

SPIRIT POSSESSION AMONG THE MIJIKENDA

by E.C. Orchardson-Mazrui

The Mijikenda¹ believe that illness results from possession by malevolent spirits. *Pepo za mwiri*, a “spirit of the body”, manifests itself in various ailments such as malaria, whooping cough, arthritis and smallpox. Bodily possession is treated with therapy, herbal medicine and magical ornaments. *Pepo za kitswa*, an Arabic-speaking Muslim “spirit of the head”, can cause mental disturbances and necessitates a lengthy course of treatment which is similar but also includes an important exorcism ceremony called *ngoma za pepo*, “spirit dance”.

Both kinds of afflictions are diagnosed by specialists, *waganga*, who first identify the spirit then prescribe the course of appropriate treatment. The identity of the spirit is learned when the healer speaks to it, saying “we are here to listen to your wishes; reveal yourself; we are friends”, etc. The spirit is thought to respond to the healer via the possessed person who speaks the spirit’s own tongue. Thus, the spirit may be identified as Arab, Pemba, Somali, Maasai, Mugalla, etc.

Waganga, who may be men or women, are concerned with curing people and use “good” medicine (*uganga*). *Wachawi* practise “bad” medicine in great secrecy. The Mijikenda are convinced that *wachawi* still exist but, of course, no one who practises *uchawi* would admit doing so.

The belief in the existence of “evil” medicine offers Mijikenda people a convenient excuse when they are in conflict with their community. By claiming to be possessed by an Arab spirit, or being the victim of *uchawi*, an individual may go to a Muslim *muganga* who will exorcise the spirit. When this happens, it is often said that the spirit wanted the individual to break with Mijikenda tradition². Entrepreneurs for example have commonly adopted this method of distancing themselves from the community.

In the course of carrying out field research,³ I witnessed a Giriama *muganga* named Katso Kanyoi carry out diagnostic and therapeutic sessions, and I attended spirit possession dances which she and her colleagues conducted. Katso later married a Muslim Rabai, converted to Islam and took the name Fatuma Abdalla.

According to Katso, Arab spirits are more powerful than African. She named some of them as being *Mwarabu* (“Arab”), *Mwalimu* (“teacher”), *Mpemba* (“from Pemba island”), *Mshihiri* (“from Sheher in South Arabia”) and *Mbarawa* (“from Barawa in Somalia”). Such spirits may possess both Muslim and non-Muslim Mijikenda. In addition, there are African spirits bearing the names of the African peoples who used to raid Mijikenda villages, *Maasai*, *Musambala*, *Mtaita*, *Mkavi*, *Mugalla*, and *Mkamba*. She named other spirits which cause specific bodily illnesses, the *Mwanamdungu* which causes muscular weakness; *Nyari*, *Dena* and *Kiliku*, all of which are Digo spirits which cause weakness of different parts of the leg; *Shera* and *Lika*, two additional Digo spirits, which



Katso in a trance



Paraphernalia used by Katso in treating spirit possession: canisters of medicinal powders, gourd rattle, bundle of medicinal twigs and reed shaker

cause madness and “coldness of the body”. Insomnia is attributed to a troublesome spirit called *Koma* which is appeased by being offered a piece of blue cloth fringed with blue and white beads. The *Sanzua* spirit causes anaemia, and the *Mwangalamwangala* produces itching. Impotence in men is caused by the *Balushi* and *Jangamizi* spirits; the latter may also give rise to sterility in women, and vomiting and diarrhoea in children.

One therapeutic session I witnessed in 1984 involved a woman with a sick child. When a child becomes ill, infidelity on the part of one or both parents may be considered the cause. Usually, it is the mother who is more liable to be blamed for a child’s illness. In this instance, it appeared that the mother was not happy about the conduct of her husband. The *muganga*, Katso Kanyoi, began the session by asking the woman questions; then she gradually went into a trance and began communicating with the spirits. At intervals, she pointed to various parts of her own body where she would feel a pain, indicating that the patient’s problem was in the same area.

