



Ancestral calling as identity and the rite of passage: The case of Vhavenda indigenous healers

Dr. Salome Thilivhali Sigida (PhD)
University of Limpopo, South Africa
thili.sigida@gmail.com

Prof Tholene Sodi
University of Limpopo, South Africa
Tholene.Sodi@ul.ac.za

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Abstract

Accepting the ancestral calling to healing and undergoing the training to become a traditional healer in southern Africa is seen as a process of identity formation which is constructed by the knowledge acquired throughout the process. The researcher embarked on a journey with traditional health practitioners to understand their lived experiences and explored the psychological meanings of Vhavenda ancestral calling with a view to identifying and documenting the psychological meanings embedded in this culturally entrenched practice. A qualitative research method located within the interpretative paradigm was used. A descriptive phenomenological research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of traditional health practitioners who have gone through the process of ancestral calling. Both snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to recruit 17 participants until saturation was researched in the findings. The findings of the study revealed that there are several symptoms that are indicative that one has an ancestral calling. These symptoms are often misunderstood and misdiagnosed when interpreted from the Western and Eurocentric perspectives. However, accepting the ancestral calling and going through training is linked with identity formation. The findings also revealed that ancestral calling is a life-transforming and therapeutic experience and a journey of self-realisation.

Keywords: Ancestral calling, Vhavenda, traditional health practitioner, Afrocentric, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous knowledge systems.

Introduction

In southern Africa, Vhavenda people are considered to be one of the indigenous cultural and linguistic communities that practice indigenous healing. In these regard, indigenous healing plays an important role in primary health care in many developing countries in Africa (Oguntibeju, 2018). This is supported by the reports suggesting that between 70% and 80% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa consult indigenous healers before they seek care from western-trained medical practitioners (Audet et al., 2014).

In South Africa, it is estimated that between 60% and 80% of the population consult with indigenous healers at some point in their lives (Puckree, Mkhize, Mgobhozi, & Lin, 2002; Oguntibeju, 2018). A similar observation was made fairly recently by Matlebjoane (2022) who



reported that many Africans who suffer from mental illness often seek help from both indigenous healers and western-trained practitioners. According to Bodoker (2009), indigenous healers are usually the first option for many Africans when they seek treatment for illnesses. Some of the reasons for the apparent popularity of indigenous healers include cultural congruity with their clients, accessibility and affordability (Mbanga et al., 2002; Natrass, 2005; Qi & Kelley, 2014; Viljoen, 2007). Indigenous healers practice within their communities where they have widespread respect and recognition as mediums for communication between the living and the spiritual world occupied by ancestors and God (Edwards, 2011). The indigenous healers speak the same local language as their patients, spend more time with the patient as compared to western trained practitioners, explaining the source of illness and the necessary treatment, and they offer perceived compassion than western-trained practitioners (Audet et al., 2014).

To become an indigenous healer, an individual is chosen from within the family (Booi & Edwards, 2014). This is understood to depend on the powers that the previous ancestors had (Kale, 1995; Mufamadi & Sodi, 1999). The person has to accept the calling to become an indigenous healer and has to go through the process by means of rigorous training (Kubeka, 2016). According to Matsika (2015), the training of an indigenous healer involves, amongst other things, assessment of illness, ability to locate lost objects, and treatment of diseases. However, the training and experience of the initiates depends heavily on their connection with their ancestors (Wreford, 2007).

There is an increasing interest in culture and psychopathology where discrepancies between western medicine and traditional understanding of illness continue to be a challenge (Bakow & Low, 2018). Bakow and Low (2018) posited that ancestral calling has been compared to western mental health constructs, such as a psychosis due to the accompanying symptoms. The individual that is chosen to become an indigenous healer may display signs like aggression, social withdrawal, or bizarre behaviours before accepting the calling to undergo training (Mufamadi & Sodi, 1999). Makhanya (2012) asserted that these signs and symptoms may lead to some misunderstanding as to whether or not one has a calling or suffers from a mental illness. Booi (2004) conducted a case study with traditional health practitioners who had undergone the process of ancestral calling. In this study, a case narrative was interpreted using the traditional Xhosa beliefs, the western psychiatric and the transpersonal psychology perspectives.

