

BEMBE TREATMENT OF POLLUTION DURING PREGNANCY

by

D. BIEBUYCK

Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale, Brussels

2II The Babembe¹ believe that a loss of ritual status during pregnancy may spring from different kinds of contagion. It is commonly believed that it is extremely ominous for a mother to be pregnant at the same time as her daughter, and it is generally asserted that it would result in the death of one or both of them. Moreover a mother has always to preserve herself against sexual contagion which might affect her because of her daughter. Before entering the village where her daughter lives, a mother has to take every precaution for fear that, at the very moment, her daughter might have intercourse with her husband. In the same way, a father may be contaminated by his daughter-in-law. Although it should rather be conceived as an idealized pattern of behaviour, many Babembe say that a man must not have premarital intercourse with his future wife, the sanction being that his father might die when eating from the manioc paste prepared by that woman.

Pollution during pregnancy may have two primary sources, the nature and method of removal of which are described here. It is universally accepted that parturition will become laborious if a husband has intercourse with other women during his wife's pregnancy, or if the wife mates with other men during that period.

In the first case, the wife might die from *iusiko*, deposition of sperm in another woman. Special reference must be made here to the polygynous family and a distinction drawn between the attitudes claimed in relation to a senior wife or a junior co-wife. When his senior wife is with child, a Mbembe abstains from sex relations with her from the third or fourth month on. A junior wife, however, must not be left alone and intercourse only ceases from the ninth month on. Even though a senior wife be pregnant, it does not matter whether or not a man has sexual relations with her junior co-wife. But if a junior co-wife is with child a man has to take all necessary precautions when desiring to continue intercourse with his senior wife. He therefore calls the *mbu'i wa mahano*, a medicineman specializing in these matters. The procedure is simple: the *mbu'i* takes a chicken and invites the two wives to take hold of the upper and lower part of its beak and the husband to clasp its legs. Thereupon the medicine-man ritually kills the chicken by cutting horizontally through its beak. He now mixes the blood with *'elembo* powder and with water that the wives went to fetch with his gourd (*'achuba*) in each house of the village. The husband and his wives then drink the mixture in turn, while the medicineman gives the following precepts: 'When your junior wife brings forth, none of your other wives may be pregnant; when your child is born, neither you nor your other spouses may take the child up, lest it should die; only when it

begins to crawl about are you allowed to do so.' No further treatment is necessary and the *mbu'i* leaves with his payment of two chickens and a bundle of salt.

More intricate is the case of a woman who has mated with other men during pregnancy, which is regarded as *usambya chemi*, 'to mix up the foetus.' The old women (*babukuma*) teach the young girls in this way: 'If you had intercourse with other men, you must confess it; if you fail to make the appropriate revelation before or on the day of delivery, parturition will be abnormal and dangerous; on seeing your child for the first time, you might die or want to tear it to pieces.' With regard to the treatment, a distinction must be made according to whether a woman confesses some time before the day of delivery or on the day itself. Furthermore the methods of healing vary according to the personal experiences of the medicinemen and the tradition to which he belongs. If the woman confesses to the old women of the village some time before the day of delivery, they immediately call her husband, who has to search for a *mbu'i*. When he arrives, the first thing the medicineman is supposed to ask is 'Did you mix with other males?' If the woman answers '*nasambya*,' (I mixed), she is asked to mention all the names of the adulterers. Babembe do not believe very much of what their women say, and the *mbu'i* brings along as his first medicine '*abulabula* (*ubula*: to open), which will favour a rapid and complete confession. '*Abulabula* is a concoction of *tekuchi* herbs and *m'manga* roots, which are cooked with river water; its vapour is inhaled and causes profuse perspiration. After everything has been revealed, the adulterers are sent for; in the meantime, the *mbu'i* prepares the *mte wa pende*, the medicine against pollution (*pende* from the verb *u'ihenda*, to take one's self, to mix the foetus). For this purpose he always carries his special gourd (*ngumbu*) with him, which contains several powders.

I know two different preparations of this '*elembo* mixture of dried, burned and pulverized herbs, roots and other ingredients. When he is short of pharmacopoeia, 'Emengele sets out alone in the bush; when he is out of sight, he undresses and carries only his sickle (*'ahelu*) with him. He first of all draws water at the confluence of two rivers; he then halts before the '*esanda* tree, making several *mitumba* (beating with the flat hand on the hollow fist) and explaining the purpose for which he came. He now puts four pieces of charcoal in the four directions of the tree together with two banana leaves, and begins to scrape off the bark of the '*esanda*. When he judges the amount of scrapings to be sufficient, he leaves the spot without looking any more at the tree. After having dressed again he slowly returns to the village. At the first crossroads (*m'ma'ano*) he gathers some earth, holding his hands behind his back. Afterwards

he picks herbs and grasses on three different village paths (*ilembo*) in three different ways: first, with his hands behind his back; secondly, with his hands crossed (*ihendulanya mabo'o*); thirdly, with his arms passing under his legs (*ichinganya*). He particularly looks for 'esasi and *msebaseba* grasses and for *m'mota'ema* tubers. He thus regains the village, where the medicine must be prepared. After he has dried the herbs and grasses, he pounds them and mixes them together with the earth and the bark scrapings. He then washes the beak and legs of a chicken, adds this water to his hotchpotch and kills the chicken ritually by cutting it horizontally through the beak. While the blood drips on his medicine, he says: '*Nabu'a pende, ana'anda alala na balumyana babele, na'yaka mchilo wa pende*' (I treat pollution, although she sleeps with two men, I lift up the sanction of pollution).

