

Encounters with forces of pepo; Shamanism and healing in East-Africa

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About the author. *Jessica Erdtsieck is a student of anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and is now in the final stage of writing a PhD thesis that mainly concerns a comparative study of reputed pepo healers in Southwest Tanzania. In her thesis she directs specific attention to accounts and experiences with spirits of two female healers and their clientele. In doing so, she questions what types of spirit forces healers use and how these affect their lives and their practice. This is placed against various personal, geographical, historical and cultural dynamics. The findings serve as a frame of reference for a broader discussion of inland and coastal healing practices in Tanzania to which recommendations will be added for further research and policy implementation.*

Abstract. Intermediaries between spirits and men are central in African religious life. They do not block the way between man and God, but rather they form bridges. Certain intermediaries can be seen as the African equivalent of shamans. Our contemporary understanding of the shaman owes much to the influential work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) who pointed out that the shaman provides a sick member of his society with a language by means of which unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed. In African society the language of sick people is imbedded in spirit illness and spirit manifestation. Certain spirit healing interventions enable patients not only to improve their individual well being but also spur visionary sights or a vocation to heal. To demonstrate how this takes place, I present this article with special reference to a female healer from Mbeya Region, Tanzania, called Nambela. For this study I used a grounded theory approach and qualitative research methods, like narratives, in-depth interviews, action participation and audio-visual recordings.

Introduction

Ever since my anthropological study (from 1990 onwards) about the role of spiritual forces and the application and effectiveness of therapeutic techniques of traditional healers in Tanzania, I have met a number of female and male shaman diviners who were also healers. It made me wonder why so little is known about them and their work, especially because the community considers them to be the most competent of all healers. Although many scholars have written about the spiritual world of African peoples, ethnographic literature about the indigenous knowledge and healing roles of shaman or spirit healers in Africa is limited, to such an extent, that shamanism is often disregarded as to exist at all in this continent. Eliade (1983) withdrew himself from a discussion on shamanism in Africa by saying that it is far too complex to describe comprehensively. In the meantime other authors have taken up the challenge of discussing this phenomenon

further. To someone belonging to a culture where the shaman is part of everyday life, shamanism is seen as a gift of nature or of God as to help and serve the community. Lévi-Strauss (1963) delineated the parallel between the roles of the shaman and the psychoanalyst. Given their respective collective and individual orientations, the role performed by each is different. Both the shaman and the analyst establish a direct relationship with the patients' conscious and an indirect relationship with his unconscious - the analyst through listening, the shaman through oratory.

There is much confusion about the definition and functions of indigenous healers in Africa. Terms such as witch doctors, medicine men, diviners and herbalists are used interchangeably to denote a wide variety of practitioners. In East Africa, where the national language is Swahili, they are generally called *waganga* (singular *mganga*) from the verb *kuganga* which means to heal, to cure. Those healers,

who combine various skills, are usually shaman diviners also called *waganga wa pepo*, literally meaning healers who are inspired by spiritual or unseen forces. The word *pepo* stems from the verb *kupepea* meaning “to wave about in the air”, whereas *upepo* means “wind”. The *waganga wa pepo* have gained knowledge on rituals and medicinal plants in part by training but foremost upon instruction of the spirits. They know how to apply protective means against the intrusion of spirits or witches in the form of amulets, charms or medicine. In contrast to the sorcerer, who uses rites and spells for illegal purposes, the *mganga wa pepo* will do so for legal ends and for the benefit of the community. As a specialist of unseen forces, he/she deals often with symptoms caused by spirits, known as *ugonjwa wa pepo* or *pepo*-illness. This term denotes a broad range of psychosomatic and mental complaints. Without the proper treatment they may become chronic. Due to a great variety of spiritual forces, each *mganga wa pepo* will have different qualities and skills so as to handle particular types of spirits. People look at these specialists as the ones to take care of social relations, physical and emotional wellbeing and to act against any practice of black magic.

