

# THE WITCH DOCTOR AT WORK

BY C. J. S. THOMPSON

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THE causation of disease, as believed by primitive people throughout the world, may be traced back to prehistoric times. From the earliest records, probably going back five thousand years, we find the prevailing idea that the cause of disease in man was due to some demon or evil spirit that took possession of his body. Thus in a Babylonian tablet from the library of Assur-bani-pal, which is said to date from 3000 B.C., there is a formula of exorcism, which is translated as follows:—

Against the head of a man, exercises his power the execrable Tapa,  
Against the life of a man, the cruel Nampa,  
Against the neck, the dreadful Tiga,  
Against the hand, the shocking Zealal,  
Against the chest, the terrible Alal,  
and so on.

In contrast with this ancient formula the Cingalese of to-day have even further divisions of the body, and classify their demons according to their power and the symptoms produced. Thus they have a Demon of Deafness, a Demon of Blindness, a Demon of Cramp, a Demon of Fever, and of other morbid symptoms. These conditions are represented by masks like human faces, painted red, yellow, blue, and other bright colors. They employ the mask for the exorcism of the demon in the following way. The native medicine-man builds a small hut with a great number of niches, in each of

which he places one mask. Before the mask he makes a small altar upon which he sacrifices to the demon, while the patient lies down upon a litter. After the sacrifices he puts before his face the suitable mask and dances round the patient until, being exhausted and probably hypnotized, he falls to the ground. After this the patient is sent to his home and is supposed to be cured.

The object of the primitive practitioner of healing is to rid the body of the intruder who is causing the mischief. His methods are both physiological and psychological. In the physiological may be included such operations as trepanning with flint knives and scrapers, the opening of abscesses with similar instruments, cupping, and the use of fumigation of various parts of the body. Among the psychological methods may be included incantations, charms, and the use of fetish figures, hideous masks, rattles, and drums, all of which form part of the general treatment carried out by the medicine-man or witch doctor. Among barbaric races the medicine-man is an important personage, and in some tribes is even more powerful than the chief. His position is often a special and remarkable one, and his power and influence are usually very great.

The methods employed by the medicine-man or witch doctor for driving out the disease demon or evil spirit from the sick person vary with the tribe to which he belongs. Usually the beating of drums, the shaking of rattles, bells, clappers, and other noisy in-

struments, are employed as first treatment. The bells are generally made of metal. The rattles consist of large nuts with the seeds inside, or dried gourds in which small pebbles have been placed and then tied to a stick. Horns are also used, made from tusks, and wooden whistles, often carved in the shape of birds.

Fetish figures carved in wood also play an important part in the treatment of the sick. The connection between the fetish figure and the primitive practice of medicine is twofold. First, it may be used as an amulet or means of enchantment, or the spirit which affects it may be adjured to grant a petition or drive away the malignant demon that causes disease or misfortune.

In many of these fetish figures, especially those used in Africa, there is a cavity in the abdomen, generally covered by a piece of glass, behind which the so-called 'medicine' is placed. The treatment of healing proceeds as follows. After certain incantations, the proper remedy is placed in the figure. It is rarely administered to the patient, but occasionally some of it is mixed with palm wine and given to the sick person, in the belief that, if the demon escapes, the fetish will bring terrible punishment upon it. In some parts of the Congo region it is customary for the medicine-man to put a wood figure in some secret place in a wood or jungle. A person who desires to give his enemy pain will go to the medicine-man, who will then insert a sharp nail into the fetish, in the belief that this will cause the enemy severe pain in the arm, leg, or other part of the body. If the death of the enemy is desired, a nail is driven into some vital part such as the stomach or heart.

This figure is regarded as a mere piece of wood until it has been in the hands of the medicine-man, who puts

into it the proper charms or smears it with the proper 'medicine.'

In Mashonaland the medicine-man often employs divining bones to diagnose the complaint of a sick person, for the object is to discover the enemies who may have bewitched him, or the particular demon which has to be appeased by sacrifices, and has made known its desire by visiting the patient with mysterious illness. These are made of Shaka wood, one of the few timbers into which the familiar spirits of the medicine-man deign to enter, those of other trees being said to 'lie' by the tribe to which the medicine-man belongs.

