

Connecting: The Therapeutic Work of Traditional Healers in Uganda

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Abstract: *The therapeutic work of traditional healers in Uganda has parallels to the Ericksonian and hypno-systemic psychotherapy. One fundamental concept is connecting: Establishing or restoring a contact to entities of another dimension - spirits. On one hand these are acting as therapeutic instances using the healer as a channel and on the other hand they build resources for the patients. Healers - having normally an amnesia after the session - are the bearers (mediums) of the spirits. An open question is whether spirits can be considered to be ego-states appearing almost in identical form at different healers. The course of treatment using alert trance is described as well as the tasks patients have to accomplish to regain their health. Finally there is a short discussion of problems arising, when people coming from cultures with traditional healing systems are confronted with our healing system.*

Connecting is a central concept among traditional healers in Uganda. It means establishing a link with an entity of an other dimension. In February 2008 we had the opportunity to stay two weeks with a group of traditional healers. One of them - Hassan Muwonge - we had met at the Ethnomed Congresses in October 06 and October 07 at Munich. Even then we were surprised by the parallels to the Ericksonian and hypno-systemic therapy. Part of our experiences we like to present here.

The visited group calling themselves Lubowa Traditional Healer Association is living in a small settlement about two hours west of Kampala treating patients there and in the surroundings. The density of medical doctors being very small in Uganda (1:25000) traditional healers have a important function in health care. We therefore helped them to build up their organisation during our stage. At present we are about to make a statistical analysis of their healing activities and hope to publish the results soon (s. www.ethnoresearch.ch/publikationen/healing_uganda.pdf)

But back to connecting: Starting the therapeutic process the healer brings himself in a trance using diverse techniques: One induction is achieved by singing specific songs accompanied by drumming and rattling. An other one is inhaling tobacco with special, often multiheaded pipes. The Lubowa Traditional Healers never used psychotropic substances for this purpose. Specific clothes, headgears and ritual objects may also be helpful to reach a particular spirit. But it is not possible to determine which spirit actually will appear. The spirits normally manifest themselves with ritual welcoming words which have to be answered correctly to stabilize their appearance. Once a spirit manifests himself - what can be in no time - the healer as his bearer is "connected" and is only addressed with the name of the spirit. Healers mostly have an amnesia after the session. Therefore an assistant is keeping a record

of the whole proceeding. Thus we came to the statistical data. It is amazing to observe the changing of the healers personality during connecting: Every spirit has its own way of speaking, a special voice, pitch and intonation, distinct mimicry, gestures and movements.

For people living in the region spirits are absolute realities and clearly distinguished from their bearers. In the presence of the former bearer we often heard: "Mr. Lubowa told ..." (Lubowa is a well known spirit). There is a very complex system of spirits in Uganda with different categories and subcategories as e.g. ancestor spirits, nature spirits etc. But we will not go into that.

The patient never will be purposely hypnotized. But he mostly enters into an alert trance during the session and is himself ready for connecting now. Like in Western medicine a diagnosis is made first. This may result from a questioning, a physical examination or an oracle. The kind of examination as well as the further treatment is determined by the present spirit. Direct instructions of behaviour are given, herbal medicines prescribed. Tasks have to be accomplished just in place or at home. Several times we could observe patients making fire at the ritual fire place, burning certain objects and disposing of the ashes afterwards. Sometimes something dear has to be given to the fire as an offering for changing an unpleasant state. Arduous rituals have to be fulfilled or specific objects have to be acquired for a ritual. If a task is too extreme it is possible to negotiate with the spirits: Once a mother with little children should stay alone in the forest for a full week. Another spirit was called and understood, that this was impossible for her. He negotiated with the first one until they found a proper task for the woman!

According to the seriousness of the problems treatments take place in one or more sessions. Partially it depends on the duration a spirit is staying – the bearer normally can't decide on it. We were very impressed by the ending of connection: When the spirit is leaving the bearer raises his arms over his head as taking off a shirt - a clear taking back of the trance.

Traditional healers often are treating whole families or clans. They connect the spirits of these communities in order to prejudice them beneficial and supportive. However it is more important that families and single persons learn themselves connecting their spirits to find individual and helpful solutions – we would call this building up resources. In many parts of Uganda religion and therapy are still an unity having the meaning of connecting back. Lacking harmony with the spiritual world causes physical or mental problems. Thus the task of the healer is to restore the connecting to the spirits. It is not surprising that people originating from countries with traditional healing systems often feel misunderstood from the Western medicine - our theories of disorders are not culturally meaningful to them. According to their system they lost the connection to their spirits and therefore became ill. We could raise the heretical question how many western people have lost their connecting and fell ill – the big rush to esoteric practices might be an answer.

Our western form of connecting with a mobile phone is also having its effects in Uganda. Lacking a fully developed fixed-line network the country is covered with a superb mobile network. Every traditional healer has his mobile phone. If a call comes in during a treatment the spirit decides whether the healer shall accept it – such sort of thing we should have too!