



Natural and Supernatural: Intersections Between the Spiritual and Natural Worlds in African Witchcraft and Healing with Reference to Southern Africa

by T. S. Petrus and D. L. Bogopa

Abstract

For generations, African beliefs and practices regarding witchcraft and traditional healing have been located at the intersection between the natural world and the supernatural world. Despite the impact of both colonialism and, in the contemporary context, modernization, the complex interplay between these worlds has not been reduced. The interaction between nature and religion, as a facet of culture, has long been a subject of inquiry in anthropology, and nowhere is this more evident than in the study of African witchcraft and traditional healing. A distinct relationship exists between witchcraft beliefs and traditional healing methods. This relationship brings these two aspects of African culture together in such a complex manner that it is difficult to attempt to understand the dynamics of African witchcraft without referring to traditional healing methods, and vice versa. In this paper, the authors outline the various ways in which African witchcraft beliefs and practices, as well as traditional healing beliefs and practices, interact within the nature/culture domain. This interaction will be conceptualised in a Merleau-Pontian sense, focusing on the indeterminacy of the natural and supernatural worlds. In its presentation of an essentially anthropological case study focused on southern Africa, the paper draws on various ethnographic examples of African communities in the southern African context.

Introduction

The study of the interaction between nature and religion, as a facet of culture, has long been an area of interest for anthropologists. Some scholars, such as Geertz (1985), have suggested that the interaction between nature and religion has existed at least since the emergence of Neolithic cultures. According to Geertz, "...during the Neolithic period...which is marked by the cultivation of crops and domestication of animals, cycles of nature became an important feature of magic and religious beliefs. Drought, storms and other natural perils of the farmer could have created a growing dependence on supernatural powers" (quoted in Lehmann & Myers, 1985, p. 2). It would thus seem that it was already apparent during these early stages in the development of religion

among Neolithic cultures that religion and nature would develop an important and complex interrelationship.

Among modern simple cultures, for example those of hunter-gatherer or foraging peoples such as the San of the southern African Kalahari region, the closeness of nature and religion has created a unique type of religion. According to Scupin and Decorse (2004), "The religions associated with modern foragers are ... 'cosmic religions' [since they are] ... intimately associated with nature ... features of the natural environment are invested with sacred significance" (p. 367). This point is especially relevant if one considers Hirst's (2005) comment that "Religious representations are first and foremost cultural constructions acquired during socialization and

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include, inter alia, conceptions of Nature” (p. 19).

This paper will focus on two aspects of the religious and cosmological systems of indigenous African communities, namely witchcraft and traditional healing, and will attempt to illustrate the interplay that exists between these and the natural environment within which these communities exist. Particular reference will be made to ethnographic examples in southern Africa to show the sometimes complex interaction that can occur between witchcraft beliefs, traditional healing practices, and the natural world.

Natural and Supernatural as Bounded Entities: The Problem of Scientific Categorisation

In essence, the interaction between witchcraft and traditional healing, on the one hand, and the natural world on the other, is an interaction between the “supernatural” and the natural. For the purposes of this paper, the “supernatural” will be defined as “all that is not natural, that which is regarded as extraordinary, not of the ordinary world, mysterious or unexplainable in ordinary terms” (Norbeck, 1961, p. 11). However, it must be pointed out at the outset that indigenous communities may not categorise their lived worlds in terms of a distinction between the supernatural and natural, but may view these “worlds” as inextricably linked. Both Schutz’s concept of “multiple realities” (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28) and James’s concept of “sub-universes” (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28) support the idea that some human societies, such as indigenous communities, do not separate their lived experiences of the natural and supernatural worlds into distinct categories. Some scholars suggest that supernatural and natural are etic categories imposed by Western scholars trying to make sense of the beliefs and practices of non-Western communities and may be emically meaningless to the communities themselves. According to Harris (1993), “few preindustrial cultures make a neat distinction between natural and supernatural phenomena ... [as they] ... may simply lack emic categories for ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’” (p. 386). This view corresponds with the view expressed by Newman (1965) in his earlier study of the beliefs of the western New Guinean Gururumba: “our use of the notion ‘supernatural’ does not correspond to any Gururumba concept: they do not divide the world into natural and supernatural parts” (p. 83). The attempts made by Western scholars of indigenous religions to create categories such as natural and supernatural, are, in fact, efforts at trying to create a Western-scientifically defined rationalistic framework. In some social sciences, such as anthropology, this can create problems in accurately describing the lived experiences of