Divination

Because divination plays a pivotal role in East African traditional healing systems, understanding its role within the framework of shamanism needs further explanation. Many African peoples maintain that ‘real’ knowledge is hidden, secret, and available only to certain people capable of using it properly. Frequently that knowledge is only revealed through divination that is therefore a much respected practice within African traditional healing. It is based on a holistic approach of the sick person as an individual with physical, social, psychological, moral and spiritual aberrations or disturbances. Serious troubles arise when the harmony of an individual's spiritual components is broken. In that case, it is the source of the disorder, not its particular manifestation that must be treated. This responsibility falls mainly within the domain of the diviner whose main function is to diagnose illness and misfortune and explain their cause. The *mganga wa pepo* will do the same, but in

addition he or she will, with the help of magical remedies, counteract bad medicine, witchcraft practices, spirit afflictions. Musical and ritual ceremonies may be needed to enhance communication with the spiritual world, whereas physical complaints may be treated with herbal medicines.

To diagnose, a *mganga wa pepo* can go at will in a trance state and obtain messages from the spirit world or communicate with spirits or have one or more spirits speak through him. Often specific songs are used to invoke the spirits. The state of consciousness of the *mganga wa pepo* may vary from full alertness to a complete absence of personal awareness. During this absence the spirit(s) may seem to displace the personality of the healer, whose behavior, voice and body posture may change dramatically. Such occasions are most confusing for outsiders. Both visitors and myself would need guidance by a family member or an assistant, as to know how to address the healer in this state. This happened when the healer would advise me to communicate with these forces directly if I wanted to know more about their motivations and abilities. This could feel as if I was talking to someone entirely different. I usually needed a certain amount of time to understand how to deal with each manifestation and it happened the healer would make strange sounds or loose consciousness. Sometimes the enthusiasm of the spirit guides became so great, that one after the other came to introduce them to me. In general all were willing to help me understand their role in the life of the healer.

To discover the cause of and the solution for a problem or sickness, diviners sometimes use oracles consisting of sticks, shells or stones that are thrown on the ground. Other ways to divine are by using geomancy or astrology. In Tanzania, among the coastal Swahili population, *waganga wa pepo* sometimes make use of an oracle book that contains symbolical signs and pictures. Oracles may be used as a means of inspiration and guidance. They can function as a journey, as the spirit force sends the healer in a trancelike state, making his soul absent

while staring at the shape of the oracle or the symbolical picture in the book until clairvoyant visions appear. The dreamlike images or messages that enter the head or the heart will transform into a simple knowing. Skilled healers may actually succeed in this without the use of oracle means. Famous healers usually had little need for oracles.

The client will take care not to reveal anything to the healer on beforehand and may even stay anonymous. For the healer the reverse is true. He makes every effort to maximize the clients' belief in him. Often, after a few words are exchanged, he lists the patient's problems without having been told about them beforehand. If he/she is right, the client's confidence is raised appreciably. Besides this, in his/her role as a healer the healer may carry objects that are essential for a charismatic image. Depending on the region, drums, bells, ratels, masks, tails or antelope horns assist in making for an effective image.

The helping spirit

Diviners enter into their career in much the same way as shamans do. Men, but more often women, may be chosen by helping spirits, because of some striking feature or experience. They suffer from sudden epileptic fits or curious symptoms, feelings and behavior and refuse normal food. The initial call may be based on heredity, but often a person in distress or danger receives a calling. At such instances spiritual forces seem to be aroused in the body and mind as a means to alarm and protect the individual. This may involve sudden loss of consciousness during which strong visions or dreams are experienced. These may be so dramatic, that they can be considered a shaman initiation crisis. Well-reputed senior diviners and elders are the ones to recognize the genuineness of someone's calling, who from that moment onwards will develop guiding visions and starts singing spirit songs. Often, however, the diviner to be will try to resist as long as possible but after a series of unfortunate events or a bad state of health, he will finally undergo initiation and training.

As Walsh also remarks in his book *Spirit of shamanism* (1990), the call to shamanism may be received as being 'doomed to inspiration'. The spiritual forces may impose illness, symptoms or fits as long as refusal of the call continues. Documenting the illness history of the *waganga wa pepo* shows that the refusal of the call results in unhappiness, loss of weight, insanity or near to death experiences. Once the call is accepted however, they usually recover quickly. By that time, a deep change has already taken place in the personality of the diviner-to-be. To test the authenticity of this change, people may ask a diviner-to-be what they have hidden and to go out and fetch it. Or they may request to seek hidden witchcraft items, to be found in a house or in the fields. Upon installation, diviners will also often have to prove their capacities to people within the community. They may have to divine free of charge to show their capacity to perceive and penetrate the concealed.

