

The Relevance of ‘Gata’ Among the Shona of Zimbabwe in the Context of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

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Abstract

The paper attempts to explain the continued relevance of ‘gata’ (consultation of a traditional healer to account for the death or life threatening illness of a person) in the context of HIV/AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe. It is a truism that HIV/AIDS is one among a plethora of causes of death in Shona society. Relatives of the diseased are more often aware of the fact that their departed ones succumbed to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but are always inclined to find out why such life-limiting disease affected their family member. It is in the context of these HIV/AIDS related illnesses and deaths that this paper probes into the continued relevance and practice of gata in the Shona worldview, even when the cause of one’s death is known.

Introduction

The Shona people are a dominant ethnic group in Zimbabwe under whose armpit fall the Manyika, Karanga, Korekore, Zezuru, Ndau and Kalanga linguistic groups. They occupy the largest area of the present day Zimbabwe (Asante, 2000: 20). The Ndebele are another ethnic grouping that occupy the greater part of western Zimbabwe. Like any other ethnic groupings, the Shona have been affected by the tide of globalisation that has to some extent changed their way of life. However, it is important to note some of the Shona traditions that have survived the test of time, and continue to be at the core of their belief systems. Mandaza (1970:54) notes, and rightly so, that some Shona traditions have to some extent survived Western influence and this include the ritual of *gata*.

Among the Shona, death has always been followed by a sequence of rituals that differ from group to group but, by and large, serve the same purpose of ensuring a proper transition of the dead from a life of bodily existence to a life of spiritual existence. One such important event in this sequence of Shona death rituals is the attempt to establish the cause of death, commonly known among the Shona as *gata*.

It is an actuality that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has caused the death of people not only among the Shona people but the world over. More importantly, due to the establishment of testing centres and a general awareness of the HIV/ AIDS related signs and symptoms, the Shona people, just like people of other social orientations throughout the world, are aware that many of the deaths that befall their kith and kin have uncontested causes such as HIV/AIDS. It is also a truism that a plethora of accidents or mishaps may lead to the demise of a person and in such cases it appears apparent that the cause of death is quite clear and therefore in no need of rational doubt or disputation. However, what is disturbing about the Shona people's way of life is that they are interested in 'knowing' the 'cause' of their member's death even if the cause appears apparent and uncontested. They attempt to establish the cause of death of one of their members through a practice called *gata* whereby close relatives of the dead consult a traditional healer to ascertain the 'actual cause' of the death. For Mandaza (1970:58), *gata* is a "...ceremony [that] is held to determine the cause of the death" of a person. *Gata* is a traditional belief that attempts to show that death is not a natural phenomenon but is a result of, among others, some evil acts of enemies or a curse from the ancestors. Its main purpose is to find out the cause of death and also to find corrective measures to safeguard the remaining family from a related mishap. For Gundani (2004: 94), "the original idea behind the '*gata*' ritual was for the family to adopt corrective measures by way of spiritual fortification, which often required the *n'anga's* [traditional healer] involvement." While the intention was to safeguard the remaining family, the *n'anga* also disclosed the culprits responsible for the death of the deceased. This led to accusations, violence and disharmony in the society. At times the accusations may not be true. Some deaths may simply be a result of certain illnesses that have nothing to do with enemies such as those caused by HIV/AIDS. In order to ensure objectivity and transparency in the findings, *gata* is conducted far away from the homestead of the deceased and is presided over by a *n'anga* who is endowed with the rare skills of establishing causes of illnesses and death in the realm of the human race. A distant *n'anga* is more preferable to carry out this vital death ritual as a way of eliminating or minimising bias, prejudice and manipulation of family history by the *n'anga* (especially local ones) in an attempt to ensure objectivity and accuracy in establishing the real cause of death.

It is commonly believed that a local *n'anga's* diagnosis of the cause of death may be heavily influenced by what he already knows about the deceased or the family of the deceased thereby rendering the credibility of his judgement open to disputation. It is in light of fear among the Shona people that Gelfand (1982:42) argues that a good *n'anga* must be capable not only to predict with exactitude the real cause of death but also to name each person in the delegation including his or her social status, tell them that so and so members of the delegations doubted the *n'anga's* ability to perform the task at hand before embarking on the journey or even on their way to his homestead.