Among the Boloki of the Upper Congo, witch doctors use a curious charm to ward off sleeping-sickness. A small clay bowl is painted bright yellow with red and green spots, and in it are placed a number of twigs cut from a shrub. Over the bowl is erected a little hut or shelter to preserve the charm from weather or decay and so protect the sufferer from serious relapses. Another charm, employed to relieve rheumatism, lumbago, malarial fever, and debility, is practised as follows. Two posts about five feet long are erected near the hut of the patient, and are painted bright yellow with red and green patches. This is done to entice the demon to leave the sufferer and enter the posts. Sugar cane, wine, and food are placed on the posts to attract the evil spirit, and the tops are connected by pieces of native twine in which loops are tied, designed to catch the disease-dealing demon should it try to escape. Should a bird become ensnared in one of these loops, it is regarded as a visible embodiment of the demon of disease, who has been caught in this guise.

Among the forest and menial tribes of Northern India, the Begat or healer squats beside the patient, speaking some meaningless words which are re-

garded as a kind of oracle. He then waves round the head of the patient a bunch of peacock feathers, which is supposed to drive away the evil spirit causing the disease. The Veddass of Ceylon are treated by the medicine-man holding a bow balanced by the string while he recites an invocation to determine to which Yaku or spirit of the dead the patient's illness is due. When the right name is spoken the bow is said to swing to and fro. The shaman or witch doctor of the Dakota Indians claims to be able to expel the evil spirit that causes the disease, first by calling on the aid of some other demon by means of incantations and ceremonies, and then by making noises and sucking various parts of the patient's body with a hollow bone. He then discharges a gun, which is said to destroy the demon as it passes by the door of the tent. Among other American Indian tribes, massage, fumigation, and a primitive form of hot-air bath are also employed.

The native medicine-men in Central and East Africa deal largely in charms, which they sell at high prices. The Babundas, Bapende, and other tribes of the Congo district wear charms to prevent sleeping-sickness. These are generally carved in ivory or bone or fashioned in brass, and represent native heads, the eyes having the heavy closed lids so typical of the disease. A ring of rhinoceros-hide is worn as a protection against fever in Nyassaland, and an armband of snake-skin is believed by Kafirs to prevent rheumatism. A leopard's claw or a crocodile's tooth carved with a small fetish-head is commonly used on the Congo as an amulet against disease, and among the Bagongo small antelope-horns filled with a mixture of herbs and animal substances are believed to endue the owner with powerful protective properties against various illnesses.

The dress of the medicine-man, when he wears any costume at all, is usually of a weird and fantastic description, and varies according to the tribe or region to which he belongs.

In some parts of Africa, especially in the Congo region, a complete costume of native string, either closely or loosely woven, is worn. It is generally made in one piece, and covers the body from the neck to the legs, a long fringe being left round the wrist and ankles. Some have a long tail appended, reaching to the ground, while round the waist a girdle of twisted fibre is worn, from which hangs the bag.

In parts of East Africa, the medicine-man wears a closely woven tunic, with a skirt or kilt composed of the pelts of animals. Skins are also sometimes worn, hanging from the shoulders. In other districts, the medicine-man's dress consists of a necklace of beads and a decorated loin-cloth.

The devil-dancers' masks are usually grotesquely carved and painted, and are generally made of wood, sometimes covered with skin, and the faces are made more hideous by being daubed and painted in various colors. Some are surmounted by the figures of leopards or other animals, and from the chin a long beard sometimes hangs, which reaches to the waist. Among the South African native tribes, the medicine-man rarely wears an elaborate costume, but decorates himself with beaded scarves on which bells are sometimes hung, and he often paints his body in various colors. Kafir witch doctors, however, sometimes don a very elaborate dress consisting of a headdress of feathers and shells, with a curious mask over the face. The rest of the body is covered with a robe made chiefly from skins and grasses decorated with bead-work.

