

## CONCEPTS OF CHILDHOOD DRAWN FROM THE IDEAS AND PRACTICE OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS IN MUSAMI\*

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MARX IN THE sixth of his Theses on Feuerbach (1968, 29) analysed the individual as 'the ensemble of the social relations'. Therefore, in order to understand the individual, Heilbroner (1980, 46) recommends that we 'pierce the façade of the solitary being to its social roots, and then reconstitute the individual as a person embedded in, and expressing, the social forces of a particular society'. In this article, I explore the knowledge of traditional healers (hereafter called *n'anga*) in order to discover how they define the child as an individual and describe the social relations that shape the individual.

From January 1982 to December 1983 I conducted fieldwork on the training of traditional healers and the transmission of knowledge across the generations. As ritual specialists, as healers and as social commentators, *n'anga* deal with many children and with problems that originate in or reflect on the nature of childhood. Few societies consciously formulate their ideas about childhood. They need to be pieced together by the careful recording of lived experience.

I shall make a number of assumptions the most important of which is that *n'anga* reflect the opinions of society when they articulate their understanding of the sum of things. That is to say, *n'anga* are social analysts (see Turner, 1967, 361). On the basis of field experience, it seems to me that *n'anga* are often more articulate than their neighbours and that they have grappled more consciously with concepts to do with the sanctity of life, the meaning of death, the nature of relationships, than have their neighbours. I do not mean to imply that others are inarticulate nor that they have not pondered on the Great Mysteries but I suggest that such matters are necessarily addressed as part of the business of being a *n'anga*. As I see it, *n'anga* train as social analysts and their success in this venture partly determines their reputations and, therefore, income. For, as Turner suggested (1967, 360), a social explanation for illness is posited.

In effect, I am assuming that in piecing together the notions of childhood used

\*The fieldwork on which the article is based was done while I was a Research Fellow in the Department of Psychology, University of Zimbabwe. The Research Board of the University generously helped to fund the research.

by *n'anga* I am approximating their society's ideas. It is a truism, but one worth recalling, that all ideas undergo transformation. However, the extent to which transformation is consciously sought varies. While the Zezuru conception of the place of the child in the cosmic whole has undergone transformation this century, it is likely to be transformed further as active efforts are made to reshape post-Independence society. I suggest that in order to guide changes being made in conceptions of childhood in the interests of Zimbabwean children, we need first of all to describe existing conceptions and then attempt to anticipate what impact new forms will have on the place and needs of children.

Some argue that *n'anga* are a conservative force in society. It may be so but I would caution against underestimating their ingenuity as innovators and their wit in rationalizing change within accepted norms. Part of their brief is to reaffirm the assignation and assumption of roles that fit one with another to give meaning to the whole. As meanings are reinterpreted, so *n'anga* alter their analysis and diagnosis of social needs. My thesis is that *n'anga* currently fulfil a role in society that helps to make life experiences coherent and that their offices proffer a series of resolutions for a variety of familial or communal crises that remain acceptable to many across the generations, the sexes and classes. Their role cannot be neatly subsumed under categories of health care or religious succour. It is a role that permeates daily life in an occasionally destructive but often constructive fashion. In reconstructing society, we ought to analyse that role and either support its continuance or seek to replace it. We should take care not to import wholesale notions of childhood from elsewhere if for no other reason than that they are as burdened with anachronisms as is any society's. Nor can we invent from scratch a conception of the place of the child in society tailored to suit ideological needs as it requires generations to ensure a rough fit between practice and meaning.

I shall touch on certain themes that concern the place of children in the cosmology of the Zezuru in order to demonstrate how it is that they intertwine. I make no claim to represent all the beliefs or practices of *n'anga* and nor do I lay claim to having exhausted the variety of notions under each theme.

