



Traditional Herbal Medicine and Healing in Zimbabwe

Tabona Shoko*

Department of Religious Studies, University of Zimbabwe, Classics and Philosophy P.O. Box MP 167, Mt Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Natural and herbal medicines are experiencing a global renaissance, with the World Health Organisation estimating that more than 80 percent of the world's population uses this type of medicinal therapy. Traditional medicine has always been at the heart of most African people and in particular the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Statistics show that in Africa, 50 percent of the population regularly uses alternative therapies, natural herbs being the most used. The fact that most of the medicine is found within the vicinity of the African community makes it very attractive, user friendly as well as it being cost effective and flexible in adapting to the dynamics of modern society trends. The paper highlights that in Zimbabwe, there is growing popularity of the herbal medicines due to the healing properties attributed to them. Other reasons are affordability of medicines, as compared to bio-medical therapy and user friendliness of the herbs.

The paper's objectives are to:

- (i) To understand the need for professionalization of traditional medicines;
- (ii) To investigate the role of traditional healer;
- (iii) To assess the impact of traditional medicine in Zimbabwe.

Professionalization of Traditional Medicine

Traditional healers were first professionalized in Zimbabwe at the country's independence in 1980 through the establishment of an organization of traditional healers called Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA). The urgency in securing the independence of traditional healing from the oppressive and negative perception it had got from the colonial government shows the importance of traditional medicine and healing in the lives of the people of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has also been hit by a flood of herbal medicine that originates from countries such as China, Tanzania and India. This has seen the proliferation of herbal medicine in the country. This paper is based on empirical research in Zimbabwe and will seek to explore how traditional medicine has continued to fare well in the face of rapid socio-economic and political change in Zimbabwe. For purposes of logical analysis the paper will examine traditional medicine and how it has interacted with the modern change in Zimbabwe. It will seek to argue that despite its onslaught by western medical scientists, traditional medicine and healing is a strong force to with in Zimbabwe.

The Traditional Healer

The impact of traditional medicine in Zimbabwe is intricately linked to the operations of traditional healer as the chief practitioner. The traditional healer performs multiple functions as diviner by diagnosing the causes of sickness, misfortune and death; as herbalist he dispenses medicines and as healer he promotes health and wellbeing of the Shona through rituals and treatments [1]. The Shona use a common term "n'anga" to describe his roles as traditional medical practitioner. Traditional medicine is used for various purposes that include preservation of morality, good luck charms, contraception, psychological and spiritual problems. In fact the traditional medical

practitioner has multiple functions, in addition to being a medical practitioner, the traditional healer is a religious consultant, a legal and political adviser, a marriage counselor, a police detective and a social worker [2].

Impact of Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine has a great impact on modern Zimbabwe. This is primarily because medicine is used to not only cure physical disorders but to achieve almost any end that requires for its success and control over forces which would otherwise be uncontrollable. Medicines are used to protect one against witchcraft; to pass exams; to win the love of an unwilling woman; to see in the dark; to grow crops successfully; to dispel *ngozi*; and for many other purposes. The potency of traditional medicine has been appropriated by University professors in academic institutions in University curricula. It has also been brought to open market by 'street doctors', availed in supermarkets and surgeries, transported into agriculture through herbal gardens, adopted in traditional colleges and surgeries in Zimbabwe. ZINATHA has proposed medical bills for traditional practitioners and their families (Shoko 2010: 85) [3].

Traditional Medicine in Modern Times

The attainment of Zimbabwe independence in 1980 saw the government's adoption of a "generous religious policy" which promoted religious liberty in the country. In line with this policy, Parliament passed the Traditional Medical Practitioners Act in 1981 that saw the reappraisal of traditional medicine in Zimbabwe. As a result the first Cabinet Minister of Health, Dr. Chris Ushewokunze, himself a medical doctor, approved within the medical fraternity, the introduction of a body of traditional medical practitioners called Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association. (ZINATHA) on 13th July 1981. The association had amongst other aims set to promote traditional medicine and practice and to regulate members operations (Shoko 2010: 85). This development saw the resurgence of traditional healing practices in the city. Harare as the capital housed the offices of ZINATHA and that boosted its membership and clientele. The association posted advertisements on buildings and streets with inscriptions that advertised "ZINATHA Pharmacy Styles' supplements of drugs for various forms of diseases such as, HIV related Symptoms; Blood Purification; Sugar Diabetes; Malaria, Herpes, Asthma, STD, Cancer, Syphilis, High blood pressure Albinos Cream, TB, etc"

*Corresponding author: Tabona Shoko, Department of Religious Studies, University of Zimbabwe, Classics and Philosophy P.O. Box MP 167, Mt Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe, Tel: +263 4 741824; E-mail: shokotab@yahoo.com

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(ZINATHA: 2002: 10). This resulted in the establishment of traditional healing centres in the cities such as Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru Mutare, Masvingo.

It is against this backdrop that in the city centres, traditional medicines called *vhukavhuka* that enhances male potency are now sold in pharmacies and market places. At market places traditional herbs in form of dried roots, barks, shells, etc are on display for those who are prepared to buy. In Harare there is a traditional surgeon also operates in the industrial areas along “Beatrice” road now Simon Mazorodze. At one time city supermarkets like TM and Food World have been hit by a spiral wave of long chains of people queuing for “*Musimboti*” (traditional mambo’s brew). In the Indian shops hot spice and some flour-type powder, mixed with hot lemon juice is used as remedy for flue ((Shoko 2010: 85). However there has also been an influx of “fake” medicines on the market in the city due to hyper inflation in the country.