indigenous communities, especially with reference to their beliefs in and experiences of supernatural phenomena (Petrus, 2006).

These views suggest that some cultures may view the interaction between the natural and supernatural worlds as a symbiotic relationship, implying that, in their reality, there are, in fact, not two separate worlds, but one world in which the natural and supernatural exist interdependently. In other words, for these communities, the natural and supernatural worlds are not bounded entities, but are rather conceived of as being indeterminate, that is, as not having fixed boundaries. The problem that this poses for scientific categorisation is that, if an object cannot be categorised within fixed boundaries, then, at least as far as the scientific view is concerned, this object either does not exist, or is impossible (Petrus, 2006, p. 4). Merleau-Ponty rejected this view, arguing against the objectivist assumption that “every object is fully determinate... [that is, with]... fixed or precise limits or boundaries...” (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991, p. 133). Rather, Merleau-Ponty argued that “non-determinacy is primarily a characteristic of what is actually experienced in the world” (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 135). Thus, as Petrus (2006) argues in support of Merleau-Ponty, “in societies not bounded by the limitations ... of scientific objectivism and rationalism, no boundaries may exist between the ‘real’ [or natural] world, as experienced through the senses, and the supernatural world. As a result, for such societies, there is a constant interaction between the real world and the supernatural world” (p. 5). It is with this view in mind that the interplay between witchcraft, traditional healing, and the natural world will be discussed.

Witchcraft, Nature and the Supernatural

Within African communities, witchcraft is regarded by most, if not all, as a reality (Mavhungu, 2000). Whether it occurs in rural African communities (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Hammond-Tooke, 1989; Marwick, 1970; Middleton and Winter, 1963; Parrinder, 1963) or urban communities (Ashforth, 2000, 2001), witchcraft exists as a viable cause of misfortune, illness or death. Witchcraft may have many different meanings depending on the cultural context within which it is believed to exist, and therefore formulating a single definition of witchcraft is very difficult. African witchcraft is a broad or general concept that can refer to two sometimes interrelated activities. Firstly, psychic witchcraft involves “the illegal destruction of life and property by means of ‘familiar’...” (Hunter, 1961) and is inherently a “psychic act” (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). The second related activity is sorcery, which is

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defined as “the use of material (i.e. medicines), rites and spells for illegal ends” (Hunter, 1961). Witchcraft involves the use of supernatural forces for evil or harmful intent, and is thus distinguished from the use of supernatural powers for benevolent purposes, for example in divining or traditional healing.

The distinction between witchcraft and sorcery was made by the founding father of studies of witchcraft in anthropology, Evans-Pritchard, whose classic study of witchcraft and sorcery among the Azande of Sudan (1937) became the foundation of later ethnographic studies of witchcraft. In his study of Zande witchcraft beliefs, Evans-Pritchard noted that “Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them by virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They [the Azande] believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers” (Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 21). The distinction drawn here between witchcraft and sorcery has not, however, proved true for other African societies. Crawford (1967), for example, found that, among the Shona of the former Southern Rhodesia, witches were conceived of as being able to perform both psychic witchcraft as well as witchcraft with medicines. Hirst (2005) has also pointed out that, among the South African Xhosa, “the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, both of which are referred to by the term *ukuthakatha*, is blurred, in thought and practice” (p. 3). It appears that scholarly efforts to categorise witchcraft beliefs into psychic witchcraft and sorcery may also lead to inaccurate descriptions of how these supernatural beliefs are perceived in the lived experiences of people holding these beliefs. From an anthropological perspective, cross-cultural ethnographic data should reveal how various societies experience these phenomena in their own contexts, so as to avoid the problem of assuming that a clear distinction between witchcraft and sorcery exists universally.