That which follows represents the opinions of some thirty *n'anga* from the Musami area of Murehwa (eighty kilometres east of Harare). According to them, a baby is always born innocent of evil. This is said despite their accord with the common belief that witchcraft is inherited. The inheritance seems to be a potential that must be realized by some outside force such as a mother's initiation of the baby into evil or possession by an evil spirit. A baby is afforded protection by the shades from the very moment of its birth. Although the baby is born pure, he or she is extremely vulnerable — vulnerable before the anger of the shades and the evil of witchcraft and the mischance of natural illness. Protection from the shades is essential but not foolproof. It is necessary for adults in the family to perform certain rituals, to administer specific medicines and to observe taboos on behalf of

the baby in order to bolster the protection and ensure its efficacy. It is incumbent on the family to act in accord with society's expectations of responsible and caring adults, both in relation to one another and to the spirit world, if the baby's vulnerability is not to be exposed.

The shades often cause illness or distress to fall on the baby because, the *n'anga* say, the family will pay immediate attention, seek out the cause and attempt to redress grievances when a baby's well-being is affected. One *n'anga* said, 'It takes a child to hurt the relatives'; and another explained, 'The anger of the shades is expressed through an innocent child because more pain is felt by the adults who then seek the reason more actively and attend to its redress more quickly.' Yet another *n'anga* said, 'It is impossible for a baby to anger the shades but the shades use the child as a weapon.' (For a careful look at the relationship between the shades and the living in terms of protection and retribution see Kiernan, 1982.)

The baby is at the mercy of the family. If the baby is not contented and well, adults should inspect their relationships and attend to their obligations. In doing so, they may call on a *n'anga*. Turner (1967, 375) observed that among the Ndembu 'part of the work of a doctor is to encourage people to discharge the obligations of their status well and not seek escape from them'. Conversely, the baby is powerful as an essential link in the kinship system that crosses over into the awesome sphere of the spirits. I shall shortly give evidence to suggest that even quite young children learn how to exploit this delicate balance in their own interest.

'Ritual is transformative', says Turner (1967, 95). He also says that 'ritual adapts and periodically readapts the biopsychical individual to the basic conditions and axiomatic values of human social life' (1967, 43). He sees ritual as functioning as an aid in bringing about the acceptance of a culturally prescribed destiny. I agree with Turner except that I feel that he underemphasizes the range of options within the culturally prescribed destiny and the flexibility of the basic conditions and axiomatic values of social life. In Musami in the 1980s ritual continues to function as a transformative mechanism. In every ritual there is a place for children. Perhaps the most moving ritual performance is that of *kurova gava* when the spirit of one recently dead is called back into communion with the living. For two weeks, as the family gathers, brews beer and prepares for a feast, the children of the neighbourhood are invited to play drums, dance and sing in the family's yard each evening, the idea being to demonstrate to the one who died that it is a happy home to which to return. Unless the spirit is settled, it may wander and cause distress.

One ritual focuses on the needs of children. It is a ritual in which a child is named after an ancestor. In response to some dis-ease in a child, such as excessive crying in an infant, extreme naughtiness in a toddler or odd behaviour in a child, a

*n'anga* is consulted. He or she may divine on behalf of the child and reveal that a particular ancestor, usually (if not always) one who played an important part in the child's life, wishes the child to be named after him or her. A child of a *n'anga* had, as a baby, cried for four hours or more at a time. Another *n'anga* divined that his father's father wanted the child to be named after him. Black beads were bought as a gift for the ancestor and his spirit was invoked and pleaded with to let the child alone until he was a little older. The crying lessened and the child grew into a bright, active, naughty boy. He is five now and soon a ritual is planned in which he will be placed on a mat with a wooden plate beside him into which guests will place money. He can use the money as he pleases. Beer will be brewed and a feast held. The boy is aware of the planned ritual and he knows that when he is ill or particularly difficult, his father offers a small gift to the spirit of his own father begging him to leave the child alone for a while. He is also aware that his parents have been instructed to treat him with patience, not to shout at him nor beat him. He views his special tie with an ancestor with some awe and he knows that there is a possibility that he may, one day, be selected as a medium through which his grandfather may communicate with the family. Instead of feeling isolated because of his troublesome nature, the boy is drawn more closely into the kinship web and the value of his position in it is publicly celebrated.

