

Health Problems That Require No “Medication”: The Case of Ancestor-Related Illnesses Among the Tumbuka of Northern Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This paper, based on fieldwork conducted among the Tumbuka people of Northern Malawi, reaffirms the continued belief in ancestors by the Tumbuka people and the continued role of the ancestors in the lives of their descendants. Ancestors can cause misfortunes to their descendants and these are revealed through the processes of divination, dreaming and the sighting of certain snake and grasshopper species. What is apparent from this paper is the ancestor's desire to see their descendants living peacefully. Fighting and quarrelling amongst relatives is deplored by the ancestors. Ancestors also desire the continuation of what are described as the Tumbuka customs, for example, that men should not abandon the land of their ancestors and build a home elsewhere. Once misfortunes including illnesses caused by ancestors are known, the Tumbuka believe that traditional as well as western medicines are unnecessary. “*Medication*” consists of talking to the ancestors using established systems and addressing the reasons why the ancestors caused the misfortunes.

Keywords: Ancestors, Malawi, Tumbuka, Treatment, Malawi

1. INTRODUCTION

Mr Lekani Luhanga retired from the civil service in the mid 1990s after working for thirty years. Instead of going back to his home village (as expected), he settled at Rumphi Boma with his family. Rumphi is about 20 kilometres east of his home village. One diviner claimed that Mr Luhanga's father, who died in the early 1960s appeared to her and requested her in a dream to ask his son (Lekani Luhanga) why after retiring he had decided to settle at Rumphi and not in his home village. In addition, in that dream the deceased father's spirit warned that if his son did not move away from Rumphi and settle in his home village, “he should not be surprised if anything befell him or his family”.

When Mr Luhanga was informed about the diviner's dream, he said that his daughter, Towera, was at school some 100 kilometres away and that he would leave Rumphi and settle in his home village when his daughter came back from school. Towera had a two-year old son, whom she had left with her parents, when she went back to school after delivery. The child was, therefore, being

taken care of by its grandparents. One day, as the grandson was playing in the yard, he fell into a very big pot full of water head first and died instantly. During the funeral, which was conducted in Mr Luhanga's home village, the diviner and some elders in his village explained to him that the ancestors (his father) had killed the child by "throwing" him into a pot full of water. He was also informed that if he continued to live in Rumphu, more misfortunes would follow. (Initially, when he was told about the ancestor's wishes, he had neglected them. He had spent a lot of time in the urban areas where he worked and did not really believe in or pay much attention to the work of the ancestors)¹. He was, however, so terrified after experiencing the death of his grandson that, fearing further afflictions, he immediately left Rumphu and settled in his home village. Since then he has not had any misfortunes in his household.

Although it has been argued and there is evidence that the Tumbuka people of northern Malawi were once a matrilineal group and that it was the Ngoni invasions and domination of and massive interaction with the Tumbuka that changed the Tumbuka to a patrilineal society, as of now the Tumbuka are a strongly patrilineal society. Inheritance is from the father to the son. When people leave their home villages to work elsewhere, be it abroad or elsewhere, they still communicate with their relatives back home. When people living away from their home villages die, it is desirable, funds permitting, that they should be buried in their home village together with their ancestors. A number of funerals occurred in western Rumphu where fieldwork upon which this paper is based was undertaken as will be detailed below. Although some deaths occurred far away from the village (in some cases as far as Blantyre which is located approximately 800 kilometres south of Rumphu District away), the dead bodies were, nevertheless, brought to the area for burial. When someone retires, it is required that he should return to his village and settle in the land of his ancestors. Building a "home" away from someone's home village is, therefore, something that is reprehensible and punishable by the ancestors. In the western world and among those Tumbukas who have embraced the western ideals, the death of Mr Luhanga's grandson in the above case may be interpreted as an accident. As far as most Tumbuka people are concerned, accidents and deaths (although not in every case) are just some of the many misfortunes that the ancestors can inflict upon their descendants. It can be seen from the above case study that the occurrence of misfortunes and attributing them to ancestors is a way of coercing people to abide by what society expects of them. It is important to briefly look at who the Tumbuka people are.

¹ This was the diviner's interpretation of why Mr Luhanga neglected what the ancestors were demanding.