On the floor of the therapy room was a winnowing tray placed upside down, and covered with fine white sand. I also noticed a reed shaker (*kayamba*), a calabash rattle (*kidonga*), a bunch of medicinal twigs tied together and some sort of powdered substance (“food for the spirit”, according to Katso) in a small container.

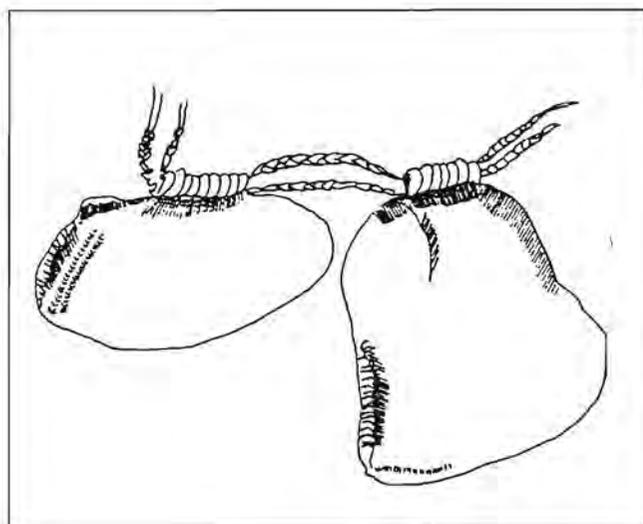
While asking various questions, Katso would shake the *kayamba*, sniff the bunch of twigs or pick up the *kidonga* and rattle it in accompaniment to a song. At one point in the session she drew patterns in the sand on the tray, sprinkled some of the powdered substance over the patterns, put a pinch of the powdered substance in her nose and began to diagnose the patient’s problems in a dialogue with the spirit and the

woman. The communication between Katso and the woman became quite intense at times, particularly when Katso was in her trance and spoke in an alien tongue (“the language of the spirit”).

Therapy sessions are usually followed by medicinal treatment. On this occasion the child was washed in an infusion of leaves and roots. Sometimes, magical ornaments, made by the healer’s apprentice, are prescribed to alleviate bodily pain. They are worn round the wrists, the neck, above the elbows, on the legs or thighs, wherever prescribed by the *muganga*. They are supposed to appease and drive out the possessing spirit.

While bodily spirit possession may occur more or less equally among men and women, possession of the head by spirits is predominately a female phenomenon. In most cases when it occurs in a man, the *muganga* will assure him that he is not possessed or bewitched but that his ancestors are complaining that they are being ignored. He will be asked questions relating to his ancestors and whether he has put up memorials to them. Has he propitiated the unhappy spirits of his ancestors? If the answers are in the negative, which they invariably are, the healer will advise the affected man to seek out an elder of a certain status to prepare memorials and install them according to set rituals.

Possession by *pepo za kitswa* is manifested by an individual’s anti-social behaviour. A woman will berate her husband and children in public, using abusive words and actions that would normally lead to a beating by her husband. However, in such an instance, the husband may believe that his wife is possessed and he will go to a *muganga* for help because “spirits are not to be trifled with”.



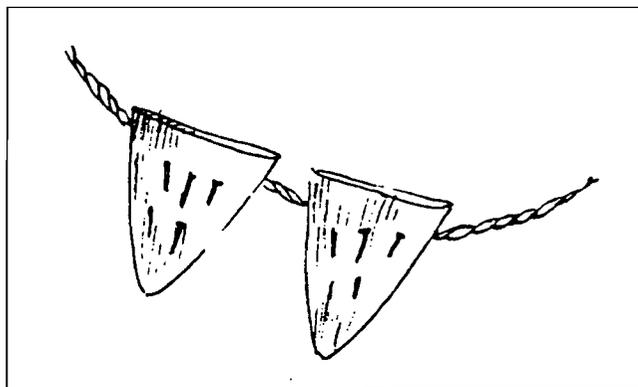
Fabric pouches with sewn seams for carrying magical substances

When the spirit has identified itself through the host to the *muganga*, it is asked what it wants and promised that everything it desires will be given to it. Then the spirit enumerates the various items, the last of which will be the *ngoma za pepo*. Its requests are made in an "alien tongue" only fully understood by the *muganga*. Some people present at a diagnostic session may recognize a word or two, exciting them to guess the spirit's identity.

