



Health and Ancestors: The Case of South Africa and Beyond

by David Bogopa

Abstract

Ancestral belief is central to such an extent to the world view of many cultural groups in South Africa that it inevitably influences health matters. One thus cannot talk about health in South Africa without acknowledging the reality of ancestral belief. This paper explores the relationship between health and ancestors in the South African context, with various case studies presented to illustrate the experiential reality of this relationship and the significance of ritual practices in this regard. Pointing to both intra- and inter-cultural conflict in respect of these traditional practices, the paper concludes by emphasising the importance of promoting cross-cultural tolerance and respect for traditional beliefs and ritual practices among both adults and children.

A Brief Historical Background

Ancestor worship is an age-old belief; which can be traced back to the dawn of history. It was extensively developed by the Egyptians and was inherited by the forebears of the Zulu nation (Binns, 1974, p. 78). Lindemans (1997) confirms that ancestor worship occurs in ancient cultures throughout the world and that it plays a vital role in primitive religions even in modern times.

Ancestor worship is founded on the belief that the dead live on and are capable of influencing the lives of those who are still living. It is believed that ancestors are capable of both blessing and cursing those who are still living. Hence, their worship is inspired by both respect and fear. According to Fortes (1965, p. 122), ancestor worship looms large in the anthropological image of sub-Saharan Africa. Ancestors have mystical powers and authority, and they retain an important role in the world of the living. Kopytoff (1971) describes the relationship of ancestors to their living kinsmen as ambivalent, as it can be both punitive and benevolent and sometimes even capricious. Pauw (1969, p. 51) lends further

credence to this in describing how traditional beliefs, particularly with reference to ancestors (*izinyanya*), still play an important role in the life of African people who have migrated to urban areas.

Traditional healers often facilitate communication between the living and the dead and are reputed to divine the cause of a person's illness or social problems by throwing bones to interpret the will of the dead ancestors (Madamombe, 2006, p. 11).

Who Are the Ancestors?

Hammond-Tooke (1994, p. 2) emphasizes that the ancestral spirit forms the foundation of the Southern Bantu religion. All cultural groups have a special name to refer to the ancestors, and the names for these special beings are more often used in the plural form as a sign of showing respect.

Different terms are used by various cultural groups in South Africa to refer to the ancestors. For example, in the Sesotho language, ancestors are known as *badimo*, in isiXhosa they are known as *izinyanya*, while in isiZulu they are known as *amadlozi*. Hammond-

Tooke (1989, p. 59) uses the above-mentioned terminology to refer to ancestors in the respective cultural groups. He further mentions that in Tsonga culture ancestors are known as *shikwembu*, while in Venda culture ancestors are known as *midzimu*.

In order to understand who the ancestors are, one needs to have a clear understanding of the nature of kinship groupings beyond the immediate family, as the ancestors are held to be the deceased members of the family (Hammond-Tooke, 1989, p. 59).

Ancestors are the deceased senior males of the clan, which comprises the descendants of a common great grandfather (Mayer & Mayer, 1974; Wilson, 1982). Further, Hunter (1936, p. 123) has noted among the Mpondo that all the deceased old people reputedly become ancestors.

According to Buhmann (1984, pp. 27-28), ancestors are the "living dead"; they are the clan members who are called "shades" in anthropological literature. The "living dead" have favourite places where they congregate, such as the area opposite the entrance door of the main hut of the homestead (*entla*). Another favourite place of the "living dead" is the cattle kraal opposite the entrance gate. There are also non-clan-related ancestors, namely "People of the River" and "People of the Forest".

The ancestors are known as *mizimu* within the context of the Tumbuka culture in northern Malawi. The Tumbuka believe that, when someone dies, the body is buried, but the spirit departs from the body. The Tumbuka people conceptualize *mizimu* as dead parents or grandparents (Munthali, 2006, p. 370).