Waganga wa pepo experience a positive change in themselves, once they are installed. The new abilities bring along a change in life style and will protect them against dangers, such as witchcraft or accidents. Food restrictions are common and no food is to be eaten outside the home. In fact, the forces regulate much of the daily life. As long as the regulations and instructions are respected, not only their powers will develop but also their reputation will grow. In practice however very few are capable of maintaining this situation. Many will turn to their old habits and see their powers reduced. In Tanzania, perhaps one out of ten shaman diviners will fully respect their forces. Usually these are female healers, some of which have a national reputation. Due to the abuse of alcohol or money and sexual affairs men sooner disrupt their collaboration with spiritual forces or see these forces turn against them.

Among the *waganga wa pepo* only few people are called by strong guiding spirits. Usually they have one or two major spirit forces, while others can support them in special or difficult cases. There may be ancestral spirits (*mizimu*) of Bantu, Swahili or Arab origin. Other spirit forces may be called *pepo*

(mainland) or *jini/geni* and *sheitani* (coastal areas). These forces (either good or bad) are classified by tribal names and distinguished by their behavior and needs by the shaman diviner. Spirits of the land (*pepo*) are Bantu and famous for their healing powers, whereas *jini* or *geni* are sea spirits of Arab or Swahili (mixed Arab and local tribe) origin. In general these spirits are considered inferior to the land spirits with one exception, the Ruhani forces. Ruhani is derived from the Arab word *buruhani* meaning divine force, which is transmitted to the healer. Though they originate from the sea, they know about the powers of plants growing on the mainland, whereas other *jini*'s are limited to the usage of sea ingredients and coastal vegetation. These can only be of help when the symptoms are linked with Arab or Swahili spirits. The Arab word *sheitani* means devil and refers to a force which brings temporary nuisance. They are experienced as forces that play around with people, frightening them with sudden appearances or acts. Usually it suffices to chase them away by wearing an amulet containing a charm and/or certain medicine. Never will the *sheitani* function as guiding spirit.

In mainland Tanzania the word *pepo* can mean either an angel, a good force (*pepo mzuri*) or a demon, a bad force (*pepo mbaya*). The Bantu word *pepo* is derived from *upepo*, which means wind or unseen force. *Pepo* healers from the interior often hold prayers in the open air. This is considered a traditional religious practice and may be attended by both Muslims and Christians. Those *pepo* healers, who themselves are brought up as Christians, may have to take up certain traditional practices and refrain from church activities or gatherings. However, they may use the bible as a means of oracle or inspiration. In contrast to coastal spirit forces that may force a (Christian) person to embrace Islam, I have never met healers who had to accept Christianity in order to practice.

Along the coast and in the interior Islamic regions, the so-called Ruhani forces are much respected for their religious and healing capacities. Strongly influenced by Arab culture, they force

novice healers to embrace Islam upon entering into their healing career and build a type of personal mosque with an altar as working space. This in contrast to ancestral spirits who usually desire the novice to embrace traditional religious practices and build a traditional hut to work in. These differences are also reflected in the range of ritual objects and means that are applied. Their colors, usually white, red or black, reflect the type of spirit. The objects are important means to increase the power and capacities of the shaman. The Ruhani spirits who always desire white clothes, only allow songs, handclapping and incense to call them. More inferior spirits are accompanied by drumming. This hierarchy in spirit powers is well reflected in the practice of healers with Arab or Swahili (coastal) spirits who are referred to as the healers of the drum (*waganga wa dundo*). They will organize a feast with music (called a *ngoma*) as to please Arab or Swahili spirits, over whom they may not always have control. Elsewhere in the country the drum also has the function to feast with the spirits, but rarely will it be applied by a *mganga wa pepo*, who will require songs or hymns only.

During my stay with *waganga wa pepo* along the coast I made the acquaintance with a typical intervention, that I had as yet not seen in the interior: the sucking out of power objects from the body of a patient. Guided by his spirit the shaman healer can trace an object and remove it. Often these objects look like a thread or a tiny piece of bone, made out of plant material. It seems to be invisible as it enters the body through food or drink. The healer will often claim that this is done deliberately by someone and is thus an act of witchcraft. As a consequence, the victim will suffer from bodily pains often combined with malfunctioning emotionally and socially. Michael Harner mentions this specialization with reference to Indian shamans in his book *The way of the shaman* (1982).