In contrast with their fellows of the eastern hemisphere, the shamans or

medicine-men of the North American Indians generally envelop themselves in complete bearskins, which give them an awe-inspiring appearance.

An important part of the paraphernalia of the African medicine-man is his bag or pouch, in which he carries his drugs and various oddments for use in his practice. Some of these bags are of large size; others, such as those used by the Kafir and Basuto witch doctors, are small, and are more of a pouch than a bag. They usually contain a strange assortment of objects, including the head-bones of antelopes, the claws of birds, and bones of various animals, which are used during the treatment of the patient. In Central and West Africa the medicine-man's bag is made of the skin of some animal peculiar to the district in which he lives, a special charm being believed to be connected with it. The skin of the polecat is frequently used for this purpose, the hairy side forming the exterior of the receptacle, and when the skins of birds are used the feathers are always put outside.

The medicine-men of the Loanda Negroes sometimes wrap up their drugs in pieces of red cloth decorated with small bells. In these they put various shells, nuts, small pebbles, and the scrapings of certain horns, which are held to be powerful remedies. The contents of some of the medicine-men's bags are varied and curious. An examination of some in the collection in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum has revealed a varying and extraordinary assortment of objects.

The first is a bag formed from the pelt of a wild cat, which measures thirty inches by six inches. Its contents consist of a necklace of blue and white glass beads, with one cowrie, a necklace of cowries and bean pods, some small horns filled with a sticky substance, a small cotton bag, a piece of hollow

bamboo four and a half inches long, an empty matchbox labeled 'Three-Star Safety Matches, Made in Sweden,' a fragment of bone hollowed out and apparently used as a container, another piece of bamboo six inches long, the metal portion of an old pocketknife, a pod of *Cassia fistula*, a metal ring two inches in diameter, three charms in the form of small bags made of material on a plaited string, a horn container with pieces of straw and string with shells attached, a tail of an animal, two small beans, a portion of the skin of an animal with brown fur, a bag of native cloth bound with a piece of twine, the head of a small bird, three pieces of the stem of a tree, and the twigs of a shrub two and a half inches long.

Another bag of different shape is made of the pelt of a small animal, and measures twelve inches long by seven inches wide. It has a flap to which are attached five primitive instruments, evidently used for surgical operations. One of these, with a sharp blade, is shaped like a scalpel; another has a curved blade, and there are also two straight instruments, probably used for extracting foreign bodies from a wound.

Another African medicine-man's bag of hide measures eleven and a half inches long by eleven inches wide. It contains five torpedo-shaped gourd bottles or calabashes decorated with skins and containing Kikuyea powder used as a remedy, a small calabash containing a powdered root used to promote vomiting after the ordeal ceremonies used by the medicine-man, and a hair switch used in the ceremonies.

A Kafir witch doctor's pouch measuring eleven inches by eight inches was found to contain an old knife with a bone handle and the blade half ground down. It was probably used by the owner for surgical purposes. An interesting bag is one from West Africa. It is oblong in shape and made of soft

skin, eighteen inches long by six inches wide. The mouth of the bag, which is bottle-shaped, contains a bisected gourd into which is inserted a drum, and when the bag is compressed, concertina fashion, it emits a squeaking noise, which the medicine-man assigns to the demon which he keeps inside the bag. It also contains some stones which rattle when the bag is shaken.

Another bag is made of the complete skin of a polecat, including the head and legs. It is twenty inches long, and contains two horns filled with some solid substance used as a medicine, a pod containing seeds, and a piece of bone wrapped in a very dirty piece of cloth tied with string.

The treatment employed by the medicine-men of the Somali and also in certain districts of East Africa is largely mixed up with astrology and the sale of written charms and horoscopes. A bag used by a witch doctor in this region is made of cotton fabric originally of a buff color, stamped with a design of a small circle in black, and bound with a red material like braid, and contains a number of pieces of paper inscribed in Arabic, evidently used as charms, the lid of an Havana cigar-box, several pieces of old colored fabric, a piece of wood of a pestle shape covered with fabric and bound with red braid, two pocket handkerchiefs of Indian calico with a blue border.