The date for the *ngoma za pepo* is determined by the *muganga*. This must be at a propitious moment and allow time for the possessed person's family to acquire all the items demanded.

The whole ceremony of exorcism is referred to as *kapunga pepo* ("to exorcise spirits"). The point at which the possessing spirit is "called" into the head of the patient is *kupandisha pepo kichwani* ("to cause the spirit to 'climb' to the head"); this is said to be done in order for the *muganga* to have a dialogue with it.

The method of making the spirit speak is through herbal medicine and the *ngoma za pepo*. Various coloured cloths are used in the exorcism ceremony to which the patient is brought; completely covered at first in a white cloth tied in a peak at the head, the patient is changed into red dress before the spirit is "called" into the patient's head. The last colour used is black or dark blue. The significance of the sequence of coloured cloths is unclear; these three colours are, however, used in all Mijikenda rituals. According to one of my informants, the white cloth represents the spirit's goodwill, the red cloth represents the particular spirit possessing the person and the black (or blue) cloth

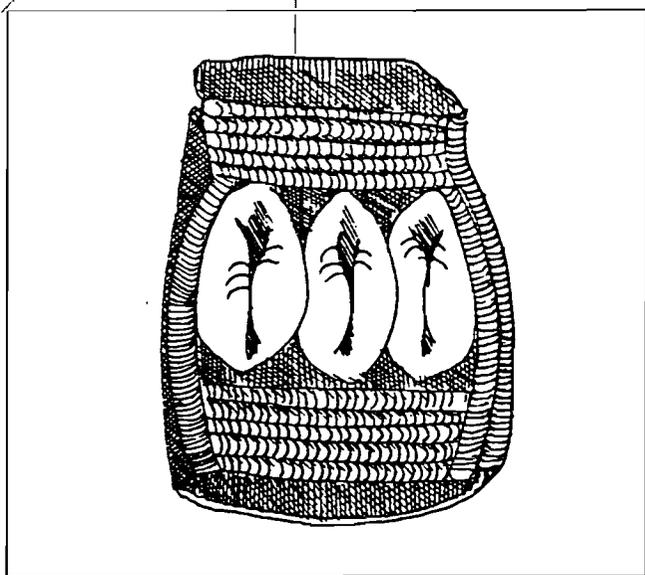


Magical wooden ornaments decorated with burned patterns which are worn on a *muganga's* knees to appease spirits

represents the act of appeasing the spirit at the end of the *ngoma za pepo* when castor oil is poured on the patient to drive the spirit from the patient's body.

The *ngoma za pepo* is held at night-time. All the *waganga* present wear metal rattles on their feet and magical ornaments on their arms and legs. The musicians prepare themselves for the ceremony by tensioning the *ngoma za pepo* drums. The initial drumming informs people that the ceremony is about to begin. They gather in a circle, leaving space in the middle for the patient and *waganga*. A mat is placed where the patient will sit with her legs stretched out rigidly. One of the *waganga* begins the singing, and the audience joins in the chorus. As the drumming intensifies, the patient's whole body begins to tremble and then to jerk spasmodically until she springs up and begins to dance wildly. The *waganga* now and then urge the patient's relatives to help her dance. While dancing, the patient speaks in the tongue of the spirit. She may suddenly stop and complain bitterly that the rhythm or the tune is not pleasing to her "spirit". The drummers must be ready at all times to switch tunes and tempo. The audience participates by singing, clapping and sometimes dancing. When the patient becomes tired she sits down and the *waganga* sprinkle medicine over her. They continue to talk to the spirit and to dance on behalf of the patient. A mortar of herbal medicine is kept nearby for anyone present to use. As the *waganga* and people dance, they may, from time to time, sprinkle this medicine over themselves, too.