Research Objectives

In many instances, South Africans find themselves at loggerheads, largely because they do not understand each other's world view. There is a high level of ethnocentrism which often creates conflict between different cultures and even among members of the same culture. The main aim of this paper is to provide an explanation of how some cultures, within the culturally diverse context of South Africa, view the link between health and ancestors. According to Burhmann (1984, p. 31), in order to understand the Xhosa cosmology, for example, one needs a holistic approach, in that one needs to understand the historical background, politics, economy, religion, health system, and so on. To elaborate, the Xhosa health view is based on indigenous religion and ideology, and as such the treatment for any physical or mental dysfunction among the Xhosa-speaking people requires not only the co-operation and active

treatment of the patient, but also that of other members of the family. There are certain ritual ceremonies that cannot be performed without some relatives of the patient being available to fulfil certain obligations. In addition, there is no ritual ceremony that can be successful without the guidance and co-operation of the ancestors.

The aim here is to show the importance of ancestors within the context of some of the South African cultures, particularly those cultures in which ritual ceremonies have traditionally been, and still are, performed. Ritual ceremonies are performed throughout the life-span, marking different stages of life, such as the birth stage and maturity stage, and even after a person has died. For example, the ritual ceremony known as *imbeleko* relates to the birth stage. When a woman has a newborn baby, she is expected to stay in her house for ten days performing various ritual ceremonies. After ten days, when the mother leaves the house, a white goat is slaughtered. The mother eats some of the ritual meat known as the *intsonyama* (the meat on the inside of the right front leg). This ritual ceremony is performed to thank the ancestor spirits for protecting both the baby and mother. If the ritual is not performed, it is believed that the child will continuously wet its bed and will be disobedient (Pauw, 1994, p. 12).

Following the above-mentioned birth stage, there must be a ritual ceremony (*ukushwama*) before the initiates can go through the *ukwaluko* process and after the initiates have graduated from the *ukwaluko* process. It is believed that performing the fore-mentioned ritual ceremonies is to thank the ancestors for protecting the initiates.

Further, when a person has passed through the above-mentioned two stages of birth and maturity and is ready to get married, different ritual ceremonies are performed throughout the process of *ilobola* up until the marriage has been concluded. It is widely believed that performing these ritual ceremonies serves to create a bond between two families and to introduce the couple to the ancestors.

It is also important to slaughter for the ancestors when someone within the family has passed away. Vilakazi (1965, pp. 91-92) outlines different stages of mourning within the Zulu culture. Firstly, the family slaughters a cow or a goat a day before the burial day. Secondly, a ritual ceremony (*hlamba izindla*) is performed a week after the burial day and is followed by another ritual ceremony (*zilela ofile*) which is performed a month after the burial day. Lastly, a ritual ceremony (*buyisa*) is performed a year later. It is believed that failing to perform these ritual

ceremonies might have a negative impact on the health of the family members.

Research Methodology

The research tools employed in this research include, among others, interviews. Person to person interviews were conducted with a view to eliciting individual perspectives on issues related to health and ancestors. To supplement the interviews, informal discussions were held with various people. Secondary material was also consulted, ranging from newspaper articles to published scholarly texts such as journals and books relevant to the topic.

Part of the Problem

Part of the problem within the context of South Africa, and particularly within many African communities, is that there is an ongoing debate about the existence of ancestors and the relevance of ritual ceremonies. In this regard, three broad categories of people can be identified. Firstly, there are the Christians within the African communities who do not see any reason to perform ritual ceremonies. Secondly, there are the non-Christians who believe in performing ritual ceremonies from time to time. The last category is comprised of those who are Christians but still believe in performing ritual ceremonies. In addition, intercultural conflict may occur between South African communities, particularly within multi-cultural residential areas, due to misunderstanding of ritual ceremonies. For example, several cases exist where African families found it difficult to slaughter an ox (*inkabi*) for ritual purposes because neighbours did not understand the importance of the practice.

