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Shangana-Tsonga Curing-Songs

By *Thomas F. Johnston*

Abstract

The Tsonga live in a fairly harsh environment, in a time and place where they have neither the psychological security of their traditional lifeway nor the material security of modern Western society. In this twilight zone they experience various physical and mental ailments, administered to by both the native herbalist-practitioners and European mission doctors, who do their best to combat the various forms of disease. The songs collected reflect Tsonga beliefs and values in connection with their ailments, their fears regarding illness origins, and their methods of curing. Their associational thinking is rather like the Doctrine of Signatures of the European Middle Ages, though we do not imply a temporal comparison of the cultures. The Tsonga pray to the python to cure tape-worm, and believe that groundnuts (which resemble testicles) bring fertility. Remedies include appending various kinds of bones to the sick person, and bringing ants to the affected part, to effect a cure. These beliefs are consistently revealed in the song-texts discussed.

During a two-year stay among the Shangana-Tsonga of Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal in 1968-70, I was based near the French-Swiss mission called Elim Hospital, near Louis Trichardt, and was able to collect a number of songs and proverbs connected with common ailments. The texts reveal that many of the beliefs are widespread across southern Africa, and that many of the charms and medicines found among the Venda, Pedi, Chopi, and Swazi, are used also by the Tsonga. The following song is sung to cure tape-worm; this represents a form of associational thinking similar to the medieval Doctrine of Signatures (walnuts are brain-like and thus cure headaches, etc).

Ff
 Unison Chorus: Bri-Mamba
 N'wa-hlarhu
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba
 Ndza ku vitana
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba
 U vitana hi tatana
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba
 Hi tatana a vabyaka
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba
 U vabya hi tindluwa
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba
 Hi tindluwa ta mananga
 Bri-mamba manjengenja, bri mamba

Unison Chorus: Child-of-the-Mamba (Python)
 Child-of-the-Python
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 I call upon you
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 My father calls upon you
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 My father is unwell
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 It is because of the groundnuts
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 The groundnuts of the desert
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python
 The desert Manjengenja
 Child-of-the-Python Manjengenja, Child-of-the-Python

The groundnuts mentioned in the above song have a connection with witchcraft—either an evil spirit has sold the health of the old man for groundnuts, or he has been bewitched. Groundnuts are sometimes associated with bewitchment because “evil spirits go to the groundnut field by night and steal the nuts out of the kernels” (informant). This explains the occasional empty kernel.

A Chopi dance-song collected by Hugh Tracey illustrates the former hypothesis:

Come together with your wives
 I will tell you of my mourning
 Of the bereavement that I have suffered
 You have taken your child, they say
 And sold him for monkey-nuts
 My Matuwane never was sick (1948 : 68)

Henri Junod once witnessed the fatal scalding of a child, being present as a Rikatla mother stumbled and spilled burning groundnut-sauce from the pot on her head (1927, 1: 334), but it is doubtful that this was the case with the old man in our song.

A Pedi song, in
 a doctor:

J. H. Nketia cit
 this snake stands f

I. Schapera pr
 here the *mamba* l

Ef
 Call:

Response:

Call:

Response:

Call:

Response:

Call:

Response:

A Pedi song, instead of calling upon the *mamba*-god, bewails the lack of a doctor:

My parents
I am ill and have no doctor
Husband, child
I am ill (Huskisson 1958, App. B:x)

J. H. Nketia cites a song from Ghana about the *mamba*, but explains that this snake stands for "good and evil, beauty and cruelty":

Offspring of Prempe and Akwawua
of Asafo
Like the black mamba (1963 : 43)

I. Schapera preserved a Tswana praise-poem mentioning a *mamba*, but here the *mamba* kills rather than cures:

They found a python lying down,
a mamba meaning harm to none;
they shook it and rashly tackled it;
it shook its body and someone fell,
he remained on his back and died.
(1965 : 90)