In another case, the nephew of a well-known public figure was divined for and it was said that his father's father wanted the boy to be named after him. When I first knew him, he was twelve and had just begun to rebel. He was noisy at home, he would steal food to share with his friends, he was restless and he would play truant from school. As a baby he used to cry a lot and a *n'anga* divined that his father's father wanted him to be named after him. Beads were tied to his wrist and, when he was three years old, a feast was held to celebrate the naming of the child. It was held in response to his father's sister's advice. The child had been very ill and his father's sister had walked barefoot and in a trance from Murehwa (some forty kilometres away) at night to tell the family to hold the feast at once or the boy would die. It was held and he recovered. He had no further problems until 1981.

He is a clever child and his parents held consultations with teachers and family members in their attempt to help him. He refused to discuss his problems and would run into the bush if cross-examined. Towards the end of 1982, beer was brewed, the family congregated and the shades were invoked. It was divined that a final ritual should be held in connection with the naming of the boy after his grandfather. It was held and the child's behaviour improved and he returned to school. The points that I wish to emphasize are that the process of handling the young boy's problems was one that involved the whole family, one that took time and one in which a number of avenues were explored. The final ritual crystallized family and communal care and concern for the child and enabled the child to

accept an explanation for his unhappiness that originated from without, thus giving him the opportunity to alter his pattern of behaviour.

Responsibility for moral behaviour is shared within the family. Some say that a man is not fully responsible for his moral actions until his father is dead. A proverb that is often repeated is that a calf eats in its mother's footsteps. A child will follow a parent and may learn evil ways in doing so.

If there is a delay in a baby attaining expected developmental stages, a *n'anga* may be asked to divine the cause. Serious cases of delay in crawling, walking or talking are usually seen to be caused by the shades and are often related to the failure of the family to pay the mother's cow (*mombe yomai*). Bad mental retardation may be seen to be caused by God (*benyi waMwari*), in which case it cannot be treated, or by witchcraft that affected the child in the womb or by an ancestor who died before he had paid off a debt. Both of the last two causes can be treated. Delays may be interpreted as interference by a *mudzimu* or *shave* who, having selected a particular child, may be ensuring that he or she is seen to be different from others and the spirit may block the child's success at school wishing to keep the child free for its own purposes so that he or she will be ripe for possession when older. The shade selects 'the heart' of an innocent child and guards that child. The shade causes illness and behaviour problems in the child in order to draw the parents' attention to the fact that the child has been selected. The chosen child's behaviour may display certain characteristics: he may be troublesome, noisy, have problems with friends, be restless, he may run away, or reject certain foods, especially onions, or he may beg for snuff and his talk may be incomprehensible to adults. Signs of spiritual selection may be noted in infancy but often become clear between the ages of five and seven at 'the dawning of understanding'.

The majority of the *n'anga* with whom I have worked had aspects of their childhood behaviour interpreted to them as signs of future possession. One recalls that as a child he was often alone, rejected friendship and was short-tempered with his peers. Another refused as a child to eat onions and would wake at night and sit up very still and quiet for long periods. Her parents feared that she had been bewitched, but her mother's mother, a *n'anga*, divined that it was an early sign of future possession by a healing spirit. A woman who has recently begun to divine and treat in her late middle-age refused as a child to drink water and, at the age of seven, would wake in the night crawling and crying. Her father's father and his sister (both of whom were *n'anga*) divined that she would be possessed by a healing spirit when she reached menopause. So it happened. The eccentric behaviour of children is only sometimes interpreted as being a sign of future possession but the pattern illustrates how, among the Zezuru, the vagaries of the shades can be used to explain abnormal behaviour.