The study revealed that the Xhosa perspective has an advantage of helping people through the ancestral call to find meaning as everything is explained by their ancestors. On the other hand, the western psychiatric perspective has disadvantages in that it does not address the underlying problems but only relieves the symptoms with drug therapy. In another study by Kubeka (2016), it was found that the Zulu perspective is that a person who has an ancestral calling must be treated by a traditional health practitioner using traditional medicine such as herbs. Furthermore, there is a sense of fear of the consequences when certain rituals or duties that are required from the individuals are not fulfilled (Kubeka, 2016). Zuma et al. (2016) suggested that it is only when the illness becomes disabling and potentially fatal that the person has no choice but to undergo training. The implication here is that when the ancestors have run out of patience, there would no longer be room for the living to negotiate with them. Therefore, the person with the calling would either have to choose between dying and having to go through the training.

All cultures have different symbolic and traditional ways of expressing their perceptions of reality and existence, as well as their construction of multifaceted identities (Mlisa, 2009). Ancestral calling is defined in different ways, since it is a unique process for each individual (Edwards, Makunga, Ngcobo & Dhlomo, 2004). This phenomenon is associated with crises or afflictions such as accidents, physical and psychological ailments (Laher, 2014; Lesolang-Pitje, 2000; Mlisa,



2009; Wreford, 2007). Because of this, other cultures in South Africa like the Xhosa sometimes refer to ancestral calling as *inkathazo* which means trouble (Mlisa, 2009).

Ancestral calling as identity and rite of passage

Accepting the ancestral calling and undergoing the training to become a traditional healer is seen as a process of identity formation which is constructed by the knowledge acquired throughout the process. The training is seen as liminal state, as a process of psychosocial development and identity achievement that reintegrates an individual who has gone through struggles and misfortunes into an in-group (Turner, 1970). Thus, the process of ancestral calling is seen as an identity formation process which Erikson (1956) defined as a constant process that allows an individual to transition and gravitate towards the ideal self and ego through transformation gained through rites of passage. Carl Jung's theory of collective unconsciousness reveals a close connection between the individual, culture and the ecological environment. According to Jung (1990), the creation of an individual is determined by his or her ethnicity, culture and social factors. In addition, he argued that all humans share a subconscious mind that stores the memories of all people whether they are alive or deceased. Mlisa (2009) viewed the ancestral calling as a process that involves rituals to invite ancestors into the life of an individual going through the process to transform the individual from a life of misfortunes with a new identity as a healer that assists people. Turner (1970) stated that the formation of a new identity constantly changes through new information and guidance that the individual is exposed to.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design. More specifically a descriptive phenomenological design was employed with semi-structured interviews to elucidate the psychological meanings of ancestral calling by Vhavenda traditional healers. Phenomenology was adopted as a research design for the present study. The descriptive phenomenological research design was implemented to explore the lived experiences of traditional health practitioners who have gone through the process of ancestral calling. Descriptive phenomenology aims to obtain fundamental knowledge and it has a strong psychological orientation (Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Osborne, 1990). It is used when the researcher wants to describe a phenomenon under study and bracket their biases (Reiners, 2012). Husserl developed descriptive phenomenology, where every day conscious experiences are described while preconceived opinions are set aside or bracketed (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, phenomenology requires a new way of looking at things; it requires researchers to step away from their own background of all their predispositions and biases and study something with fresh, naive eyes to see what is before them. Since the present study seeks to explore the psychological meanings of ancestral calling by Vhavenda traditional health practitioners who have gone through ancestral calling, phenomenology was deemed the appropriate design for this research as the participants were able to narrate their experiences of ancestral calling.

