

Merging pharmacopoeia: understanding the historical origins of incorporative pharmacopoeial processes among Xhosa healers in Southern Africa

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This paper focusses on Xhosa healers and their pharmacopoeias in Southern Africa. Its preliminary aim is to show that Xhosa healers have incorporated Western pharmaceutical products into their traditional dispensaries. The primary aim of the paper is to explain the trend towards medicinal incorporation in terms of the historical development of health and health care in Xhosa-speaking regions. Finally, it is suggested that Xhosa healers utilise Western medicines for their symbolic value, allowing them to negotiate some of the historical precedents which have had the effect of marginalising their profession.

Key words: healers; history; incorporation.

Introduction

In Southern Africa, traditional healers have incorporated a vast number of commercially-available pharmaceutical products into their dispensaries. Ranging from penicillin to potassium permanganate, from cough mixtures to castor oil, these products are commonly purchased from drug stores, supermarkets, peddlers and black markets. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the extent of such incorporation among Xhosa healers* of Southern Africa and to suggest the historical conditions which prompted these processes of incorporation. We feel that this may provide a valuable context in which to understand the development and growth of pharmacopoeial trends in Southern Africa and elsewhere.

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*Among the Xhosa, there are two categories of healers: the herbalist (*ixhwele*; pl. *amaxhwele*) and the diviner (*igqirha*; pl. *amagqirha*). Both treat illnesses and diseases, although the diviner is largely known for his or her ability to communicate with ancestral spirits.

Among the Xhosa-speaking people of Southern Africa, a wide range of remedies are used to combat disease and illness. In an on-going study intended to document remedies used by the Xhosa, we have isolated over 100 medicinal preparations (see Appendix). As the list suggests, most Xhosa remedies are organic in origin. Such medicines are known as *imithi* (sing. *umthi*), and include remedies derived from trees, shrubs, herbs, leaves, bulbs and roots. Yet the list obscures an important fact, namely that an increasing number of organic ingredients are combined with pharmaceuticals and other products which are widely available throughout the region. It is common to discover that the dispensaries of traditional healers contain not only a wide variety of organic substances, but also commercially-available products like Disprin, cough mixtures, purgatives, glucose lozenges, castor oil, potassium permanganate, washing soda, asbestos flint and even liquid paraffin.

It is only since the late 1800s that Xhosa healers have utilised Western pharmaceutical products. Why should they have chosen to do so? In what way do these products work to their advantage? What are the historical conditions of this process

of medicinal incorporation? To answer these questions, we need to consider the historical context of health and healing among the Xhosa and how these conditions encouraged the Xhosa healer to combine Western medical products with traditional healing substances.

The Xhosa: A brief medical history

Before 1800, Xhosa-speaking people had no contact with Western medical care. When ill, people had to rely on the skills of local healers and their dispensaries. With the arrival of British settlers in the eastern regions of Southern Africa in 1820, local inhabitants were for the first time introduced to Western medical products. Each settler family had its medical kit and one family member was usually skilled in the treatment of minor illnesses. Occasionally riders were dispatched to travel through Xhosa country, and their reputation as bearers of efficacious medicines quickly spread.

In the mid-1800s, mission churches pioneered the first hospitals in the Xhosa-speaking regions of Southern Africa (Gelfand, 1984). This period coincided with a dramatic increase in illness and disease. The Xhosa people had to contend with formerly unknown diseases like tuberculosis and measles, both of which claim heavy fatalities to this day. The mid-1800s was also a period of intense military conflict between the Xhosa and British forces; a conflict which had virtually destroyed the Xhosa economy by 1880, leaving people starving and susceptible to disease (see Peires, 1981). In 1856, the prophecy of a young girl, Nongqause, encouraged the Xhosa to kill all their cattle and plant no grain in the hope that the European invaders would be swept into the sea (Hunter, 1979). Widespread famine resulted, and British authorities were forced to set up aid camps and provide food supplies. Mission hospitals were filled to capacity with starving and sickly people.