Helping spirits may also harm the healer. Then they will show their authority and make him stop doing something they do not like. In particular they trouble him when he uses his skills for bad purposes

or behaves against regulations set by the spirits. The healer can suffer from anxiety, epileptic fits or bodily tensions as a result. As I stayed with a young healer, who still had difficulty in submitting fully to the forces of his Ruhani spirit, I was often called to help him calm down whenever he was 'punished'. He could stay immobile for hours in the hot sun or he would bang his head on the wall. During these crises his spirit would show emotional agitation and discontent about the way the young healer was going about his things. Only by calling his own teachers (whom he addresses as his spirit father and mother) did the young healer succeed to appease the anger of his spirit guide. This brings us to the role of the spirit possession guilds in which shaman healers play a pivotal role in curing symptoms of possession illness or *ugonjwa wa pepo*.

Spirit possession guilds

A guild is a group of people centered upon a healer affiliated with particular spirits. These spirits are approached by means of specific acts and gifts (these may include recitations, songs, music, odors, colors, foodstuff, drinks or plants as a part of ritual procedures). All patients become a member of the guild and receive support from the *pepo* healer in exchange for favors to the healer. Along the coast the *pepo* healer is often addressed as a master of spirits or *mwalimu wa pepo*. Those patients, who are chosen by powerful helping spirits, also receive training from the healer. In fact, reputed healers will regularly install novice healers, choose a proper location for their practice and provide them with protective means as to resist sudden attacks by unseen forces. For these patients, the guild functions as a shaman guild.

There are various ways in which a person may become possessed by a spirit. It may be inherited, it may simply like a person and want him as its associate, it may possess anyone who passes by its haunts (for example large trees, rocks, caves, the seashore), or it may be sent through witchcraft to harm someone. A disease spirit may have been sent to harm someone or it may have come to seek a personal contest. It may manifest itself by directly possessing a patient so that the patient's body

becomes the vehicle of the spirit, and it may even speak through him. More commonly, however, the spirit manifests itself initially more indirectly through illness (both physical and mental), bad luck, barrenness, loss of family members and the like. In either case, possession is manifested by all kinds of abnormal behavior, such as running off into the bush, hysterics, trance, or distorted speech. The distinction between true possession and mere hysteria can only be made by the *mganga wa pepo* who invites the spirit to expose itself. He does so with the help of prayers, specific songs or incenses that attract the spirit, which will then 'mount into the subject's head'. In Swahili terminology this is called *pepo anapanda mtu*, whereas to exorcize or liberate the powers of spirit forces is called *kupunga pepo*.

Propitiating the spirit once possession is ascertained involves going through a ritual, in which food, drinks and/or objects are offered to the spirit of the patient. In general spirits desire food or juice of an unripe coconut. The food may consist of a loaf of bread or porridge made of cereals, but for the strong and severe spirits fresh blood of an animal is often required. Healing spirits usually desire some fruit or juice, which they share with the participants. More important to them are the gifts or items that give expression to their healing capacities. After this ritual, the patient may become a member of the guild in which the shaman can control the spirit. A guild member has certain obligations: to attend the guild rituals, to make an initial offering or celebration for one or more spirits and bear the expense of an occasional ritual. If he wants to travel, he has to request the shaman to call the spirit(s) and inform them. If these regulations are disregarded the member may fall ill or become distressed.

Occasionally the leading healer may punish a member or novice healer for not sufficiently respecting the master shaman or for abusing his spirit powers. The master or *mwalimu* will 'close' the spirit, which is also called *kupunga pepo*, by means of a magic spell or rite. This is seen as an act of witchcraft and the consequences for the member or novice healer are considerable. Not only is his

healing power suffocated, but also bodily tensions arise (for the forces cannot be expressed), which may cause a burden for lifetime. No one can alter this other than the healer who has closed the helping spirit.

There may be several guilds in one village or town, each with their own type of spirit, or belonging to a certain tribe of spirits. These cults have developed among the Islamic Swahili peoples of the East African coast and have spread far into central, western and southern Tanzania, where they are often known as *pepo* or *sheitani* cults. The *pepo* or *sheitani* cult complex is a major example of a cult in which various cultural influences come together. It is found throughout the Islamic world in general and Islamic Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. In the interior these guilds exist foremost where Islamic religion has had a vast impact on daily life. Elsewhere *pepo* healers may express and explain *pepo* forces in different ways, even though certain guild features may be present. An example of this is given in the next outline, which is based on a case study of a female *pepo* healer in South-west Tanzania.

