from the serving dishes and throws them to the spirits of east and west. Should he refrain from offering some of the first fruits of the harvest to the ancestors who have helped to ensure the crop, then he will be smitten with illness (D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1936g:2-4).

The feast of new beer directly follows the feast of new grain. *Omhya* (chalk) and *omhalo* (salt, or powdered bark of the *omunamhalo* tree) are sprinkled with freshly brewed beer (*omalodu*, as opposed to the weak beer *oshikundu*) from the mug which the householder presents to his first wife. Then all the family and guests receive some. Should the former owner of the kraal, now deceased, be a relative of the present owner, then the latter takes to the grave site a mug containing *oshixupaela* (freshly brewed beer, still warm) and pours it over the mound (Tönjes 1910, in Turvey 1977).

Estermann writes that the invocation of the spirits is less in the feast of beer, yet they are acknowledged by the ritual throwing of chalk over the new beer before it is presented by the first wife to her husband. The throwing of chalk, he suggests, is an indication of "the participation of the spirits in the consumption of beer manufactured with new grain" (Estermann 1976:191).

The ripening of *ngongo* fruit is another cause for celebration and thanksgiving. The fruit of the Marula tree ripen in January, and huge pots of intoxicating liquid are brewed from the pulp. Basically, everything stops at this time of year except for drinking parties and dance festivals. The celebrations begin with the small ritual *efifino ngongo* ('sucking ngongo'), followed by the main feasting known as *omuai* (Estermann 1976:190). During the rite of consuming the first *ngongo* fruit (*efifino ngongo*), the two

protagonists - the householder and his first wife - have their faces marked with chalk, thus indicating the sacred character of the event. Before presenting the fruits to her husband, the first wife marks her own face and her husband's, in the firm conviction that the spirits will be satisfied at being remembered and thus accept their offering "with pleasure" (Estermann 1976:191). Estermann emphasises the point that the rites need not be explicit to show that "...thanks for favours received and supplication for the continuance of such favours..." are offered (p191). Loeb's account is similar (1962:213-214).

There seems to be some confusion in the source literature about when the various calendrical ceremonies take place, and in what order they occur in relation to each other. Loeb states that the New Year festival among the Ovakwanyama is called *omuaji* and is held at the time of *ngongo* ripening. Estermann mentions *omuai* following the rite of first *ngongo*, but does not say whether it is to mark the start of a new year. One ceremony which does seem to be connected with moving into a new season is *epena*, called the Spring festival by Loeb. It seems to be generally agreed among the sources that *epena* serves to regulate certain social and economic activities. *Epena* is actually comprised of the verbal root *-pena*, which means the taking place of something, only in its proper context. *Epena*, then, is the festival of dancing before activities such as harvesting, re-roofing, house moving and so on can take place (Turvey 1977:22, the definition possibly taken from Tönjes).

Estermann writes that among the Ombandja, when the aloe blossoms turn red (July), the chief's first wife gathers some of these flowers, and having soaked them in water rubs the chief's body with them as he sits in the *olupale* (central meeting place). This act signifies the commencement of the *epena*. There is no information to show that the Ovakwanyama also perform the aloe blossom aspect of *epena*, but the following aspects have been recorded and are shared by both Ovambo groups. Basically, *epena* is an occasion for the reunion of all the old warriors, especially those who have killed someone during a raid. They perform the 'Dance of the Hyena' for a number of consecutive days. Estermann does stress that only after the *epena* can housemoving, the eating of harvested corn stalks by cattle, *osimanya*, and *ekongo* take place (1976:131). Aarni (1982:44) maintains that *epena* follows *omathila*, and heralds the return of the cattle herds from the grazing pastures. Drawing on the work of Hahn, Aarni classifies *epena* as the third of the calendrical rites.

Among the Uukwambi, to the west of Ovamboland, the *omathila* celebrations are most definitely concerned with the closing of the old year and the heralding of the new, and included among them is a special request to the ancestors to send rain (Hahn 1928:4). Rain is desperately needed to fertilise the new crops sown in the Spring following the *epena* festival. For more details see the section below dealing with *ohula* offerings.

### **Ohula**

*Ohula* are traditionally blood sacrifices and are normally offered during times of important personal or social crisis (for example, serious illness, pestilence, rainmaking ceremonies). Of the two kinds of propitiation, *ohula* are offered far less frequently than *esaagelo*, but are nonetheless considered to be the more potent and important. Altogether there are officially four grades of *ohula* offerings: the chicken, the goat, the dog and the ox. The ox is the most prestigious of all, whilst the chicken is the least. Furthermore, there is a further distinction based on sex, with male animals possessing higher status than the females (Estermann 1976:164). Estermann writes that the animal to be slaughtered is known as *okhula*, and the corresponding rites as *okufiaulila* or *okulia okhula* (Estermann 1976:191). He maintains that although the initiation ceremony of the healers (*endudu*) has strict rules governing the choice of animal (i.e. in the order indicated above), the choice in the case of illness depends solely on the economic position of the patient. The possessing spirit, through the mediation of a diviner, in any case normally demands the type of animal necessary (ibid:192). This feature is supported by some of the Liljeblad material, whereupon sheep, beans (Filippus Uusiku, Ondonga, ELC 1932 item 210:470-474), as well as melon seeds (*etapati*), milk and dog, and tortoises (for a poor man) (Leonard Auala, Ondonga, ELC 1932 item 226:519-524) are also included as *ohula* offerings.

When trying to detect the cause of the illness (*omuankeli*), Närhi records that the Ondonga offer the following: (1) vegetables with butter, (2) chicken, and (3) beans (imitating dog) (Närhi, 1929:84-85). It is interesting to see that non-bloody offerings can be presented as *ohula* sacrifices in situations where blood is normally required, but perhaps not surprising since not everyone would be in a position to offer livestock. Moreover, Närhi's information relates only to the *divination* of the cause of illness, not to the curative procedures involving *ohula*, or even to the fees of the *ondudu* (usually in cattle). In other words, the whole

business of curing serious illness can be an expensive one for the patient and a lucrative one for the healers. It may also be the case that Närhi has not distinguished between *esaagelo* and *ohula* offerings in his discussion of healing because it is acceptable to offer *esaagelo* for minor illness as mentioned above. Aarni's rather weak theory is that the spirits can be fooled into thinking they have been offered meat, when only vegetables or a very low grade animal have been presented. He claims people viewed the deceased as being 'short sighted' and very easily fooled, so that when sacrificing a "tough old chicken" one spoke of a "fat ox" and the spirits were none the wiser (Aarni 1982:62). Estermann, by contrast, argues that no-one would dare to offer below their 'material' means, for fear of ancestral retribution (Estermann 1976:192). The latter explanation is probably the most likely, whereupon poorer people are only able to offer beans in circumstances that technically require a dog. Attributing vegetables or lower grade sacrificial animals with high grade *ohula* names should not automatically be seen as deliberate deception of the ancestral spirits. It is perhaps more likely that people name their offering "ox" instead of "vegetables" because that is what they feel their ancestors deserve, even though they are perhaps not able to provide it. In short, propitiators are concerned with respect rather than deception, and of course Estermann's view that the Ovakwanyama would not wish to invite ancestral wrath unnecessarily is (to a degree ) most likely also correct.

