3. Central African Healing Traditions

Zablon, *nganga lunga*, and his apprentice Davidi, work with two patients at their clinic in Kikungu, Manianga region, Lower Congo.
Ancient Egypt was in Africa

Kush and Meroe in Sudan synthesized medical ideas from regions to the west and south with Egyptian, Greek, Roman and ancient Near Eastern ideas and practices.
Islamic “Greek” and “Prophetic” medicine reached NE Africa over 1200 years ago

Scribes in this Sheik’s *maseed* in Khartoum write Koranic verses for the preparation of medicinal and teas.
Africa has known Christian healing for 2000 years.

The Church of the Holy Spirit in Africa, of Lower Congo, practices healing, blessing, and “weighing of the spirit”
Post-Enlightenment Western medicine has been practiced for a century in Africa
The ancient tradition of foraging for medicinal plants continues in Central Africa.

Kitembo, North Kongo healer-herbalist of Balari region, Luozi Territory, Lower Congo, emerges from the dense underbrush of a forest where he has harvested plants he will use in a treatment.
Domestication of plants, food production, and settlement, a 3,000 year history

North Kongo village of Kumbi, in Kivunda Commune, demonstrates extensive plantings in clusters behind houses.
Domestication of medicinal plants:
Nzoamambu Oscar, Lower Congo

Nzoamambu Oscar, Kongo nganga-nkisi, left, has transplanted a herbarium of nearly 100 decorative, symbolic, household, food, and medicinal plants into his settlement.
Nganga Kitembo of Balari Commune, North Manianga, instructs chief Kusikila and Dr. Arkinstall on collection of plants for identification. A total of 183 plants were collected for identification by botanists at Lovanium University, Kinshasa.
Domestication of Medicinal Plants: Kivu Research Institute, Bukavu, Eastern Congo

The herbarium of the Kivu Research Institute, cultivates dozens of medicinal plants known by healers and researchers to be helpful in treatments for human and livestock conditions.
Scientific research and pharmaceutical production from known medicinal plants

Congolese pharmacist, author, and entrepreneur Byamungu Lufungula, left, oversees research in his pharmaceutical lab in Bukavu, where 23 products are marketed in several pharmacies in the region.
Adaptations to arid regions

This Fulani pastoralist in the Senegalese Sahel depends must figure out how to keep his cattle over the long dry season. Medicines for people and livestock draw from this environment and reflect understanding of the powers of plants, minerals, and substances from animals.
Markets across Central Africa feature medicines from West Africa’s arid regions.

Nganga Tambwe Antoine and his assistant purchase Sahelian and West African savanna medicinal materials at Kinshasa market from a member of the large Hausa community of merchants.
*-puta-, wound; *-duad-, *-donda-, to suffer;

Physical injury and existential suffering are in the ancient vocabulary of Central Africa.
*-pemba-, caolin, a state of purity of body/person

The notion of whiteness or clarity, often represented in caolin, is used to define a bodily, personal, or social situation that is transparent, open, and accessible to the spirit world, as in this novice to the Zebola cult of the Upper Congo river region.
The verb *kupoka*, meaning “to cool down,” is derived from the proto-Bantu cognate -*pod-* with wide Western and Eastern Bantu distribution. Here a North Kongo *nganga mpodi*, administers the *nkisi mpodi* cupping horn (*ku-hola mpoka*) to draw out the heat of pollution, to cool down the heat of conflict and confusion in this young woman’s case.
“Flow & blockage”

In Nzoamambu’s anatomy of the person (see Quest for Therapy) he represents the body as a channel through which flows food and all liquids. Flow and exchange are life-giving, blockage in bodily and social functions is destructive and deadly.
Dichotomy and continuum of causal attributes in Kongo thought

natural
“... kia Nzambi”

human
“... kia Muntu”

Nzambi, Nature, the order as it is
Bisimbi, Water and nature spirits
Bakisi, Medicine spirits
Bankuyu, Errant ghosts of the dead
Bakulu, Ancestor shades fixed lineage cemetery
Bandoki, Human witches powerful mostly malific
Bantu, Human responsibility and social conflict
*-dok-, *-dog-, the power of words and will

This proto-Bantu cognate everywhere in Bantu languages conveys the power of language and will. In Kikongo, *ku-loka* means to take an oath or swear; in Zulu, *kuthaka* has the same meaning. This concept of the power of language and the intention behind it is used to describe powerful persons, *ndoki*, who have *kindoki*, or in Zulu, *buthakani*. Chiefs and kings and powerful orators have this. With colonialism, *ndoki* took on a negative connotation of “witch” and *kindoki* of witchcraft.
*-zambi-, *-yambe-, *-kulu-, *-lunga

Multiple terms for God suggest relatively late appearance of monotheism and of this source of causal attribution in illness.
Kongo medicine categories & elements

*Minti*, natural ingredients; *makaya*, “leaves,” “tobacco;”
*Bilongo*, medicinal compounds, injections, including
biomedical materia medica; *min’kisi*, consecrated
techniques with invoked or spiritual linkage;
*ngoma/nkonko*, corporate drums and curing societies