The shades do not pre-determine a child's development but may influence its

course. They do not grant special gifts to individuals nor order the mix of inheritance and environmental influence that shapes the individual. A child is shaped by inheritance and environment in, most say, about equal measure. A child's character may in part be formed by that of an ancestor. For instance, he may be unusually anxious as was an ancestor in life. Suggestion plays a role in character formation. One example comes from a five-year-old child whom I knew well. He is the son of a *n'anga*. His father's father was a *n'anga*, too, and the child has been named after him. The boy's grandfather had had a crippled right arm and the child's grandmother (father's mother) pondered aloud in front of him on the likeness between him and his grandfather even to the extent that the child always hurts his right arm in play.

Cleansing is an important part of ritual that is conducted by *n'anga* for young and old. It forms an integral part of the treatment of many illnesses and of the preparation for any major ritual. *N'anga* deny that the conscience is being cleansed but say that it is evil from without that is being chased away. One can be cleansed of evil airs, the evil imprint from contact with a corpse, evil spirits (alien or witch), and evil actions that result from another's envy, jealousy or ill-will. Unless the patient reveals the truth, cleansing will be ineffective. And unless compensation is paid for harm caused in serious cases such as murder, recovery will not follow and trouble will continue to afflict the family.

A patient is cleansed internally and externally. A wide range of plants (especially aromatic herbs) and animal parts are used as emetics, purgatives, in incisions on the skin or in bathing and drinking water. I have numerous cases of cleansing on record: they include the cleansing of a White farmer who killed a girl during the war and, as a consequence, was having trouble with his labour; the cleansing of a young woman jilted by her fiancé; and the cleansing of a child affected by experiences during the war. *N'anga* cleanse those to whom they teach herbal remedies or dream interpretation or whose spirits are being called out.

Babies, too, are cleansed. Soon after birth, a baby should be protected against illness that is seen to be related to the fontanelle. During this treatment, the baby is usually cleansed with water in which a cowrie shell has been soaked. A baby with diarrhoea may be cleansed internally with, often enough, disastrous results. In one case, the *n'anga* divined that the baby's diarrhoea was caused by evil directed at her by a neighbour's jealousy of the mother's successful farming. He threw his bones to determine whether or not the baby should be taken to hospital.

Cleansing is seen to strengthen the mind, chase evil and secure protection. I could find no parallel among the Zezuru for the concept found elsewhere in Africa (see, for example, Harris, 1978) of cleansing as a way to clear the heart of anger. Despite suggestions from me, no *n'anga* saw the act of cleansing as a means to ease the conscience or as an opportunity to 'speak out' the ill-will in one's heart. Indeed, they said that the motives of one who speaks too easily in such a vein

would be suspect. Most see anger in the heart as being a private matter. Yet cleansing seems to clear the air allowing normal relationships to be resumed. It certainly seems to have performed this function in the aftermath of war. One *n'anga* who was tortured during the war claims to know the youths who informed on him. He suspects that they suffer knowing that they did wrong and should not have yielded to a bribe. They cannot rid themselves of their suffering unless the problem is made public. This is unlikely to occur unless mental confusion assails one of them. It is not possible to cleanse oneself by speaking out alone to the shades.

It is said that the blood shed during the war retarded the thinking of some children. They had to be cleansed. In 1982, the impact of the war on children could still be seen. A boy of six, for example, was brought by his parents to a *n'anga* because he was acting strangely. He would scream, 'My gun, my gun. The soldiers are here.' Cleansing medicine was placed in incisions in his skin and his parents were advised to keep him under close surveillance. They were instructed not to be harsh with him, nor to shout at him and they were told to set him small tasks and observe how he handled them. The parents were to report on his progress to the *n'anga* and to return with the child when his behaviour had improved so that he could be protected against further influence from evil spirits. During the treatment sessions, no one was blamed for the child's odd behaviour and the child was not labelled as deviant. Ritual attention and gentle care probably helped to exorcise the effects of his experience during the war.