Such kinds of rare insights would dazzle the delegation that they would have confidence in his verdict on the cause of death and the curative prescriptions that he proposes. As a token of appreciation for the services rendered, the delegation pays a fee to the *n'anga*. When the delegation returns to the village, it relays the findings of the *n'anga* to family members and whatever procedure the *n'anga* has recommended to be carried out in order to prevent further misfortunes or catastrophes in the family. The *n'anga* is believed to have esoteric powers to detect other possible consequences to follow to the concerned family if precautionary measures as he has recommended are not taken timeously. Hence, such an adventure will result in the fortification of the victims' family to avert mishaps from recurring.

The traditional healer is the contact person in this quest to establish the cause of the death because he is believed to be in contact with the world of the departed ones (*nyikadzimu*) who happen to have the abstruse knowledge of the goings on in this mundane world. This shows that the Shona people will never accept as the 'cause' (see Gombe, 1986: 169) that which we ordinarily point out as behind one's demise such as HIV/AIDS, but goes beyond this scientific justification of one's mishap to seek audience with a *n'anga* in order to ascertain what they will regard as a convincing cause of one's death. This paper, therefore, argues that the concept of *gata* remains a permanent feature in the Shona rituals of death even in the context of HIV/AIDS related deaths.

Understanding the Concept of *Gata*

The Shona people from time immemorial have witnessed deaths and accepted its existence as an undeniable reality. However, they are convinced that science cannot fully account for a plethora of mishaps that trouble humanity including HIV/AIDS. For them, death that has, for so long, caused intense worry to the human race can be explained with finality by appealing to the supernatural world that has the capacity to allow or prevent illnesses and deaths to befall man. Through such an engagement with the supernatural world via the mediation of a *n'anga*, it may be discovered that a given death is a result of the work of an enemy, some evil forces or spirits. It is commonly believed that one's enemies or ancestors has the capacity to send or allow evil spirits respectively to cause misfortunes that can be life threatening if they feel the deceased had, among other things, wronged them or neglected them in the case of ancestors. One may be the only one who dies as a result of, for instance, a road accident but the family members of the deceased are always keen to know why that tragedy befell their member and not any other person. It is not enough to say that the nature of the accident meant that some people had to die. Consultation of a *n'anga* to answer pertinent questions such as why and who 'caused' the deceased to meet his fate is a core exercise because the Shona deny that death can just occur out of nothing (*hapana rufu runongouya rwega*). Even though the Shona people believe that death must be a gradual and explainable event, such a belief does not trivialise the importance for *gata* not only for the sake of knowing the circumstance that led to the death of their member but also for the sake of protecting the remaining members from similar misfortunes.

It is unacceptable among Shona people to accept death as a result of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, heart attack, high and low blood pressure or stroke that are silent killers in our contemporary times. If one dies under these circumstances where scientific explanations furnish a clear history, the Shona are quick to suspect the hand of an enemy hence they visit a *n'anga* who in turn consults the supernatural world for expert explanation. Suspicions of the work of an enemy or retribution of the angered *vadzimu* (ancestors) (Bourdillon, 1993) as the causative factors in cases of life threatening illnesses and deaths are quite common.

Gata is a concept that constitutes a crucial part of Shona peoples' death rituals. When a person dies, relatives are supposed to go to a traditional healer to inquire about the cause of the death because they believe that traditional healers have the esoteric knowledge about things beyond the comprehension of ordinary human beings. For the Shona people, there must be a cause behind every effect and the quest to establish the cause behind the cause of death is a crucial component of Shona death rituals irrespective of the deceased's age, mental status or physical defects. This is clearly captured in one of the famous Shona proverb that says *chiripo chariuraya, zizi harifi nemhepo* that literally means that there must be something that caused the owls' death for it can not be killed by the wind. Thus, Mbiti (1975:117) notes that "when someone has died, people often try to find out who used sorcery, witchcraft or magic against the dead person." In such circumstances, someone is often blamed for the death because, among the Shona people, a person does not just die. Moreover, if death is believed to be free of witches or sorcery, the blame will be shifted to the spiritual agents who are believed to possess extra ordinary stamina to curse the living for breaching some social taboos or omitting some vital rituals like appeasing the living dead. This explains the Shona people's obsession with the upkeep of the welfare of the departed one because their anger can be catastrophic to the living if proper rituals are not carried out according to the family traditions.