Study area

The study was conducted in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province in South Africa. Vhembe District was chosen because it is the area where the researcher resides and is thus familiar with the culture of the people that stay in that area. Vhembe District is one of the five districts in Limpopo Province in the Republic of South Africa. It is located in the northern part of Limpopo Province



and shares borders with Capricorn, Mopani District municipalities in the eastern and western directions respectively.

Sampling

In the present study, the sample was drawn from Vhembe District in Limpopo Province. Both snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to recruit the participants. In purposive sampling, participants were selected based on specific criteria, for example that participants were traditional health practitioners who had gone through the process of ancestral calling (Crossman, 2016). In the present study, the researcher approached the Vhembe Traditional Healers Association. The chairperson of the Association announced in a meeting that participants who were interested should approach the researcher after the meeting.

Snowball sampling involves approaching few known individual(s) from the relevant population who would then identify other members that could contribute to the study (Welman et al., 2005). In the present study few participants who met the sampling criteria (that is, traditional health practitioners) known to the researcher were approached (Crossman, 2016; Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005). They then referred the researcher to other traditional healers. In this way, a further set of appropriate individuals were identified so that the sample, like a rolling snowball, grew in size.

Data collection procedure

An interview guide was used to guide the proceedings. The interview guide was constructed in English and translated to Tshivenda, and back-translated into English to verify the accuracy of the translation and for preservation of the meaning. Before data was collected permission was granted by Vhembe traditional healers Association and the University of Limpopo Research Ethics for the study to be carried out.

Findings

The following themes were drawn from data analysis namely: (a) The symptoms of ancestral calling, (b) Accepting the ancestral calling, and (c) The new status as a traditional healer. The results are presented and discussed below.

The signs of ancestral calling.

The findings of the present study revealed that the participants experienced symptoms that are indicative of ancestral calling. However, these symptoms differ from one person to another. They are usually obscured. The symptoms include dreams and sickness. This is illustrated by the extracts below:

“It starts with dreams, you may dream of a late person instructing you to go and extract medication from a certain tree and where to find it, it may be a lemon tree or mugote etc... Well, I found my Thangu by the river. In a dream, I was told to go to the river and I found them (divining bones) hanging by a leaf”. **Participant K, 54, Female.**

“I slept a lot and I would dream about a lot of things. Every time when I wake up my family will be asking me what I dreamed about. They called me Joseph, they will keep saying, Joseph what did you dream about? Joseph, Joseph, you know from the Bible. To a point where I would have an attitude and just say nothing even though I knew there was something strange that I dreamed about. At times, the dreams would feel real; at the other time it will feel like this thing has happened before. I didn't know what was going on. I just ignored it, but when something that I dreamed about happens, I got frustrated. So, when I was growing up the most things that I was able to see was



like if someone was going to die, I would know and it was problematic for me because I would ask myself if I am a witch or cursed. I didn't know. It was frustrating..." **Participant Q, 33, Female.**

The notion that dreams are a sign of ancestral calling is supported by Mlisa (2009) and also Booi (2004) who also conducted research with indigenous healers who mentioned that they experienced dreams when they were going through the process of ancestral calling. In this regard, Hirst (2005) found that those that are experiencing ancestral calling may have dreams and visions as a message from the ancestors regarding their calling to become indigenous healers. However, the importance of this dream or the meaning behind the dreams is not known by the dreamer in the initial stages of the ancestral calling.

Apart from experiencing the dreams, the study participants also mentioned that they experienced sicknesses. The sicknesses were physical and also psychological. The sicknesses that the participants experienced could not be treated by western medicine. This is illustrated by the below extracts.