In another case, a sixteen-year-old girl was brought by her mother from Bulawayo to see a *n'anga* in Musami. She had fought in the war and had since been acting oddly, singing war songs, beating her mother saying, 'I want my money' and acting childish. She was given a purgative, medicine was rubbed into incisions in her skin and placed in her drinking water. It was divined that a *ngozi* was affecting her. Apparently another *n'anga* had divined the same cause and her family had paid compensation to the family of the person whose death the girl had caused. However, the girl still needed treatment according to the Musami *n'anga*. It is quite possible that the girl was, in part, rebelling against her return to the conservative norms and forms of control of her family. It would be interesting to know whether the traditional form of resolution offered her any comfort.

The compensation demanded of some families whose children had wrongfully caused someone's death during the war was sometimes high. In one case, seven cows, one goat, one chicken and a girl were demanded. One *n'anga* professes to know of four cases in which a girl was given in compensation. It is said that the girl should grow up in the stranger's family, eventually have a child and, if the baby is the same sex as the family member killed, her duty will have been fulfilled. She could then marry into the family with full *roora* being paid or return home leaving the child behind. I did not meet anyone given in

compensation. Sometimes the gift of a girl was purely a ritual gesture. Through the payment of compensation, old scores were aired and the possibility for the renewal of cordial relations between families was created.

One *n'anga* treated many youths haunted by their experiences during the war. Some said that they were troubled by what they had done although they had had no choice. They were cleansed and given medicine to stop them from reliving the experiences. Some were under fourteen years of age. Cleansing, according to this *n'anga*, equals forgiveness. If, however, wrong was committed when there was a choice to do otherwise, compensation must precede forgiveness.

It was said that the shades were angered by the blatant transgression of the ethics of war and, to demonstrate their displeasure, they caused an epidemic of eye infection in the area. War atrocities affect all the people just as a son's misdeeds affect all the members of his family. In the aftermath of war, traditional means were used to meet modern needs. It would seem that *n'anga* helped families to adjust to the post-war situation, and they helped to still war memories and provided means of catharsis. Perhaps, too, they channelled new forms of rebellion along conventional lines.

The ritual of *kurastiriri*, in which evil is cast out, is a cleansing process. Most often, a black or white chicken is brought by the patient's family on the instructions of a *n'anga*. The chicken is treated with medicine then cast out into the bush symbolizing the rejection of evil influence. In one case, a boy of thirteen was brought to a *n'anga* by his parents because he was refusing to eat either *sadza* or meat. Divination revealed that a foreigner who had lived in the boy's father's homestead had died a bachelor. His spirit was seeking a wife in the area, and, to draw attention to his needs, was troubling the boy. A black cockerel was thrown away, the boy was cleansed then made to join the *n'anga* in a ritual performance. They sat together on hides, took snuff and had *mbira* played for them. Both became possessed and a family spirit identified itself through the boy. His family agreed to accept the spirit whose intention was to protect the family. Now, this boy was not physically ill but suffering some adolescent trauma. The *n'anga* found a cause outside and by focusing family attention on his problems and by clearing the way to recovery, he brought the trouble to a head and offered a resolution. The resolution was to give the boy a role in family affairs that channelled communication between them and the spirit world through him.

The point to emphasize here is that children can be cleansed of the evil that afflicts them although they will neither have invited the evil nor have acted in such a way as to lay themselves open to attack. That children are vulnerable to the bad effects of immorality or amorality is demonstrated in the commonly held belief that unless a man uses a certain herb as an antidote after committing adultery, he cannot touch his young children for fear of causing harm to befall them.

Some *n'anga* say that it is difficult to settle a spirit with one host these days



because the cleansing ritual is improperly performed. Cleansing is symbolized in the use of traditional beer, water, milk, oil and snuff. A *n'anga* whose spirit is made blind must be cleansed at a sacred river.

