



Wisdom Keepers' Stories

The interviews below were conducted by Bradford Keeney and Professor Ansie Johnson in May, 1999 with a male healer and several women traditional healers in the Okongwati and Okaua areas.

HIMBA

The Himba are semi-nomadic pastoralists who live in northwestern Namibia. They still live a traditional lifestyle and follow their herds of goats and cattle to grazing areas and waterholes in a harsh land that is difficult to traverse. Himba women cover themselves with a mixture of rancid butterfat, red ochre, and the aromatic resin of the Omuzumba shrub, giving their bodies a smooth and reddish feature. Both men and women become healers and in addition to using medicinal herbs, the women have an ecstatic dance that enables the ancestral spirits to express themselves through trance.



Kondomboro Tjambiru

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Himba woman healer from village of Okaua, Namibia:

Both men and women are healers in our culture. Some of us use plants as medicines that heal, while others practice different ways of healing. We dance as a way of working with the spirit. We form a semicircle comprised mostly of women who clap and sing. Those who feel moved to do so, jump into the middle and dance with great enthusiasm. You can tell when the spirit enters a person because their behavior changes quite dramatically. They may shake, dance more wildly, and make big noises. When someone is filled with a spirit, the healer can see what spirit it is. If it is a male spirit, the person is asked to stand on the right side of the semicircle, facing the singers. If it is a female spirit, they stand on the left side, also facing the rest of the women. A woman who becomes filled by a male spirit will speak with a man's voice. The healer then works with that person and helps the spirit move out of them.

I learned to heal from a spirit that entered my body. This took place when I was a young adult. I had already given birth to two children. The spirit first came to me during a dance that took place in a village. This was a very special experience in my life. It felt like needles were sticking me all over my body when the spirit entered. My whole body shook, my hands trembled, and sometimes I convulsed. The shaking, along with the feeling of pins and needles in my skin, lasted from midday to midnight.



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The healer who presided over the dance that evening helped me remove the spirit from my body. It took almost a whole day for my body to come back to being normal. While this was happening, I didn't realize that I had been chosen to be a doctor.

The spirit that entered me talked to a spirit that was in another person. This took place during the dance. It spoke in a language that I did not understand. Fortunately, someone at the dance recognized the language and knew what was being said. The spirit claimed that I was becoming a doctor. That spirit is now a part of my life and it is very powerful. It still communicates with the spirits of other women. Our name for a spirit is omukwenyama. During a dance, my spirit enters my body from the earth as I dance. When it speaks, another woman at the dance gets a spirit inside of her. Her spirit will then speak with my spirit.

The spirit comes into my body only during the dance. It has not come to me in my dreams. The spirit has its own home. It lives where we bury the people who have passed on. Those spirits come to us when we dance.

It is the ancestral spirit of my aunt who comes to me. There were two sisters in my mother's family and it is the younger sister who comes to me. This is one of the ways you become a doctor. The name otjimbanda refers to both men and women doctors. That is what I have become.

There are fewer men doctors than women doctors. I know only one man who talks with the spirits. The main way we doctor and heal others is through speaking with the spirits. The name for healer, otjimbanda, means "one who speaks with the spirit."

As an otjimbanda, I can predict when a spirit will come forth in another person and I can understand what that spirit is saying when it speaks through another person. What I see is the trembling in the other person. That tells me that a spirit, an omukweyama, is entering their body.

My own spirit must first come into me before I can help another person. When I talk to another person's spirit, I can ask that person's spirit to dance. When it's difficult for the spirit to come out, I might have to make an offering of a goat or ox. Then the spirit is more likely to come out.

We believe that a person is sick because a spirit is bothering them. Our job is to get that spirit out so they can get well. It is the spirit that causes pain in the body. When people feel pain, we call for a dance. When we dance the spirit out, the pain is danced out.

The spirits are always the cause of body pain and sickness. This is not a bad thing. It is a natural thing. If you don't take the spirit out, over time it will settle into your body and will no longer feel painful.

When the spirit is in me, it is not a pleasure. It is a strong force that sends pain through my whole body.



Kondomboro Tjambiru with her grandchild



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The person who experiences the spirit goes to everyone in the community and holds their hands. This is a greeting of the spirit. It brings everyone in contact with the spirit.

The spirit that is in me will someday go to my daughter. Her name is Mukamena. She will get the spirit from me after I pass on. Then she will become the healer.

I do not use plants to heal sickness. I only use the dance to heal others by talking to the spirits. They tell me what must be done. There are other doctors who heal with the plant medicines. They are called by the same name—otjimbanda.