"I just got really sick, in 2013, I got really sick, I lost a lot of weight (silence) to a point where if you would touch my hands." **Participant F, 37, Female**

"This sickness is supernatural; it's unlike the others. You wouldn't know what's wrong with you; when you go to the hospital, they won't be able to diagnose you. Sometimes you will feel like there are things crawling under your skin.... unusual things I tell you. You will have unusual sicknesses." **Participant B, 35, Female**

"I was depressed in a sense that I was just tired. My energy was just too low. I was so negative about everything; that's why I wanted to kill myself. There is this empty thing; there is a void within you but you cannot fill it." **Participant Q, 33, Female**

"I consulted with medical doctors; they once said its blood pressure (BP) and depression in 2013". **Participant F, 37, Female**

"I was doing a four-year nursing course, so I dropped out in my second year and did auxiliary nursing instead. I was not getting healed even after trying to get help. They even took X-rays tests, yet they could not see anything wrong with me. Those Boers (Afrikaner doctors) suspected that I had TB and ulcers because my stomach was also a mess." **Participant H, 36, Male**

These symptoms become more severe the longer it took for them to accept and acknowledge that they have the calling. These is supported by Mlisa (2009) who indicated that ancestral calling is accompanied by many crises that includes sicknesses and rejecting the calling invites continuous misfortunes that may ultimately lead to death. Similarly, in the study conducted by Bakow and Louw (2018) participants reported experiencing a sickness as a sign that they are called by the ancestors to become a traditional healer. These sicknesses that is experienced during the calling cannot be treated by western medicine. However, when these symptoms are interpreted from a Eurocentric perspective, they might be misunderstood as some kind of psychopathology.

Accepting the ancestral calling.

From the finding of the present study, the participants indicated that when they have made a decision to accept the ancestral calling, they leave their home and go to be trained to become a traditional healer. This is reflected in the below extracts.

"I went to four different places. They said the same thing, they said, *ndi midzimu* (ancestors).... *ndi midzimu*. I didn't accept it, but because I went to four places and they told me the same thing....



I had no choice but to believe what I was being told. I was so sick to a point where I couldn't walk or stand up. Then the time came for me to go and accept". **Participant B, 35, Female**

"She (traditional healer) told me that I would not be able to find employment unless I obeyed the ancestors. She said they are giving me signs that I must stop what I am doing and do their work. I didn't have money so I had no idea how I was going to pay for everything. I took a loan. I went and got initiated. Because I was struggling, I got initiated and my misery was put to an end." **Participant G, 38, Male**

From the above extracts, it can be concluded that accepting the ancestral call was not an easy decision for the participants. Accepting the call was an attempt to end the agony that was being experienced by not following the instructions of the ancestors. From the findings of the present study acceptance of the calling is a challenge. The findings further revealed that after going through the process of training, the ill participants were healed and those who were unable to conceive, later had children. In essence, their lives went back to normal. This is noted in the extracts below.

"On my side, after coming back to school, I finally agreed to the calling and accepted it, after my initiation it did not take me three months to get a job with that auxiliary nursing certificate I had. From there I was able to identify other healing trees, I would see them in my dreams and when I'm walking on the veld I would just trip and the moment I look down to see what's tripping me I would see that tree, the same exact tree I saw in my dreams. It's a lot to explain" **Participant H, 36, Male**

"From there we sat as a family and we agreed that I must acknowledge the ancestral calling. Then from there thing started to unfold by themselves (smiling) the guy who broke up with me started calling me again. I got a bursary after applying for it long time ago". **Participant Q, 33, Female**

"I just got initiated and got healed, up until now, I've never been sick again. I am practicing although I don't do it fulltime. Since accepting this calling, my dreams are only about medication...of which I extract and bring home". **Participant J, 48, Male**

After accepting the calling there is transformation in the participant's life. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Regardless of all the hardships and being sick, physically, psychologically and spiritually, all that the called individual had to do is to accept the call and undergo training to become a traditional healer. Accepting the ancestral call is a way of unlearning the old way of living. This is in line with the results of Bakow and Low (2018) who asserted that going through the process of ancestral calling was perceived as affirmation of indigenous African identity and increasing self-worth of those who went through the experience.