The materia medica of witch doctors includes the bark, roots, fruits, and juices of various trees, shrubs, and plants, and also many animal substances, including human blood and

the internal organs and secretions of animals and reptiles, which they regard as important remedies. Parts of the crocodile, in particular, are especially esteemed in some parts of Africa, and Sir David Bruce states that in Nyassaland nearly every part of the internal economy of the crocodile is valued by the natives for its remedial properties.

The knowledge of poisons, both animal and vegetable, possessed by the medicine-men and witch doctors of Africa is considerable. The sources of those which they employ for ordeal or for poisoning their darts or arrows they guard with great secrecy. Naturally, the drugs they use are those peculiar to the regions in which they live. Thus the Malay jungle natives use the sap of the Upas tree, which contains a powerful poisonous principle. Certain tribes of South American Indians use curare, another virulent poison, which is extracted from a species of *Strychnos*. The Bolantos of West Africa employ sassy bark, and other tribes in this region use the Calabar bean, kombe (*Strophanthus*), and others.

We owe the discovery of the last two drugs, the active principles of which have proved of such great value in modern medical practice, to native medicine-men. To the shamans of North and South America we are also indebted for our knowledge of other valuable remedies, such as the familiar *Cascara sagrada* and the *Cinchona* (from which we obtain quinine), which was employed by South American tribes as a remedy for fever centuries before it was introduced into Europe.

# A BRAZILIAN SNAKE GARDEN

BY LUCIANO MAGRINI

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A TRAVELER on his first trip from Santos to São Paulo over that miracle of engineering, the English railway that climbs the densely wooded façade of Serra do Mar, — the enormous mountain-buttress that the interior plateau of Brazil thrusts out toward the coast, — might well imagine that he was journeying toward a land of dreams. He ascends between forest walls half-concealed in mountain mists, which veil the outlines of the distant landscape and add to the mystery of the jungle of ferns, lianas, and parasites that drape the tall, slender palms, the expansive and decorative rubber-trees, and the gloomy araucarian pines that border the route.

But a disappointment awaits him. São Paulo, in her vulgar opulence, is no dream-city. This capital of rich *fazendeiros* is an overgrown camp of public buildings, private villas, and rows of low, one-storied houses monotonously aligned along broad, dusty streets. She is the home of a horde of impatient and adventurous traders possessed of that money-making fever that drives out every other thought and interest, and leaves no desire or leisure for higher things. She is a city of chaos and disharmony, albeit generous. Nature does so much to conceal her rawness under the sumptuous vegetation of the tropics. She is a city rich in money, but poor in art, even though her most prominent building is a huge municipal theatre.

Nevertheless, half an hour away from São Paulo, upon an elevation

dominating the city, lies an oasis in this intellectual desert. It is Butantan Institute — a serpent laboratory and headquarters of a persistent war against the venomous reptiles that kill, according to popular and possibly exaggerated estimates, four thousand people annually in Brazil. This institute was founded by its present director, Dr. Vidal Brazil, to follow up the experiments and investigations of the French scientist Calmette, who obtained from a horse inoculated with the venom of the Indian cobra a serum that neutralized the poison of that particular snake. On the hypothesis that any poison inoculated into suitable animals will generate an antitoxin, Dr. Brazil has made long and laborious researches with the snakes of his native country, and has succeeded in producing a series of antitoxins that have proved effective in very many cases.

South America has 254 recorded species of snakes, of which forty-two are poisonous. Of this number 155 species, including twenty-three poisonous varieties, are known to exist in Brazil. A study of that country's venomous reptiles has led to their classification in three main groups, each of which has its distinctive poison. These three classes may be sufficiently described for popular purposes as the rattlesnake or crotalus, the pit viper or lachesis, and the coral snake or elaps. Three types of serums have been obtained from horses inoculated repeatedly with small doses of their three venoms; and an injection of the proper