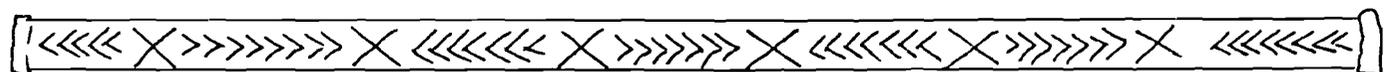
At some point in the *ngoma za pepo*, the patient is instructed in divination. She is required to memorize patterns drawn by the *waganga* on sand placed on a winnowing tray turned upside down. Concentric circles with projecting lines are drawn by the leading *muganga* and then erased; the patient then tries to redraw them.



Coiled copper wire and cowrie shells on a leather pouch containing magical substances



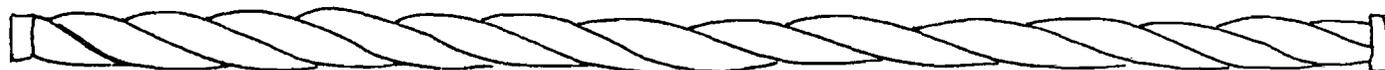
Copper bracelet for Barawa spirit



Copper bracelet for Pemba spirit



Copper bracelet combining both Barawa and Pemba spirit symbols



Twisted copper and iron bracelet for Mishihiri spirit

More and more patterns are drawn and erased; and again the patient memorizes and redraws them until the *waganga* are satisfied that she has mastered them. At a later stage, a white porcelain plate, covered with intricate patterns drawn in a brown substance, is brought out of the *muganga's* medicine bag. These patterns are subsequently erased with some special liquid. If the possessing spirit is identified as a Muslim one, rosewater is used for this purpose. The liquid is poured over the patterns which are then erased with a finger. The liquid is given to the patient to drink. The porcelain plate may be covered in an appropriate Islamic prayer written calligraphically. Islamic prayers are held to be powerful and appropriate for "Arab" spirits.

The items required by the *pepo za kitswa* are generally the same in most cases of spirit possession. They include a pure gold ring, a brand new garment, a tray of assorted sweetmeats (referred to as *chano cha pepo*, "the spirit's tray") and two goats, one white and the other brown (referred to as "horses for the spirit to ride on"). All these things, though presented to the "spirit", are actually used by the patient who keeps the ring and new garment for herself. She will also wear a magical metal bracelet to appease the troublesome spirit.

It has been suggested that female possession by "spirits of the head" is a form of feminist protest. By claiming to be possessed of a spirit, a woman can make

various demands on her husband, demands which under normal circumstances would not be entertained. According to Lewis, women use indirect forms of mystical attack to make their demands known in traditionally male-dominated societies.⁴ This would appear to be the case among Mijikenda women possessed by *pepo za kitswa*.

NOTES

1. The Mijikenda are a group of nine peoples who share a common language, history of origins, cultural, social and political institutions. According to their traditions, they migrated southwards to the Kenya coast in the 17th century from 'Singwaya', said by some historians to have been located near Burkao or Port Durnford in Somalia. The name Mijikenda is a Swahili equivalent of the Mijikenda word 'Midzichenda' which means 'the nine villages', or 'the nine peoples'. They occupy a strip of the Kenya Coast stretching from the Uмба River in the south near Vanga to the Galana (Sabaki) River in the north near Mamburi.

2. Parkin, D. 'Medicine and Men of Influence', *Man*, 3, 1968, pp. 423-439; Brantley, C. 'An Historical Perspective of the Giriama and Witchcraft Control', *Africa*, 49, 1979, pp. 112-133; Gomm, R. 'Bargaining from Weakness: Spirit Possession on the South Kenya Coast', *Man*, 10, 4, 1975, pp. 530-543.

3. Orchardson, E.C. *A Socio-historical Perspective of the Art and Material Culture of the Mijikenda of Kenya* (Ph.D., 1986, University of London).

4. Lewis, L. *Social Anthropology in Perspective: The Relevance of Social Anthropology*, 1976, Cambridge University Press, pp. 85-91.

E.C. Orchardson-Mazrui was born in Kenya where she received her primary and secondary education. She earned her B.A. at West Surrey College of Art, U.K. Since 1979 she has been a lecturer at Kenyatta University in the Dept. of Fine Art. She has a Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.