When the dance starts and the spirit isn't coming into anyone, I will go to another person and shake them. That helps the spirit come in. That is when I touch others with a shaking hand and body.

Some doctors can see things from faraway and even see the spirit world. They are very strong. My spirit is strong and I see the spirits when I'm in the dance.

We know that the tribal people of the world know how to talk with the spirits. However, the white people who make the trucks and airplanes have lost touch with these old ways. Because they no longer talk to spirits, they have gone mad and are harming the rest of the world. We must awaken their spirits or our future will be over.

Mukamena Tjambiru

daughter of Kondomboro:

I am my mother's only daughter and I help my mother in the healing of other people. I help her by the way I clap during a dance. When I make a strong sound and rhythm, it helps the spirit come out. I don't experience the spirit coming into me, but I am told that this will happen after my mother passes on.

Our songs are created during the moment that we sing them. They can be inspired by looking at a beautiful tree. Yesterday we sang about some people who don't have any homes. This is how we sing our songs.

My grandmother was also a great doctor. She is remembered as a very strong dancer. I believe that my grandmother will be the spirit that helps me in the future.

When I was a small girl, I witnessed many people being touched by the spirit. I have grown up with this way of life. It is natural for the spirits to come to us. We expect it and see it as the way things should be for healthy communities. We don't understand why white people don't listen to their



Mukamena Tjambiru



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ancestral spirits. Such deafness and blindness makes them ignorant of the counsel of their wise elders.

The conch I wear around my neck was given to me by my husband. It means that I am married. The name of this necklace is Ohumba.

Kondomboro (mother):

I have a dress that is made of ox skin. I only wear it when I am going to talk with the spirits. It is called an Omiyira. This is an important piece of clothing. It helps me do my work in helping the others.

Long ago, we women started wearing red ochre on our skin, what we call Otjize. We apply it to our body as a mixture of animal fat and red ochre. Putting it on is like bathing. It helps keep us clean. The men bathe in the river, but we women never bathe in water. We only bathe with Otjize.

Otjize makes us beautiful. We also like to wear jewelry because it, too, makes us look beautiful. Beauty is very important to us. When we walk, we walk in a seductive manner. All of our movements try to be beautiful. Our beauty is stronger than big muscles. This gives us power over the men.

I remember my mother quite well. She milked the cows and gathered the food for us when I was a child. She was a good mother and a good doctor. I want more people to know about how we are able to talk with our ancestral spirits. This knowledge will help others learn how to be better people. There is little hope for the future unless we can be carefully guided by our ancestors.

"We have doctors who see things. They can even tell you when an ox will get lost and where to find it" -- young Himba man

Mjorozi Manuel

young male Himba doctor from village of Okangwati, Namibia:

I work with the plants and with the spirits when I heal others. I don't use the dance to heal. People simply come to me and I heal them.

When I was around 17 years old, I fell ill. My parents took me to another doctor and the doctor told us that I should become a doctor. He explained that just before I had become sick, my uncle had died. He said that my uncle's spirit had come into me. That is what made me sick. The doctor told this to everyone in our community.

No human being taught me about the plants. It was the spirit that taught me everything. I would go to sleep and dream about the sick person and which tree to use as a medicine. Then I would wake up in the morning and go find that medicine to give to the person who was sick.

When I'm with someone who is sick, my body usually shakes. That's when I go into the bush and find a medicine for them. When I'm there, the spirit of my uncle comes into my body and speaks to me. He tells me what plant to use for someone who is sick. Some men and women can heal by talking to the spirits in our dance, but I do not heal that way. I heal according to what the spirit of my uncle tells me to do when



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Mjorozi Manuel

someone is sick.

I see the future when I sacrifice a goat and look at its guts. I also see the future in my dreams. I know when someone will get sick and decide to see me before it happens. When we use the goat, we suffocate it and then slaughter it. The meat and stomach content give me information. For example, it can tell me whether someone is going to do me harm. If that is the case, I will leave town.

If someone is ill, they might bring a goat. I will sacrifice the goat and see what is wrong with the person and how they got to be that way. The spirit of my uncle talks to me when I examine the inside of a goat. The reason I use the goat is that it helps me focus on the spirit of my uncle. This, in turn, brings help to heal others. After the diagnosis and treatment, we all eat the goat.

My uncle's spirit sometimes tells me about my other ancestors. I actually see the spirit of my uncle as part of God. He is an intermediary for the Great God who we call Mukuri. In a way, my uncle is a mouthpiece for the Great God.

The spirits of my ancestors tell me how to live. They say that I should not kill or steal from others. They teach me about how the Great God wants us to live peacefully with one another. When

the spirit touches my body, it makes my whole body tight, especially my stomach. It feels like there is a snake in my stomach.