However, deaths caused by spirits and curses are rare since in most cases people always find or suspect someone in the village, especially a close relative, to be the cause. For Bourdillon (1976: 198; *see also* Gelfand, 1968:4), when the consulted *n'anga* diagnoses the spirit as the cause of death, he recommends some ritual actions to avert further calamities in the family. The Shona are also afraid of the threat posed by an avenging spirit (*ngozi*) of some long departed close relative or colleague who could have been seriously wronged by the deceased or his family. It is important to note that, among the Shona people, it is not always the case that the wrongdoer is the one who gets killed or cursed by *ngozi* but any person who is a blood relative of the wrongdoer is subject to the anger of *ngozi*. It is commonly believed, among the Shona, that "...family spirit elders (*midzimu*) never directly cause death in their own families, but they may withdraw their protection if they are displeased, and allow some witch or evil spirit to do its work" (ibid, 198). In such a scenario, the diviner has to prescribe some corrective rituals that must be done to appease the spirit elders that had been neglected by those still living.

The avenging spirit is, therefore, believed to be very dangerous among the Shona people such that they have to consult a diviner in order to tell what really caused the death of one of their family members. Thus, *gata* is a very crucial aspect of Shona death rituals in that it is an important learning curve that alerts those still living to take precautionary measures so that misfortunes of such a catastrophic nature do not visit them again.

Gata is insisted upon mostly in the case of a mysterious death such as sudden death even if it is a common knowledge that diseases such as HIV/AIDS can inflict a sudden blow to the infected in the form of opportunistic infections such as ordinary flue. This is not to say that deaths that are generally classified as 'ordinary' namely those that are due to advanced age do not require *gata* in the Shona world view. In light of this, Bourdillon (1976:197) argues that, while in some areas such as the Korekore communities that are found in the Mashonaland region, death of a very old person can be considered as "...natural and that a diviner need not be consulted especially if the deceased was very elderly: they might say that an old man died because he was 'tired' or that the death was caused by the higher god alone." However, in the case of a younger person, death is always considered to be apparently unnatural and therefore in need of divination to establish the real cause for his demise. Even though the kinsmen are convinced that the death was natural or that they know the cause of the death, they are still likely to arrange a consultation with a diviner in order to confirm their opinions thereby making the *n'anga* the final arbiter in the quest to establish the cause of death. This is indicative of the fact that Shona people do not take the issue of death lightly.

The selected close relatives of the diseased are entrusted with the task of consulting a *n'anga* to ascertain the cause of death, misfortunes or bad omen of one of their family members in order to deal decisively with any form of suspicion on who could have 'caused' such mishaps. This select group is made up of elderly people and is chosen by the head of a family. For Mandaza (1970: 58), "...the head explains to [the *n'anga*] the purpose of the delegation and pays the required courtesies and fee. Then the *n'anga* using his *hakata* (divining bones) and a transparent object [normally a conventional mirror] discovers the cause of death and names the guilty person." However, there are variations within the Shona society as to why and when *gata* is conducted but the general impression is that it is done as a result of mysterious illness, misfortunes and death. Bourdillon (1976:197) concurs with Gelfand (1973: 187) that immediately after the burial (if the *gata* ritual did not take place during the illness preceding death), appointed close relatives of the deceased are sent on a mission to consult a diviner on the cause of death while Mandaza (1970, 57-58) places the ritual of *gata* at a month or so after one's death. In spite of differences in opinions by scholarship placing the time frame within which *gata* has to be done, a closer look at the Shona worldview show that given the controversies and suspicions that surrounds death, *gata* is always treated as a matter that warrants immediate attention. Since *gata* acts as post-mortem, it must be done immediately after burial so that all suspicions regarding who and what could have caused death settled in order to avoid divisions within the family that emanate from uninformed accusations and counter accusations.

For the Shona people, *gata* for other misfortunes such as bad luck and illnesses may be done, but more emphasis is put on *gata* to account for the cause of one's death because illnesses and bad luck are reversible. Among the Shona people, suspicions are normally cast on a close relative of the dead for causing the death primarily because he is believed to be the one with the capacity to cheat *vadzimu* who 'fence' and protect their homesteads from the attack of witches and evil spirits whose works may cause not only fatal illnesses but a plethora of misfortunes. In light of the active role that *vadzimu* play in the lives of the living, Gelfand (1973:114) notes that sicknesses or deaths invoke the affected families to seek audience with their *vadzimu* in order to determine the spirits that could have caused the family to lose the protective powers of these spirits and so allow evil to enter their homes.