Ef Va Tekile Marhambu Mambirhi
Call: Va tekile marhambu mambirhi
Va nyika Mbitsini
Mbitsini a nga kaya koti marhambu
I lava nyama-a
Response: Ha-a-a-a-a! Hi lovile-e!
Ma-Rheyilani ma le kaya
Ndzi nga ta lova
Call: Va tekile marhambu mambirhi
Va nyika Mbitsini
Mbitsini a nga kaya koti marhambu
I lava nyama-a
Response: Ha-a-a-a-a! Hi lovile-e!
Ma-Rheyilani ma le kaya
Ndzi nga ta lova

They Took Two Bones

Call: They took two bones
And offered them to Mbitsini
They offered Mbitsini bones
Oh! We are dying
Response: Ha! Ma-Rheyilani, depart
She needs meat,
She does not need bones
Call: They took two bones
And offered them to Mbitsini
They offered Mbitsini bones
Oh! We are dying
Response: Ha! Ma-Rheyilani, depart
She needs meat
She does not need bones

The two fictitious personal names used in this song—Mbitsini and Ma-Rheyilani—mean “Disgusted-One” and “Scheming-One” respectively. Many songs have real people mentioned in them, such as members of the audience or relatives, but frequently a singer will invent “appropriate” names to suit the song in hand. This song preserves the idea inherent in an occasionally-performed sacrificial ritual, during which a goat is slaughtered to appease the gods who caused, or who can cure, the girl’s illness. *The astragalus and other pieces of the animal are tied on the sternum of the patient, who then commences a period of convalescence.*

John Blacking heard a Venda song containing the same meat/bone theme as our song:

Mbebeda was carrying some meat
So I said, Give me a little piece
So that I can go and roast it
He offered me a tiny piece
Of bone and took it away again
(1967 : 116)

Blacking mentions that there may have been a celebration at which a beast was killed; this ritualistic overtone may bring his Venda song into the same category as our own—a propitiation song to alleviate misfortune.

Fc

Nta Famba Ni Mi Siya N'wananga

Call: Maseve Rilisa-a-a
Sikhiya mani

Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
Wa fela ra Mashava
Wina na sikhiya manxi

Call: A nta famba ni mi siya
Mi n'wananga xawe

Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
Wa fela ra Mashava
Win? na sikhiya manxi

Call: I nyan'waka xinyan'waka n'wananga
A-ha-ha bombi

Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
Wa fela ra Mashava
Wina na sikhiya manxi

I Am Leaving You Behind

Call: My friend, Rilisa
All is nothing

Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
I will die at Mashava's house
I will perish

Call: I am going, my child
And I'll leave you behind

Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
I will die at Mashava's house
I will perish

Call

Response

Again we find
subject-matter,
and “do that for
related to the fo

Swa khale
Once gone,

Cc

Call
Response

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Call
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Call
Response

This song describes
n'anga (herbalist)

He will put
will take all
fortune will

Eileen Krige describes

The doctor
morning, he
out a little.
made to vom

Call: This year is the modern times
 We must do that for which we yearn
 Response: Wa-a-a-a-a-a
 I will die at Mashava's house
 I will perish

Again we find the use of a personal name—Rilisa—appropriate to the subject-matter, for it means "Condoling-One". The lines "all is nothing" and "do that for which we yearn" are somewhat philosophical and may be related to the following Tsonga proverb:

Swa khale a swi vuyi
 Once gone, time does not return

Cc Chucha Xa Ka Va Wena Xa Madeha

Call: Hoza u nga dyiwa nhloko hi majenje
 Response: Hoza u nga dyiwa nhloko hi majenje
 Call: U nga zama ku tilangutela
 Response: U nga zama ku tilangutela
 Call: Yowe! U nga dyiwa nhloko hi majenje
 Response: Yowe! U nga dyiwa nhloko hi majenje
 Call: Ho! Tlawa-tlawa u nga dyiwa nhloko hi manjenje
 Response: Ho Tlawa-tlawa u nga dyiwa nhloko majenje
 Call: Hayi chucha xa ka ra wena xa madeha
 Response: Hayi chucha xa ka ra wena xa madeha