In order to comprehend the interaction between the cultural concept of witchcraft and nature, it is necessary to understand the position of witchcraft beliefs and nature in the general cosmological view of the African. In South Africa, many indigenous African communities share similar views of a natural order of existence in which human beings have a crucial role to play. It is believed that humans have the ability to control both the natural and supernatural worlds and thus become the centres around which natural and supernatural forces interact (Forde, 1954). Most cosmologies of South African indigenous peoples postulate four categories of theories that

explain the human condition, namely the Supreme Being, ancestors, witches and sorcerers, and pollution beliefs (Hammond-Tooke, 1989, p. 46). Among the Venda, it is believed that a limited cosmic good exists in the world and that every person has a fixed place and a fixed amount of cosmic good, which includes harmony and general well-being. If a person is thought to have more than his/her fair share of good fortune, the person is suspected of attempting to gain an unfair advantage over others by manipulating unnatural forces, which could take the form of witchcraft. This loss of cosmic good through supernatural means could be interpreted in terms of natural events such as a failed crop, disease or untimely death (Minnaar, Offringa, & Payze, 1992, p. 7).

The practising witch is a highly ambiguous figure, as he/she operates in both the natural and supernatural realms. The witch is both a human being, with a natural, physical body, and, at the same time, also a “superhuman” being, able to control both natural and supernatural forces for evil. It is this ambiguity that causes the witch to be viewed as the antithesis and enemy of the natural order. Thus, any unnatural events that occur in a community, such as random lightning strikes that destroy property or kill people and livestock, as well as inexplicable illnesses or deaths, are attributed to witches. Psychic witchcraft involves the sending of “mythical animals (familiars)” (Hammond-Tooke, 1989, p. 48) to cause harm to others. Familiars are supernatural spiritual agents that can only be controlled by a witch who has created them. Some examples of Xhosa witch familiars include the lightning bird (*impundulu*), the baboon (*imfene*), the snake of men (*inyoka yamadoda*) and *uThikoloshe* (Hammond-Tooke, 1989; Olivier, 1981; Osei, 2003; Pauw, 1975; Pauw, 1994). The interpretation of these spiritual agents as animals illustrates the interaction between nature and witchcraft beliefs. Although these agents are invisible to ordinary humans and thus belong to the supernatural realm, they are conceptualised as recognisable animals in the natural world. They become associated with witchcraft because, like the witch, they occupy an ambiguous position in the cosmology of indigenous Africans. As Douglas (1970) has pointed out, “it is precisely those animals which do not easily fit into the broad classificatory taxa of a culture that become the focus of ritual attention” (quoted in Hammond-Tooke, 1989, p. 76). The ambiguous position of the witch is further supported by the belief that he/she can transform into one or other of these familiars, which suggests that he/she is neither completely human nor completely animal. Thus, by combining human and animal characteristics in an unnatural manner, the witch can

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“transcend the abilities of ordinary persons” (Osei, 2003, p. 49).

