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Descriptions of African Medicinal Traditions: Zulu

As we have observed in our sampling of various aspects of traditional African societies and their beliefs systems, the connection of the individual to the group is felt to a much greater extent in these communities, as opposed norms of involvement in the more individualistic societies of the West. In addition to this strong communal bond, many African cultures also strong believe in a hierarchical structure and practice spirituality literally, with the assumption that their rituals have impact in the spiritual realm. There is a intersection between spirituality and community, which both happen to be very significant aspects of African societies described in Mbiti’s text. The role of the medicine man fits well into this model of spirituality and community as the profession is often associated with many rituals and cures that are based in spiritual philosophy and intended to enact spiritual change to diagnose or to address illness. This essay intends to briefly investigate the set of traditions associated Zulu medicinal practices, and their relevance to the community as well as their grounding in spirituality.

Primarily, Zulu traditional medicinal practices have been conserved relatively well over generations, and the medicines themselves are referred to as *umuthi*. Both the medicine and the administrator of the medicine play a role in the overall conceptualization of these Zulu traditions. To begin, there are many types of practitioners, whose medicinal crafts are derivative from different philosophies. The major two categories are medicine men who derive their products from animal and plant essences, and those who make contact with spirits in order to dispel illnesses caused by malevolent interference. A website containing pertinent information regarding these distinct roles notes: “They are the *inyanga* or herbalist who is concerned with medicines made from plants and animals, the *isangoma* or witchdoctor who makes contact with the ancestral spirits and prescribes medicine according to their dictates and the *isanusi*who is a diviner capable of ‘smelling out’ sorcerers and other evil-doers” (Zuluculture.com 1). From these descriptions, it is also noted that there is a subcategory of spiritualist medicine men, ones that focus on dealing with the spirits of ancestors, which are more relevant to the community, and ones that are more specialized towards finding and dispelling malevolent influences that may be causing sickness in the individual. The classification of the types of Zulu medicine men is the first significant point, as it shows how medicine men interact differently and occupy various roles depending on how they choose to address sickness.

Moreover, another point of importance lies in the methods of diagnosis, of which there are three main methods. These methods are listed as (1) the throwing of bones, also known as *amathambo*, (2) transmental diagnoses, and (3) perceptive diagnoses. Consider the throwing of bones first. This action of throwing represents a ritual that is performed in order to give knowledge based on the pattern in which the bones fall or land in, it is usually performed individually and does not require the intervention or procedural knowledge of a doctor (Zuluculture.com 1). In the technique of transmental diagnosis, the patient is put into a trance or otherwise altered state of consciousness using drugs, plants, or other methods, in order for a doctor to more directly access what ails the patient. The above technique appears to involve the *inyanga* classification of medicine men more heavily. Finally, in perceptive diagnosis, the doctor procedures through a skill that “implies the ability to see or feel and interpret the various vibrations emitted by the patient (almost like an aura. The doctor sits a few feet away from the patient and, without having to exchange words, he or she will physically perceive the pain actually experienced by the patient” (Zuluculture.com 1). These methods outline the general diagnostic procedures undertaken by Zulu medicine men.

After the process of diagnosis, there are a variety of treatments available based on the result of the diagnosis. As Zuluculture.com notes, animal medicines are selected based on the essence or characteristics of the animal, and “…despite the toxicity of certain animal tissues, their bones, skin, teeth and viscera are often used ritualistically or medically. Many medicines include these animal ingredients, but particularly their fats…” (1).The other types of treatments lie in a category known as “magical plant medicines”, which are valued for their psychoactive properties and ability to enhance positive emotions. Among these plants are the *ncinda*, the *ukuchatha*, and an emetic (agent to induce vomiting), *wokuphalaza* (Zuluculture.com 1). Furthermore, these medicines are referred to as *muti* in Zulu culture, and in contemporary contexts, they seem to represent the lingering cultural beliefs of the Zulu people. For instance, report John Carlin notes that whale fat is used to ward off lightning: “They smear it on their bodies so they can go outside when the sky is thundering” (1). This inclination to buy medicines highlights the literal and incredibly physical relationship that Zulu people possess with their environment. Carlin further notes the astonishing statistic that these traditional medicines are often bought by a larger share of the population than Western medicines: “It is big business in South Africa: more than 70 per cent of the black population resort to traditional African ways when beset by ill health…” (1).These facts highlight the incredibly relevant role that these traditional medicines and medicine men still occupy in present society.

Finally, we have considered the aspects of the medicine and their related procedures, but the last significant point regarding the medicine men is the appearance and social rank of such an administrator. Alfred T. Bryant notes in a journal article detailing his experience with Zulu medicine and medicine men that: “Compared with the sleek and imposing personality of the chief, the medicine-man presents quite a mean appearance… Along with the chief he shares the greatest power in the savage tribe – not, it is true, the power of supreme authority, but a power over life and death not less effective and real, though hidden and mysterious” (3). Here, a glimpse of the societal role and standing of the medicine man is given, and it is evident that these medicine men are given higher positions in these communities because of their communion with the spiritual realm. This indicates an overall respect for the spiritual realm in these traditional African societies.

Ultimately, through this investigation we have shown a few major aspects of Zulu traditional medicine and highlighted the role of the medicine men. The classifications of medicine men are discussed, along with the procedural aspects of diagnosing a disease, as well as the available treatments. Afterward, the spiritually linked role of the medicine men, and the respect that the community affords the medicine men is detailed, showing how the concepts of community and spirituality are relevant here.

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