Remove the Primitive Bangles

Call: Come! The ants might eat your head
 Response: Come! The ants might eat your head
 Call: Try to look out for yourself
 Response: Try to look out for yourself
 Call: The ants might eat your head
 Response: The ants might eat your head
 Call: Squirm! Squirm! They'll eat your head
 Response: Squirm! Squirm! They'll eat your head
 Call: Remove the primitive bangles, aged one
 Response: Remove the primitive bangles, aged one

This song describes another curative procedure, but instead of bones, the *n'anga* (herbalist) uses ants. Henri Junod describes the method thus:

He will put the shell into the hole without looking back towards it; the ants will take all the *timbhorola* (medicine) down into their nest and so the misfortune will remain with them. (1927, 2:471)

Eileen Krige describes a similar ritual with the Zulu:

The doctor grinds black medicines and puts them in water. Then, early in the morning, he takes the patient to an ant-heap which he cuts open and scoops out a little. The patient is given the medicine which acts as an emetic, and he is made to vomit into the hole. (1936 : 304)

A Tsonga herbalist who uses ants (both dead and alive) in many of his cures offered the following proverb in explanation of the song-text:

Tisokoti i murhi wa lomu ndzeni
Ants are a cure intended for internal consumption

The singers offered two explanations for the line "The ants might eat your head". The first was that a woman who is too sick to raise herself up from the ground will get badly bitten during the night; this would explain the following line "Try to look out for yourself".

The second explanation was that, much as cattle suffer in the traditional herdboys' game when ants are sprinkled on the foreheads of the former, a sick woman who does not look out for herself will lose her head (i. e., die).

J. Torrend cites a Bena Mukunu folktale in which an ant bites and a child sings about it:

Father of Mwinsa, relieve me; it is heavy
It was a little ant that bit her (1921 : 36)

Concerning the mention of bangles, it is known that Tsonga women are easily recognizable throughout Southern Africa by the numerous bangles encircling their legs, and which are considered charms for retaining the attention of husbands and for maintaining fecundity. The number of bangles a woman wears is indicative of her wealth and seniority, as the following Tsonga proverb, heard by the writer, implies:

Masongwa ma rila ma ri manyingi
Bangles jingle when they are numerous

The reason that the woman in the song is advised to "remove the primitive bangles, aged one" is that, in the event of death, no metal would be permitted within her grave (it does not perish, and is therefore thought not to make the long after-life journey with her).

Hugh Tracey gives the following Chopi dance-song about bangles:

Why not use bangles and not cut your foreheads?
Why not use bangles and not cut your foreheads?
(1948 : 58)

Chopi men going to the Transvaal see Tsonga women with unmarked faces, wearing bangles, and they wish the Chopi girls would drop their face-marking custom.

The following song concerns hyenas, which the Tsonga believe to be disguised witches.

Cc

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Honwi-honwi is
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witches derives fro
up fresh graves (1
set of sixty-four b
gods because it rem

Cc A Ka Matiyane Timhisini

Call: Honwi-honwi!

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Honwi-honwi!

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: A xi bedlele

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Honwi-honwi!

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Kengeleta

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Ku na mavabyi

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Laha xibelhela

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Ha kombisiwa

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: Hi famba hi mavabyi

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

Call: A ka Matiyane Timhisini

Response: Wa kanganyisa manane za kanganyisa!

At Matiyane Where There Are Hyenas

Call: *Honwi-honwi!*

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: Honwi-honwi!

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: At the hospital

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: *Honwi-honwi!*

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: It's finally found us

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: We're so distraught

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: There are diseases here

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: We're being shown the way

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: We walk about with disease

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Call: At Matiyane where there are hyenas

Response: We are deceived, I swear by my mother!