The sorcerer, as distinguished from the witch, uses medicines (*ubuthi*), rites and spells to cause harm to others. Among the Xhosa, the most common form of sorcery is *idliso* or *ukudliswa* (poisoning), which “refers to the oral administration of medicine of sorcery, usually by adding it to the victim’s food or drink” (Olivier, 1981, p. 92; Pauw, 1975, p. 233). In addition, other forms of sorcery also exist, such as *ukuthathela*, which involves the use of material that a potential victim has been in contact with and that has a personal connection to the victim, such as hair, nails or clothing, which, when mixed with other medicines, can be used as contagious magic to cause harm. Another example of sorcery is *umeqo*, which involves burying medicines along a path that a victim will use. Once the victim steps over the medicine, he/she will fall ill (Olivier, 1981, p. 93). Sorcery operates from the premise that natural substances such as roots, herbs, soil, water, and even bodily substances from people, can be influenced by supernatural forces that are controlled by the sorcerer through the use of an appropriate rite or spell, in order to produce a harmful effect once these substances are ingested by a victim. Like the witch, the sorcerer also acts as a centralising force, bringing together the natural and the supernatural by manipulating supernatural forces to affect natural substances for the purpose of causing harm. As is the case in respect of the witch animals or familiars, the natural substances used by the sorcerer also possess an ambiguous character, in that the same substances used by the sorcerer to harm others by supernatural means may be used by a traditional healer (*inyanga*, or more specifically in the use of medicines, a herbalist or *ixhwele*) to help others or to counter the effects of witchcraft. Among the Xhosa, it is believed that a sorcerer also has the ability to make a witch familiar through the use of charms and magic (Hirst, 2005, p. 4). Alternatively, it is believed that a witch can use medicines to cause harm to an intended victim by sending a familiar to administer the medicine (Pauw, 1975, p. 234).

The interaction between nature and culture, as it relates to beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery, is represented in most African communities in South Africa by the symbolic interpretations given to this interaction. This applies specifically to instances of witch killings that occur in South Africa, particularly in the rural areas. Since witches are regarded as opponents to the natural order of harmonious community life, any inexplicable or unnatural misfortunes that befall a community raise suspicions of witchcraft. The suspected witch is hunted out and may be killed by members of the community

(Ashforth, 2005; Hund, 2003; Mavhungu, 2000; Minnaar et al., 1992; Niehaus, 1997; Osei, 2003). Witch killings represent a symbolic response to the nature/culture dichotomy inherent in the witch symbol. If witch killings are contextualised in this way, Turner’s (1985) theory of the “polarization of significata” (p. 56) becomes significant. According to this theory, cultural symbols operate in between two poles: the sensory, which involves clustered meanings that refer to physiological (or natural) processes, and the ideological, which involves clustered meanings attached to social values and allegiances (i.e. cultural). Since the witch symbolises that which is in contradiction to the natural order, by destroying the physical or natural body (physiological pole) of the witch, usually through burning, it is hoped to symbolically restore affirmation and confirmation of the social values of community conformity and collectivity (ideological pole). Similarly, in the case of so-called *muti* (medicine) murders, in which human beings are killed in order to harvest body parts from them for the purpose of making potent medicines (Minnaar et al., 1992), certain body parts, such as male and female genitalia, are favoured. By removing the physical genitalia of a victim (representing the physiological), it is believed that the user of the resultant medicine will increase his/her reproductive potential - which, in the African context, is a highly valued social function in terms of its implications for wealth and status in the community (representing the ideological).

In the preceding section, attention was focused on the interaction between African conceptions of nature and conceptions of religion, specifically as they relate to beliefs in witchcraft. The two main activities associated with witchcraft, namely psychic witchcraft and sorcery, were considered in relation to the broader cosmological ideas of African communities. It was also shown how the nature/culture dichotomy is symbolically dealt with in respect of the witch symbol by referring to Turner’s theory of the polarisation of significata. In the following section, traditional healing will be focused on as yet another example of the complex manner in which nature and religion can interact in the African context. In order to illustrate this interaction, specific reference will be made to case studies drawn from various groups in the southern African region.

Traditional Healing

De Villiers (1991) conducted research on tuberculosis among the Xhosa-speaking people in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, with his research methodology based on interviewing Xhosa-speaking patients from both rural and urban areas, as well as

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Xhosa nurses. De Villiers's findings revealed *inter alia* that the causes of tuberculosis among Xhosa-speaking people were believed to be related to the activities of *impundulu* (the lightning bird).