When this first starts to happen, it might last for a day until I start to feel better. There are times when I make sounds, but I never hear them. Other people tell me that they hear these sounds. In the process of healing I am told that I talk to the people who come for help, but I am not aware that I have said anything until afterwards when other people tell me what happened. I might ask them to give gifts to the spirit or to do some specific task. That's how the spirit works with me.

The ancestral spirits affect my body in various ways. Besides making me shake and feel tight, the spirits will make my body alternate between feeling hot and cold. When the spirit touches me, I feel very hot. I sweat a lot and continue getting hotter. Then I suddenly feel cold for a while until I switch back again to feeling hot. This goes on, back and forth between the extreme temperatures. During this experience, my uncle's spirit will instruct me to go to another village and treat a certain person who lives there. I might respond by saying, "No, I don't want to go there." Before I know it, the people come to see me without a previous word having been sent.

When the spirit comes into me, it enables my eyes to see things beyond where I live. The spirit can make it possible for me to see someone who has just fallen and broken a bone. I'm shown the problem before the person gets to me physically.



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The spirits like to give me gifts. For instance, my ancestral spirit may tell me that there is something for me to go get for myself that can help me do my work as a doctor. They might show me where to get a particular magical bone. The deiker bone I wear around my neck was a gift from my ancestral spirit. I wear it as a special kind of protection.

I was called to a village today in order to see the headman. My uncle's spirit also told me that you would be here today and that we would have a friendly conversation.

My uncle was taught by a spirit in the same way that I learned. No human being taught him either. The spirit of my uncle's uncle went inside of him. My uncle was Tjiningeni and Kawakopondjira was the spirit's name. Other people can come to you as a spirit. Other doctors get help from the spirits of their mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, aunt, or uncle. When these spirits come to you, they bring the power of healing.

Once I treated another headman from another village. He was placed in a government truck and was being taken to the hospital. I was asked to go along with him. When I got into the truck, the spirit of my uncle told me to place a certain stick in front and in back of the truck. I did this to keep the truck from rolling off the road.

The stronger you become as a healer, the more people will try to harm you. They might try to poison you or say bad things about you. I protect myself by talking to God, saying, "It was you that brought me into this. Now you must protect me."



If I'm around people who I believe will harm me, I immediately leave them and go into the bush to pray. However, when I feel safe at home, I have a certain place where I go to pray. The special place is under the mupani trees. That spot is my church. There I talk inside myself when I pray to the Great God.

I know that there are other healers around the world. They know the truth of God and they also have a difficult life. I have this to say to them: "If you come to me, I will point you to God and give you the spirits that I have." If they come to me, I will take a pot and fetch some herbs and wash them with the extract.

It is good for a doctor to shake, but others should not necessarily shake. Ohandi is the name of the spirit that shakes us. It shakes us, teaches us, and guides us. This is true for all of our doctors.

My assistant, Mosikutu Electric, carries my medicine. He is my helper. Whatever I need, he gets for me. If a goat is needed, he will get it. We always travel together. I never travel alone.



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A group of Himba women performing a traditional dance

The ancestral spirit has given me many gifts of understanding, but my life has also experienced suffering due to the jealousy of other people. When I sense that others are jealous and threaten my life, I know that my uncle's spirit will go to them and kill them or cause them to have trouble.

I am married and have three children. My wife is a doctor who talks to the spirits in the dance. We work separately.

The spirits continue giving me things to use when I heal others. For example, I have a rattle that I use when I am healing a sick person. I can only use it for treating sickness and for no other reason.

When the spirits called me to be a doctor, I was given the spirit name of "Anger of the Meat." The community held a large ceremony to celebrate the fact that I had become a doctor. Today I heal the people with the help of my uncle's spirit. I make medicines for healing sickness, for protection against those who want to harm you, for good luck, and for harming the enemy who threatens your family's life. My whole life is dedicated to being a doctor.

Account of a Medicine Session with Mjorozi

– (by Dr. Bradford Keeney)

I'm up at 5:15 to get to the doctor's hut by 6:00 a.m., as Mjorozi had requested. I asked him to diagnosis and treat me. A fire was burning outside of his hut and his assistant was busy making



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preparations for the session. The doctor emerged from his hut with many objects and jars in his pockets. He asked me to remove my shoes, socks, and t-shirt. I was told to sit on the ground facing the sunrise, sitting inside a circle made by a large beaded necklace that the doctor had taken off his neck and placed on the ground.