In fortune or misfortune one does not stand alone. One's own dis-ease, illness, distress, is not seen as a reflection of one's own weakness, shortcomings, inability to cope. Rather it is a signal to alert the family to the fact that something is amiss and needs attention. Some see the system as encouraging personal denial of responsibility. It is possible, though it is incumbent upon one to pursue due process towards recovery through the use of ritual and herbal remedies which aim to alter the situation allowing new permutations to arise. The process often involves cleansing: its efficacy depends on the revelation of truth. Explanations are sought, remedies tried, resolutions put forward until the dis-ease, illness, distress, goes. Opportunities for the transformation of behaviour, within certain limits, are created. Shame, doubt, guilt or blame is shared. In externalizing emotions (even responsibility) scapegoats are sought. If one's heart and house are in order, accusations do not stick but where misfortune renders one vulnerable the accusation is not easily deflected.

What are the implications for childhood? A child is a gift and if not treated as one the anger of the shades will afflict the family. The child is shaped both by that which he inherits and by the environment in which he lives. It is the responsibility of the extended paternal and maternal families to secure him an appropriate environment and the protection of the shades. His health and happiness depend upon harmony within the home, among kin and between the living and the dead. If the child shows particular talent in some area, he or she is likely to be seen to have the guidance of a *mudzimu* or *shave*. No particular superiority over others is assumed as the gift comes from without. Similarly, the cause of a child's misbehaviour may come from elsewhere and opportunities for changes in behaviour patterns are created. Nevertheless, bad behaviour is not excused and is punished and may be said to have 'natural' causes.

Individuality and even eccentricity are allowed some scope and are fitted into the explanation of things. A child's oddities are channelled and a series of possible explanations are put forward. The society sanctions patterns of behaviour that allow for the expression of difference yet minimize alienation. As Turner (1967, 106) describes it, 'there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence. As in the works of Rabelais, there is a promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of the categories of event, experience, and knowledge, with a pedagogic intention.' Instances of madness or aberrant behaviour can be dealt with in such a way as to avoid labelling the malefactor as mentally disturbed or delinquent except in relation to that incident. Once a situation is resolved to the satisfaction of all parties, it is seen as closed and, while it is possible that similar incidents may recur, it is not anticipated.

In this article I have touched on the notions of childhood implied in ideas commonly held by *n'anga*. We need more detailed descriptions of the experiences of children, especially of their relationships with other family members. It is difficult to describe the role of *n'anga* as it is a topic that stirs up much emotion. There is no doubt that malpractice occurs amongst them and there is no doubt that they can exploit situations of fear and tension. However, the positive aspects of their role are seldom celebrated. They administer to the needs of many people both in the countryside and in towns.

It is likely that as society in this country adopts new forms, the conception of childhood will alter. Possibly children will have to assume a greater sense of responsibility for their own actions, successes and failures, and equally possible is the likelihood that their sense of responsibility for others will lessen. Possibly some leavening of fears of the night, of owls, of witches, will occur but an attendant possibility is that fears will be focused inwards and the search for scapegoats will be redirected. Perhaps people may be freed from some of the shackles of traditional roles and conventional expectations but they may then begin to see their own needs in opposition to those of others, even those of their children.

I do not mean to call for a stay in the march of time. I only caution that, as society is transformed, those who shape the change should place new burdens with due discretion. It seems likely, for instance, that young women may be allowed to assume the moral responsibility for the well-being of children that used to be shared by all members of society. It is unlikely that a new order will cope as successfully with deviance as did the old. There are a variety of ways of meeting children's needs but new forms need to be anticipated and their costs met. Psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1950, 277) says that 'to understand either childhood or society, we must expand our scope to include the study of the way in which societies lighten the inescapable conflicts of childhood with a promise of some security, identity, and integrity'.

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