2. WHO ARE THE TUMBUKA PEOPLE?

The Tumbuka are a group of people found in the northern region of Malawi, particularly around Rumphu and in some parts of Nkhata Bay and Mzimba Districts. Like the Chewa of central and southern Malawi, the Tumbuka came from Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and settled in northern Malawi between the 14th and 16th century AD. The area the Tumbuka occupied in that period corresponds with the present districts of Mzimba and Rumphu in Malawi, and Lundazi in eastern Zambia (Phiri, 1982). Around 1780, the Balowoka people led by a man called Mulowoka came and settled among the Tumbuka. Very little is known about the Tumbuka people before the coming of Mulowoka and his entourage (see Vail, 1972). At the time Mulowoka settled among the Tumbuka, the Luhanga were the most dominant clan (Vail, 1972; Kalinga, 1984). Other clans included the Botas and the Kumwendas. Before the coming of Mulowoka, the Tumbuka were organised in family clans and they did not have any centralised form of chieftainship or tribal aggregation (Young, 1932: 27; Phiri, 1982). Mulowoka and his entourage were traders and they came to the Tumbuka country in search of ivory. The Tumbuka sold the ivory to him (Mulowoka) in exchange for cloth, beads and conus shells (Kalinga, 1984; Nyirenda, 1931). During the course of his stay among the Tumbuka, Mulowoka started distributing clothes and hoes among the local people for free. Many people interpreted the distribution of gifts as aimed at wooing their support.

Because of Mulowoka's generosity, the Luhangas (which was a dominant Tumbuka clan) gave him a wife, but he did not have any children from that marriage. After this, the Kumwendas also gave him a wife; and from this marriage, he had several children. It was also because of his generosity and, the fact that he lived happily with the people, that they decided to elect him chief of the area². At the time, the Tumbuka did not object as they did not have a centralized form of government. This chieftainship assumed the name of Chikulamayembe. The first Chikulamayembe was Khalapamuhanya and after his death, a decision was made to give his chieftainship to his paternal nephew, Kamphungu Nkhonjera. Nkhonjera wanted this chieftainship to belong to his clan, hence he went on rampage: he killed and chased away members of the Chikulamayembe lineage. Because of his behaviour, his subjects rebelled against him and killed him in the process and the chieftainship returned to the Chikulamayembe family. Towards the end of the 1800s the Nkhamanga Kingdom which was being ruled by Chikulamayembe was invaded by the Ngoni from South Africa who captured some people and went with them upwards to Tanzania. The Ngoni however returned and settled among the Tumbuka.

Although the Balowoka spoke Kiswahili, they later adopted the language and worship of their new people, the Tumbuka (Fraser, 1922). It was the Ngoni invasion and the earlier settlement of Mulowoka and his entourage that changed

² Personal communication with Chief Chikulamayembe, 12th July 2000 at his Bolero Headquarters.

the social organisation of the Tumbuka: notably, the establishment of a centralised form of chieftainship, patriliney and virilocal residence and the full payment of bridewealth (Young, 1932; Forster, 1989). Chikulamayembe is still the chief for the Tumbuka people in northern Malawi. Chitumbuka is the language popularly used in households in northern Malawi. This study was therefore done among the Tumbuka people, whose history is largely unknown before the coming of the Balowoka.

3. ABOUT THE STUDY

The data upon which this paper is based was collected using in-depth interviews with old men and women and young men and women with under-five children. Key informant interviews with health workers, traditional healers, traditional birth attendants and community leaders were also conducted. This qualitative study was carried out among the Tumbuka people in the area of Chief Chikulamayembe in western Rumphi District in northern Malawi between May 2000 and May 2002. The overall objective of the larger study was to explore what the Tumbuka consider to be the most prevalent illnesses among under-five children, their perceptions about the causes, treatment and prevention of these illnesses and how such perceptions have changed over the years. Old and young men and women were interviewed in order to determine the changing perceptions about childhood illnesses. One of the issues that came out very strongly from this study was the existence of illness and other misfortunes that do not require any medical attention and these were illnesses caused by ancestors. This paper therefore describes how the ancestors are conceptualised among the Tumbuka including who qualifies to be an ancestor, the role of the ancestors in the lives of the living, how the Tumbuka recognise illnesses caused by the ancestors and lastly, how therapy is sought for ancestor-related illnesses.

4. WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

Mizimu is the Tumbuka term for the ancestors (*muzimu* is the singular). Whenever the Tumbuka refer to the ancestors they normally use the plural word *mizimu*. The Tumbuka conceptualise *mizimu* as dead parents or grandparents; and this is why the phrase, *wasekulu withu*, meaning “our grandparents”, is also used to designate or to refer to ancestors. It is believed that when someone dies, the body is buried, but the spirit departs from the body. The Tumbuka also believe that ancestors are “second” to God and they pray to God through them. Such a belief is widespread as the Chewa of Central Malawi also perceive ancestors to be the intercessors between living human beings and the almighty God (van Breugel, 2001).

Not everyone qualifies to be an ancestor and death is not the only qualification for one to become one. The prerequisite for becoming an ancestor is that he or she should, at the time of his death, have a child. Even though one may be advanced in age and even married, if he or she does not have children, he or she cannot become an ancestor. The reasoning is that, though they are dead, ancestors continue to play an important role in the lives of their descendants. My informants said that if someone at the time of his/her death does not have children, as far as the Tumbuka are concerned, there is no need for his/her spirit to come back to the village and trouble people: “*Who is there for his spirit to come and see? Who is there for his spirit to protect and punish when he or she has done something wrong?*” The Tumbuka say that it is better for the spirits of such people not to come back as they have no role to play and no one to look after. In order to ensure that the spirits of those who did not have children do not come back after death, older men and women interviewed said that a piece of charcoal is rubbed against the anus of the dead man/woman and the process is accompanied by an invocation, saying:

“*Kuno undalekeko kako yayi. Sono ungakawerangaso yayi*”. (You have not left anything in this world. Do not come back).

The Tumbuka fear that such a person’s spirit can come and trouble people in the village; hence the ritual is carried out to ensure that the spirit does not come back. Informants could not explain why they rub the charcoal on the anus, but they stated that charcoal is used because it is black in colour; hence it would make that person’s spirit unable to see and at the same time it would make him/her forget the relatives he/she had left behind.

5. THE ROLE OF THE ANCESTORS IN THE LIVES OF THE LIVING

As is the case with many cultures in Africa (for example see Gelfand, 1964; Ngubane, 1977; Hammond-Tooke, 1989; LeBeau, 1999), the Tumbuka also believe that ancestors have a role to play in the lives of their descendants. The ancestral spirits protect their descendants against misfortunes such as accidents, deaths and illnesses, irrespective of where they are on this earth. This is why the Tumbuka say that “*mizimu ni mphepo*”, meaning that ‘ancestors are wind’, because they are also found everywhere where their descendants are living. Most informants said that whenever there are no deaths or illnesses in the village, it is believed that it is because of the protection that is afforded by the ancestors.

Though ancestors can be helpful and protective, they can also be angered by the acts of their descendants and, in turn, subject them to a host of misfortunes. There are a number of factors that can make the ancestors angry. The graveyard where the ancestors are buried is supposed to be well cared for. Once every year

the bush in and around the graveyard is supposed to be cleared, and during this event beer is brewed and sacrificed to the ancestors. The people sing funeral songs and pray to the ancestors that they should give them good things, especially protecting them from the many misfortunes prevailing in this world. If their descendants do not clear the bushes in and around the graveyard, and do not periodically offer sacrifices and pray to the ancestors, then the ancestors will become angry. In addition to this, fighting and quarrelling amongst kinsmen, including chasing one another from the land (of their ancestors) are also things that are reprehensible in the eyes of the ancestors. The Tumbuka say that the ancestors are happy when they see that their descendants are happy and living peacefully. Descendants are also supposed to uphold tradition as this is what the ancestors desire. The death of the grandson of Mr Luhanga in the case cited at the beginning of the paper illustrates what can happen if traditional values are not adhered to.

