

UKUHLONIPHA: ITS ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL HEALERS WITH REFERENCE TO AMAZULU APPRENTICES

Jabulani Owen Nene

University Of South Africa, South Africa

Traditional healers are an intrinsic part of African societies. They are afforded the highest esteem, not only because of their special powers to heal the sick, but also because they are imbued with some spirit which is believed to be a gift from the ancestors. It is for these reasons that people regard them as being custodians of culture, especially within the context of *ukuhlonipha*. Although the community still adheres to the practices of *ukuhlonipha* performed by traditional healers, they do not understand its deeper meaning. It is precisely for this reason that this study attempts to utilise relevant sociolinguistic theories, especially the politeness theory, to critically analyse the features of *ukuhlonipha* in order to fathom its deeper meaning.

Keywords: *ukuhlonipha*, Politeness, Traditional healers and traditional healers apprentice.

Introduction

Before exploring the topic further, it is important to define exactly what a traditional healer is and also the *ukuhlonipha* philosophy. Although our discussion is not on traditional healers but on *ukuhlonipha* within traditional healers, it will be important to understand who traditional healers are. The definition of traditional healers varies from people to people depending on a person's background. Some people call them 'spiritual healers' some 'indigenous healers' those terms still means traditional healers. Although traditional healers are known for their healing methods in helping the society maintain balance between spiritual and physical state of mind, there are some people who still believe in the old stereotype that traditional healer are witches, just because they use African traditional methods of healing. Some believe traditional healers are witches because they know how to counteract the evil used on people. If we can look at the definition of witches or a witch we will draw to a conclusion that those people were misled indeed. Most dictionaries define witches in most cases to be an ugly woman wearing a black cloak and hat using stick to fly and cast evil spell on people. On the hand a traditional healer is a person that provides health care to people by using different methods, it can be through the use of ancestors, holly water, herbs, animal substances and or a prayer. Their main purpose is to protect people against evil and help alleviate people's life. However they are those who misuse their knowledge to kill people and breaking the rule that traditional healers are meant to protect and heal, thus becoming witches (Nene, 2013: 3). The aim of this article is not to argue on the issue of traditional healers and witches but to explore the *hlonipha* features used by traditional healers. As it is difficult for most people to understand why traditional healers have so many rules during consultations, it will be goal to enlighten as to why it is so.

Before clarifying the meaning of *ukuhlonipha* it would be important to first define its meaning. The expression *ukuhlonipha* simply means 'to respect' as this is an act of being polite towards others. Across

cultures and communities, politeness and *ukuhlonipha* are important elements in interaction that are taken as peace elements. It is for this reason that people want to be associated with politeness and *ukuhlonipha*. However, it must be remembered that different cultures understand politeness and *ukuhlonipha* differently. Since the term ‘politeness’ ‘to respect’ or ‘ukuhlonipha’ comes with a range of behaviour that is understood by a group of people and the meaning can be overlapping with other groups.

The *ukuhlonipha* expression is commonly known and used among the Sotho and the Nguni people (Kuckertz, 2007: 2). AmaZulu understanding of *ukuhlonipha* has characteristics of ‘positive’ actions, such as gestures to benefactions and good behaviour. Although some people are obliged to follow *ukuhlonipha*, some take it positively as one of the cultural aspects to which they respond with an attentive obedience. For an example the act of becoming a traditional healer’s apprentice, can be by choice to some people and others can be forced to it. It must be remembered that it is not everyone’s childhood dream to become a traditional healer, but once a person is faced with that opportunity they must take it, as one of the gestures of respecting the people above them.

Lo and Howard (2009: 215) argue that politeness includes semiotic practices that if one studies this theory they may consider looking at elements, such as (1) speech, dress, gestures, etcetera; (2) the social values that those practices are thought to point to, such as being rude or considerate; (3) the image of personhood that is linked to the use of such practices, and (4) the people to whom such practices, values and images are linked. Our discussion will demonstrate how *ukuhlonipha* is linked with the amaZulu traditional healer’s apprentice with the use of the politeness theory.