Blood seems to be the most important element (as opposed to the meat) in *ohula* offerings. On occasions where the living and the ancestors are supposed to be gathered together, the blood of the sacrifice is offered to the ancestors and the meat is consumed by the living. If the ancestors were not offered blood, then the alternative should at least be "the nice smell of flesh", if the ancestors are to be appeased (Brincker 1900:46, in Aarni 1982:46-47). The particular significance of cattle sacrifice lies in the fact that, "... the living dead were tied to the living mostly through cattle, who in turn, were a means to get in touch with the ancestors". The 'essence of life' pertaining to the ancestors was found in the blood of the sacrificial animal, hence the meat was either left or (more likely) consumed by the living (Warneck 1910:320, in Aarni 1982:63). Going further than Warneck, one could suggest that the blood is not consumed because to do so would constitute what amounts to a form of cannibalism. Märta Salokoski mentions the special bull in a man's herd known as *oshitondekela*, where the souls of this bull and the owner are believed to unite. Through this unification, the living man gains access to the spirit world of the ancestral living-dead



(Salokoski 1987b:9).<sup>24</sup>

### *Situations Requiring Ohula*

One instance requiring *ohula* is dreaming about a special ancestor. The colour of the sacrificial ox had to be pure black, since this colour symbolises the ancestors, together with the rain clouds and the earth (Warneck 1910:320, in Aarni 1982:46).

*Ohula* can be offered in connection with royal power. The Ovakwanyama living in Namibia were in possession of a powerful stone, gained by them during the years of migration south. Northern Namibia is devoid of stones, therefore large stones achieved a sort of mystical quality. Brought into Namibia from Angola and Zambia by *endudu*, such stones were used by *endudu* and *oonganga* and in particular by rain-makers. (I think the stones come from river beds, hence the link between the stones and rain).<sup>25</sup> The Ovakwanyama stone was propped level, then kept under surveillance by a circumcised man and his wife. If at any time the stone began to incline then a black ox was slaughtered and the stone, after being re-propped, was smeared with its blood. New kings knelt before the stone in order to obtain 'power', without which they were thought to be incapable of ruling (Hiltunen 1986:30). The 'power' in question here is most probably the ability of the king to predict and influence the falling of rain (for example see Clarence-Smith 1974).

The link between kingly power and rain is something which has been recorded in relatively more detail by Estermann. He talks of, but omits to name, "...a very important sacrifice of intertribal character":

"This sacrifice was once offered on the occasion of great calamities (among which droughts are conspicuous), and in response to the repeated threat of famine. The sacrificing chief was the chief of the Vale and the sacrifice was repeated each time one of the other Ovambo chiefs sent a black ox. The beast was immolated on the grave site of a dead chief and there too a cow that had recently calved

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<sup>24</sup> Cattle are credited with a number of mystical/spiritual qualities: 1) *odilika*, bull or heifer. *Odilika* means 'forbidden'. The cattle concerned are given this mystical status without the owners knowledge, and should he set eyes on them he will die (Estermann 1976:141). Salokoski argues that *odilika* bulls are actually used to foretell danger (1987b). 2) *Nangula*, the 'seeing' cow, does have a prophetic role to the advantage of her owner (Estermann 1976:141).

<sup>25</sup> A smooth, egg-shaped 'Stone of Rain' is held at the FELM Museum in Helsinki (artefact 442). The accompanying notes claim that it was most likely brought into Namibia from Angola, because of Namibia's lack of stones. The Uukwambi people are reputed to hold a great many.

was milked and her milk sprinkled over the grave" (Estermann 1976:192).<sup>26</sup>

Loeb also talks of the Kwanyama expedition into Evale country to obtain rain (1962:65). Loeb's account of Namibian Ovakwanyama is quite similar to Estermann's for the Ovakwanyama of Angola. Evale territory is lush and green, and is also the source of the *efundja* (where the rivers swell and flood southwards to the Etosha Pan) in Ovamboland. Loeb writes:

"..the word got about that the *ovakwamunghu* (the ancestral spirits) were holding back the rain. The next step was to appease both the High God Kalunga and these spirits. This propitiation required a sacrifice. An old circumcised man (one of the Big Men or Priests) wearing the king's beads and shells, drove a black cow and its young calf into the sacred grove near the *ombala*.<sup>27</sup> A black cow was selected because the colour represented thunder clouds. She was supposed to drip milk along the way in imitation of rain. At the edge of the grove the calf was taken away and the cow was driven alone to the king's grave within the grove..." (Loeb 1962:62).

The cow was sacrificed by being choked to death using "...a round stone which was put into its mouth (Loeb 1962:63).<sup>28</sup> The cow was then skinned and its blood collected in a container. Blood was sprinkled over the royal grave sites as an act of propitiation to Kalunga and the royal spirits, together with requests for the spirits not to be angry and to send the much needed rain (Loeb 1962:63). This *ohula* sacrifice was performed by an old circumcised man of the priestly royal clan (post 1857): the *ovakulunu*. Prior to 1857 the kings themselves performed the rite as circumcision was still practised by the Ovakwanyama (circumcision ended with the death of Haimbili in 1857) (Salokoski 1987a:5, based on information from Brincker 1899 and Loeb 1962).

The threat of drought was always hanging over the heads of Ovambo peoples, particularly those living in what is now northern Namibia.<sup>29</sup> Rainmakers were therefore regarded as very powerful and were

<sup>26</sup> Estermann also states that a young mother's milk was drawn and that her child, together with the calf, was killed at the grave site (ibid:192).

<sup>27</sup> *Ombala* was originally the royal household where circumcised kings lived. However, as circumcision died out only the circumcised ritual specialists: the Big Men of the Ombala, lived there (Loeb 1962).