With the discovery of gold and coal in the Johannesburg regions at the turn of the century, impoverished Xhosa men left their homes to seek work. By 1904, 77,000 blacks, a large proportion Xhosa-speaking, were employed in gold and coal mines (Maylam, 1986: 142). There they worked under abysmal conditions, exposed to a range of

occupational diseases hitherto unknown to the Xhosa people (Green and Miller, 1980). When these workers returned home, they carried their infections with them, thereby creating an ideal breeding ground for the further spread of disease (see Packard, 1989). Tuberculosis was the most widespread of these diseases and had attracted considerable concern by 1935. Funds were granted for the erection of tuberculosis wards and by 1961, 55% of all available hospital beds in Xhosa-speaking areas were reserved for tuberculosis patients (Cape Archives, 1961). Yet the disease profile remained high, and today tuberculosis, measles, cholera, diphtheria, meningococcal infection, tetanus and poliomyelitis account for over 99% of notifications in Xhosa-speaking territory (Development Information, 1987).

With the introduction of diseases like tuberculosis and measles and specialised Western centres of treatment, the role of Xhosa healers changed. Experience quickly taught patients that local healers had neither the skills nor the equipment to deal with these essentially foreign diseases. In addition, Western practitioners in the 1800s and early 1900s waged an open campaign to discourage patients from consulting local healers. Under Western eyes, recourse to Xhosa healers delayed effective medical treatment with disastrous effects on a patient's condition. While this sentiment may not have been shared by patients, it is telling that rural health care centres have become increasingly popular among local people (see Simon, 1989). This popularity has its origins in the historical observation that Western practitioners achieve health with the use of exotic and powerful drugs. From the medical kits of the early settlers to the bewildering variety of pharmaceutical products on the drugstore shelves, the faith in Western medication has grown from strength to strength. Thus it is not surprising that patients as far afield as Taiwan (Kleinman, 1980), Zambia (Spring, 1985) and Southern Africa (Simon, 1989), travel great distances to receive multi-coloured tablets and injections from Western practitioners. In some parts of the world, this faith in Western drugs has been greatly exploited by local entrepreneurs, who openly peddle a variety of pharmaceutical drugs in market places (see, for instance, Janzen, 1979).

At the same time, the prominence of local heal-

ers has declined to a point where it is increasingly common to hear a rural herbalist or diviner lament the poor rate of consultation these days. Tales of flourishing trade before the "white doctor" arrived are told to young healer-apprentices by their mentors. Yet the healer's role has not disappeared. As patients gained increasing access to Western medical services, so healers gained similar access to numerous outlets for pharmaceutical products. Among those who went to work on the mines in and around Johannesburg (see above) were healers, bereft of a significant income in the rural areas. In the urban areas, these healers had direct access to drugstores and a variety of other outlets for medicines. Over time, they were able to supplement their dispensaries with Western products not available in the rural areas of Xhosa country. On their return home, they treated patients with a new and exotic array of medicinal substances.

After experimenting with a variety of pharmaceuticals, healers quickly realized that Western products have a strong symbolic value.* Colourful pills and lotions were popular while dull powders and liquids were less enthusiastically received by patients. Today this attribution persists and healers will go to considerable lengths to present brightly coloured medicines, often resorting to food colouring to achieve the desired effect. With careful scrutiny of current practices in modern medical services, healers have also been able to imitate their Western counterparts. White laboratory coats and stethoscopes are obtained by many healers, and worn to emphasize their allegiance to modern medical trends. Healers' practices also boast shelves with contemporary medical publications, strategically positioned to catch the patient's eye. Medicines are decanted into containers with medicinal brand-names on them and dispensed to patients.