General politeness

The theory of politeness is promoted by several theorists such as Lakoff in Reiter (2000), Leech (1983), as well as Brown and Levinson (1978). However, this article will primarily look at Leech’s notion of the politeness as defined as:

[F]orms of behaviour that establish and maintain comity. That is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony (Ingilish 2006).

The above definition emphasises politeness as the ability of people to interact peacefully with one another. We were not born with the technique of being polite, but we acquire it through socialisation with others. This contributes to the implication that politeness is not something that comes naturally, but is constructed socio-culturally and historically. The AmaZulu have a saying ‘*umuzi nomuzi unomthetho wawo*’ which means ‘every household has its own rules’ (Nene, 2013: 28). During consultation, a patient is bound by the rules of the healer just as a visitor is bound by rules of the household he/she is visiting. The ‘thanking Rule’ is among other examples, whereby a patient must not thank the healer for the medicine as it will not work effectively.

Brown and Levinson (1978) are under the assumption that humans have inherited rationality and have face. The word ‘rationality’ simply means one’s ability to make a concrete decision based on reason, thus leaving one with choices in order to make appropriate decisions and achieve certain goals (Nene, 2013). Ha and Kwon (2009: 81) explain a model person as:

...Somewhat ideal individuals in society, who are error free, have a decent memory and know the linguistic systems of their native language.

In reality Ha and Kwon (2009) model person does not exist but people strive as close to that model by using their cultural knowledge to be polite, such as saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ as an example. Brown and Levinson (1978: 61) notion of ‘face’ consist of two parts which are the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ faces. A positive face is the one an individual seeks approval and acceptance from a group as

elaborated by Brown and Levinson in (Kitamura, 2000: 1). Reiter (2000: 12) goes on to say that one's culture and the social group contributes to the maintenance of positive face that his or her desires are shared with other people. In doing so, one will have to listen attentively to what the other party is saying and will have to try to agree about some topics. On the other hand, the negative face is one's need to be independent by not being imposed upon or imposing on other people. At times one may even mention that one is aware that one might be imposing on another person and apologise for that. That on its own can create a harmonious conversation, as it is shown from the start that the invader respects the other party. It is for the same reason that *ukuhlonipha* was introduced by acknowledging when one is intruding on another person.

Knowledge of the gestures and things that traditional healer apprentices do to show *ukuhlonipha* is necessary in the field of healing. In this paper, *ukuhlonipha* will be demonstrated and analysed by employing the politeness theory in relation to gestures, text and language. Photos will also be utilised in the analysis to illustrate the researcher's interpretation.

Analysis of the *ukuhlonipha* of traditional healer's apprentices

Across many cultures it is believed that if a person does not respond to a call, he is being impolite, *akahloniphi* in isiZulu. The same thing applies to traditional healers. The first sign of respect by anyone who is a traditional healer is to accept the calling of the ancestors. If a parent calls his children and they ignore him, one assumes that the children will be punished for being disrespectful. The same applies to anyone who is called by an ancestor and decides to ignore the calling. Different types of misfortune may follow them, such as becoming permanently ill and western medical practitioners not being able to diagnose the cause of the illness. This may also result in the death of close family members. Nene (2013: 93) quotes one of the interviewees as saying:

Before I accepted the calling of becoming a traditional healer, my grandmother came to me through a dream and asked me if I want to lose my kids, because they have been telling me to take this job but I did not want to.

In order to avoid any harm consequence from the ancestors it is the best to comply with their request by undergoing a training for a determined period of time under the leadership of a qualified diviner (Melato, 2000). During the apprenticeship program, the student diviner is taught the qualities of the various medicines used, the significance of the art of healing, how one has to show politeness towards the ancestors and the power of the mind (Cumes, 2004).