It is believed that *impundulu* attacks people in various forms. It can attack by kicking one between the shoulders or on the head. It sometimes presses on a victim's chest or sucks the victim's blood (Hirst, 1990, pp. 243-245). As far as tuberculosis is concerned, *impundulu* is believed to cause coughing, breathlessness and pains in the back, all of which are natural symptoms of possible tuberculosis infection, but interpreted in supernatural terms. In order to cure tuberculosis, the Xhosa-speaking people prefer to consult an *igqirha* (diviner), in the belief that the Western practitioner will not understand the problem of witchcraft (De Villiers, 1991, p. 70). One possible interpretation of the scepticism of Western medical doctors is that, while the traditional healer understands the human body as a site for the interrelationship between natural and supernatural forces with the capacity to influence each other, the Western practitioner regards the human body as a bounded entity with its own internal logic that has no connection to supernatural forces, with whatever occurs in the human body thus interpretable only in natural terms. In that the experience of being attacked by a supernatural force, such as *impundulu*, is one that transcends both the natural and supernatural worlds, Xhosa people may thus be more inclined to rely upon the help of a diviner who understands this dual experience and will therefore treat the patient holistically, dealing with both the physical and the spiritual aspects of the affliction.

Traditional healers are greatly respected among the Bantu-speaking people. Diviners and herbalists are seen as equally important, and superiority attaches to both. Among the Mpondo people, consulting one diviner is not enough. The Mpondo people prefer to consult more than one diviner, particularly in cases of suspected witchcraft. In cases of grave or long-lasting illness, the formal step of consulting a traditional healer is taken. When an illness becomes serious, then people will suspect witchcraft and a diviner will be consulted (Hammond-Tooke, 1989, pp. 103-104).

Herbalism is an exclusive traditional profession practised by a small number of both females and males. Most of the herbalists in South Africa are highly skilled and devoted. The more accomplished herbalists are extra-ordinarily versatile, possessing a sound knowledge of divination. Some herbalists, particularly those who are based in rural areas, are capable of staunching the flow of blood from a spewing knife wound by applying a tourniquet made

of the soft pliable bark of mopani saplings (Becker, 1974, p. 112).

The traditional healer, be it the diviner or the herbalist, is, like the witch or sorcerer, a highly ambiguous figure in African society. The healer not only exists in between the natural and supernatural worlds, but is also morally ambiguous. Due to his/her special ability to exist between both the natural and supernatural worlds, the healer possesses knowledge of both natural phenomena, such as plants, roots and herbs, as well as of spiritual phenomena, such as divination. In a very direct way, the healer thus experiences the interaction between the natural and the supernatural, and the moral ambiguity which characterises the healer is, consequently, directly related to his/her position as a central point around which the natural and supernatural converge. As noted in respect of witches and sorcerers, such ambiguity renders the individual susceptible to being perceived as suspect. While the healer is expected to use his/her knowledge of the natural and supernatural to benefit the community, it is simultaneously understood that the possibility exists that the healer may, like a witch or sorcerer, use his/her powers for evil. Implicit in the perception of a person as having a special ability to manipulate natural and supernatural forces is thus the sense that he/she is potentially dangerous to the community.

The First Case: A Shona Interpretation of Physical/Natural Symptoms in Supernatural Terms

Chavunduka (1978, pp. 35-36) conducted research among the Shona in what is now Zimbabwe (previously Rhodesia). His interviews with a range of members of the community probed whether they believed that it is possible to find a "really healthy" person. The responses differed significantly, with the majority of the Shona people interviewed holding that it is impossible for there to be a "really healthy" person, while only a small percentage believed that it is possible. Those who rejected the idea held the view that there is always something wrong with individuals even if they are well enough to continue to work. Two factors were mentioned by the respondents as to why a person could not be "really healthy". The first factor was *varoyi* (the presence of the witches) and the second factor was the poor living conditions of the people. Those who believed that it is possible for there to be a "really healthy" person, supported this view by referring to people who wear protective charms at all times, such as *muti* or charms tied around the arm.