These results confirm Friedson's work among the Tumbuka, who found that failure to obey the wishes of the ancestors, infringement of taboos and non-fulfilment of certain obligatory rituals were factors that made the ancestors angry (Friedson, 1996: 59). It is believed that once the ancestors are angered, they can punish their descendants. There are no specific misfortunes that can be attributed to ancestors. Informants stated that accidents and deaths (like the case illustrated above), illnesses, dismissal from work, being caught by lions, barrenness, etc can all be caused by the ancestors. Some cases were cited in which people lost their jobs, but came back to their home villages and after propitiation of the ancestors, they were either reinstated or they got another job immediately. It is necessary to recognise the changing nature of the misfortunes that the ancestors can cause. Old men and women said that in the past it was common for children and adults to be killed by wild animals, especially lions, but that these days (owing to the scarcity of lions) car accidents, being killed during the collapse of mines, dismissal from work, etc may also be attributed to ancestors. The bushes and forests that used to exist around people's homes have long since been cleared for agriculture, the construction of houses, roads and other infrastructure, and lions have moved away, and therefore no longer pose a threat to human beings or to domesticated animals.

One of the issues raised by informants was that in most cases ancestors do not punish those who have done something wrong. Innocent people are mostly the ones who suffer. The view was expressed that if punishment befell those who had done wrong, people would have stopped "sinning". For example, infertility in women is sometimes attributed to the ancestors' anger over the non-payment of bridewealth by the husband; the death of the grandson of Mr Lekani Luhanga as cited at the beginning of this paper was attributed to his grandfather's decision to settle away from his village. Though this is the situation, it was also noted, however, that in some cases the guilty themselves experienced the punishments. It can, hence, be envisaged that misfortunes caused by the ancestors can afflict both the innocent as well as the offenders. Children under five are particularly on the receiving end, as it is unlikely that

they are able to offend their ancestors. According to one of the diviners, ancestors make children suffer or experience misfortunes, mostly because they want to attract the attention of their parents who would then act speedily so that the child can be healed.

6. KNOWING THE AFFLICTIONS CAUSED BY ANCESTORS

While ancestors provide protection [against misfortunes] for their descendants, they also expect them to uphold tradition and to propitiate them from time to time. Once it is known through dreams and divination that the ancestors are demanding some form of propitiation or redress for something wrong, as far as the Tumbuka are concerned, it is necessary to do whatever they demand, otherwise illness, death or other misfortune may occur. Not all misfortunes and diseases, nor indeed any particular misfortunes or diseases, are specifically attributed to the ancestors. In addition to dreams and divination, the Tumbuka also recognise afflictions caused by ancestors through the sighting of certain species of snakes and grasshoppers.

Informants said that there are certain snake species, such as *zuvi*, which are very commonly seen around the home. If such snakes enter someone's house, he or she will not be surprised, because in most cases they are looking for food such as chicken eggs. There are other snakes, however, such as *chitumbi*, which are rarely seen around the home. If such a snake is seen in someone's yard or house, it is a sign that something is amiss. Such snakes may even enter a house, curl up in a corner and cause no harm to anyone. People ask why such a rare snake has entered the house. Even if such a snake is killed, another one may come again the following day and coil up in the same manner. This is a warning that something is wrong in the family, which needs immediate redress. In addition to the snake, my informants said that there is a grasshopper species known as *mazombwe* which is brownish in colour (similar to the colour of soil). It is a rare type of grasshopper and when people see such a grasshopper flapping its wings, it is an indication that there will be a death in the family. If it does not flap its wings, it is an indication that the ancestors are not happy with something in the village. Fraser has also mentioned that the Tumbuka perceive the sight or presence of certain snake species as a sign of the presence of ancestors. He specifically mentions the blindworm, a snake with a saw-like backbone, and the puff adder. He says that some snakes, even if they enter the house, are not killed or chased away, as it is a sign that a well-intentioned spirit has come to live among them (Fraser, 1922). How then do the Tumbuka seek treatment for illnesses caused by ancestors?

7. SEEKING THERAPY FOR AFFLICTIONS CAUSED BY THE ANCESTORS: KINSHIP THERAPY?

Informants said that illness (and misfortunes) caused by ancestors cannot be healed by biomedicine. The following two cases illustrate how treatment is sought in such cases.

Case 1

One day as Khwima, a 4-year old boy, was coming out of his mother's house, a snake bit him on his leg. His mother took him to the hospital several times and when they saw that there was no improvement, the services of an herbalist were sought. There was still no improvement. When they consulted a diviner, they were told that the ancestors had sent the snake to bite the child as they were displeased because of the quarrelling and fighting that was so prevalent between Khwima's mother and his uncle (Khwima's father's younger brother). In addition, they were also using very foul language against one another. The diviner then called those who were fighting and their relatives, and they set the matter right by addressing the ancestral spirits and requesting them to heal the child. Before the ceremony of talking with the spirits, the child was unable to walk, whereas after the ceremony, he woke up and limped away to his mother's house. No more medicines were necessary after this.