During the training period, there are certain things that need to be done by the apprentice that signify *ukuhlonipha* to the people involved in the training – these are the ancestors and qualified traditional healers. The first thing that is done by a person accepting the calling is to go to the qualified traditional healer to set guidance on what action to take. In most cases the apprentice is guided by the ancestors as to which traditional healer to go, as the healer is also informed by the ancestor of the apprentices' arrival. When the apprentice arrives at the house of the traditional healer he/she is not allowed to enter the house until he/she has been instructed to do so, reason being the healer must perform a certain ritual. However, in some cases the healer is not aware of the arrival of the apprentice as illustrated by one of the participants in (Nene, 2013: 94) study:

!7 During divination the first thing that you must be aware of is that when a person comes for training, you do not know that a person is

coming ... when they come they start by singing at the gate, and you will feel like it's a dream. From which you awake and go outside the house, where you will find that person standing outside. You have to rush to that person and welcome her or him. The ways that you welcome her or him is through clapping of hands and then saying, "Welcome elders we are welcoming you". You must burn *impepho* (incense) and make or him or her sniff it and then you must call them to come in. The new apprentice will enter the gate kneeling until he or she reaches the consultation room.

The above narration is a demonstration of the rules of etiquette that must be followed by the apprentice during his or her arrival of the homestead of the qualified traditional healer. The apprentice must sing from the gate to announce his or her arrival, the qualified healer will then welcome the ancestor and the apprentice by burning incense and informing them that they are welcomed. The apprentice will then enter the homestead kneeling until he or she reaches the healer's consultation room. This is one of the gestures that signify positive politeness towards the qualified healer and the ancestors.

There are so many gestures that signify *ukuhlonipha* or respect in cultures and kneeling in front of a person or king is one of them. This shows the type of respect one has for that person or king, Hence, when an apprentice enters the homestead of a qualified traditional healer, kneeling is a sign of respect to them and their ancestors and it maintains peace between the two families (Nene, 2013). Blum-Kulka and Elite (1984) explain that the politeness theory can be shown through direct, indirect or non-conventional speech such as kneeling of the apprentice. Nyembezi and Nxumalo (1996: 125) elaborate as follows on the signs of respect shown by African traditional woman in the past:

We were just saying that when a woman meets a man on the street, she will bow and then speak to him. If they meet at home she will kneel.

It is for this reason that traditional healers believe that when greeting one another, the apprentice needs to bow or kneel. It is also essential for an apprentice to kneel when entering the homestead of a qualified healer to signify respect, as it is said 'one must not stand in the presence of one above them'. Kneeling is not the only sign of respect shown by the apprentice when entering the healer's consultation room or *isigodlo*. Mourning and abstaining from certain things and behaviour such as having sexual intercourse are also signs of respect. Should the apprentice engage in any sexual activities during his/her training period, he/she will have to wash with certain herbs to cleanse himself/herself again before consulting with the ancestors. When we talk of mourning we are not only referring to grief but rather to the appearance of the apprentice during the apprenticeship programme, such as covering their face with red mud and wearing of the red outfit for the duration of the training or unless the training is about to be finished. The significant of such is an indication that one is undergoing training and must show respect to whoever has *idlozi* or ancestor, by kneeling or bowing and greet them whenever they meet. A further explanation on the reason why people rub their faces with red mud was given in Nene (2013: 96) as follow:

Basuka bekhuleka edlozini ufana nomuthi ozilile, ibomvu leli njengoba ngisho awuyi ekhaya uma ufake lolubomvu. Fuze uze uligeze kuqala ngembuzi ngaphambi kokuthi uyongena ekhaya.

They are usually pleading with their ancestors, it's like grieving medicine. This red mud, as I am saying, you don't wear it when you go home. You are supposed to cleanse it off with a goat before you can enter your home.

The above explanation shows how important it is for apprentices to follow and respect holistic culture, especially with regards to the restrictions and rules imposed upon them. Otherwise, there will be ructions, not only for them but even for the people who are close to them.