<sup>28</sup> Other sources tell of the suffocation of sacrificial animals: either with earth or stones. The purpose of death by suffocation being to prevent the spillage of blood outside the ritual context. The spirit-soul is believed to reside in the blood, so spillage before the offering is properly made was avoided in order that the spirit-soul should not escape (D. Powell-Cotton 1936c:2, A. Powell-Cotton 1937d:3, Estermann 1976, Aarni 1982; see Loeb (1962:260) for an account of smothering a dying king with a lambskin so that his body and spirit can enter the next world 'whole').

<sup>29</sup> To get an idea of how bad the droughts were see Clarence-Smith (1974) who discusses the frequency and severity of either lack of rainfall or rainfall at the wrong time.

accorded high status. They were engaged by the kings to promote rain, because the power position of the latter depended on it (Clarence-Smith 1974, Salokoski 1987a). Various ritual acts involving the symbolic simulation of rain were performed, although the offering of *ohula* signified the moment of contact with the spirits who were thought to have interfered with the rains and prevented their arrival.

Sckär (1916:3) writes that among the Ovakwanyama a black ox was slaughtered at the grave site of the ancestral chiefs. The latter's spirits are believed to reside in a nearby thick grove (*omulu*), and are concerned with the sending or withholding of rain. When the rains are overdue, some fried meat and blood is placed on the grave site as the *ovakwamungu* are called, asking that they might show pity on their successors.

Alternatively, a pure black ox can be taken to the banks of the Cunene River (i.e. a location of water and fertile earth) and there slaughtered and skinned. The carcass is left for the spirits to eat, so that when they are fed they will be appeased and not continue to withhold rain. The spirits grow jealous if they are not fed, hence their interference in the rains which Kalunga sends (Erastus Shamena (Ondonga), interview FELM, June 1989).

In Namibian Ovamboland, Hahn records that rainmakers (*alokithi*) are in high demand among the Ondonga when the season promises to be a bad one. One of the rituals performed in the hope of promoting rain involves sprinkling water and the fat of a freshly slaughtered ox (provided by the chief) over the rising smoke from a fire. The drops of water and fat symbolise the desired rain, whilst the smoke represents the thunder clouds. If the *alokithi* were successful then they received cattle from the chief and grain from everyone (Hahn 1928:6).

The calendrical rite of *omathila* is performed at the advent of each new year and involves *ohula* sacrifice. Hahn describes the rite as it is performed by the Uukwaluthi of Namibia (the content of the rite varies between the different Ovambo groups). *Omathila* represents the bringing of good fortune (i.e. rain) by giant birds flying over the land. Four or five male elders (*ekanjo*: men who call the clouds for rain) march eastwards in the early morning to greet the sunrise. They whirl bullroarers around their heads to create a noise similar to the huge birds wings in flight. This is maintained for four days, and during this time any small livestock encountered by the *ekanjo* become theirs. Such animals are taken and sacrificed at the

*oshimbo* on the final day, to the *omathila* - spirit of the birds. This sacrificial rite is known as *oshimbo*. If no stock are encountered then the chief will provide a prime ox (Hahn 1928:4). Hahn makes no mention of the ancestors in connection with *omathila*, though other sources stress the importance of the link between the disposition of the ancestors and the abundance or lack of rain, so that one feels they must be involved in *omathila* to some extent. Or, to put it differently, for the ancestors to be completely absent from the occasion would be unusual. Certain large birds such as the *kaimbi* (type of eagle) herald the rains with their arrival in the area. But if they happen to arrive too early in the season, for instance before the rains are actually needed, then they are attacked and chased because they become a symbol of misfortune (Loeb 1962:65). Their soaring is also said to destroy the rain clouds (E & M Shamena 1989, interview, FELM, Helsinki). It is possible that the *kaimbi* acts as a visible sign of Kalunga or of ancestral power.

#### *Illness and Spirit Possession*

Sckär states that animal offerings were used by the Ovakwanyama to cure illness, and that the gravity of the illness determined the choice of animal. After slaughtering the animal, some of the meat or blood is thrown skywards in all directions and some is given to the sick person (Sckär 1916:2). Similarly Rautanen writes of the Ondonga:

"The *ohula* is a sacrifice or sacrificial meal to the spirits of the deceased... According to the nature of illness and the age of the patient, so the *ohula* differs. The principle *oohula* (*pl.*) are of six different kinds" (Rautanen 1880:68ff, translated in Aarni 1982:46).<sup>30</sup>

*Oohula* are normally only performed in cases of illness recognised to be serious and to have been caused by a disgruntled ancestral spirit. Such propitiation is also just one element (albeit an important one) in a whole range of methods used to combat serious illness - herbal medicines and psychiatric help being two examples. Justina Shivuta's paper on traditional healing in Ovamboland contains a detailed description of how *ohula* may be used as a curative method:

"If he (i.e. the healer) finds out from the signs that the illness is caused by the spirits of the dead, then the sick one was cured through sacrifices, the help was sought by sacrificing. An animal was used,

<sup>30</sup> Aarni does not recount the six kinds in his translation!

since it was believed that the relations between people and angry spirits of the dead are corrected by letting blood flow on the ground. In this manner also quarrels between people could be remedied. The connection between the antagonists could only be reached through the death of someone, or through letting blood flow on the ground. The sacrifice was in actual fact a sacrificial meal for the spirits and the sick one. The spirits had to be chased away, or rather they are enticed away from the sick one by preparing a meal for them.... The sacrificial meal consists of chicken and beans chopped into bundles which are cooked on a holy fire brought from the (king's) court. The person eats, thinking that it is dog. While eating he barks like a dog. When he stops the dog is considered to be dead. In this way the sacrifice is seen to be completed. The performers of the sacrifice are the mother of the sick person, his brothers or other relatives. Those making the sacrifice say, "Spirits of the deceased take meat that you long have been craving for. Go away from this person." Or s/he takes beans and chicken, spits on them, and throws to the east and west, saying: "Take your beans, spirits. My child is well." The sacrificer pours blood into the mouth of the sick one from both his/her hands. Once the sacrifice has been performed, the sacrificer says to the sick one: "go away from the spot where the sacrifice was made for you." When the sick one has gone, the spirits are addressed as follows: "You stay here. Do not follow us." When the meat of the sacrifice is eaten the sacrificer wipes his/her hands on the sick one. Each one who has eaten of the meat does likewise. The following day the sick one is taken to a diviner, who removes the residue of sacrificial meat by greasing the sick one's body with butter. The former returns the next day also, again to cleanse the sick one's body with his hands and grease him with butter...If the sick one begins to recover it is a sign that the spirits of the deceased have gone away. But if the illness continues, the following sacrifices are performed: the goat sacrifice, the sheep sacrifice and the bull sacrifice" (Shivuta 1981:6-7, translation by Märta Salokoski 1989).

