



## Traditional Medicine and Healers in South Africa

by Daleen Krige

With the many changes in South Africa and a renewed challenge to provide accessible primary health care to all, the role of traditional medicine has once again moved into the spotlight. A traditional healer can be described as follows: "Someone who is recognised by the community in which he lives as competent to provide health care by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and certain other methods based on the social, cultural and religious background as well as the prevailing knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causation of disease and disability in the community".<sup>3</sup>

The two main kinds of traditional healer are the *diviner* and the *herbalist*. Traditional healers are not witchdoctors (*izangoma*, Zulu word for "witchdoctor"). Diviners use listening, observation and experience to make a diagnosis aided by the supernatural (communication with ancestors) and the throwing of bones. A person normally does not choose to become a diviner, but rather follows a calling (*thwasa*), which can be disobeyed only at risk of serious (sometimes fatal) illness. An apprentice (*ngaka*) undergoes an apprenticeship of up to seven years with a fully qualified diviner. Only after a ceremonial ritual and a test of the person's abilities can they start practising as a qualified diviner. Sometimes the diviner also trains as a herbalist (*inyanga* [Zulu] or *ixhwele* [Xhosa]) and can practise both healing vocations simultaneously or separately. The herbalist acts as a druggist, dispensing medicines (*muti*) made from natural substances including bark, roots, leaves, animal skin, blood or parts of animals, herbs, or seawater.

To understand traditional African medicine, it is important to understand the life and world views of the traditional Africans. According to Wessels: "The world views of traditional Africans are not integrated but form a complex system in which beliefs concerning ancestral spirits, magic, sorcery, witches and pollution exist together. This loose association provides a natural way of understanding misfortune and provides understandable answers to the vexing questions of the purpose of life".<sup>4</sup> To the traditional African, health thus means to be in harmony with cosmic vitality/energy (e.g. ancestors are involved in the lives of the living and have to be honoured, otherwise they can cause ill-fortune).

Therefore, in the African view, causation of illness is regarded as: natural (accidental or congenital, e.g. mumps, porphyria), animistic (influence of wind, clouds, earth, water on people, e.g. colds, rheumatism), magical (sorcery, witchcraft, e.g. insanity, headache), or neglect of paying homage to ancestral spirits (e.g. misfortune). These examples can vary considerably, due to differences between cultural groups.

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Treatment therefore involves restoring harmony within the body as well as between the body and the cosmos. Medicine also needs to have a strong symbolic meaning, e.g. the belief that white medicine protects against sorcery and red medicine cleanses the blood. It is also believed that characteristics of an animal/plant are transmitted to the user: e.g. the Tswana would use crocodile skin for fever since the crocodile, being a water creature, symbolises cooling-off, or the Zulu would use lion or elephant (or any strong/fierce animal) parts as a potion against anxiety. Diviners will prescribe the wearing of an armband or necklace, made of animal skin, as a protective amulet against evil or illness.

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These medicines are administered in a variety of ways: orally as a liquid (e.g. plant juices or tea from dried plant parts), as a powder/paste (either orally or as an ointment), as a washing solution (in a bath - the healers would often bathe the patient themselves, outside their house, using specially prepared bathwater), applied as inoculations, as inhalations (as a snuff or boiled in water with inhalation of the vapours) or as smoking agents. A steambath is usually used to remove harmful "medicine". Hot liquids are also often sucked from the fingertips to ward off evil or danger. Ground medicines are often administered rectally. In order of popularity, the treatment methods normally employed include: induction of vomiting, administration of an enema, inhalation (either as a powder or vapour), and incisions in the skin with the rubbing of medicines into the incisions. Almost any plant part as well as whole plants are used as the basis from which to prepare medicines.