A positive face is shown by an apprentice by avoiding looking to a person with *idlozi* directly in their eyes as they kneel or bow and greet. According to Brown and Levinson, this is a face that is shown by people who seek approval (Reiter, 2000). However, not everyone who wears a red traditional outfit is in the process of becoming a traditional healer. See **image 1** below, which illustrates what an apprentice's outfit should look like.



Image 1: Apprentice dress code



Image 2: Kneeling when entering a traditional healer's consultation room



Image 3: Apprentice greeting



Image 4: Different types of apprentices

The 'positive' face must be maintained by an apprentice throughout the whole process of training and divination. An additional task of an apprentice as a sign of respect to the ancestors and their *gobela* (trainer) is to always kneel when entering into *esigodlweni* (see **images 2, 3 and 4**). These images show clearly how apprentices enter into *esigodlweni*, which is different to the way anyone else enters.

Furthermore, the traditional healer's apprentice uses the name *makhosi* which means 'king' to show respect to anyone above them, this could be their trainers or even the ancestors. The word *a/makhosi* means 'king/s' is used by people with *idlozi* and those who understand its meaning and fundamentals. Nene (2013: 102) explained the importance of saying *makhosi* when greeting:

- !3 we are showing respect...
!4 we are respecting yours' ancestors and mine
!3 kings (! while saying *makhosi*, all traditional healers in the room clapped their hands)

Clapping hands is an important aspect of greeting, which is done by traditional healers as a whole. In so doing, they show respect for others and their own ancestors. It should be clear that not everyone has the privilege of being a *makhosi* as cited in Nene (*op.cit*) as follows:

- ! 5 By the way I see things, they do not just take anyone (-) as I am a traditional healer it depends if you have the ancestor that wants to work with the way that she/he wants to work with. When you decide to go to eat, wash the ancestor that you have, that is when you are really washing the ancestor. They are not giving you, telling you "there it is, take what we are giving you" but you are washing what you already have and then after washing it and then you can be called *umakhosi* or *ugogo*.
* By using that word you are respecting...
!5 respecting the ancestors that have entered you.

The above emphasises that in order for one to be called *makhosi*, they need to be cleaned from all the uncleansed ways of doing things and take an oath of becoming clean by allowing the ancestor to do what he/she desire. As a sign of respect the clean ancestor, traditional healers' will call each other *makhosi*. It is also for these reasons that before apprentices accept the calling traditional healers start by doing a cleansing ritual for the apprentice as a way of informing the ancestors of what is about to happen.

It was noticed by the researcher that every time anyone said *makhosi* to traditional healers, they say *makhosi* in reply, while clapping their hands. For example, during the group interview, the researcher was busy interviewing participant 7 when a traditional healer's apprentice entered the room. The first thing she said was *makhosi*, while clapping her hands. Eventually everyone in the room stopped talking and said *makhosi* in return and clapped their hands. This is done concurrently with saying *makhosi* as a sign of respect. However, the clapping of hands is not something that is only done by apprentices when they are in agreement. It is done by everyone who has *idlozi* and understands its meaning.

Discussion

This study revealed that although some people no longer consider and follow cultural aspects that are considered *hlonipha* features but most traditional healer's apprentices follow this custom. Even though some qualified traditional healers take advantage of apprentices by making them do things unrelated to their training such as doing their domestic work for them, most apprentices have shown the characteristics of *ukuhlonipha*. With understanding that when one respects a person who has *idlozi* one is not only respecting them, but their ancestors too. The long forgotten custom of reciting ones clan name when

entering another mans' homestead is still followed by traditional healer's apprentices. This is shown in this study that when a traditional healer's apprentices arrive for the first time to be trained, they don't just enter the homestead without being told to do so. They kneel from outside the gate; some sing or recite the qualified traditional healer's clan name to show the respect they have for that family. This is not only done in place such as rural areas but even in locations and suburb areas.

The study further revealed different gestures shown by traditional healer's apprentices that signify *ukuhlonipha*, such as the use of the word *makhosi* when greeting qualified healer's or people with *idlozi* and wearing red attire with mud on their faces. All of the above mentioned examples signify the type of respect that apprentices show toward ancestors and people with *idlozi* and it was discussed in the text, together with the gestures and language found and used as shown above.