Shivuta here seems to be referring particularly to spirit possession, as opposed to spirit inflicted illness - such as earache. I think there is a difference between illness caused by spirit possession and that caused by spirit 'malevolence', but it is often difficult to distinguish the two in the source materials. A closer evaluation of the data is needed before any definite conclusion can be reached. Certainly, in cases of minor illness

(spirit inflicted) *ohula* - blood - is not necessary, whereas it seems to be crucial in cases where actual possession by a spirit occurs. This is discussed further in chapter 3, dealing with ancestral spirits and divination.

### *Initiation*

*Ohula* sacrifice is a very central aspect of the various ceremonies of initiation. Transition rites are deeply significant in that, as life crises events, they are occasions when the spiritual presence and guidance of the ancestors is regarded as paramount. When male circumcision was practised, the blood of the sacrificial animals together with that shed during the boy's operation was allowed to run into the earth, creating bonds between the men, their cattle herds, the ancestors and the land itself (Aarni 1982:39). During the female *efundula* ceremony, the sacrificial pure black oxen represent desired fertility. However, they also propitiate the ancestral spirits who are regarded as being instrumental to the fortune and fecundity of the young women (see Tuupainen 1970, for more on this).

Initiation into the professions of blacksmith and healer also require *ohula*. Indeed, spirit possession in these situations is regarded as a calling, which may or may not be followed. As above, blood is seen as the medium through which the spirits of the living and the living-dead are able to be in a state of communion - translated by diviners. (See Chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of *endudu/Oonganga* initiation.) According to Estermann, hunters too enjoy 'supernatural' office which:

"....requires the close collaboration of the spirit of an ancestor through the medium of possession. For this reason the apprenticeship includes a spiritual initiation, and the actual exercise of hunting requires a certain number of acts of worship addressed to the possessing spirit" (Estermann 1976:144).

Unfortunately he does not elaborate on the actual content of the initiation, but it would not be unreasonable to suppose that *oohula* are offered, given that spirit possession is involved.

The ritual purification of either individuals or whole (kin) groups often entails the offering of *oohula*, for the benefit of both the living and their ancestors. Ritual purification is usually performed when the living have transgressed precepts or prohibitions, or else have been cursed by other kin members (perhaps as

punishment for devious behaviour), all of which are offensive to elders and ancestors. Ritual purification does not only involve *oohula*, but also the offering of *esaagelo*, as well as many of the therapeutic actions and remedies found in Chapter 5.

### **PRECEPTS, PROHIBITIONS AND RITUAL PURIFICATION**

There are numerous precepts and prohibitions governing the various Ovambo communities, and so I will only list a few of the more important ones here: those relating to kinship, politics, social relations and religion for instance. Among Ukwanyama a sacred precept (for example the First Ngongo Fruit Rite) is called *osikola*, and a sacred prohibition (or taboo) *oidila*. The non-fulfilment of a precept or the violation of a prohibition is known as *etimba*. *Etimba* normally entails punishment in the form of a protracted and painful illness, inflicted upon the offender by the ancestral spirits. Thus, one who neglects the rites of *oshipe* (harvest thanksgiving) will most likely be inflicted with *emiakani* (a disease of the knee-joints) (Estermann 1976:206; Hahn 1928:4; D. Powell-Cotton 1936c:1). Punishment, or at least the threat of punishment, in the form of illness or misfortune, is therefore a strong determinant of 'moral' conduct within society. If Ovambo have committed *etimba*, they may attempt to escape ancestral revenge by eating the plant known as *etamupya* (drive-out-unluckiness) [**Gomphocarpus tomentosus**] (Rodin 1985:51, based on Loeb et al 1956).

Some of the main moral codes have been recorded by Estermann, who writes that the following are avoided wherever possible:

[a] Excessive irascibility (*ehandu*).

[b] Thieving.

[c] Sexual excess

[d] Incest

[d] Avarice (*ouluva*).

[e] Sloth/indolence.

Such precepts and prohibitions are constantly expressed and reinforced in the form of riddles and proverbs (Estermann 1976:208-211). Matti Kuusi has documented some 2483 proverbs and 472 riddles (Kuusi 1970,

1974). Many precepts have been discussed in previous sections of this thesis, for example the correct performance of ritual celebrations and honouring of elders and ancestral spirits. Prohibitions (*oidala*) occur much more commonly in the everyday existence of Ovambo peoples.

*Oidala* operate at both the intra-group and inter-group levels. Some affect particular clans, whereas some are imposed only on particular individuals (i.e. pregnant women, ritual specialists) (Estermann 1976:207). Aarni writes that all Ondonga sacred places (grave sites, spirit groves etc), along with the human shadow, spittle and names, belonged to what he terms an "invisible mystical sphere" - and all of which were regarded as *oshidhila* (forbidden). To disregard their status would be *oshiponga* (to invite disaster, bad luck)<sup>31</sup> (Aarni 1982:52). Hahn records that any person desecrating the 'holy' ground *oshimbo* (located at the edge of community territory), by cutting trees, disturbing soil or collecting firewood etc , would become blind and paralysed in the legs (1928:3). There were indeed a great many prohibitions in daily life, those of particular importance being *iidhila* (*plural*) relating to peoples' dealings with the royal family. For instance, it was *oshidhila* to enter the king's household without removing one's sandals, as this is believed to indicate the death of one of the royal inmates (Hahn 1928:2). It was also forbidden to speak to the king without first coughing. Kings themselves were forbidden to eat he-goat, viscera or pork (Hopeasalmi 1946:58, in Aarni 1982:85).

Freda-Nela Williams, in her list of "set rules and norms to ensure the maintainance of law and order", includes: no toleration of murder, except during war; no rape; no cutting down of young trees and no picking of unripe fruit; and no hunting to be carried out until the season was inaugurated by the king. Transgression of these and other laws was judged through a judicial system presided over by counsellors and the king himself (Williams, 1988:107). Adherence to these laws was known as *efimaneko* (acting with honour), whereas breaking the laws was *okuhadulika* (to be without honour) and involved payment of heavy fines (*ofuto*) (Loeb 1962:68).