Honwi-honwi is translated by Cuénod as "the howl of a hyena". The singers have perhaps witnessed a great deal of distressing illness and death, which they associate with hyenas because this creature reputedly eats only the dead left behind by other animals. An association with flesh-eating witches derives from the belief (as reported by Henri Junod) that hyenas dig up fresh graves (1927, 1: 163). It is also known that, in the bone-thrower's set of sixty-four bones, the astragalus of the hyena represents the ancestor-gods because it remains hidden in its lair during the day.

The Tsonga suffer the usual illnesses found in southern African rural societies—tapeworm, lumbago, etc. Henri Junod heard the following Ba-Ronga beer-song prior to 1897:

Je cherche quelqu'un qui veuille bien me ventouser
Aie! Cette maladie! Ce maudit lumbago!
La voilà qui m'empêche d'aller, cette vilaine maladie
Et voilà que cela fâche mes parents de me voir assis sans rien faire.

(1897 : 42)

I need someone to put leeches on me
This cursed lumbago is terrible
The trouble prevents my walking
It annoys my relatives to see me sitting doing nothing.

Some of the ailments suffered by the southern Bantu-speaking peoples are very rare by European standards—it is for this reason that the mission hospitals experience little difficulty in staffing, for the doctors and nurses of Europe find there a good proving ground. Tribal people, however, retain a basic suspicion of the rather inauspicious, sometimes invisible medicine of the Whites, and prefer the traditional practices of the herbalist-practitioner.

Associational thinking (rather like the Doctrine of Signatures of the Middle Ages in Europe) causes the Tsonga to call upon the Child-of-the-Python in case of tape-worm, and to associate groundnuts (with their testicle shape) with fertility. Other remedies include the manipulation of animal (and sometimes human) bones, to bring ants to the part of the body diagnosed as being affected, and to blame the hyenas. The song-texts given here are symbolic expressive mechanisms for the alleviation of anxiety concerning ailments and illnesses common to the human and geographical environment.

NOTE

The author carried out field work during the period 1968–70 in Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal, under grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (No. 2504) and the University of the Witwatersrand. He is a graduate of the California State University at Hayward (M.A., 1968), California State University at Fullerton (M.A. *summa cum laude*, 1972), and the University of the Witwatersrand (Ph.D., 1972). He is currently teaching at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

- Blacking, John*
1967 Venda c
Cuénod, R.
1967 Tsonga-
Huskisson, Yvo
1958 The soc
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Junod, Henri A
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1936 The soci
Nketia, J. H. K.
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Schapera, Isaac
1965 Praise-p
Torrend, J.
1921 Bantu fo
Tracey, Hugh
1948 Chopi m

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Abstract

The Tsonga live in a fairly health-conscious, as a rule and place where they have neither the psychological nor the material luxury of most traditional African societies. In the medical sphere, however, they experience various physical and mental ailments, as witnessed to by both the native herbalist-practitioners and European medical doctors, who do their best to combat the various forms of disease. The songs collected reflect Tsonga beliefs and values in connection with these ailments, their (own) regarding illness origins, and their methods of curing. Their conceptual thinking is rather like the Doctrine of Signatures of the European Middle Ages, though we do not imply a temporal comparison of the cultures. The Tsonga pray to the psychon in their tape-worms, and believe that groundnuts (which resemble testicles) bring fertility. Remedies include spreading various kinds of bones to the sick person, and bringing ants on the affected part, to effect a cure. These beliefs are consistently revealed in the songs now discussed.

During a two-year stay among the Shangana-Tsonga of Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal in 1968-70, I was based near the French-Swiss mission called Ekin Hospital, near Louis Trichardt, and was able to collect a number of songs and proverbs connected with common ailments. The texts reveal that many of the beliefs are widespread across southern Africa, and that many of the charms and medicines found among the Venda, Pedi, Chopi, and Swazi, are used also by the Tsonga. The following song is sung to cure tape-worms. It represents a form of conceptual thinking similar to the medieval Doctrine of Signatures (testicles are bean-like and thus cure headaches, etc.).

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the following Ba-

faire.
(1897 : 42)

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