Causation and the Concept of *Gata*

Causation can be defined as "making something happen, allowing or enabling something to happen or preventing something from happening" (Sanford, 1975:193). It is predicated on the maxim that there is no effect without a cause and no action or reality may bring itself into existence. The notion of causality is crucial to all African forms of life (Gyekye, 1997:28; *see* also Gelfand, 1981: 51). African cultures appreciate the notion of causality very well just as sciences put it. However, causes of mishaps that befall humanity in the African worldview is generally understood in terms of mystical powers as the agentive causes of such mishaps while Western understanding of causality seems to be inclined towards purely scientific or empirical explanations. For Gyekye (1997:28), even though Africans are aware of these purely scientific causal explanations, they do not often consider them as profound enough to offer complete satisfaction in accounting for the events of life that they feel need an explanation. This leads them to give up on the search for empirical causal explanations, even of causal relations between natural phenomena, or events and resort to supernatural causation. Thus, the Shona people's faith in agentive causality leads them to postulate mystical powers as causal agents to events in this world, both positive and negative. For instance, despite the scientific explanation for the presence of HIV and AIDS pandemic in the human race, the Shona people, just like other ethnic groups in Africa, are keen to know why a given member of their family got infected with this life limiting disease.

The scientific position is that HIV is an illness-causing germ that affects human beings by weakening their ability to protect themselves from other illnesses. It weakens one's natural ability to protect him from the disease causing organisms. HIV belongs to an unusual group of viruses called retroviruses (Jackson, 1988). Acquired AIDS is a syndrome and not a single specific disease. It is a result of a combination of symptoms that is given a convenient label, AIDS. It is a natural and logical progression of a body's failure to defend itself resulting from a severely damaged defence mechanism initiated by HIV.

The disease resistance capacity of an AIDS patient is significantly lowered so much so that the body fails to fight off other infections that can be fatal. The body of an AIDS patient can be vulnerable to the slightest infections because its ability to protect itself from various infections is compromised. It is for this reason that Usher in Kitts *etal* (1996) characterised AIDS as a syndrome in which the body's immune system goes berserk. Since the body can no longer fight off a plethora of infections, it eventually succumbs to various infections and dies. Thus, a body that is thoroughly ravaged by AIDS can even die from a common headache or cold.

However, for the Shona people, it may be true that such a disease is caused by some viruses but, for them, science may not be able to fully address the questions 'why' and 'how' a given person became a victim to the disease especially when he knows how it is acquired and that it is life threatening. It is a truism that science tells us that the person got infected because he, for example, exposed himself to conditions that meant that he got infected. However, for the Shona people, that explanation is not enough in that science fails to tell them why the individual exposed himself to a disease that he knew was fatal. Therefore, though the Shona people follow, to some extent, the scientific explanation for acquiring HIV/AIDS, they resort to mystical powers as somehow responsible for the misfortunes of getting infected. Even the failure of a patient to respond to treatment can be linked to the anger of *vadzimu* perhaps because the victim or members of his family may have done something contrary to their will and bidding. Such illnesses may also be attributed to the evil works of witches who are believed to possess extraordinary powers to manipulate nature for destructive purposes. Since the cause of illnesses and deaths is believed to be some supernatural powers, any scientific explanation and remedy is inappropriate to deal with such a condition. Thus, a *n'anga* is regarded as a panacea to this predicament since he has the capacity to dialogue with the spiritual world in order to explain that which afflict those in this mundane world.

The concept of causation is very crucial in the Shona people's worldview just like among other African societies. For them, it is given that every effect has a cause and every cause has an effect. More importantly, Shona people believe that causes of a given effect cannot go on *ad infinitum* because the cause of one's death can be established with some degree of finality by appeal to supernatural causes. Even when the cause of a person's death appears quite obvious, the Shona people enquire beyond this obviousity to establish what could have caused this obviousity until they establish a convincing cause with the assistance of a *n'anga*. For instance, a person may have died because of a road accident. Whilst this might appear to be an adequate explanation for the cause of the death of a person, the Shona people go beyond this to enquire what could have caused their relative to be in such circumstances that resulted in his death (Masaka and Gwaravanda, 2008). If the accident occurred because of human error, the Shona people want to know why such human error occurred to the driver that in turn led to the death of their relative. The questioning goes on and on until they establish what they consider as the adequate cause of the death of their relative such as witchcraft or some evil spirit through the assistance of a *n'anga*.