Strict rules governed the use of the left and right hands. It was considered quite unacceptable to use the left hand, especially when greeting someone. Using it was thought to invite the death of someone in the

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, these places can be visited, and saliva etc used, only this must occur in a proper context under the control of a ritual specialist.



family on the mother's side. The left hand must not be used for eating or for offering gifts to anyone (E & M Shamena 1989).<sup>32</sup> Loeb writes that when offering gifts, the Ovakwanyama hold the object in their right hand, arm outstretched, placing their left hand beneath their right forearm (Loeb 1962:68).

Clan members usually followed certain observations concerning food. These involved either avoiding particular kinds of food, or else the eating of special totemic foods (i.e. millet, oxen). *Endudu/ooganga* may have to obey certain food restrictions, depending on their position in the hierarchy of healers (Estermann 1976:193). It is considered *oshidhila* for anyone to drink beer when a king has died and his successor has not yet been inaugurated (Hahn 1928:15). Pregnant women must avoid eating certain animals: pork (*osingulu*) might make the child resemble a wart hog, hedgehog (*nikifa*) might make the child shy, and small tortoises were thought to make the child want to retreat into the womb after birth, and so forth (Loeb 1948:24).

It was most definitely considered *oshidhila* for a woman to give birth to a child before she had participated in the *efundula* transition ceremony, because the child was thus not a 'legitimate' member of the matrilineage (Loeb 1948:23, D. & A. Powell-Cotton 1937a:7). Abortion was also classified as *oshidhila* in Ukwanyama (a law enforced by King Mandume in 1913), and two head of cattle had to be paid by the prospective biological father to the girl and her kin in compensation. During pregnancy, husbands were not bound to observe any sexual restrictions, unlike their wives. For instance, women refrained from sleeping with men other than their husband, otherwise it was thought their children would die at birth (Loeb 1948:24). There are, however, sexual restrictions placed on men at other times. For instance, if a husband does not remain solely with his first wife at the time of new harvest (*oshipe*), sleeping instead with his other wives, then this is considered *oshidhila* and he will be struck by a disease where his intestines will break (Adalf ya Sidine (Ukwanyama), ELC 1932, item 323:752). Men also cannot have sexual intercourse during the daytime, or during their period of ritual purification after cattle raiding (Loeb 1962:76).

The birth of twins is an event receiving much attention in the source literature, but one which has been shrouded in confusion and contradiction. This may be due to a number of things: perhaps the various Ovambo groups deal with twin births differently; perhaps the discrepancies reflect cultural changes that

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with author at the FELM, Helsinki.

were taking place within Ovamboland during the colonial period; or perhaps there were different laws applied to different people within and between Ovambo groups. Some authors state that it was *oshidhila* for anyone giving birth to twins, and that the latter should be killed at birth (Aarni 1982:50).<sup>33</sup> Others maintain that twin births were only of grave concern if occurring in the royal lineage (when one or both were killed). However, if born to ordinary people they were allowed to live following a purification ceremony (Hahn 1928:3). Indeed, non-royal twins have been truly regarded as a blessing from Kalunga, according to Loeb. He states that the Ovakwanyama like twin calves and twin children because they are powerful signs of fertility. However, elaborate purification ceremonies are required for twin births, and the latter must be killed at birth if the cost of such ceremonies cannot be met (i.e. as among the poorer western Ovambo groups). Nevertheless:

"The Kwanyama rejoice at the birth of such twins (of unlike sex), since they consider them to be two spirits of different sexes with one personality, who together form a complete being."

The Kwanyama apparently conceive of Kalunga as a bisexual being, and they also think it good luck to have sex with an hermaphrodite (Loeb 1962:17-18). For all their positive qualities twins were still an unusual phenomenon, and therefore the need for ritual purification is not surprising.

### **Ritual Purification**

The transgression of social and moral laws and the neglect of precepts, was believed to invite ancestral wrath. One way of counteracting such wrath was to offer *oohula* or *esaagelo*, as discussed above. In addition, ritual purification was also considered central and essential. Transgressing society's norms and values, whether wittingly or unwittingly, rendered a person 'unclean' or polluted in some way. Ritual purification, then, entails the ritual washing of protagonists, as well as internal cleansing with medicinal liquids (enemas and emetics) and blood-letting.

There are many situations requiring ritual purification. Only four will be dealt with here in the context of *edimba*: sexual relations after the death of a partner, the birth of twins and breach birth, the removal

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<sup>33</sup> According to Setson, an Ovambo theologian, the Ovambo sacrificed to the ancestors in order to avoid the birth of twins. (Setson, interview with Aarni 1981, footnote in Aarni 1982:58). Unfortunately Setson does not specify which particular Ovambo group or groups did this.

of a sorcerer's curse from a kin group, and finally the purification of warriors after a cattle raid. For other examples see the work of Loeb, Estermann and the Emile Liljeblad Collection.

*Olusi: Mortuary Pollution*

Aarni writes that among the Ondonga it was believed that a mortuary taboo, *olusi*, existed in the body of the surviving partner in marriage. "This *olusi* was the cause of the disease, which could make the survivor swell and die" (Aarni 1982:70). In order to remove *olusi* and so prevent illness, an *onganga* of the opposite sex needed to be summoned. Ritual purification was considered vital if the widow or widower wanted to remarry and have sexual intercourse without causing illness to the new partner. The object of the purification rite was to mystically break the link between married people, one of whom is deceased (Tuupainen 1970:81ff).

Among the Ovakwanyama (in Namibia), anyone who has gone through the second marriage ceremony must be purified after the death of his or her spouse. To neglect this would be *oshidhila* and death would result. Moreover, the person marrying the unclean ("ghost-ridden") widow (*omufijekadi*) or widower (*omufiluakadi*) would be the one to suffer. Thus the surviving partner is given herbs by an *ondudu*, and then must participate in a symbolic sexual act, whereby the sexual organ of the opposite sex is moulded from clay (Loeb 1948:79). Loeb's account is actually based to a large extent on that of Estermann (1976:80-81), who describes the *olusi* ritual in rather more detail. Estermann explains that the name *olufi* (pronounced *olusi*) comes from the verb *okufya*, meaning to die. The ritual itself is comprised of two parts, involving:

- 1) General washing of the whole body by the *ondudu* a few days after the death of the spouse, and
- 2) Performance of sexual intercourse using genitals of the opposite sex moulded from clay. This is done with the assistance of the *ondudu*, in a consecrated place in the bush. Following this the *ondudu* rolls the clay organ into the shape of a ball, then hides it either in a hole in a termite hill, or else in a thicket of *omidime* bushes. Both for men and women, the *olusi* rite is performed in close proximity to these bushes if possible. According to Estermann the Kwanyama name for the plant, *omidime* [***Euclea lanceolata***], is connected with the verbal root *-dima*, meaning 'extinguish'. This is, of course, directly related to the purpose of the rite: to extinguish past ties in order that new ones may be created. This second part of the rite is

performed shortly before the new marriage is contracted.