Chavunduka came upon the case of a Shona man

named Shame who was from a wealthy family and who also had a formal education. Shame had been experiencing persistent coughing and pains for about two weeks. His brother bought him a bottle of cough mixture and another bottle containing pine tar and honey from a chemist. Shame continued to take these medicines for three weeks without any success. Shame's next move was to go to hospital, and the diagnosis noted on the hospital chart next to his bed was that he was suffering from pneumothorax. The hospital could not help Shame, and after five weeks he was discharged at his own request. His brother decided to take him to the traditional healer. The traditional healer diagnosed witchcraft as the cause of his illness, and the witch was believed to be his well-known neighbour who was jealous of their wealth. He was charged Rh\$6 (now Zimbabwean dollars) and a goat for the medicine and treatment. After the treatment, Shame felt better and returned home (Chavunduka, 1978, pp. 49-50). This case illustrates the relationship between experiences of physical or natural symptoms of illness and supernatural explanations for these symptoms.

The Second Case: The Futility of Western Medicine

This case, also reported by Chavunduka (1978), involves a senior nurse at a former Salisbury (now called Harare) private clinic who became ill during working hours. Her right foot started to itch while she was writing at her desk and a few hours later her leg was swollen. She consulted a Western doctor, but it proved fruitless and her husband decided to take her to the hospital, where she agreed to take medicines but refused to be operated upon. The reason for her refusing to undergo an operation was that the pain, as she experienced it, was moving from one place to the other, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the ailment. She was convinced that her illness was *chipotswa*, a form of witchcraft. She was discharged after three weeks at her own request. Her neighbours advised her to consult a traditional healer. The healer made a number of cuts on her right foot with a razor blade and rubbed a black powder into these cuts. This is a common method used by healers to combat the effects of witchcraft or sorcery (cf. Hirst, 1990, p. 161 and Hirst, 2005, p. 4). She was also given a brown powder to smoke for two weeks, and, after some time, she appeared well and eventually went back to work. The suspect was believed to be a junior nurse who was jealous of the status of the senior nurse (Chavunduka, 1978, pp. 51-52). This case is similar to the case of Shame, in that the nurse's experience of her ailment indicated that it was witchcraft related. She knew that Western methods of treatment would be futile since they focused only on the physical cause

of ailments. Consequently, she consulted a traditional healer who could diagnose a supernatural cause for the physical symptoms that she experienced. After receiving medicine from the healer, the nurse appeared to return to health.

The above two cases illustrate how the experience of illness on a biological or natural level can find expression or be interpreted in supernatural or spiritual terms. In both cases, the boundaries between the natural or physical and the supernatural or spiritual are blurred. What is also apparent is that, specifically in the Shona case - and, for that matter, in African communities in southern Africa in general - perceptions of health and well-being are not one-dimensional. Health is thus not measured only in terms of physical factors, but, in accordance with the recognition of human being as multi-dimensional, in relation to the interdependence of the physical or natural, social and spiritual dimensions of being. This lived awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of the human being underpins the African experience of being human. As Spiegelberg (1975) points out, the experience of a human being of himself/herself as a human is based on the consciousness that a human being has of himself/herself as a human being: a human being is "essentially a phenomenological being. He and his behaviour cannot be understood without knowing how he appears to himself" (Spiegelberg, 1975, pp. 270). This essentially phenomenological notion has a direct bearing on the African experience of the interaction between the natural and the supernatural in relation to ill health and healing. Given that, in the African experience, there are no fixed boundaries separating the experience of the biological, social and spiritual aspects from the other, with all experienced simultaneously, a holistic approach is thus crucial in the African understanding of both diagnosis and healing.

The Natural Process of Death and its Relationship to the Supernatural

Within the Zulu culture, death is believed or suspected to be caused by witchcraft. Hence a ritual ceremony is performed a day after the funeral of the deceased, which involves the eating of *amakhubalo* medicines. The medicines are eaten with the meat of a cow or goat slaughtered for the occasion. This ritual is believed to strengthen the members of the family of the deceased and also to fortify them against the stealthy thrusts of death and the sorcerer's medicines which might, even then, still be trying to attack another victim (Vilakazi, 1965, p. 91).