Pepo healer Nambela

In 1990/1991 I stayed with the female healer Nambela who is part of the Bantu tribe Nyiha. She runs a large practice in the Southwestern highlands of Tanzania (see Erdtsieck 1997 and 2001) ever since 1965. Thirty to fifty people may be in treatment in her compound, whereas others come for ambulatory care or divination. About forty huts offer temporary housing to patients. Food is abundant, since the healer and her family are farming a fertile area. Patients who stay for a long time may be given a small piece of land on loan to grow their own food; other patients can buy staple food from the healer or her family. Personal gain is of no interest to Nambela, though she does accept small gifts in kind after someone is cured. She is also known to counteract the power of witchcraft and has an extensive knowledge on beneficial plants. Delivery and infertility are other areas of her competence.

To Nambela the powers of *pepo* serve foremost as a tool for patients to develop strength in body and mind. The individual view she holds about *pepo* forces have been much influenced by Nambela's illness history. Ever since Nambela was a child she had symptoms of an 'ill' *pepo* or *pepo mbaya*. She had various symptoms of anxiety, like a weak condition, heart palpitations, restless sleeping, painful joints and severe headaches. Nambela started to suffer from confusion due to traumatic experiences, which included the experience of sudden clairvoyant 'messages'. This experience made that she felt like hiding herself in the bush and to live in isolation. As she became older, she would have regular seizures, in which she would lose consciousness while her body would stiffen completely.

Whereas a majority of traditional healers claimed that her problems were due to witchcraft, only very few healers (*pepo* healers) related her symptoms to an ill state of *pepo*. The illness required the use of *pepo* songs in order to 'awake' and to 'liberate' *pepo*. The treatment seemed to trigger her 'ill' or 'bad' spirit to expose itself, but not sufficiently to totally relieve her tensions. When she was about thirty years of age, she came to know a *pepo* healer, who confirmed that she had an 'ill' *pepo*. More so, she was 'born with an angel', which meant that she had a vocation to become a healer. The major treatment she received were group singing sessions as to awake and express *pepo* through altered states of consciousness. There were different songs that allowed her to feel in balance again. As her mental and physical complaints diminished, she developed her spiritual powers with the help of the skilled *pepo* healer. Under her guidance Nambela developed her *pepo* to the extent that she cured herself by using its clairvoyant and sensitive powers daily. A deep religious experience made her aware of the reason of her suffering. This event followed her training period.

One day, as Nambela was working in the fields, she was suddenly under the influence of forces of *pepo*. In a trance state she ran off to some large rocks near to where her present compound is. For five days and nights she stayed there, without food or water.

During this time she felt overwhelmed by the messages that came to her, explaining her the reason for her suffering and the purpose of becoming a healer. By that time she had already proven her shaman capacities to other healers and to the community as she had cleared the whole area from bad medicine and witchcraft items under the guidance of her *pepo*. This experience made her ready to accept her role as a shaman healer (*mganga wa pepo*) and start her own practice. In the mean time she has helped to cure many people in the area and elsewhere, of whom a good number have become *pepo* healers themselves. As such she is responsible for passing on a system of belief about the causes and cures of *pepo* symptoms and other diseases. The effectiveness of shaman therapy depends much upon such beliefs being widely held and emotionally accepted by the cultural group.

A consult with Nambela

Two or three times a day a divination session takes place in the open. Nambela divines in a semi-trance state, usually proceeding from relational problems to physical complaints. Since the divination session is a public affair, other clients or visitors may be watching as the person for whom Nambela divines is seated on the ground a few yards away from her out in the open. People always have to sit with their legs straight forward which is a common feature with most diviners. Before she goes into a trance state by the typical shivering of *pepo*, she will ask the client where he is coming from and from which tribe he is. No further exchange takes place and Nambela concentrates on the client to become conscious of the various aspects of the problem. Whatever she feels, hears, sees or knows she expresses right away, whether or not these are direct or indirect matters to do with the client's situation or state. The following example of a divination session concerns a woman who has come with a small child. Nankala, a novice healer, has brought her along.

Nambela: 'Among your relatives, there is someone who has been running with *pepo* (*kuchima*). At your homeground there is a case of accidental death (*kifo cha ghafula*).'