The botanical work of Loeb and his assistant Rodin allow further insight into the kinds of plants used in the *olusi* rite. The plant *omudime* (to-destroy-thing) has been identified by Rodin as ***Euclea divinorum*** (rather than ***Euclea lanceolata***) and apparently has many uses in connection with repelling misfortune. In the context of *olusi*, the leaves are stamped and boiled in water. The new widow is then washed with the mixture by an *ondudu*, to extinguish the negative effects of her husband's death (Rodin, based on communication with Estermann, 1985:73-74). Following the death of her husband, a wife drinks a potion made from the plant *oshinanganamwali* (*okatendadikwa*) [***Kleinia* sp. cf *Kleinia longiflora***]. Rodin is doubtful about Loeb's observation, however, because of the toxicity of the plant's latex and its emetic qualities (Rodin 1985:63, based on Loeb 1955a). I would argue that such "emetic qualities" may in fact be the key to its use in this particular context, since the aim is to *cleanse* the protagonist. *Okaxupilaunona/xypila* (to-give-an-enema) [**Rubiaceae *Borreria* sp.**] leaves and stems may be used to brew an infusion, to be used as a vaginal douche during the purification of a new widow. The douche is used in conjunction with the clay phallus given by the *ondudu* (Loeb et al 1956, in Rodin 1985:125). Finally, an infusion is made from the bitter leaves of *oshiyooseuta* [***Clerodendrum unciatum***] which is then drunk by men who have intercourse with new widows before the latter have been ritually purified. Without drinking the infusion it is believed that the men's intestines will rot away (Loeb 1956, in Rodin 1985:133).

#### *Twin and Breach Birth: epasha and oupili*

Hahn describes the procedure of purifying mothers who have given birth to twins. First a hole in the ground is prepared by the *ondudu/onganga* and the midwives, which is filled with water. Then, in order to rid her of the 'bad' blood within her body (regarded as *oshidhila*), the mother's entire skin surface is scraped with an iron razor (*oshimbi*) to create the flow of blood (a process known as *okushatua*). She is afterwards thoroughly washed all over with water. On being led back to her house the mother must stumble over a pestle laid purposefully in her path; this upsets a small pot of water over a grass fire, causing smoke to rise. As the woman passes through the smoke it is thought to take the last of the 'evil' with it. Her husband must also be cleansed in a similar fashion. Incisions are made on his thighs, wrists, forearms and tongue. Twins of the chief are smothered at birth, then wrapped in the skin of a freshly slaughtered black ox and buried in

the calves pen (Hahn 1928:26).

The Powell-Cottons recorded that purification measures were necessary for some time following the birth of twins. A bowl of water containing a charm plant (not named in source) was left at the *ohnu* (main entrance), and all those entering were required to sprinkle their feet, lest they may swell upon entering the household (Diana Powell-Cotton 1937b:84). Rodin names the plant *oshiyooseuta* [**Clerodendrum uncinatum**], as being made into a sprinkling infusion called *ondipa*, used in a special purification ceremony performed on all entering a household where twins have been born. The infusion is sprinkled on the face and feet (Rodin 1985:133). Lastly, a purifying medicine made from *oshimhelewene* [**Portulaca oleracea**] and the roots of **Entada arenaria**, is used by Ovakwanyama in Namibia to prevent mothers or members of her family from swelling after the birth of twins (Rodin 1985:122-123).

Breach birth (*oupili*) is considered the same as a twin birth because two legs emerge instead of one head (Magdalena Shamena, Ondonga, personal interview FELM 1989). In Ombandja, purification akin to the *olusi* rite must be undergone after the birth of twins or a breach birth, before sexual relations can safely resume. Iitulu also mentions a drink made from the root of *epaha*, together with the fact that the payment exacted by the diviner was a bull (Sakeus Iitulu, ELC 1932, item 262:612-620).

#### *Purification of Warriors*

Loeb gives a good detailed account of the purification warriors must undergo upon their return, should they have killed someone. The word *outoni* has a double meaning: first it can denote a man who has killed someone, and second it is the name of the hyena call the killer must make. The hyena call is uttered as the man approaches his homestead. *Outoni* warriors need ritual purification, because without it they are regarded as a danger to themselves and to others. In particular, the ghost of the victim is believed to attack unpurified killers, sending the latter insane. Warriors who have not killed whilst on a raid are simply washed by an *ondudu*, given herbs to drink, then have their backs sprinkled with ashes by their first wives, thus freeing them of any misfortune.

When an *outoni* returns, however, he must give the cry of the hyena and all his family will rush out to greet him. His father engages in a mock struggle with him. As soon as the warrior has entered the

household, and before he is allowed to talk with anyone, he is given the herb *ejakanoni*, which he has to chew whenever he sits on the logs by the sacred fire during his period of purification. If the warrior has brought back a slave or a head of cattle then the latter is taken to the cattle pen and the former must squat at the feet of the warrior and his father. All the household members bring the *outoni* welcoming gifts. A pot of butter is brought to the group and the father and son proceed to rub everyone present with the substance. Some of those present then hang hoops made from the roots of the *omusendje* bush [**Combretum calocarpeum**]<sup>34</sup>, bound at intervals with aloe cord, around the *outoni's* neck. In addition, any siblings of the warrior had to wear the necklaces, as did his wife or lover. They also fastened tail hairs of the captured animal in their hair.

The next morning, at dawn, the *outoni* and the slave he captured are rubbed with a thick mixture of millet by the pre-pubescent girl who had cooked the ritual pre-raid meal. The *outoni* then spends four days and nights in isolation, either in the gardens under a tree or in the main meeting area of the household - sleeping on the log seats. During this time he must sleep alone and have no sexual intercourse; when he eats it must be from special utensils. His war weapons (belt, bow and arrows<sup>35</sup>) were hung on a bush in the entrance of the household. Each morning the *outoni* went out and directed the hyena cry at these objects. People customarily tried to avoid meeting the warrior, but if they did then they were obliged to offer him gifts. Eventually, after four days, the *outoni's* weapons are brought to the *olupale* (central meeting place) and hung on the cattle skull rack there. Then the final purificatory rites are performed: the *outoni's* father gives him special herbs in water to drink, and the pre-pubescent girl rubs his body with herbs. The wooden beer cup and the food dishes used during the period of impurity are burnt, the warrior receiving new ones. Now he is considered cleansed and safe, and can be reunited properly with people (Loeb 1962:89-92).