In the capital city of Harare traditional medical services used to be procured from the late traditional practitioners such as Prof Gordon Chavunduka, President of ZINATHA and his Sec General Mr. Sibanda. But after his death Mr Sibanda passed on his skills to Mutandi Sibanda his son who operates ZINATHA School in Harare, alongside his role as traditional healer. Other healers of great repute include one Sekuru Banda of Malawian origin whose fame is spread across the country. There are also other prominent spirit mediums in the Nharira Hills near Harare. Besides there are also some self-styled healers running TV programs such as Kapasule. Of late ZINATHA has proposed construction of a traditional healing training college and hospital; introduction of medical aid scheme; administration of televised and air programs; conduct of conferences and workshops ((Shoko 2010: 85).

In modern Zimbabwe, there are a number of prominent healers that have emerged. One such healer is Benjamin Burombo, a Kuwadzana famous healer who featured prominently as a “Harare *n’anga* (who) treats AIDS” (*Sunday Times*: 15/08/1993). The healer claims he has overwhelming evidence that shows that patients who have been under his care have tested HIV negative at local health laboratories. At one time he threw out a challenge to Dr Timothy Stamps, then Minister of Health, that he would invite confirmed HIV+ patients whom he claimed treated, then tested negative and referred them to the Ministry for further tests for confirmation. Burombo’s emergence came in the wake of several *nangas’* claims that they could cure AIDS. One such claim came from a Mrs Chihuri who had documents to prove that the patients she had cured had also tested HIV-negative at local medical laboratories (Shoko 2010: 90).

In Harare, there is also another practitioner Richard Ngwenya who has been widely publicized as administering HIV and AIDS therapy at the Immunity Enhancement Centre in the Avenues in town. He uses bio-medical drips to strengthen blood and recommends Western food rich in vitamins and wheat porridge for good health, but he also maintains traditional foodstuffs such as *rapoko*, *sorghum*, *millet*, ground and monkey nuts, vegetables and wild fruits make up good healthy diet (Shoko 2010: 100). He disburses drugs with traditional medical ingredients to combat thrush, the result of severe infections. As former army personnel his fame backdates to the liberation struggle when he served guerrilla fighters with medicines during the second Chimurenga war. However some people have questioned his type of medical treatment.

In light of the growing number of people resorting to traditional medicine, a group of herbalists and conservation experts have teamed up to set up an indigenous herbal gardens that grow local traditional

medicinal plants and promote natural remedies. Nurseries have been established in the cities in Zimbabwe with hundreds of indigenous trees and grass species with medicinal properties. The Medicinal Plant protection group sponsors the projects. Its membership includes doctors, nurses, chemists, environmental experts and teachers (*Sunday Mail*: 7/07/1996).

Criticisms of Traditional Medicine and Naturopathy

The role and work of the traditional healers has been subject of criticism. Some western scholars and missionaries have labeled traditional healers as “witch-doctors”, “magicians” and “medicine-men”. Some people are also concerned over the use and safety of some natural medicines. The Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe (MCAZ) has at one time warned against the use of traditional medicines whose promoters claim they cure all ailments including HIV and Aids. The authority said the medicines were posing a serious health risk to members of the public who have unwittingly used the remedies in place of prescribed conventional medicines (Newsday Zimbabwe, 2011). Most critics of traditional medicine argue along the lines of naturopathic medicine which regards alternative medicines as pseudo-scientific medicines that are based on folk medicine and rather than scientific based medicine. As such the naturopathic medical doctors are regarded as having no scientific merit (Jagtenberg 2006: 323). The medical profession considers naturopathic medicine as ineffective and possibly harmful thereby raising ethical issues about its practice.

But these misconstructions have never failed the popularity of traditional healers. And results show that patients are satisfied with the herbs as more continue to stream to use them. Through the testimonies by traditionalists, we have concluded that these complimentary medicines do work when they are used correctly and consistently. In such scenario, P. Scicchitano et al. [4] observe the role of nutraceuticals in mitigating health problems especially in the gastrointestinal tract.

Although many Shona people take some of their illness to scientific medical practitioners in hospitals, clinics and private doctors’ surgeries while others visit faith healers of Zionist and Apostolic Churches, a good number visit traditional healers. This shows the faith and growing popularity of traditional medicine in Zimbabwe, particularly in times of serious illness [5-9].

Conclusion

Overall the paper demonstrates that health is one of the important aspects of the Shona life style and medicine and the practitioner are central in its maintenance. Traditional medicine has proved a strong force to reckon with in Zimbabwe. It has continued to flourish in various forms through surgeries, at market places, immunity enhancement centres and herbal gardens. In spite of its criticisms from some sectors of society, traditional medicine commands a strong hold on the Shona people especially as it addresses aspects which bio-medical practice fails to address. In the Shona understanding, healing is conceived and practiced holistically, to embrace not only the physical conditions of that individual, but also his spiritual, psycho-emotional, social and ecological dimensions.

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