Mjorozi took some ash from the fire and marked a spot on my forehead, throat, navel, and the back of my neck. He touched me under each armpit and then took a reddish powder and marked my left foot, leg, and arm. With white powder, he marked the symbol of a cross on a segment of tortoise shell. Following that, he took more reddish powder and let a pinch of it fly out of his fingers into the air in each of the four directions over my head. He took the tortoise shell, along with a small metallic spear, and a perfectly shaped round stone, and placed the shell and spear on various parts of my body.

He tapped the tortoise shell and the spear with the stone, moved the objects to different places on my body, and tapped them again with the stone. When this was completed, he took the round stone and allowed it to freely roll down my chest, back, and each side of my torso. His assistant handed him a cup of water with a mud-like mix of tree bark and herbs. To this concoction, he added some of the reddish powder along with pieces of hot charcoal that resulted in a lot of smoke being released into the air. I was asked to drink the potion, but to leave the charcoal in the cup. He took the bits of charcoal out of the cup and placed one piece on each of my shoulders while tapping them with the round stone.

Mjorozi proceeded to remove the deiker horn that he wore around his neck—the magic horn that was shown to him in a dream about his uncle. He placed this horn around my neck. Next, he took the beads that were encircling me and put them on my chest in a crosswise pattern. I was told to not wash any of the marking off of my body and to not take a bath. I returned for two more sessions, one that evening at sundown and a final one at sunrise the next morning.

The last two sessions were essentially the same as the first except that he now used his toes to touch my body in various places. He also broke twigs over my chest and head, throwing each piece of the branch to the left and right of where I was sitting. He ended by cracking his knuckles over the top of my head and saying a few words.

Tueumuna Tjipurua

Himba woman doctor at the village of Okongwati, Namibia:

I treat people with the help of our ancestral spirits. After I gave birth to my first child, the spirit came into my body. It took place during a dance. This experience started in the afternoon and my body shook throughout the entire night. Before the dance took place, my body was aching with discomfort. I went to the dance and immediately started shaking. The spirit inside of me was the ancestral spirit of my uncle. Since he first came into my body, I continue to shake whenever I need his help. This happens both during the dance and at other times outside of the dance.

I'm old now and I still shake. When I lie down, the shaking may come on me. The shaking that takes place when I lie down is very fast. In the dance, the



Tueumumu Tjipurua



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shaking isn't as fast, but it is stronger. I use my hands to heal others. I rub a person's body to help them. I also use the medicine plants to treat the sick.

My uncle comes to me in the spirit if someone is really sick. I touch the sick person very hard when my uncle's spirit is in me. When I touch them, sounds come out of me. I treat all kinds of illnesses. For example, I touch people on the head and throat when they have a headache or chest trouble. I touch their forehead with ash, blow on them, and touch certain spots.

My uncle's spirit has introduced me to other ancestors and they have also been my teachers. When the spirit of my uncle comes into me and my children are nearby, they can ask him questions and he will answer them through me. My uncle's spirit only talks to me about medicine and healing. He taught me to heal with plants and with my hands. When I heal, I can see the sickness. The sick spot looks red in color to me.

There are other women doctors, but they too easily get jealous of me. Although I sometimes talk to these doctors, I am careful when I am around them. I have to treat people in secret without other doctors knowing about it. When a doctor is very jealous of another doctor, they will kill that doctor with a poison.

The spirit of my uncle lets me know when someone is trying to harm me and he tells me what to do about it. He always warns me and generally advises that I should do my healing work in private.

When I was a little girl I was very friendly to everyone. I always wanted to heal the people, but now I am very tired. My parents were also very friendly. They encouraged me to be a doctor. They would take me to the dances. When the spirit of my uncle came into my body, they were extremely happy. My parents told me at the time that the spirit went into me while there were many girls whom the spirit could have chosen. They celebrated that I was chosen.

In my childhood, the dancers were stronger than they are today. If a person wanted to be healed back then, they brought maize and gifts to me. I would stare at the offerings like other doctors look at the entrails of a goat. When I did this, my uncle would speak to me, saying what was wrong with them and what kind of treatment I should give. Now that I'm old, I usually only help girls who are having complications with pregnancy. If the child is not lying right in the womb, I will wash my hands and move it physically by myself.

There are different spirits and doctors for drumming, healing, and working with children. I even heard of a healer who could get a person freed from legal accusations. That doctor prepares a special piece of twig which is held under the tongue of the accused person during the entire trial. There are many ways we are able to help our people.

When I pass on, I believe my spirit will pass on to either my son or daughter. That's how it has always worked for the Himba people. Because of this, the healing will continue long after I am gone.

I want other people in the world to know that if someone is sick, they can go to a Himba doctor and be healed. We heal as well as any of the doctors in the rest of the world.