Bruwer writes that a Kwanyama man who has killed a turkey buzzard (*epumumu*) must undergo some form of ritual purification, similar in some respects to that necessary for *outoni*. The hunter must wear roots of *omusendje* [**Combretum zeyheri**] and give the hyena cry in the bush every morning. He must eat and sleep alone until purified by being rubbed with water and herbs by a healer (Bruwer, in Rodin

<sup>34</sup> Rodin identifies *omusendje* as *Combretum zeyheri* (1985:60-61).

<sup>35</sup> This shows how relatively early this account is, the information no doubt coming from Sckär, because guns very quickly replaced bows and arrows - even during the latter's time (early 1900s).

1985:60-61).

*Collective Purification: Etikululo (the removal of curses)*

Affliction may not always be the result of dissatisfied ancestral spirits. Witchcraft and sorcery are also instrumental in causing illness or other kinds of misfortune. Sorcery can be practised by the living upon their neighbours or relatives, usually with the assistance of medicine-men or women. Sorcery need not be conducted purely out of malice, unlike witchcraft for example, but may in fact be used to teach someone a lesson. Just as offended ancestors respond by sending misfortune, then offended living (kin) members respond by cursing the person they have particular issue with. Indeed, not only is the 'deviant' cursed, but his or her entire kin also.

Hiltunen has described some interesting cases of sorcery documented in the Liljeblad Collection. Cursing the fecundity of women is apparently very frequent. For instance, it is regarded as a great insult if certain kinship obligations are not publically honoured during the female transition ceremony, the *efundula*. If these obligations are not met (i.e. the girl's mother, or the mother's brother or sister, not receiving their proper share of the wedding ox [donated by the girl's father]), then those offended may decide to curse the future marriage and future fertility of the initiate. A mother never directly curses her daughter, but the mother's brother and sister will curse their niece: "While pregnant, may she give birth to earth" (Hiltunen 1986:138).

Removal of the curse in this situation can be orchestrated by the cursed woman and her new husband visiting the curser, and apologising for their offensive actions at the wedding by offering gifts. The curser may also be by this stage under general public pressure to lift the curse, and resume friendly relations. Eventually after grievances have been aired, and a compromise reached, the curser withdraws the curse by making *esaagelo* offerings to the ancestral spirits at sunrise. She (or he) wishes for her niece's fertility and demands that a girl-child be her namesake. The couple themselves make a ritual spit in the direction of east (i.e. at the sun) and ask for happiness. All three then share in a meal, symbolising their reunion (Hiltunen 1986:138-141).

Of course, there is no ritual washing or rubbing with purifying herbs in this case, unlike the

purification of warriors. However, it is still ritual purification in that during a special meeting between the antagonists the curse is removed and the ambience restored. Whilst under the effects of the curse the couple could be regarded as being in a somewhat impure state. Through the reformed opinion and actions of both themselves and their curser the couple have their impurity or contamination removed. There are, nonetheless, examples of curse removal that do include washing or fumigation, and here the whole kin group can be involved.

The cleansing of the whole kin group occurs when the misdeeds of one of the members are believed to have repercussions for everyone. Hiltunen relates many examples of such cleansing, *etikululo*, as it occurs among the various Ovambo peoples.

"Sakeus Iiteua from Ondonga writes: The kin of a cursed person fetches the *onganga*. He is in the house overnight. The next morning he gets up early and makes a fire outside the house. He puts herbs (*iimbondi*) into the fire. After this he goes into the house to invite people. He orders them to take off all their clothes and put on only a string with a small front-cover.

Then he takes them to his fire to warm themselves. All kin must be present, even small children. The smell of the herbs burning in the fire removes the curse from them. They then throw their covers and strings into the fire and leave the place as naked as they were born. In the house they dress in their own clothes again. After that they are given herb-drinks from the horn of a wild animal and they are tapped on their heads with a stone. When the *onganga* leaves he gives them herb-flour to be mixed into food. Once they have eaten it they are no longer in mortal danger" (ELC 1932, item 1566; in Hiltunen 1986:144).

Also among the Ondonga the curse can be removed by a mixture of water and blood. According to Konsa Niilonga, a pit resembling a cave is dug. The *onganga* slaughters a pure black ox, and its blood is mixed with the water in the pit. The kin of the cursed person gather at the pit's edge one by one are guided through the water: first the men, followed by the women and finally the children. Having gone through the water each person receives a leather band. It is *oshidhila* (taboo) for any person who does not go into the pit, and as a result he or she will die (ELC 1932, 409, in Hiltunen 1986:144).



Tönjes writes that in Ukwanyama the kin group sits around a pit, in the bottom of which a fire has been kindled by a female *ondudu*. The *ondudu*, using the skin of a freshly slaughtered black ox, rubs the back of each person in turn, whilst at the same time giving that person herbal medicine to drink. The *ondudu*'s assistant follows clapping two iron hoe blades together. The backs of the kin are then rubbed a second time, after which they may all lift their faces. The group then remove their clothes and run away naked, whilst the men and boys shoot arrows into the pit without turning to look round (Tönjes 1911:224, in Hiltunen 1986:146). Also in Ukwanyama, the kin may be asked to sit inside the pit itself (adults first, followed by children), covered with a fresh ox skin in order to be fumigated with roasted herbs. After fumigation the people are washed with water and are made to roll on the skin. Their old attire is removed by the *ondudu*, who presents them all with charms to wear instead, as well as some medicinal powder to take with them. If some relatives are not present, then some medicine is kept specially for them. This mixture should be eaten by the absent person as soon as he or she returns - even before speaking with anyone, because to speak first will cause death (Mateus Shehama, ELC 1932:1089-1090, in Hiltunen 1986:148).

The importance of treating absent kin members, no matter how many years lapse before they return, is also mentioned by Moses of Ukwanyama (Loeb 1955c:293), by Sakeus Iituku of Ombandja (ELC 1932:579-580, in Hiltunen 1986:151-2) and by Saara Silongo of Ukwanyama (Liina Lindström notes, in Hiltunen 1986:150).

