

Sinethemba Makanya // The title of my PhD research project is “Ukugula Kwabantu[1]: The Construction of Mental Health by Traditional Healers.” Throughout the process of my research, however, I have realized that my question is not necessarily whether or not “mental health” exists within the traditional healing canon, but rather, it is a question of knowledge and how it is constructed. For this research, it has been important to me to position myself as an indigenous researcher, albeit a somewhat problematic and fraught concept. I have been in a unique and privileged position to be both researcher and researched, as both a traditional healing practitioner and a scholar within the university.

This position has not been without its challenges, as holding both mantles has meant that these seemingly conflicting world views have had to come alive in me. I have had to painfully acknowledge that due to colonization, indigenous knowledge has been marginalized and Euro-American systems prioritized.[2] Furthermore; as part of the university system in Africa, I have had to grapple with the notion that the African university began as a colonial project.[3] This project not only brought with it theory from the “Western” university—with the assumption that theory is only produced in the Global North[4]—but also that the university outside this Global North is limited to merely applying that theory.[5] My challenge, then, was to avoid importing theory from the North, and to theorize from my own reality and contribute to what Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) refer to as Theory from The Global South. In doing this work, I was adamant that it was a mandate from my own ancestors to contribute not so much to the decolonization project, but to the important and difficult project of reclaiming indigenous knowledge as theory that can exist within the university in Africa.

As an indigenous researcher, I had to privilege “indigenous concerns, indigenous practices and indigenous participants as researchers and researched.”[6] This agenda therefore called for “an indigenous research frame [that] allowed for the development of methodologies that reconstruct and reconceptualize research paradigms to reflect indigenous cultural positions.”[7] In this way, I found myself having to rethink research methodology and ethics in order to not perpetuate how research was introduced through colonization as a project of conquest. What follows is a reflection on the challenges I faced while conducting my research as both researcher and researched.

I had initially proposed to do a qualitative phenomenological study, in which I would interview traditional healers and use myself as an autoethnographic subject, as I believed that the research would happen parallel to my initiation into traditional healing. I had also proposed to hold a focus group with the healers, after an initial analysis of all their responses. This triangulation, I felt,

would offer my study rigor and allow me to analyze responses at a number of levels. However, my autoethnography took center stage as I underwent various initiation stages. These stages not only helped me understand deeper the nature of the ancestors, nature, and healing, but also drove me deeper into an understanding of African cosmology and metaphysics, challenging my own frameworks that I had inherited from my upbringing within the western academy.

Coming face-to-face with a group of healers who told me how much they despised researchers—because all they did was take and give nothing in return—reminded me of the colonial and racist legacy of research on traditional healers. I met these healers as part of a research project in which I was assisting a clinic. The healers were disgruntled with how the clinic's research had been previously conducted with them, particularly with how the researcher often talked at them in English and neglected to listen to their views on anything other than the researcher's area of interest. The healers also commented on how the clinic had previously imposed various trainings on them (such as counseling, HIV testing, and referrals), but was never interested in hearing how traditional healers do their work and never referred patients to the healers. This resulted in a reluctance to hold my own interviews, as I struggled with the implied power dynamics of research of this nature. These power dynamics and politics painfully remained, regardless of the fact that I considered myself an insider.

When I finally got the courage to contact the traditional healers that had signed up for being respondents to my own study, I was faced with the dilemma that my interview schedule came from a very western way of understanding knowledge, questions, and answers. It had not taken into account that in the traditional healing canon, I was not only having a conversation with a healer, but also tapping into the knowledge of the ancestors that guide them. I know from my own practice that my healing knowledge comes from guidance from my ancestors and not necessarily from myself, and that any patient coming for a consultation needs to acknowledge this ancestor by ukukhanyisa[8]. I had to treat the interview as a consultation and paid the consultation fee they charged their patients, going against one of the conditions of my university's ethical clearance.

Another tension I felt here was that I was asking questions and they were merely responding to them, making them respondents, interviewees, the researched. Although I managed to access a wealth of information from these conversations, the fact that I was making people speak about that which they had no interest in, for the benefit of my own research project, left a sour taste in my mouth. Furthermore, the symbols of the digital recorder, notebook for notes, and informed consent forms reinforced that I was an outsider belonging to the university system, and created a barrier in the solidarity that I thought being an insider, a traditional healer, would yield. Having spoken to only five 'respondents' out of the twenty I had proposed to interview, I needed to make another plan that would sit better with both me and my ancestors.

From conversations with my supervisors, we then narrowed my sample size down to ten. I decided to dig into my own database. Because of my discomfort with the way in which I had recruited participants before, I decided it would be most safe for myself to use people who were more familiar with me and my research. The next four respondents were friends who knew me and the

research I was doing, as well as my own journey toward being a traditional healer. They were also friends who were thinking critically about traditional healing in the 21st century, who were busy with writing books, undertaking their own studies, and creating performances grappling with the challenges of colonization, capitalism and commercialization within traditional healing. I found that I was more comfortable with this type of engagement and recognized that the healers now had moved from being research participants to co-creators in this research. Here I was gathering reflections and stories they wanted to share as opposed to answers to questions I had thought up in the Ivory Tower of my university office. Still I needed to offer their ancestors thanks for allowing me to talk to them, and with my friends, I gave not money but things they would use in their practices such as candles, impepho, and incense.

I was unfortunately not able to hold focus groups for this research, as I was reluctant to call the initial group of traditional healers again and felt that I had enough information to help me strengthen my theoretical framework and more than enough to analyze. I found the analysis so much more difficult—in the translation from isiZulu to English, as well as the lack of a uniform conversation structure—as I had to wade through so much information to look for categories and patterns. I do, however, recognize the difficult work of self writing[9], particularly writing against the grain.

I am currently still grappling with the limitations and critique of my methods by my university, and understand that I may be penalized for my unorthodox collection and writing methods. I acknowledge that further research in this area needs to be done in order to strengthen the idea proposed by Smith (1999) of indigenous research methods. As a beginning and experiment, I believe my research project has set the foundation for the type of scholar I wish to be and the agenda I wish to contribute to; that of strengthening theory from the Global South and for these theories to be recognized as not lesser than, but as useful counterparts to, theories from the Global North.

## Notes

[1] The title is taken from the concept introduced by Ngubane (1977); Ukufa kwabantu. The implication here is that there are diseases particular to the African that bio-medicine cannot understand as these are seen through the African worldview. The implication here is to foreground the African worldview in both data collection and analysis of data

[2] Mkhize, 2004; Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998; Appiah, 1993; Mazrui, 1986; Matoane, 2012; Sodi &Bojuwoye, 2011

[3] Mamdani, 2019; 17

[4] A concept expanded upon by Comaroff and Comaroff 2012

[5] Mamdani, 2019; 26

[6] Smith, 1999; 107

[7] Walter, 2005; 29

[8] Lighting the way through an offering, generally in the form of a consultation fee but some times

through various gifts such as candles and incense.

[9] Mbembe, 2002

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