For the Swazi-speaking people in Swaziland, illness is caused by witchcraft, such as the deliberate use of spells and medicines to harm other people. The withdrawal of ancestral spirits is also seen as a cause of illness; for example, if the ancestors withdraw their protection, a person will become vulnerable to witchcraft (Green & Makhubu, 1984, p. 1073). African diseases such as *tilwane*, *likhubalo*, *tokoloshe* and *kuhabula* are believed to be of a chronic nature, involving supernatural causation, and as such are also thought to be neither diagnosable nor untreatable by modern medicine (Green & Makhubu, 1984, p. 1073). The threat of death through illness is thus countered by traditional healing practices.

Healing practices in Swaziland are based on a combination of naturally derived medicines and ritual, again illustrating the interrelationship between natural and supernatural. Medicine preparation takes many forms; for example, there are purgatives, smoke inhalations, and so on. The *femba* ceremony is one of the common ceremonies used in Swaziland. It consists of drumming, singing, brushing away of evil spirits, and physical manipulation of the patient (Green & Makhubu, 1984, pp. 1073-1074).

Reasons for Infertility and Pregnancy Rituals

Infertility within the context of Xhosa culture is associated with the failure to *ukuthombisa* (a ceremony for girls), and is also associated with witchcraft and sorcery, as well as with quarrels with the ancestors.

A pregnant woman must remain in her husband's kraal (*umzi*). She may leave the kraal only with her husband's permission. She may not go to funerals or social gatherings. She may not eat pumpkin, peas, potatoes, beans, sweets, kidneys and eggs, because they are believed to be detrimental to her and her foetus. She may not wear tight clothes, bangles or borrowed clothes (Pauw, 1994, p. 11).

According to Pauw (1994, p. 11), the pregnant woman also drinks medicine made from plants (*isicakathi*) or the urine of a horse or a baboon in order to ensure an easy birth of a healthy child. The birth takes place at either the woman's house or a nearby clinic or hospital under supervision of a nurse. After the delivery, the mother and her child are secluded for ten days and cared for by married sisters-in-law of the woman. Prior to the first breast-feeding, the mother will smear her face and that of her baby with white clay called *ingxwala*. The purpose of this is to ensure that the baby will have a smooth skin and may also serve as decoration for the mother. Smearing the clay also serves to ward off evil spirits

and attacks of witchcraft. Once again, even within the context of the natural process of childbirth, supernatural ideas abound concerning the causes and prevention of infertility, and hence the importance of observing food taboos and the practising of rituals to ensure the spiritual and physical safety of both mother and child.

Evident from the above is the practice among several African communities of marking both the experience of death and the experience of birth by complex rituals. Of significance in this regard is the notion of both death and birth as transitional stages in the life cycle of human beings, and hence the association with these life stages of rites of passage, rituals marking the transition of a person from one status to another. These importance attached to these rituals derives from the belief that, during the transitional period, a person is most susceptible to supernatural harm.

Witchcraft and Traditional Healing in the Context of the Nature-Culture Relationship

In the preceding sections of this paper, it was shown that there is a great deal of interaction between African witchcraft beliefs and traditional healing practices. This interaction takes place within the wider relationship that exists between nature and culture. This complex interrelationship exists because of an acute awareness, among African societies, of the three-dimensional nature of human beings as, simultaneously, biological, social and spiritual beings. As Bowie (2000) points out, "As biological and social beings we are all dependent upon our physical and social environment in order to live" (p. 118). African peoples acknowledge that humans exist in three interrelated worlds: the human, natural and supernatural worlds. Within this cultural conception, African societies create cosmologies or world-views in an attempt to understand the place of human beings in relation to the natural and supernatural worlds. They may also use cosmologies to create order, to make sense of their multiple realities, and to provide explanations for seemingly inexplicable events, such as the occurrence of misfortune, illness or death.