Woman: 'Yes, my father hanged himself.'

Nambela: 'You will also die by accident, if you don't "close" the spirit of your father. I see two women and a man will die! Child (addressing the woman), take your place on the ground (to wake up *pepo*). You will need to experience *pepo* awakening at least three times, in order to reduce the trouble of the blood that surrounds your mind ever since the death of your father. God will help you! Did you close his spirit?'

Woman: 'No, we did not.'

Nankala: 'This woman reacted with a very strong *pepo* at my place, in the way that people do who suffer severely from mental illness (*ugonjwa ya kichaa*).'

Nambela: 'Alright, here too it will work for her, for if she does not run with *pepo*, she may wander off in the woods and get lost. When you close your father's spirit, you will close it for all the elders and all children. If she runs off with *pepo* it is fortunate for her as it will help her to get strength again!'

Nambela gives no description here of the symptoms of the woman, who had already been diagnosed by the novice healer Nankala before. She does however know what has happened in her family. She also reports about someone else 'running' with *pepo*, but nothing more is said about this. Important is the fact, that the woman has an 'ill' state of *pepo* because her father committed suicide. A suicide or murder is referred to as a sudden death, just as accidents are. This is opposed to natural deaths, which occur of illness or old age. A sudden death must be closed (*kufunga kifarazi*) by means of a sacrifice (a cow, a sheep or a chicken depending on the ties with and the demands of the deceased) and/or special herbs, which are placed in and around the house or on the grave. The deceased is referred to as a shadow or *mzimu*, which must be closed as to fulfil the passage to the world of the dead. This prevents the shadow from becoming harmful to a living relative, who may as a result go through the same hardships and meet the same destiny as the deceased. In addition, it needs to be said, that to Nambela spirit force or *pepo* stops to exist upon death whereas the shadow remains.

Healing sessions of pepo

After Nambela has established what is wrong with a patient, treatment of the patient can begin. The main group therapy consists of participation in rhythmic singing sessions that are kept daily by groups of patients. Sometimes this is combined with rituals to appease spirits or other unseen powers that have an influence on one's inner spirit or *pepo*. At the singing session patients are suddenly caught in trance. They start to tremble, fall on the ground and roll over, after which they run around as if possessed by spiritual forces. On Sundays the group sessions find their highlight after a religious gathering in which Nambela acts as a priestess and a prophetess.

Through the use of songs, the music can open a gateway to altered states of consciousness. A person may encounter experiences that go beyond the bodily and can involve emotional, mental and spiritual changes, which stretch out from the personal to the transpersonal level (experiences that go beyond the personal). These experiences may have a beneficial outcome as they confront someone with his or her suppressed feelings, which were the initial cause of the mental or physical disturbances. By clearing both mind and body people can restore their balance, spur their self-healing principle, and encounter spiritual growth.

The songs that are sung during a group session contain a lot of information about the emotional, social and religious aspects of *pepo*. The type of song and with it the text depends on the situation, the emotional state or the trance behavior of one or more of the patients. Many of the songs relate to the worries, the fears and the pain that reinforce the 'ill' state of *pepo*. They also reflect how *pepo* is set free by the singing and how it takes control of the body and the mind. Most important is a total opening up to the songs by just concentrating on the singing. For this purpose the singers gather around the patient and sing next to his ear. All patients participate in this and since I often took part too I noticed how easy it was to stop thinking, for the strong vibrations of the voices would completely occupy me. It was easy to understand that this has a hypnotizing effect on

everyone. The liberation of *pepo* results in a state of trance in which a person's willpower is taken over by another power. Once a person starts to shiver intensely this indicates that a total 'awakening' is on its way and *pepo* is liberated from within the body. When this happens vigorously Nambela divines the person to find out if he has a calling to become a *pepo* healer.

The experience with the awakening of *pepo* happens in stages that people go through before it comes to an actual liberation of *pepo*. At first they experience a feeling of heat or power in a certain part of the lower body. As this sensation is rising up from the abdomen it may eventually leave the head via the crown. At this stage people lose total self control. The stronger the power, the greater the healing force and the need people feel to help others. Gradually patients may thus develop capacities similar to Nambela's as they divine and/or treat each other during the singing sessions. Those who show a strong *pepo* (*pepo joto*, literally a hot *pepo*) are advised to further train their abilities and gain control over their spiritual powers as to become novice healers. In that case they are to follow the *pepo* regulations (*sheria wa pepo*), which consist of three major disciplines: not to ask a fee for treatment, not to take any alcoholic drinks, and not to have any sexual relationship with others than the own partner. Those who violate these rules see their skills and powers diminishing or disappearing altogether.