Discussion

As Helman (1984) has pointed out, the mannerisms, dress and equipment of medical practi-

tioners symbolize or represent attributes associated with the medical profession. White laboratory coats, for instance, symbolize membership (however peripheral) of a particular healing profession, and communicate a sense of legitimacy or credibility (Helman, 1984). A healer's dress, actions and modes of treatment refer less to the individual healer than to the attributes of his or her role as representative of that special category of persons who constitute the official healing profession (Helman, 1984). This is not to say that Xhosa healers aim to integrate themselves into modern medical practice. Instead, they seek to exploit the various symbols associated with Western practice in order to attribute to themselves some of the skills and modes of treatment by which these practices have attained popularity. The incorporation of pharmaceutical drugs into traditional medical repertoires therefore represents an incorporation of symbols by which patients measure the desirability of particular forms of therapy. For the Xhosa healer, such incorporation marks a claim to the status patients have granted Western medical practice. In this way, the Xhosa healer enacts a bid to neutralize the marginality which history has dealt the traditional healing profession.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to show that the incorporation process whereby Xhosa healers have included Western pharmaceutical products into their traditional repertoires is intimately bound to the historical development of health and health care in Southern Africa. The impact and prevalence of diseases like tuberculosis and measles encouraged sufferers to seek treatment from Western medical services, while local healers were increasingly marginalized through the lack of medical resources. At the same time, Western medical centres established firm symbolic associations with its utilisation of seemingly exotic medications and modes of treatment. To counter their marginalization, healers have sought to appropriate a number of these symbolic items, notably Western pharmaceutical products. In this way, Xhosa healers are attempting to negotiate a new and complementary position in that marketplace of medicine over which they once had full control.

*As Ngubane (1977) has pointed out in her study of Zulu symbols, the colour of medicines, rather than their pharmacological properties, are considered their most important attribute.

Appendix

TABLE 1

XHOSA MEDICINAL PLANTS AND THEIR USAGES

Xhosa vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
ubhezo/umbhezo <i>Crabbea nana</i>	Insecticide; reputedly used to inflict excessive coughing
ubuhlungu bechanti <i>Eucomis punctata</i>	Against "bad blood" and rheumatism
ubuhlungu benamba <i>Acokanthera</i> : <i>Melianthus major</i> <i>Melianthus minor</i>	Against any infection; snake bites; gall disorders in goats
ubuhlungu bendlovu <i>Strophantus speciosus</i>	Reputedly used to render someone awe-inspiring (isithunzi)
ubuhlungu benyoka <i>Acokanthera spectabilis</i>	Against snake-bites
ubuhlungu benyushu <i>Teucrium africanum</i>	Against snake-bite; milt-sickness; sore throat
ubuhlungu besigcawu <i>Blepharis capensis</i> <i>Crabbea hirsuta</i>	Snake/tarantilla bite; milt-sickness; toothache
ubuhlungwana <i>Wedelia natalensis</i>	For stomach and intestinal complaints. Roots for dysentery and diarrhoea; leaves for febrile complaints/wounds
ubulawu <i>Cyathula carpulacea</i>	For skin blemishes, pimples, removal of dirt from chest; for stomach disorders, peaceful sleep and good dreams
ubushwa <i>Venidium arcotoides</i>	For colds, wounds, sores and noisy ears
ubuvimba <i>Withania somnifera</i>	For wounds, sores, ring-worm black gall sickness, neglected calves, gangrenous rectitis, venereal disease
icima mlilo <i>Pentamisia prunelloides</i> <i>eswalp</i> <i>Pentamisia variables</i>	For stomach disorders and scrofula; roots for piles, gangrenous rectitis; rheumatism
i dolo lenkonyane <i>Rumex lanceolatus</i> <i>Rumex eckloni</i>	Against tape worms; burning urine and gonorrhoea
i dungamzi <i>Euclea lanceolata</i>	Male plant: against dropsy female plant: against stomach and intestinal complaints
i dwara <i>Senecio latifolius</i>	Against wounds/sores, especially on horses
ugqogqa <i>Bowiea volubilis</i>	A purgative, said to "refresh" the blood

TABLE 1 (continued)