The general thinking among the Shona people is that no one should die meaning that man should live forever. It is in view of this Shona actuality that Gelfand (1973:114) remarks that “death is not natural. Even a very old person should never die and life is removed by the *vadzimu*.” So, by casting doubt on the cause of one’s death, the Shona people turn to the *n’anga* whom they believe to have the capacity to possess the necessary knowledge and explanation as to why deaths and misfortunes such as life sicknesses are striking members of a given family. In this case, a diviner should be consulted to determine the cause of the illnesses or deaths and prescribe necessary remedies. In the Shona worldview, such misfortunes are terrifying and believed to be, by and large, caused by angry *vadzimu* that express their displeasure through, among others, death and life limiting illnesses. For Bourdillon (1976:206; *see also* Lagerwerf 1992:7-8)), until the ultimate cause of such misfortunes is unearthed and appropriate rituals as recommended by the *n’anga* are done, there remains the frightening possibility of further trouble striking. Thus, the *gata* ritual is meant not only to unearth causes of the mishaps that trouble a given family but also to fortify it against future mishaps.

Shona people’s displeasure with empirical causation as a conclusive justification of events of human life has led them to believe that the supernatural world actively influences events in this mundane world. They, therefore, believe in the existence of a world of the living dead. This is a world of spiritual existence. In this world, only those who died and were righteous in their day-to-day life and had necessary rituals and ceremonies of death conducted for them are the inhabitants of this world. The inhabitants of this world are believed to be the overseers of the events that take place in this world. It is believed that these ‘individuals’ are quite conscious of the events taking place among those living in this physical world. They have the capacity to tell, cause and heal misfortunes and prevent deaths among the living if they deem necessary.

However, it is believed that no ordinary person can have access to the spiritual world to inquire about the wrongs done by the living except a *n’anga* who is endowed with some exceptional skills to expose the cause one’s death. The *n’anga* acts as the medium of communication between two totally different worlds, that is, the world of spiritual existence and this mundane world. He is a point man between supernatural and natural realms of existence. So when a disaster strikes the world or community it is the responsibility of the elderly within that institution to respond to this misfortune by seeking the services of the *n’anga* (Asante, 2000:21) for explanations and possible remedies. Using his rare skills, he is able to tell whether the misfortunes that are troubling a given family are a result of the anger of those in the world of spiritual realm or whether it is a result of nefarious works of witches. This belief in the spiritual world by those who are still living supports the claim that the dead have a dominant influence over the living.

Permanence of *Gata* in the Face of HIV/AIDS Pandemic

It is a truism that Shona people do accept the existence of a medical condition called HIV/AIDS as a reality but believes that the supernatural world has something to do with this life limiting disease. To those from outside the Shona worldview, continued adherence to *gata* is not only illogical but also disturbing because it implies that a mishap such as HIV/AIDS goes beyond a scientific explanation and calls for a supernatural justification. This, therefore, justifies their appeal to the spiritual world through *gata* in order to find a panacea to a plethora of misfortunes that afflict humanity.

Though the Shona people appreciate the role that medical field has done in trying to find a permanent cure to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the spiritual world is indispensable in accounting for the vicissitudes of human life in this mundane world with finality. The fact that a patient visits a *n'anga* even after medical tests have noted that person has HIV/AIDS, is an indication that the Shona people believe that the spiritual world has the final answer on everything that happens in this mundane world. The forces of the spiritual world are believed to cause sickness, recovery or failure to recover. For them, the medical field is no match to *vadzimu* since they are believed to have more knowledge and power to influence events in this mundane compared to ordinary medical practitioners. By virtue of having experience of both physical and spiritual lives, with the later being more influential in that it is closer to the creator god who is believed to be the reservoir of knowledge and power, *vadzimu* can communicate with him and at times get insights concerning causes of various occurrences in the world that have a bearing to humanity. This, therefore, explains the permanence of *gata* among the Shona people even in the context of the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the Shona concept of *gata* in the context of the life limiting HIV/AIDS illnesses and deaths. It noted that in the Shona worldview, events of life cannot be fully explained by science only but can be accounted for with finality by the supernatural world whose inhabitants are believed to be more powerful and knowledgeable than the inhabitants of this mundane world. In light of this, therefore, the Shona people quickly abandon the scientific causal explanation and opt for a supernatural causal explanation to issues that affect them in their day-to-day lives. Finally, the paper probed into the permanence of *gata* in the face of the limiting HIV/AIDS pandemic. Though Shona people reckon the threat to human life posed by HIV/AIDS, they maintain that such a mishap just like other aspects of human life can only be adequately explained by appeal to the supernatural world. Therefore, *gata* remains a permanent feature of the Shona people's way of life even in the context of the illnesses and deaths related to devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic.

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