Case 2

Alice was Fumbani's second born child. Soon after birth, her maternal grandparents gave her the name *Walyenge*, which means 'let them eat'. Upon being given that name, the child cried continuously for three days. The parents decided to consult a diviner, who informed them that the child was crying because she was refusing the name that was given to her. It was also revealed to them that the [late] father's maternal grandmother was the one who made the child cry because she had wanted the child to be named after her. Arrangements were made and the kinsfolk gathered together and talked to the spirits, informing them that the child's name was no longer *Walyenge* but Alice (the name of the father's maternal grandmother). The daughter stopped crying right at that moment. She is now nine years old, and since then she has never had any problems.

The above cases involved children aged less than 5 years old. In case one, when the boy developed the wound, his mother (a widow) first went to the hospital for

treatment. When the wound started swelling and worsening, herbalists were consulted and their treatment failed as well. In order for them to recognize that the wounds were caused by the ancestors, diviners were consulted. The worsening of the state of the wounds and their seeming incurability forced the therapy seekers to resort to consulting diviners.

One of the diviners said that the non-response to what is perceived to be the correct medication for wounds can also be attributed to what he referred to as the “plastic type of witchcraft”. He said that this type of witchcraft, which has its origins in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), involves the witch magically placing a plastic paper on the wound. This plastic paper is invisible to the ordinary human being. When medicines are put on the wound, the imperviousness of the plastic paper prevents the medicine from reaching the wound. While hospital personnel and herbalists may think that they are treating the wound, the medication does not reach its target area. This necessitates the consultation of diviners, who are known to have the ability to identify the agents responsible for the affliction.

Although the above-mentioned therapy-seeking behaviour is for wounds (Case 1), the same procedure is followed for other illnesses (both adult, as well as childhood illnesses) that are attributed to ancestors. Informants said that for illnesses that are attributed to the ancestors, it is not possible to effect a cure with medication or therapy sought from modern health facilities or herbalists. Because initially they think that it is an ordinary or natural illness, people first seek treatment from hospitals and herbalists (see also Friedson, 1996, for similar findings), which may prove unsuccessful. What most people said was that there is “no medication” as such for illnesses caused by the ancestors. When it is recognised that it is the ancestors who are responsible for the misfortune, the correct form of therapy is for the kin to come together and “talk to the ancestors”, which in Tumbuka is referred to as *kuyowoyera*. While beer is normally involved in ceremonies to placate the ancestors, in illness episodes attributed to ancestors, it is the ancestors themselves who dictate what should be used when talking to them. Substances that are perceived by the Tumbuka to be “white” are used when talking to the ancestors. These include maize flour, silver Malawian money, namely MK0.05, MK0.10 and MK0.20 (US\$0.0004, US\$0.0007 and US\$0.001, respectively) and white beads. The white substances are used because it is perceived that the ancestors are also “white”: white in the sense that they do not have any blemish or sin. Ancestors are also compared to wind, which is also perceived by the Tumbuka to be “white”.

In this ritual what the ancestors demand as *mboni*³ is put on a plate and covered by another plate. In this gathering of kin, it is the eldest surviving man/woman of the patrilineal lineage who has the responsibility of talking to the ancestors and in his or her speech he basically says that if it is the spirits who

³ *Mboni* is in most cases money - it can also be flour, a piece of cloth or white beads etc - that is paid to someone so that the ancestral spirits that possess him or her should recognise the giver.

have caused the illness or indeed any misfortune because something has gone terribly wrong, they should forgive them and cure the one suffering, and further that the ancestors should give them protection against the many misfortunes prevailing in this world. According to informants, when this ritual is over there is basically no need for further medication as this “talking” on its own, which involves kin, is adequate therapy. If relatives have been constantly quarrelling or fighting and the ancestors inflict illness upon someone, then those quarrelling have to end the hostilities against one another for a cure to be effected. Whatever is used when talking to the ancestors is supposed to be kept in the house, be it money, cloth or beads. When one would like to use it, he or she tells the ancestors, otherwise calamity may follow. If a piece of cloth was used in this ritual, after keeping it in the house for some time, one may want to give it to a child to wear. Before this is done, the ancestors need to be told that the cloth will be given to a child; and that if the child wears it, it also means that it is the ancestors who have put on it as well.