Among many African cultures in South Africa, the birth of a child (particularly a first-born baby) is an important event in the sense that it increases the status of the parents. According to Pauw (1994, pp. 10-11), the inability of a wife to have children is of a great concern among the Xhosa people. If a wife does not fall pregnant within three months to a year of married life, then her husband and a few relatives will take her to a diviner (*igqirha*) for a check up. Within the context of the Xhosa culture, the reason for infertility might be associated with the failure to perform *ukuthombisa* (a ritual ceremony for girls). It might also be associated with witchcraft, and it could also be associated with the quarrels with ancestors for failing to honour them in terms of performing certain important ritual ceremonies. Within the Xhosa culture, it is believed that when a baby continuously wets its bed and is also disobedient, it is as a result of the failure by the family to perform a certain ritual ceremony for him or her.

Within the context of Xhosa culture, as with many other African cultures in South Africa, boys are required to go to what is referred to in Xhosa as *ekwalukweni* and in Sotho as *komeng* in order to be recognised as a man. Currently, there is a huge problem of initiates dying in the Eastern Cape and other parts of South Africa. One of the reasons for the death of the initiates, particularly within the Xhosa culture, is believed to be that some parents have a tendency to not perform ritual ceremonies for their sons before sending them to *ekwalukweni*. For example, there is an important ritual ceremony known as *ukushwama*. In this ritual ceremony, a goat is slaughtered and a boy is given a right limb to eat in order to prevent misfortunes (*amashwa*) before he can be taken to an initiation school (Bogopa, 2007, p. 56).

There is a tendency by young couples, particularly in urban settings, to opt for elopement. In many African cultures there is no room for elopement, as any marriage involving the African people will not receive the blessings or approval of the ancestors if it is concluded without following the route of paying bride-wealth. This is referred to as *ilobola* in the Nguni languages and *magadi/mahadi* in Sesotho languages. It is widely believed that failing to pay bride-wealth might result in a situation where the couple will experience misfortunes, which may include giving birth to abnormal children (Bogopa, 1999, p. 34).

Vilakazi (1965, p. 89) states that among the Zulu-speaking people the causes of diseases and misfortunes are believed to be linked to ancestral spirits, particularly when they are angry. The Zulu-speaking people believe, for example, that, if a particular ancestor had a fiery temper (*enolaka*), he would come down with great harshness when he felt offended.

Furthermore, Booyens (1985, p. 141) discovered three categories of illness causation among the Tswana-speaking urbanites in his research findings. These categories are: illness as a result of sorcery, natural illness, and illness caused by the ancestors. Illnesses which are believed to have been caused by ancestors include, among many others, strokes, mumps, leprosy and vitiligo.

The above-mentioned examples are some of the problems commonly experienced by the majority of the African people in South Africa. Many other problems, however, are also attributed to the influence of ancestors on health.

Selected South African and Malawian Examples

It was reported in various newspapers that a 28-year-old man had been told to pay his father's bride-wealth (*ilobola*) or else he must live with the consequences. This man was advised by a traditional healer (a *sangoma*) that his poor health was a direct result of his father's failure to pay *ilobola* for his mother. According to the newspaper reports, his father died in 1985 without having paid *ilobola*. According to the traditional healer, the ancestors were now holding his son responsible for the 'outstanding' *ilobola* payment ("Outstanding lobola", *City Press*, 1999, p. 25; "Son to pay", *The Sunday Times*, 1999, p. 1).

It was also reported in 2004 that a popular South African gospel singer and a staunch Christian stunned his friends and fans when he underwent the *ukwaluko* process in Cape Town to mark the passage from boyhood to manhood. Before he went to *ukwaluko*, he had a drug problem; although he went to a rehabilitation centre, his problem persisted. Members of the community suggested that he consult traditional healers. Eventually the traditional healer he consulted established that the gospel singer had not gone to *ukwaluko* and suggested this as a reason for his misfortune. He then went through the *ukwaluko* process – and, after three weeks, he recovered completely (Witbooi, 2004).

In South Africa, many boys have lost their lives while going through the *ukwaluko* process. According to earlier statistics, in the period between 1 October 1994 and 1 February 1995, 743 initiates were admitted to various hospitals countrywide. During the same period, 34 cases of death and penile mutilation were recorded. Prior to this, 222 initiates were hospitalised in the period between December 1988 and June 1993 (Meintjies, 1998, p. 68).