Pepo, Kundalini and Shamanism

Since I was given similar descriptions of *pepo* awakening by both *pepo* healers and *pepo* patients in the country, I was compelled to experience what kind of forces (other than those of the spirits) might be involved. As I participated daily in these group sessions I often experienced the atmosphere full of charged energy as inner forces were aroused and expressed. This excited the singers too. Whenever I was seated there myself, I felt the vibrations of the voices entering my entire body at which point it was easy to forget everything else. Though it never came to a total awakening of *pepo*, I did feel something going upwards from my abdomen to my throat,

where it stayed a while. I often wondered if this came close to the process of awakening *kundalini*. This so-called feminine creative power awakens to rhythmic movement in uprushing and downpouring streams of heat, also felt as an internal fire. Patients experienced this feeling while being encouraged by the singers, who upon noticing the transformation in a patient shouted: *chema, chema, amka pepo* ('come to a boil and let *pepo* wake up'). The specialized and more individual potency of *kundalini* lies asleep, curled up at the base of the human spine. Stirred properly it may result in a subtle or sudden awakening of the larger consciousness. Asians refer to this as an occult experience. Once activated it can only be properly intensified if one abstains from certain foodstuff and stimulants.

Kundalini may well be compared with electricity as to the uses to which it can be put. First of all, it charges consciousness enabling detailed memory of events and experiences. Second, it is both another sense and a very powerful stimulation of existing senses. It turns in boomerang fashion with terrible effect upon those who misuse it, upon those who use it to selfish ends. It seems that both the awakening process and manifestations of *pepo* resemble the way *kundalini* force develops. As already stated, Nambela refers to a hot *pepo* once strong spiritual powers are developed, which consequently is seen as having a calling to become a *pepo* healer. Such parallels show that certain historical relationships exist between yoga, occult practices and shamanism. Mircea Eliade (1983), who made intensive studies on rites, initiations, yoga and shamanism also refers to the parapsychological powers of certain shamans and compares them with skills of Tibetan and Indian yogi's.

As for Nambela, she claims that *pepo* is an inner force that connects humans with God. Everybody is born with *pepo*. It may be responsible for one's illness and well being. By partaking daily in the singing sessions, one enables *pepo* to expose itself. As a consequence, the patient suffering from *pepo* illness (*ugonjwa wa pepo*) (2) stabilizes his personal state of *pepo* and regulates feelings of anxiety. Quite

often this spiritual process brings with it the development of a sensitive awareness. For example, a patient may experience the pain or hardship of another person and feel inclined to help. In trance he or she may start searching for medicinal plants or try to bring relief by means of manipulations of the body and the spine. At other occasions, they may suddenly start to divine another person.

In sum, *pepo* therapy aims at an inner purification. Nambela claims that in the process of setting free the 'ill' components of *pepo* one may activate a healing power or a divine force. To her, God or the divine are the only healing powers, and they cannot be benefited from as long as the mind and the heart are troubled. In finding a cure for her own crisis and illness, for example, Nambela evoked a very strong and active *pepo*, also referred to as *pepo joto* or a hot *pepo*. Her willpower was taken over by *pepo* that made her roll over the ground and run with *pepo*. People who are in this state have no control over themselves and no memory of what happens to them. It allows them to liberate accumulated negative influences that have come from negative emotions and experiences. The awakening of *pepo* (*kuampa pepo*) is essential to all patients, even those who have had no apparent *pepo* illness. Nambela feels that each individual may contribute to his own healing process by allowing the self to awake *pepo*. In what way clients with *pepo* complaints respond to the therapeutic singing sessions, is best represented by a description given by one of the singers who frequently took the lead. 'If you are suffering from *pepo* illness, it is like the maize on the field lacking vital sources, because of the amount of weeds surrounding it. With the help of the songs one's *pepo* blossoms, since all the thoughts and worries are cleared from the ground. The liberation of *pepo* then has a healing outcome. This is what the awakening of *pepo* is all about.'

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