Xhosa Vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
igqokisi ?	Against fainting spells
ikhalakhala ilabatheka <i>Hypoxis latifolia</i>	? For heart complaints, impotency, barrenness; insanity; vermin-killer
imbhozisa <i>Embolia krausii</i>	Against tape worms and catarrh
imfingwane <i>Alephantorisa burchelli</i>	Used to treat dehydration
impepho <i>Helichrysum stenopterum</i>	For ophthalmia; also used to treat bed of expectant mothers
imvane <i>Asparagus stipulaceus</i>	For toothache; to protect children
ulamula <i>Citrus limon</i>	Against influenza
ulathile ?	Leaves used to cure film over eyes
umabophe umthi wamadoda <i>Plumbago capensis</i>	A "magical knot" leaving enemies incapacitated
umagageni ?	For luck; to be victorious in fights; to drive away evil spirits
umagaqane/ugqogqa <i>Bowiea volubilis</i>	Purgative
umagwanyola	For burns by fomentation
umanaye ?	For gall and chest troubles
umathunga <i>Cyrtanthus obliquus</i>	For fractures, scrofula, chest complaints and sprains
umavumbuka ?	For piles
umfincamfincane <i>Leaenitus leonurus</i>	For colds, coughs and snake bites
umgalagala <i>Buxus macowanii</i>	Used in a vapour bath to treat mental illness
umgunya <i>Celastus buxifolius</i>	For rheumatism and heart complaints
umgwenye <i>Harpephyllum caffrum</i>	Edible wild fruit
umgxam <i>Schotia latifolia</i> <i>Brachypetala</i>	For dysentery; diarrhoea and asthma
umhlankosi/umhlakuva ?	To cure boils by fomentation
umhlonyane/msuzwane <i>Artemisia afra</i>	For influenza, asthma, rash, milt-sickness; leaves used for febrile complaints
umkhiwane <i>Ficus capensis thun</i>	For diarrhoea among children

TABLE 1 (continued)

Xhosa Vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
umkhuhlu <i>Trichilia emetica</i>	For stomach complaints and backaches. Applied as enema
umkhwangu <i>Trichilis emetica</i>	Used as snuff for headaches, for catarrh and intestinal parasites
umkhwenkwe <i>Pittosporum viridiflorum</i>	For gall-sickness and gladders
umlungumabele <i>Fagara capensis</i>	For chest and stomach complaints and coughs
ummemezi ?	Bark used to enhance complexion
umnonono <i>Olinia cymosa</i>	For stomach disorders; infertility
umnquma <i>Olea africana</i>	For tape worms; to ward off lightning
umnyamanzi ?	?
umqhwashu <i>Sideroxylum inerme</i>	For gall-sickness
umsolo womlambo <i>Matricaria nigellaefolia</i>	For rash; protection against "river-people"
umthombothi <i>Spirostachys africanus</i>	Leaves used for boils by fomentation; to relieve head-aches; remove pimples; to ward off lightning
umihuma <i>Solanum aculeastrum</i>	For scrofula, colds, coughs, dysentery and syphilis
umvusankunzi <i>Carissa bispinosa</i>	To treat impotence
umvuthuza ?	For protection against evil spirits
umvuvu <i>Celtis africana</i>	To protect the home; to ward off lightning; to enhance complexion
umwelela <i>Liliaceae</i>	For palpitation
umxhalanxa <i>Hypoxis obliqua</i>	For cuts and wounds
umya <i>Cannabis sativa</i>	Smoked like opium — for asthma and bots (botfly maggots) in horses
indlebe yemvu <i>Helichrysum appendiculatum</i>	Styptic. Also used for washing body and to bring good luck
undlebe zebhokhwe ?	Used after circumcision to treat the wounds of boys
undlebe zimhlophe ?	?
ingcobo ?	For mental illnesses
inkambi ?	For headaches and toothaches

TABLE 1 (continued)