Here are a few examples of applications of traditional medicines for various ailments, as used by the South Sotho<sup>1</sup>:

Ailment	Treatment
Diarrhoea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Roots of the <i>mosokelo</i> plant are dried and boiled in water. The liquid is taken orally 3x per day.</li></ul>
Stomach ache	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Roots of the <i>sekatapohwana</i> plant dried, pounded and boiled in water.</li><li>• Potassium permanganate dissolved in water.</li><li>• A drop of seawater added to drinking water.</li><li>• <i>leshogwa</i> leaves, dried, pounded, bottled in lukewarm water, and left for a day before use.</li></ul>
Heartburn and gall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Seawater as vomiting agent.</li><li>• Holy water (from a diviner) as vomiting agent.</li></ul>
Nausea and vomiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The inside of a chicken's breast, dried and milled. A pinch of the powder is taken in half a cup of water.</li><li>• A bit of dried pomegranate skin in water taken after each bout of vomiting</li></ul>

Traditional remedies, particularly those involving plant products, are like many pharmaceutical industry products and thus may have associated side effects. It is known amongst herbalists that the toxicity of plants can vary with the season (which may be one reason for low-dosage forms of traditional medicines). Preparation processes are important to toxicity as some (like heating) may eliminate some toxins, but increase toxicity via a chemical change brought about by heating. Research and knowledge of the pharmacologically active compounds in traditional treatments can make a great contribution towards making the methods more systematic and reliable.

Cases of toxicity are especially common in children, when dosage is incorrectly determined. Mortality is often high in such cases as even if the help of a western doctor or health worker is sought, the details of the toxicity are not fully related, either through neglect or ignorance. Such cases are sometimes not even recorded, as the African world view allows for infant deaths as purely the will of the ancestors, and even when they are reported, they are not attributed to traditional medicine because "herbal intoxications are not considered to be an unnatural cause of death"<sup>5</sup> and post-mortems are often not performed. These are all contributing factors to the inadequate knowledge of the properties and toxicity of traditional medicines.

When the incorporation/toleration of traditional healers and methods into the western system are discussed, there are 4 basic models:

- **Exclusive system:** Only western medicine is practised with the total exclusion of any form of traditional medicine. This is probably impractical, as people will use traditional medicine anyway.
- **Tolerance system:** Only western medicine is officially practised, but traditional medicine is not prosecuted. This is currently South African policy.
- **Inclusive system:** Both systems are accepted and exist completely independently of each other. This is the easiest system to implement.
- **Integrated system:** Both systems are merged into a new system that combines the best of both systems.

Since the Alma Ata conference in 1978, there has been increased support for either an inclusive or integrated system. When comparing traditional medicine practices to western uses, it is clear that there are certain areas where the one can be of service to the other. If the traditional healer can be utilised by western medicine in anti-AIDS campaigns or tuberculosis awareness programmes, for example, everyone will gain.

The fact that there are many more traditional healers than western doctors make them valuable health workers within the community; in some areas the ratio can be as high as two thousand to one<sup>3</sup>. It was estimated in 1986 that there were about 100,000 traditional healers in South Africa, as opposed to 20,200 registered medical doctors<sup>2</sup>. The advantage of the traditional healers lies in the fact that they know the cultural

traditions and they have more time to pay attention to the patient's ailments. This way, accessible primary health care within communities can be established, provided that the healers are given the necessary training.

There is a movement towards recognition for traditional healers and their services. According to Evelyn Levitz: "The traditional healer should be formally and legally recognised as a health care resource, but one that operates within totally different paradigms, each with its own code of ethics and criteria. The traditional and western health care services would (then) run parallel to each other with mutual recognition of the services each can provide"<sup>2</sup>. This trend towards recognition is manifested in the formation of two organisations where they may affiliate: the South African Traditional Healers Council (SATHC) and the African National Healers Association (ANHA). Affiliation is not yet compulsory. There is also talk of including a course in traditional healing into the syllabi for medical students to increase awareness and understanding of traditional practices. This has been done by the University of the Witwatersrand. It may also result in a more scientific approach towards dosage.

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Generally speaking, there is greater acceptance of traditional practices, and more people realise that both systems have valuable contributions to offer in the quest for health. Traditional healing and medicines existed in South Africa long before western medicine arrived, and will no doubt continue to exist in the future. If a system can be devised that allows the cultural expression of traditional medicine combined with the scientific advantages of western medicine, both types of healing can profit and the community will reap the benefits of an improved health system.

## References

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