In Ongandjera an *onganga* is summoned if a kin group believes itself to be cursed. The removal of the curse takes place in the forest. As in the case among other Ovambo peoples, a pit is dug and the blood and pancreatic dregs of an ox are added to the water. The kin remove their clothes and it is these, rather than the people themselves, that are washed by the healer. Following this the kin are considered cleansed, and no more deaths as a result of the curse will occur (ELC 1932:1387-1389, in Hiltunen 1986:150).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the previous chapter it was shown that Ovambo herbal medicines are primarily cathartic in character, being resorative and strengthening to a lesser extent. Similarly, charms, propitiation and ritual purification also exhibit a dual function: that of repelling or dissuading negative forces, whilst at the same time encouraging positive ones. There is one significant difference which is worthy of note. Herbal medicines and

associated *materia medica* are predominantly (though not exclusively) administered in response to cases of illness, whereas charms, propitiation and ritual purification respond to a whole variety of affliction - illness constituting one aspect only.

Furthermore, herbal medicines are principally curative, whilst charms, propitiation and purification can be either curative or prophylactic or indeed both. All of the above are concerned with maintaining or achieving a harmonious state of affairs, whether it be in terms of good health, or of amicable social relations, or of economic success, or whatever. Nevertheless, it must be said that what might signify good fortune for one person, may actually signify misfortune for another. For instance, charms used to guarantee success on a cattle raid are obviously not working advantageously for those about to be raided! Furthermore, one must beware of confusing those charms or actions employed to promote fortune, with acts of sorcery which benefit the curser but not the cursed. Most good-luck charms or actions are designed to benefit the user without causing damage to another. It is true that cattle-raiding is a glaring exception, but then killing and theft are not regarded as crimes in this context.

With regard to the physical appearance of charms, usually they consist of seeds, nuts, bulbs or corms, bark covered twigs, strips of cattle skin and sometimes parts of wild animals (horns, claws, teeth etc). Important charms might be decorated with ostrich eggshell or iron beads and cowries. Except for the dolls used to promote fertility in women during the *efundula* transition ceremony, and the clay phallus used in the *olusi* ritual, there are no anthropomorphic figurines or other forms of plastic art used by the Ovambo as charms (for example in contrast with the Tchokwe of mid-Angola or the Azande of Sudan).

What is of importance here is not the actual physical form of these Ovambo objects, but rather that they serve as tangible, portable receptacles for the *endudu's/oonganga's* 'powers'. Aarni states that healers invest some of their healing and protective ability in charms - they "feed" them. Such power is not permanent and can indeed wane if the charms are not "fed" on a fairly regular basis (not specified in the sources) (Aarni 1982:54). Whilst design may not be overtly significant, other characteristics such as smell, the type of animal remains, or the particular plant part used, seem to be.

For example, the charm bearing the claw of a bird of prey is worn so that the wearer will catch his or her own 'prey' in terms of wealth. Indeed, the charms worn by *endudu/oonganga* provide good examples

of 'contagious magic'. Hyena skin, for instance, is worn because the hyena is cunning, as the diviner needs to be. Dog noses are also worn by diviners as they assist that latter in "smelling out" witches. Hahn's (1928:22) description of the *oshiva* war whistle containing the wing feathers of a nervous bird, designed to render the enemy nervous, is also a good example.

Many of the charms seem to have been designed for re-use. Those often used by hunters, for example, consisting of a length of bark covered twig, may be used many times over because only a little of the bark is shaved away and burnt at each occasion. Thus charms can be quite practical as well as symbolic. Certainly, charms tend to be relatively expensive (often as much as an ox) when first obtained from a healer, thus re-usable artefacts would no doubt have been popular. Particularly valuable charms (i.e. *omusindilo*) are normally inherited within the lineage.

Acts of propitiation are both an expression by the living of the mutual obligations existing between the ancestral spirits and themselves, and protective measures directed at the ancestral spirits. Indeed Aarni describes an occasion where one man actually scolded his ancestors for not being benevolent, despite the fact they had been well appeased (Aarni 1982:57). Propitiation of the ancestors is, in a sense, a more ritualised version of the way in which mutual obligations and protective measures are conducted between the living themselves.

For instance, the presentation of votive offerings to the ancestral spirits is comparable with the fines paid to the king and the compensation paid to the 'injured' party. Loeb, for example, records that if a man is attacked and loses an eye, then his assailant must pay the king the usual fine for murder (8 - 10 cattle) and pay him a certain yearly amount (Loeb 1962:45). Propitiation is also necessary if a killing occurred during a cattle raid by Ovakwanyama upon another Kwanyama household (i.e. a punishment raid), even if the raid was carried out under the orders of the king (Loeb 1962:83, 90).

Propitious acts are employed as both preventive and curative measures. They are used as a prophylactic measure against affliction, performed prior to the event when good fortune is desired (good fortune will also be actively encouraged at this point). Alternatively, such acts are performed when misfortune has already struck, and where the emphasis is now upon the swift restoration of good relations between the living and the ancestors, as well as on the return to good health or a trouble-free existence.

The need for ritual purification in the counteraction of affliction was referred to in the previous chapter. The cathartic action of many of the medicines administered as enemas or emetics is a strong indication of the purging element in Ovambo therapeutics. This chapter has dealt more with actual rites of purification, involving the transition of people from an impure (dirty) to a pure (cleansed) state. Impurity or pollution is a severe consequence of affliction, therefore ritual purification becomes an essential component of the healing process. Purification involves cleansing and restorative elements. As with the cathartic medicines, there is the removal of the undesired negative forces complemented by the introduction of those forces that are good, so that a kind of equilibrium is achieved<sup>36</sup>.

I also agree with Hiltunen that purification rites are transition rites, where the polluted persons move from their impure state, through a period of cleansing, to emerge as unpolluted and able to live a normal, healthy way of life (Hiltunen 1986:153). It is necessary for total compliance during purification, because failure to complete the treatment or failure to have purification at all is believed to result in extreme misfortune, usually death. In association with ritual purification, the importance of the need to follow specific precepts and prohibitions becomes quite evident. Compliance will deter further wrath from the ancestors, and will assist in preventing the further contamination of others (e.g. why separation is crucial, and the ban on talking etc). The correct observance of precepts and prohibitions in general does much to alleviate the possibility of affliction in the first place.

Thus, to summarise briefly: charms, propitiation, ritual purification and the observance of social and religious codes, are all - to a greater or lesser degree - concerned with the following areas: preventing illness, preventing other forms of misfortune, providing protection, promoting good fortune, managing social relations, and ultimately (and perhaps only ideally) with establishing equilibrium.

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<sup>36</sup> Ngubane's argument for the operation of Zulu therapeutics (1977).