For them to use both positive and negative faces to show how much they have respect for ancestors and others, cannot make us deduce that their face is pretension, but we can say that it is because of *ukuhlonipha* that they try to maintain peace between themselves and their ancestors. In African traditional cultures, especially for the people who follow this culture, it is essential to maintain harmony with their ancestors (Prabhupada, 1990).

As mentioned before, the apprentice's *ukuhlonipha* include the gestures of greeting, the rhythmic clapping of hands, removing one's shoes before entering *esigodlwani* and kneeling. However, one should bear in mind that the removal of shoes at the entrance is not a practice of apprentices only, but of everyone who enters a traditional healer's consultation room. All of the above-mentioned *inhlonipho* are merely the introduction of *ukuhlonipha* of a traditional healer's apprentices to their ancestors. Thus, when thinking of *ukuhlonipha* of the traditional healer's apprentice, we can conclude that it is something that starts long before a person actually becomes a qualified healer.

Conclusion

This study has opened our eyes to understand why traditional healers are custodians of culture and why they conduct themselves in certain ways. By comprehending all of the above mentioned examples and reasons, the researcher hopes that people can now look at traditional healer's apprentices from a different perspective.

References

1. Blum-Kulka, S. and Elite, O. 1984. Request and apologies: a cross-cultural study of speech act realisation patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics* 5(3): 196-213.
2. Brown, P. and Levinson, S. 1978. Politeness: some universals in language usage. *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics IV*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Cumes, D. M. 2004. *Africa in my bones: a surgeon's odyssey into the spirit world of African healing*. Cape Town: ABC Press.
4. Dowson, M. and Devenish, S. 2010. *Religion and spirituality: a volume in international advances in education global initiatives for equity and social justice*. Charlotte, N.C: Information Age.
5. Ha, S. and Kwon, S. 2009. On politeness: cross-cultural differences. *Kling* 3: 79-102. [O]. Available: www.kling.or.kr/pds/kling200902/79-101.pdf. Accessed 30 August 2012.
6. Ingilish, 2006. [O]. http://www.ingilish.com/gricean_maxims_and_politeness.htm. Accessed 3 October 2012.
7. Kitamura, N. 2000. Adapting Brown and Levinson's "politeness" theory to the analysis of casual conversation. www.als.asn.au/proceedings/als2000/kitamura.pdf Accessed 30 August 2012.

8. Kohler, M. 1941. *The Izangoma diviners*. Pretoria: Government printers.
9. Kuckertz, H. 2007. *Ukuhlonipha as idiom of moral reasoning in Mpondo*. Umtata: University of Transkei.
10. Leech, G. N. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
11. Lo, A. and Howard, K, M. 2009. Mobilizing respect and politeness in classrooms. *Linguistic and Education* 20: 211-216.
12. Melato, S. R. 2000. *Traditional healers: perceptions of the integration of their practices into the South African national health system*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal.
13. Nyembezi, S. and Nxumalo, O. E. H 1966. *Inqolobane Yesizwe*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter.
14. Nene, J. O. 2013. *IsiZulu traditional healer's perspective of ukuhlonipha in Context*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Pretoria, Unisa.
15. Prabhupada, A. C. B. S. 1990. *The journey of self-discovery: his divine grace*. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.
16. Pretorius, E. 1998. *Traditional healers: a portfolio committee on health*. UOF, South Africa. [O]. Available http://www.hst.org.za/uploads/files/chapter18_99.pdf. Accessed 26 August 2011
17. Reiter, R. M. 2000. *Linguistic politeness in Britain and Uruguay*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
18. Schapera, I. 1946. *The Bantu-speaking tribes in South Africa: an ethnographical survey*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller.
19. West, M. 1975. *Bishops and prophets in a black city: African independent churches in Soweto, Johannesburg*. Cape Town: David Philip.