



Wisdom Keepers' Stories

The following interview was conducted by Bradford Keeney and Professor Ansie Johnson in May, 1999 in a village in the Okongwati area.

ZEMBA

The Zemba, closely related to the Himba, are semi-nomadic pastoralists who live in northwestern Namibia. They live in small villages or family groups in the Kunene Region (an area formerly known as Kaokoland when Namibia was controlled by South Africa).

Moshombo Ngava

Zemba male doctor in village of Okongwati, Namibia:

I was born in Angola and my parents brought us to Namibia. Guva was my father's name. I cannot give you his full name. In our tradition, we cannot give the full name of our fathers. If I did so, my father's spirit would take me to the spirit world where I would die. However, it is no problem for me to give you the full name of all my other relatives.

My father is the spirit that is inside of me. You start becoming a doctor when the ancestral spirit of your father or grandfather comes into your body after they pass on. Once they enter you, they come to you during your dreams or when you are treating someone.

When someone in the community gets sick, followed by a child getting the same sickness, we believe that this is a sign that the child is being taken to become a doctor. A strong doctor can tell whether it is a spirit that is coming into you and wanting to make you a doctor. My father's father was his spirit. He became a doctor when he was a young man.

As a child I watched my father use plants and use his hands to doctor people. He touched the sick to make them well. I do the same with my hands. They are automatically drawn to a person's sickness. I also can see inside a person. They will look clear except for the place where they are sick. The sick place looks red.

When I start to treat someone, I usually kill a goat and look at the bloodstream of the liver and intestines. I go into full concentration and then my father's spirit comes to me and tells me what sickness is troubling the person and what can be done to help them recover. He is the one who directs me to certain plants that can be used as a medicine.

When I treat the sick, I am very serious about the work. I go to a shop and buy a new padlock. I take that padlock to the patient and open it up next to their body. When I rub the lock over their whole body, the lock stops when it goes over the part that is sick. That's one of the ways I can find the sickness.

There are many doctors in our culture today. A doctor can't tell you how much power he or she has. This would tempt other doctors to be jealous. If they are jealous, they try to harm you. When that happens,



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you must stay away from their territory. For protection, I go to another doctor and tell them that there is someone who is jealous and ask for a medicine of protection.

There is no difference between men and women doctors among the Zemba people. We both work with the spirits to help others. The spirit is called an Omakumuku. The spirit can come when I do nothing more than talk to a sick person. At other times, I may have to dance to bring forth the ancestral spirit.

When I shake the rattles, it helps me concentrate and hear my father's spirit. Inside the rattles are tiny seeds. The plant where these seeds come from is called Omuhamati. I shake the rattle with the patient sitting right in front of me. I will be standing during this treatment. I shake it while blowing my spirit over to the patient. They then crawl under my legs as I heal them.

I use a special plant for treating certain ailments. I grind it up into a small amount of powder and mix it with water. It's also used for people who lack any appetite. The plant is called Omutangururu (Editor's note: the plant is *guibourtia coleosperma*).

The inside of the deiker horn that I wear around my neck holds a needle. I use it with someone who is sick. I cut them with the needle and then apply the medicine powder into the scratch. I cut them all over their body, apply the powder, and rub it in. I wear three horns around my neck because my father wore them that way. I also use the black and white beaded necklace when I treat someone. I wrap it around the person's body while they are being doctored. The necklace also protects me from the patient in case they are secretly a bad doctor in disguise.

When the spirit comes to me, the spirit talks through me, but since I don't hear anything, my wife and children must listen and tell me what is being said. This is how I communicate with my ancestral spirit. I also visit with them in my dreams. There they tell me about the future.

In the beginning of our culture, during the time of the first doctor, we originally learned about plants and how to heal with our hands. When I was young many years ago, my father taught me these things. When he wanted to pray, he went to the Holy Fire. There he talked to the ancestors and the Great God. Back then when you wanted to talk to God, you went to a Holy Fire. That fire was for the whole community. In addition to the Holy Fire, each family had a fire behind their house. That was where my father treated the sick. He would also talk with the ancestors at that fire. The Holy Fire is called Erao and the other fire behind the house is called Otjiyuku. I also have this fire behind my house and there is a Holy Fire for my community. Early in the morning I go to the Holy Fire. When I go to it, the spirits remind me that I have a grandchild. They tell me to bring him to the fire so that he can learn these matters. They want to get him ready.

During the day I might find a lizard or scorpion. When I later go to the fire, the ancestors will tell me what it means to have found those things.

There are times when I know that a person is coming to me because I dream that a small lightning bolt strikes my hand between my thumb and first finger. The ancestors and Great God are in charge of my life. They take care of me and keep me ready for the work I am supposed to perform for the community.

Tjehena Ngava

Zemba woman doctor and wife of Moshombo:

There was once a sick person in the community who required the help of an older doctor. That doctor was from another village and he had to travel in order to help her. When he came, he not only helped the sick person, he also put the spirit into me. The doctor made a cut on the top and bottom of my left wrist and left arm. He then crossed my arms so that my wrists were touching. After the doctor left, another woman became sick. The woman came to me and I healed her. The doctor had done something that gave me a spirit that directed me to heal. That is how it started for me.

The doctor that cut me also taught me some things about healing. He showed me how to use a hollowed-out ox's horn and how to cut a person. I do that when I need to suck out some of their blood. I cut where the person tells me that they have illness, place the horn over it, and suck out the blood. Most of the time I use my hands to heal people. I rub their whole body with both of my hands. While I am rubbing them, I talk with them. That is my main way of healing. I push very hard with my hands. Whether my treatments last a brief or long time depends on the sickness I am treating. I may treat someone as long as a month or up to a year. If they are real sick they will move into my house so I can touch them every morning, noon, and evening.



A few of the women and children of the Zemba tribe



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Some people come to me because they are unable to walk. When I treat them with my hands, they are able to walk. If a person has received a spell or curse from someone, my husband and I will work together. I will touch them first. Then my husband will stand with his legs spread over them and blow his deiker horn, whistling, while telling the spirit to leave. The patient then walks under his legs from the front and then walks under them from the back.

When my husband and I treat people, our sons and daughters stand in the back and watch. This is the way I teach them how to doctor others. Since my husband received his healing abilities from the spirit, he can't teach this way. When he dies his spirit will go to one of our children.

When people get cured by us, we are usually given an ox. It is good being married to a doctor who has the spirit in him. It is good because he receives many gifts for being a strong doctor.

During the healing dance, I am known as a powerful drummer and singer. We use the drum to help bring forth the ancestral spirits. You have permission to put our drumming on your tape and play it to others so they can hear how we call our ancestors.

"Zemba" means the people who have been forgotten and left behind. I would like for the rest of the world to remember this about us: Tell everyone that we are forgotten. People only know about the Himba. Please tell them about us. We are also strong healers.