Within this context of cosmology, based on the cultural conception of human beings existing in a multidimensional world, witchcraft beliefs and traditional healing become culturally acceptable means of making sense of both natural and supernatural phenomena. As a theory of causation, witchcraft constitutes an acceptable theory of the causes of evil, illness and misfortune. Recourse to the supernatural abilities of a traditional healer to counter the effects of witchcraft is seen as equally acceptable, as both witchcraft beliefs and traditional healing rely

upon cultural conceptions of magic (Hammond-Tooke, 1974; Osei, 2003). Since humans can exist in the natural and supernatural world simultaneously, it is acceptable to believe that forces from the supernatural realm can interact with and affect natural events. Witches and sorcerers use supernatural magic to cause various natural effects, in both the natural environment and the human body. Similarly, the healer can use supernatural powers to affect natural substances or medicines, not only to cure the human body, but also to counter the supernatural effects of witchcraft.

Conclusion

The many complexities involved in the relationship between witchcraft beliefs, traditional healing, and the natural and supernatural worlds in African communities of southern Africa are too numerous to address adequately in this paper. It has been our aim to merely illustrate or highlight some of the issues involved in this complex interplay. It has been shown that both witchcraft and traditional healing exist as cultural expressions of African peoples' attempt to exist simultaneously in a natural world and a supernatural world, each of which influences the other in various ways. The major point is that, within the interacting natural and supernatural worlds, humans occupy a central and centralising role. They are the individuals around whom these two worlds

interact, and they have the ability to impose meaning, through culture, on these worlds. Also, humans are believed to possess the capacity to bring the natural and supernatural forces together, either for the benefit of their societies, as in the case of traditional healing, or for the detriment of society, as in the case of witchcraft or sorcery. The implication is that forces in both the natural and supernatural worlds are, in themselves, neutral. It is human beings, who manipulate these forces, who will determine whether they will be used for good or evil. What constitutes the legitimate or illegitimate use of natural and supernatural forces is subject to culturally prescribed notions of values, norms and morality. This serves the purpose of maintaining order in the society and discouraging, through the use of culturally approved sanctions, the illegitimate use of natural and supernatural forces. In short, given the central role that humans occupy in the lived worlds of African communities, attempts to understand experiences of the interaction between the natural and the supernatural should not be based on rigidly objectivistic views that seek to impose Western bounded categories and sharp distinctions on these experiences. Instead, as Petrus (2006) argues in support of his view that supernatural explanations constitute a "second paradigm" alongside science, we should attempt to understand the lived worlds of African communities in a way that will be "comprehensible to the actors themselves" (p. 10).

About the Authors

Theodore S. Petrus currently teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Before proceeding with his doctoral research, which is focused on witchcraft and the challenges it poses for the post-apartheid South African state, especially in the context of legal and community development, Theodore completed his undergraduate degree in Anthropology, History and English, as well as an Honours degree in Anthropology, at NMMU (then known as the University of Port Elizabeth). Thereafter, he spent a year in the UK, studying towards a Master's degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

David Bogopa is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the School of Social Sciences at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. He has a Master's Degree in Anthropology and is conducting research in the field of sports development and transformation in South Africa for his PhD. David's research interests range from gender issues, human rights and development concerns, through to cultural and heritage issues. David has participated in many research projects, the most recent being in the domain of marine protected areas in the Eastern Cape (2004) and for the Department of Trade, Tourism and Agriculture in the municipal areas of Motherwell, Despatch and Uitenhage (2005). In 2006, David completed research for the Department of Cultural Services in Nelson Mandela Bay on the importance of erecting a memorial site for the Cradock Four [*Activists who were brutally slain by security police during the apartheid era – Editor-in-Chief*]. He has presented papers at various international conferences in South Africa and other African countries, as well as overseas, and has had some of his work published in accredited journals.

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