How the elements are combined:

All *ngoma* or *nkonko* are *min’kisi*; all *min’kisi* contain
*bilongo*; most *bilongo* contain *minti* and *makaya*; some
*bilongo* are not plant substances; many *makaya* and *minti*
are not part of *bilongo*, *min’kisi* or *ngoma*
*-ti-, *-kag-, *-kaya, tree, herb, leaf

Of these two cognates for plants, or medicinal plants, the more widespread, tí-, proto-Bantu, is also identified as "tree" (C.S. 1729) and "stick" (C.S.1731). The other terms denote medicinal uses of plants or the process of protecting with medicine, kàg. Tobacco, introduced from America, was assimilated to the Western Bantu cognates, -kaya-, -kayi-. 
Mama Mankomba draws sap from a cactus tree which she will mix with soapy water for a purgative to treat congestive heart failure. Bilongo compounds range from this relatively simple to up to a dozen ingredients, such as Mankomba’s follow-up treatment that incorporates seven different plants.
Bilongo - asperges

Zablon, *nganga lunga*, applies medicine to area that he will massage. This asperge contains three plants.

Collection of historic asperges from ca. 1920s in Kimpese Museum, Lower Congo
An nkisi is a technique, in Kongo historical thinking, that derives its power from ancestral or spiritual sources, revealed to an individual, or purchased from such an individual, or transmitted in a family or to an apprentice by a master nganga. The nkisi usually has a container or instrument, which may be a sack, a sculpture (as shown here), or an object suggestive of a technique or medicine (as the asperge shown here on the back of a personified nkisi). The nkisi is considered to be personified, with a name, and highly individualized attributes. Like an Orthodox icon, the nkisi must be used in its original revelation, or else it loses its power, is ineffective, or dangerous. This nkisi is in the Kimpese Museum in Lower Congo.
*-kiti-, *-kici-

As it distribution suggests, this cognate is of Western Bantu derivation after the spread of cultivators from the Cameroon Highlands. In its NW distribution it denotes charm, container, technique with a spirit source; in its SE expansion it denotes spirit, and spirit possessed healing.
**Nkisi Mpolo, the cupping horn**

With the cupping horn, one does *kuhola mpoka*, to suck with mpolo, to purify the polluted individual. Impurities result from broken social codes and relational observances. The cupping horn is used to suck impurity from the body through cut made in the skin with a razor. In Nkisi Mpolo the purity of the individual is considered a way to return to right relationships. *Nganga nkisi* Bayindula here sucks at cuts in the patient’s joints, where he has made incisions and thus “traced her personhood.”
*-goma-, *-ngoma, drum, performance

The widespread distribution of this cognate indicates its proto-Bantu status. However, the restricted distribution of ngoma as song-dance performance suggests an Eastern Bantu development of the “drum of affliction”
*-ganga, *-ganga, doctor, medicine

The widespread distribution of both meanings of this term suggests a proto-Bantu origin and Western and Eastern Bantu expansion, with subsequent inventions and adaptations of many kinds of practices and medicines.
*-banda-, *-mbanda-, spirit, healer
*-buka-, heal, divine

The distribution of these terms for spirit, healer, healing and divining, support their origin and spread in Western Bantu societies. Banda is particularly prevalent in the Great Lakes Kubandwa cult, in Angola, and in New World forms in Brazilian Umbanda.
Divination

The ngombo divining basket is a classical technique of the Western Equatorial & Southern Savanna regions.
*-gido-, -gida-, -gidu-, prohibitions

This concept is rooted in the verb *-gid-, to interdict, refuse, to create interdiction, abstain from food, activities, contacts. Many health-related practices incorporate such prohibitions. The distribution of the root suggests it is of proto-Bantu origin, and therefore a widespread and deep concept in common culture and awareness.
Diseases & their Etiologies in Rwanda

**Causes**
- Physical
- Mystical
- Broken prohibitions
- Poisoning

**Diseases**
- Parasitic
- Microbial
- Systemic
- Accidents
- Obstetrical & gynecological
- Psychomental & behavioral

Pierre Claver Rwangabo, Ph.D Pharmacology
The quest for therapy

The Kin group meeting episodes marked with an asterisk indicate that the kin groups sought the assistance of a inspirational diviner or *ngunza* to sort out the issues and to determine the appropriate next step.

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<tr>
<th>Western therapy</th>
<th>Luzayadio</th>
<th>Axel and Cecile</th>
<th>Nzita</th>
<th>Nsimba</th>
<th>Lwezi</th>
<th>Mbumba</th>
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<td>(*with <em>ngunza</em> specialist)</td>
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Non-kin social groups, e.g., job peers, friends, employer, cult

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African healers in public health education

These South African sangoma healers participate in an AIDS training workshop sponsored by USAID, typical of many similar programs. Healers are generally able to promote prevention of risky behaviors in the language and concepts of the common people.
Healing in the aftermath of war

Reburial of the remains, and reverent commemoration of those massacred in the Rwandan genocide calms the community. The survivors of those who died a violent death are less inclined to visit vengeance upon the perpetrators.