Statistics show that, in the Eastern Cape, 13 young men were admitted to Umtata General Hospital, of which three were severely dehydrated. Elsewhere, more than 100 boys have been admitted to hospitals in the Limpopo province with septic circumcision wounds, while eight *ukwaluko* institutions in the Limpopo province have been closed down. In December 2003, approximately 12 deaths were reported due to botched circumcisions, while approximately 92 initiates were admitted to hospitals countrywide ("Botched circumcisions", *Daily Sun*, 2004, p. 5).

The above-mentioned deaths have been attributed to a number of factors, including the failure to perform an important ritual known as *ukushwama* within the context of Xhosa culture. This ritual ceremony must

be performed by the parents before they can take their sons through the *ukwaluko* process. As previously mentioned, traditionally a goat must be slaughtered and the boy must be given a right limb to eat in order to avoid misfortunes. The purpose of the ritual is to directly communicate with the ancestors so that they may look after the boy for the whole duration of the *ukwaluko* process.

The South African Constitution clearly states that "Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice..." (1996, p. 15). This Constitutional right is, however, not always respected, particularly in the institutional context. It was recently reported in the newspaper that the principal of Springs High School in the East Rand in the Gauteng province of South Africa had turned "a beady eye" on a learner's cultural tradition. A grade 10 learner wore a bead necklace undetected for several months before the prefects at the school reported the matter to the principal, who decided to cut it off with a pair of scissors. According to the boy's elder sisters, he had started to wear the necklace a month after his mother's death. Initially, the boy refused to wear the necklace as a process of mourning and he became seriously ill; he recovered, however, once he started wearing it ("School headmaster", *The Sunday Times*, 2009, p. 5).

A traditional healer in Malawi claimed that a Mr Luhanga's father, who had died in the early 1960s, communicated a message to her through a dream. The message was that Mr Luhanga must go back to his original village when he retires from work. When the traditional healer related her dream to Mr Luhanga, she told him that, if he did not heed the call, then something terrible would happen to him. Mr Luhanga decided to postpone his departure to his original village due to the fact that his daughter was still attending school and he could not leave his daughter behind. Unfortunately, one day, as Mr Luhanga's grandson was playing in the yard, he fell into a big pot of water and died instantly. At the funeral, the traditional healers, as well as some of the elders in his village, explained that Mr Luhanga's late father (ancestor) was responsible for the grandson's death. Mr Luhanga was terrified after experiencing the death of his grandson, and, fearing further affliction from ancestors, then decided to return to his home village. Since he settled in his home village he has not had any misfortunes in his household (Munthali, 2006, pp. 367-368).

Perspectives from Interviews

According to a man from a Xhosa background, "*Imbeleko is a ritual ceremony done to welcome the*

birth of a newborn baby in the family and introduce the newborn baby to the ancestors. It is done fourteen days after the newborn arrives while the mother is still not allowed to go out of the *ifuku* [a secluded place within the homestead where a woman stays with a new born baby]. A male goat is slaughtered and an *intsonyama* [the meat on the inside of the front leg of a cow or a goat] is half cooked and the fire is made in the house where the baby was born. The mother will eat the meat and the baby will then access the meat indirectly through breast feeding. The skin of the goat will then be put under the child where he or she sleeps until after three months, when the mother and the baby are allowed to go out of the *ifuku*". He further alluded to the fact that failure to perform this ritual might negatively affect the child, in that the baby will continue to wet the bed and other rituals performed will be null and void to the ancestors.

In response to the earlier case referred to where a school principal cut off a boy's necklace, a traditional healer pointed out that red and white beads were commonly used to indicate mourning. The traditional healer strongly warned that the boy would "suffer consequences" due to not wearing the necklace, particularly if the necklace was not replaced quickly. The traditional healer further advised that the family of the boy must get a new set of beads and perform *ukuphahla* (a small ritual ceremony to communicate with the ancestors). Furthermore, the boy must go to his mother's grave to explain to her why he was not wearing the original set of beads.