In case number two, the child was not sick at all, but she was just crying continuously for three days. She had no fever and therefore the parents could not take her to the hospital. Parents were at a loss to explain why the child was crying, hence they decided to consult a diviner who subsequently told them that the crying of the child was a sign that the name that the child had been given was not acceptable. The name *Walyenge* is given to a child whose hope of survival is very slim. If a number of children have died while still young, the parents may not have much hope that the next child will survive. It is assumed that children are being eaten by witches, which is why they are given the name *Walyenge*, which means “let them eat”, as the parents do not hold out any hope for the survival of the child (see Mkandawire, 1968). This name was rejected because one of the child’s ancestors demanded that the child should be named after her. Hence, after talking to her spirit and giving the relevant name to the child, the child stopped crying immediately. Such a case confirms the fact that, in the minds of the Tumbuka, misfortunes caused by the ancestors may not need any medication at all, but rather what has been referred to as kinship therapy (see Janzen, 1978) or relational therapy (Reynolds-Whyte, 1998: 322).

In a study done among the Tumbuka in the mid-1980s, Friedson gives an example of a boy whose illness did not respond to treatment from either the local healer or the mission hospital. After his parents had divorced, the father refused to allow his son to stay in his village⁴, and he went to live with his mother which, according to Tumbuka custom, is unacceptable. Upon consultation with a diviner, it was found that the dead paternal grandfather was the spirit who had inflicted the boy with the illness, because the boy’s father had not allowed him to stay in his village. The spirit further said that if the father did not relent, the child would die (see Friedson, 1996). Friedson also gives the example of Mulaula. In the mid 1980s, Mulaula, a well-known diviner among

⁴ Being a patrilineal society, children belong to the husband and his kin and after divorce, the children are supposed to stay in their father’s village. In this case the father refused.

the Tumbuka, became ill. He tried to cure himself, but failed, and in the end he went to the hospital to seek therapy. After this visit to the hospital, the ancestors appeared to him and told him that he was just wasting his time, as he would not be healed unless he erected the cement tombs for his grandparents, which they had demanded earlier. The illness that Mulaula suffered from incapacitated him so much that he could not continue divining. It was, however, reported later on that after erecting the required tombstone he was cured and resumed his practice (Friedson, 1996).

It can be concluded that just talking with the spirits may not be adequate. The act of talking should either be accompanied by the fulfillment of the demands of the ancestors or their descendants should correct what went wrong. The death of Mr Luhanga's grandson would have been averted if Mr Luhanga had decided to settle in his home village after retiring, and not in Rumphu; Khwima was healed because those who were quarrelling and fighting stopped; and *Walyenge* stopped crying when her name was changed to Alice in accordance with the demands of the ancestors.

8. CONCLUSION

The existence of ancestors and their continued role in the lives of their descendants is a reality for most Tumbuka people. Their existence is manifested in the many misfortunes that are attributed to them by the Tumbuka people, and is revealed through the processes of divination, dreaming and the sighting of certain snake and grasshopper species. What is apparent from this paper is the ancestor's desire to see their descendants living peacefully. Fighting and quarrelling amongst relatives is deplored by the ancestors. Ancestors also desire the continuation of what are described as the Tumbuka customs, for example, that men should not abandon the land of their ancestors and build a home elsewhere. In addition descendants are not supposed to abandon their obligations to their ancestors. Because of the belief and experience of what the ancestors can do, most Tumbuka would rather not anger the ancestors. The belief in ancestors coerces people to behave in the manner approved by the ancestors. Such a belief is therefore a tool for social control.

While illnesses caused by witchcraft need to be identified by diviners, they can sometimes be known by the rapidity with which they progress from simple illness to serious illness and death. There are other diseases like pneumonia that the Tumbuka generally believe are caused by witchcraft. While such diseases can be cured by diviners, we should take note that, in some cases there is need for collaboration between diviners and biomedical practitioners as each might be required to address different aspects of the illness episode.

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