When the *mbu'i* is asked to administer his medicine, he mingles a part of it with the water drawn at the confluence of two rivers and makes the woman drink it; part of the other half is given as an enema by the old women, whose treatment takes place in the bush. In the remaining part of the concoction, the woman must look at herself and afterwards at the sky, while the old women say: '*twabu'a pende*' (we treat pollution). After the woman has eased nature, she is carried back to her hut, where the third stage of the treatment begins.

This consists of the cooking and eating of *isaba*. The medicineman bruises '*akoba'ase'e* tubers together with '*amwaka* and '*asokasaba* grasses and gives it to the old women. It is their task to cook it in the woman's house and to add some meat or fish or pounded groundnuts to it. Meanwhile the adulterers have arrived and a second rehearsal of the woman's confessions takes place. The woman mentions the name of each man with whom she slept, cutting at each name a piece of a stick and throwing it into the *isaba* cooking pot. In turn, the *mbu'i* repeats: 'If it be this one with whom you slept, you will bear.' Finally, the adulterers also have to explain how they happened to sleep with that woman. Before leaving the hut, the medicineman repeats once more the names of all the adulterers, beating at each name with the flat hand on the hollow fist above the woman's head.

After the delivery has been completed, the *mbu'i* applies his fourth and final treatment. He pounds '*mt'e'ya* and '*ichimya'aya* herbs, kneads them together to a ball (*i'emo*) and puts them in a *mtoto*, a leaf used as a funnel. The old women express the juice into the eyes, mouth, anus and vulva of the *mbyele*, the young mother.

I have mentioned already that the treatments are not all uniform and that almost every medicineman has his own specialities. It may be useful therefore to refer briefly to another manner in which the *pende* medicine is prepared.

A great *mbu'i* of the Sibachwa area told me that he prepared his *pende* as follows. His first ingredients are not only the dried sexual organs of male and female wild animals, but also the placenta of dogs and, particularly, the organs of a *mbuchi ya ndjukwa*, a goat which was born in the village and not imported from Burundi. He put his comments in

this way: 'That she-goat that slept with its own children; that he-goat that committed incest with its own mother.' All these ingredients are then dried, burnt and bruised together with the bark of the '*echubu*, '*ammaka*, '*mchibe* trees, the leaves of the '*ammaka*, '*lulonga*, '*abenda*, '*e'ukwa*, '*e'ochi*, '*echimya'aya*, '*luholoholo*, '*asibu* trees and shrubs, the roots of '*mvenesopo* and '*asukulukyi* trees, the young shoots of the banana tree, thorns of the '*mwenelulenge* shrub, and roots of trees that remained after a caving-in of the flank of a hill.

It may also happen, the Babembe say, that a woman has failed to confess her trespasses and that, after having given birth to a child, she wants to kill it. The old women, who render assistance, then quickly snatch the child away from the mother and cover her with the skin of a sheep, while they send for a '*mbu'i wa msoshi*, a great medicineman. In order to canalize the resentment of the mother and to make the sight of her child bearable to her, the *mbu'i* acts as follows. He takes earth from around the cavity of the closet, mingles it with water and puts it on a stool (an object that plays a dominant part in all Bembe *rites d'aggrégation*). Adding to it '*e'akya'akya*, '*ubya*, '*m'manguchi*, '*minanga* and '*bi-bunge* herbs, he prepares the '*ambi* medicine. The woman has now to drink from the water which did not soak into the earth and remained on the stool. The mixture itself is administered with a funnel and instilled into her eyes.

During the procedure first described the medicineman, as an additional treatment, makes two incisions ('*embe*) on each thigh or arm of the woman and rubs '*elembo* powder mixed with the blood of a chicken into them.

If the treatment has been successful, *i.e.* if the mother—not necessarily the child—lives, the *mbu'i* will be rewarded. If he treated the wife of a close kinsman, *e.g.* a member of his extended family group or of his minimal lineage, he gets two chickens and a bundle of salt from her husband's kin and two chickens and a bundle of salt from her maternal uncles. If the husband of the wife is a more remote kinsman, the payment is heavier and may include a goat. Each of the adulterers has to pay '*eseko*, a retribution, in this case, of two units (a goat and a bundle of salt). If the woman dies, they have to repay the whole marriage payment to her husband and his kin. With regard to this '*mbu'i wa mahano*, it may be noted that his function and techniques are hereditary within his own agnatic lineage or within his mother's lineage. A man's knowledge is, of course, not necessarily passed on to his eldest son, but much depends upon individual dispositions or predilections. A boy slowly acquires the necessary principles while acting as '*apenga*, a companion and assistant of his father, or grandfather, or elder brother or maternal uncle.

Finally, almost every area of Bubembe has its own '*mbu'i wa mahano*, whose activities are thus restricted within his own area and very often directed to his close agnatic and affinal kinsmen.

Note

¹ The Babembe are a patrilineal people living in the Fizi-Mwenga Territories, Kivu Province, Belgian Congo. My fieldwork among the Babembe was undertaken on behalf of the Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale (I.R.S.A.C.); Centre de Recherches Scientifiques du Tanganyika à Uvira, Congo Belge.