

Chapter 17

Pluralistic Tendencies in Healing Abantu Illness in the Contemporary South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Ukuhanjwa illness was used as an example to understanding abantu illnesses. With attributional theory ukuhanjwa illness is attributed to spiritual and social causes rather than biomedical causes, whereby causal link is socially constructed between ukuhanjwa illness and entry into the body by familiars. Issues explored included conceptualisation of ukuhanjwa illness. The focus of the chapter is on the reasons for continued pluralistic tendencies in healing regardless of the expectation by the West that people should be focusing on the use of the fast evolving biomedical healing methods. The ethnographic study took place among the Southern Nguni people of OR Tambo District Municipality (ORTDM) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Data was collected using qualitative and ethnographic research methods amongst a sample group of 50 participants. The sample was composed of traditional healers, mothers of children who have experienced ukuhanjwa illness, elderly people (male and female), biomedical practitioners and nurses.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter begins by presenting the background for the discussion by outlining the description and identifiable symptoms of *ukuhanjwa* illness; aetiology of *ukuhanjwa* illness; and dealing with illness and disease in order to have better understanding of the illness in question. The chapter has also outlined the focus of the discussion as the rationale for the Southern Nguni people to continue to engage in pluralistic tendencies in healing *ukuhanjwa* as one of the *abantu* illnesses regardless of the expectation by the West that people should be focusing on the use of the fast evolving biomedical healing methods. Ngubane (1977) in Urbasch (2003, p. 11) defined *abantu* illnesses as spiritually caused illnesses which can only be healed using traditional healing methods. Pluralistic approach has been found to be popular even in other developing countries such as India (Whiting, 1977, p. 249). Dayes (2014) has also noted

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that people resort to pluralistic tendencies in healing medically unexplained symptoms. The chapter reveals how the Southern Nguni people attach different interpretations and meanings to their illnesses and health experiences as one rationale for people to engage in pluralistic tendencies in healing as their response. The chapter specifically looks deeply into the phenomenon of invisibility of *ukuhanjwa* to the biomedical health system within the context of power relations between the two medical systems – the biomedical and the traditional as another rationale for the use of pluralistic approach in healing *ukuhanjwa* illness. Invisibility has both literal and contextual meanings in relation to *ukuhanjwa*. The invisibility of *ukuhanjwa* to biomedical diagnosis has also been addressed as part of a discourse which needs to be viewed either within its historical, political or cultural setting (Lupton, 2012, p. 2). The chapter has mainly focused on the cultural setting. This discourse also includes the concept of ritual purification, for without such discourse the term is apt to be seen as directly contradicting the literal meaning of the word - pure (Good, 2001, pp. 92-103).

Pluralism is often the result of beliefs that certain illnesses are invisible when using biomedical means of diagnoses. The Southern Nguni people also view pluralistic healing method as the holistic approach in healing *ukuhanjwa* illness – hence this has been discussed under rationale for pluralistic tendencies in healing. The chapter also addresses the perceived source of the healing power as a powerful motivation for continued use of traditional healing methods for *ukuhanjwa* and how it can be linked to pluralistic tendencies in healing.

Lastly, the chapter presents solutions and recommendations highlighting the implications of the Southern Nguni beliefs and cultural practices regarding health, illness and medicine and how those implications relate to the biomedical health sector domination as well as attempts to introduce social change.

BACKGROUND

Description and Identifiable Symptoms of Ukuhanjwa Illness

The Southern Nguni people of OR Tambo District Municipality (ORTDM) in the Eastern Cape of South Africa describe *ukuhanjwa* as an attack on a person, young or old, by familiars (*izilwanyana zokuthakatha*), literally meaning demonic animals used by witches, which penetrate the body through any bodily opening, resulting in certain identifiable and literally visible conditions. These identifiable and literally visible conditions become contradictory to the invisibility which will be explained in the discussion to follow as a contributing factor to the continued pluralistic tendencies in healing what is believed to be *abantu* illnesses.

To name the illness is to diagnose the illness. Once the name is known, the symptoms are understood, the cause is known and the treatment is straightforward. To the Southern Nguni, the illness is known as *ukuhanjwa* from *uku* meaning – to and *hanjwa* meaning - penetrate. Thus, literally - to penetrate and idiomatically - spiritual penetration. This name arose, as do all names for illnesses, from shared experiences and the common worldview of a particular group. The Southern Nguni people make a distinction between two forms of *ukuhanjwa*, namely, the mild and the severe forms of the illness. The mild form manifests itself as red patches on the lips, around the outer lining of the anus and the genitals, as well as a wide open anus. The victim could be a child or an adult since *ukuhanjwa* has no age limit, but is usually a child or infant. The victim is always sleepy and, in the case of babies, their cry is always indicative of weariness rather than of pain or discomfort. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the mild form

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