Experts from various fields slammed the school principal involved in the above incident. An academic from the University of Pretoria specializing in indigenous law said: "If we don't take the difference of culture in South Africa into consideration, we are going to continue making these mistakes. It stands in the way of good nationhood and good relations across the cultural boundaries" ("School headmaster", *The Sunday Times*, 2009, p. 5).

Discussion and Recommendations

It is evident from the above-mentioned examples that, within the context of many cultures in South Africa and beyond, health and ancestors are two sides of the same coin: one cannot live a healthy life without honouring the ancestors. The process of ancestor worship takes place in the form of a life cycle, proceeding from birth to death. For example, when there is a newborn baby within the family, a goat or anything affordable must be slaughtered, with the purpose being to introduce the baby to the ancestors. In between birth and death, a person must slaughter as well. An example of this would be when boys must

go to *ukwaluko* in order to be initiated into adulthood. As explained earlier, there are ritual ceremonies which must be performed before going to *ukwaluko* and after the process of *ukwaluko*, and the reasons for these ceremonies vary. One such reason is to protect the initiates from evil spirits, with the ancestors being responsible for this protection.

Some parents, particularly those staying in urban areas, have a tendency to ignore some ritual ceremonies before taking their sons to *ekwalukeni/komeng*. This has created a problem, and some of the boys have lost their lives (see Bogopa, 2007, p. 56). In one of the above-mentioned examples, a gospel singer had avoided going through the *ukwaluko* process and he experienced many problems because, it is widely believed, his ancestors were looking down upon him. Eventually he was advised to go through the process of *ukwaluko*, and ever since he did so there have been no reports about him experiencing problems.

There exists a perception among many African youth in South Africa, particularly in urban areas, that bride-wealth (*ilobola*) must be abolished. The majority of African females, particularly those who are educated, strongly argue that *ilobola* must be abolished because they are not "commodities". These women question why they should be "sold" to anyone. The argument from the African females is that their families, by asking for payment of *ilobola* in the form of cattle or cash from the man's family, are in effect "selling" them and thus treating them as negotiable "commodities". The argument from the African males is that *ilobola* should be abolished since some families abuse the practice to enrich themselves (See Bogopa, 1999, p. 33). There are many cases where males could not realise their dreams of getting married because of the cost of *ilobola*. This resulted in these men not marrying as they could not afford to pay *ilobola*.

In response to the above-mentioned issue of *ilobola*, it is therefore important that not only the youth but also the adults in communities where *ilobola* is practised be educated about the significance of *ilobola*. It is important that they understand that the practice is not about money but about creating a bond between the two families and also to introduce the couple to the ancestors. Failing to pay *ilobola* might lead to health problems and other misfortunes, because it is believed that ancestors will be looking down on the couple.

Conclusion

The cases presented in this paper demonstrate the experiential reality in the South African context of the

relationship between health problems and the performance of ritual ceremonies. In light of this, it would thus seem crucial, from a health perspective, that adults in the various cultural groups practising ancestor worship ensure that they teach their children about the importance of their cultural traditions and encourage the performance of ritual ceremonies. Furthermore, children from different cultural backgrounds must also learn to understand and respect the importance of ritual ceremonies to those who practise them. Given that compliance with cultural traditions has been shown to be complicated in multicultural communities and institutions by giving rise to intercultural conflict, due to the high level of ethnocentrism that exists in the culturally diverse South African context, there is clearly a need for educational endeavours to promote cultural

tolerance, understanding and respect among all the different cultural groups. Along with facilitating compliance with cultural traditions by upholding the Constitutional right of those whose culture requires the performance of ritual ceremonies “to participate in the cultural life of their choice...” (1996, p. 15), this might help to minimise intercultural conflict in multicultural residential areas as well as in the institutional context.

Given the reality, centrality and prevalence of ancestor belief and its association with health in the South African context, the key to the health of a large sector of the population thus lies in compliance with cultural traditions and both intra- and inter-cultural tolerance and respect for ritual practices, as well as understanding of their significance.

About the Author



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