Subsequently, the old identity dies and the new identity is formed. Thus, it can be assumed the process of becoming a traditional healer is a process of 'rebirth' into a new person. This is supported by Mlisa (2009) who indicated that going the process of ancestral calling is a transformational practice that operates changes in those who goes through the process. Mlisa (2009) went further and indicated that ancestral calling is a cultural initiation process that helps with the nurturing an awakening the new identity. Thus, from a patient and coming back from initiation as a full-fledged *ñanga ya Vhavenda*, accepting the call can be regarded as a treatment. Also accepting the call can be regarded as deliverance. Thus, the new person is now a self-actualised person.

New status as a traditional healer

Participants reported that after everything they had been through, they saw themselves as traditional healers and they enjoyed what they were doing. They wanted to heal and help people



and continue healing people. One participant mentioned that he was also a western-trained professional, and when he saw some patients with conditions that could not be treated by biomedical medicine, he advised them to go and seek help from a traditional healer but he did not disclose that he was one. However, some of the participants accepted the calling because they were afraid of losing their jobs. This is reflected by extract below:

“I kept working as a nurse. As you’ve just seen right now, I was just helping another. I still practise being a traditional healer even at my job. I am able to identify that this problem doesn’t require western medicine but traditional healing, so if I see such on the patients, I give them my number without telling them it’s mine. I tell them when to call and then help them from home.” **Participant H, 36, Male**

“I made a vow afterwards that I was going to help people no matter the circumstances. I would drop everything to help a patient. A boy who was mentally disturbed was brought to me, he was stripping naked and doing all the unthinkable things. I helped him and within an hour he was well. He had no idea how he got to me or what was happening to him. He said he was hungry, so I prepared some food for him to eat. He ate and left. He is now healed”. **Participant E, 57, Male**

“What good does it do to spend the whole three weeks constipated? How does staying in bed for a week due to swollen legs help me? I realised that I stand to lose nothing if I accept the calling. And so, I accepted the calling. I wanted to be healed and also to become a traditional healer.”. **Participant G, 38, Male**

It can also be concluded that accepting the ancestral call can be viewed as a process of ‘rite of passage’. Thus, not accepting the call could lead to difficulties in some areas of life. When accepting the ancestral call, the old self and old identity dies and the new person or the spiritual realm comes into existence. This is in line with (Mlisa, 2009) who noted that those who go through the process of ancestral calling are able to understand themselves better. Therefore, it can be said that when one accepts the ancestral calling, they go through the process of identity formation and going through this process enhances indigenous healers identities. Ancestral calling instils maturity and opens insights into their gift as *ñanga dza Vhavenda*.

Summary and conclusions

The findings of the present study revealed that the subjective experiences of ancestral calling differ from one person to the next. Thus, ancestral calling cannot be viewed homogenously in all cultural groups. This has been evident within this cultural community under study. Due to ancestral calling being a difficult journey, some people delay to accept the calling. Furthermore, the findings revealed that training is a form of healing and transformation. The individuals that were called by the ancestors accepted the calling and went through training to become a traditional healer. As such their life changed for the better. Those that refused to accept the calling are subjected to misfortunes that may also lead to death. The present study revealed that after training to become an indigenous healer, the participants had a new status. They were now fully-fledged indigenous healers and practising indigenous healing. The findings further revealed that the participants were happy with their new identity which was *ñanga (indigenous healer) ya Vhavenda* and also accepted the new life. The old identity was gone, and they were now *ñanga dza Vhavenda*. Erikson (1970) speaks of identity achievement as being the unification of an individual’s gifts and talents with the possible choices that are offered by the world. He puts an emphasis on the importance of communality, which is a feeling or spirit of cooperation and belonging in a group, in identity achievement. Therefore, it can be concluded that the process of becoming a traditional healer means the rebirth of a person who is given a new name. This is also in line with their assuming a new role as an indigenous healer.



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