Xhosa Vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
unobuthongwana <i>Cassia mimosides</i>	Induces sleep; reputedly used to engage in love affairs undisturbed
inqwebeba <i>Crinum bulbisperum</i>	For gall sickness in cattle and humans; to refresh the body after washing
intekwana ?	Facial lotion used as charm
intelezi <i>Aloe tenuior</i> <i>Aloe humilis</i> <i>Bulbine asphodeloides</i> <i>Cotyledon orbiculata</i> <i>Crassula rubicunda</i>	Styptic, for scrofula, dehydration, palpitation; for protecting the home
intlungunyembe <i>Acokanthera venenata</i>	For redwater in cattle; snake-bites
intolwane <i>Elephantorisa burchielli</i> <i>Elephantorisa elephantina</i>	For protecting people and cattle; for dysentery, diarrhoea, febrile complaints and dehydration
into yomtwana ?	For painful hip bones; to induce injury (ibekelo)
intsema <i>Euphorbia pugniformis</i>	Purgative; to ease painful sprains; for ringworm and cancer
intshongwe <i>Xysmalobium undulatum</i> <i>Laphathifolium</i>	For wounds, old sores, sore eyes, As tonic; for distemper in dogs
intsihlo <i>Capparis critifolia</i>	For gall sickness; as emetic in cases of bewitchment; to ward off lightning
nyazangoma ?	For fits
inyibiba <i>Richardia africana</i>	For dangling
um-ink ?	For painful hip bones; leaves used to kill maggots
uphuluka bemphethe <i>Euphorbia</i>	For dangling; energy and strength
iphuzilomlambo <i>Cunnersa perpensa</i>	Used for bots in horses and cattle; For urinary complaints, impotency, barrenness and rheumatism
iqwili <i>Alepiea amatymbica</i>	For hysteria, coughing, peace of mind; stomach disorders
uqangalabe ?	Reputed to relieve cancer; for bad sores in animals (mixed with dungamzi — <i>Euclea lanceolata</i>)
uqaqaqa <i>Triticum junceum</i>	For gout

TABLE 1 (continued)

Xhosa Vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
uqobo-qobo ?	For pubic lice (lit.: pig-lice)
isikolpati ?	For peaceful sleep
isindiyandiya <i>Bersama lucens</i>	To ward off lightning; for palpitation; hiccoughs; as a charm to win court cases; for impotence and barrenness
sihawu-hawu ?	For whooping cough
isihlungu senamba <i>Acokanthera</i> sp.	Mixed with potash for snake and scorpion bites
isicakathi <i>Chlorophytum</i> <i>Salvia scabra</i>	To ease labour pains during birth; to clean bowels of newly-born
isidumo <i>Ilex mitis</i>	To lighten the complexion; for acne
isiqungu <i>Andropogon marginatus</i>	For intestinal parasites
isithithibala ?	For "bad blood"
isivumbampunzi ?	For infants possessed by evil spirits
isisende <i>Loranthus viscum</i>	For swelling of the scrotum
ushaqa (Zulu) <i>Berkheya</i> sp.	For sore eyes; roots for rheumatism, skin diseases and ophthalmia
usondelandange <i>Scutia myrtina</i>	To enhance appearance
iswadi ?	Mixed with ingcolo for mental illness
matsane <i>Galium petiolarie</i>	Treatment of "blue" or "dark" blood
mavumbuka ?	For piles
itswele lomlambo ?	For coughs, chest pains; to protect children
ivimbela ?	To ward off lightning
uvivane ?	To aid child-birth
uvuma/vumandaba <i>Hibiscus pusillus</i>	For facial blemishes; for good luck
izicwe <i>Helichrysum pendunculare</i>	Styptic; for inflammations (mostly used by boys after circumcision)
ixonya ?	To ward off lightning
uzongwana ?	To bring good luck

TABLE 1 (continued)

Xhosa Vernacular Botanical name*	Usages
uzotho <i>Oxalis smithiana</i>	For tape worms

*Botanical names drawn from Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk, 1962.

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