



WRITING 'NATURECULTURES' IN ZULU ZIONIST HEALING

by Rune Flikke

In this article my primary aim is to argue for an ontological and phenomenological approach to studying healing rituals within the African Independent Churches in South Africa. Through ethnographic evidence I will argue that the healing rituals are misrepresented in more traditional epistemologically tuned studies, and suggest that a better understanding is to be achieved through a focus on Latour's 'natures-cultures' or Haraway's 'naturecultures', thus showing how health and well-being are achieved through a creative process which continuously strive to break down any distinction of nature and culture as separate entities. I conclude by arguing that the contemporary healing rituals, which surfaced in South Africa in the mid eighteen-seventies, were a sensible and experience based reactions to the colonial contact zones of a racist Colonial regime dependent on African labor.

Keywords: Naturecultures, healing rituals, South Africa, colonialism

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Introduction

My first efforts to 'write nature' surfaced as I was doing research on African Independent Churches (AIC) in South Africa. My experiences coincided with those made by the missionary cum anthropologist Bengt Sundkler who quoted an AIC leader stating: "This is not a church, it's a hospital" (Sundkler 1961, 152). As an active participant in numerous healing rituals over a period of three years, the number of references made to the natural environment throughout the diagnostic and healing processes struck me. A key element was how the rituals aimed to transcend boundaries between subject and object; nature and culture. My fieldwork was situated in a major black, urban township in KwaZulu-Natal where my informants were regularly diagnosed as getting sick from changes in the urban environment, and as I will show occasionally took the natural herbal remedies of *umuthi* to get well.¹ However, they would not only consume medical remedies collected in the natural environment. This use was also accompanied by ritualistic use of hygienic commodities and movements through the landscape. For my urban informants healing was something captured

in travels between their urban homes and rural homesteads (to be close to the ancestral spirits), through nights spent on desolate mountaintops and cleansing rituals at the pristine beaches surrounding metropolitan Durban.

In this article I have two concerns. First I will outline why my early, epistemologically tuned analyses were theoretically insufficient in the study of Zulu Zionist healing rituals. My second and main concern is to give an empirical outline of how the ritual practices transformed health into flows between 'nature' and 'culture', in ways best captured by the theoretical approaches of Latour's 'natures-cultures' (1993), or Haraway's un-hyphenated 'naturecultures', which I prefer (2003). The healing rituals emerged as a stage where healing was sought through blending of 'nature' and 'culture'. Health was achieved when humans, non-humans and spirits were harmoniously merged as aspects of one another (Latour 1993). However, let me start by outlining the ethnographic context for my work.

The environment as illness and health

Illness in the context of Zulu culture is not a self-explanatory category, and needs an explanation to bring us closer to an understanding of the connection between illness, health, culture and nature. When my informants talked about what I have translated as 'illness', they would use the native term *ubumnyama*, or a derivative of *mnyama*, meaning darkness. When they spoke English, they would simply state that this or that person had 'bad luck'. Illness could thus refer to what we conceptualize as disease, as well as poverty, regular struggles with boyfriends and girlfriends or flunking exams even though s/he were smart and studied hard. A ritual expert I discussed the term with explained *ubumnyama* as a state of being where the afflicted was 'walking in darkness'. It was conceptualised as a state of being where the sufferer generated problems through their mere existence. 'Bad luck' had become part of the sufferer's physical constitution (cf. Flikke 2003a, 2005). As I was gradually introduced to this problem by participating in healing rituals, I was made aware that the underlying cause was *insila*, which literally could be translated as 'body dirt'.

Insila was conceptualized as a source of generalized misfortune where substances with negative metaphysical qualities could be picked up and shed in various places. The struggle to get well and maintain health was linked to having control over the physical substances encountered through everyday life. There were no indications of any easy or simplistic divisions between 'nature and tradition' as good, and 'culture and modernity' as bad. Rather,

nature was amoral and could pollute through tracks, *imikhondo*, left by certain animals shedding 'harmful tracks' (*imikhondo emibi*) as they moved about (Ngubane 1977), or through natural phenomena such as lightning strikes, which would infuse a place with the spiritual power of the heavens. This power was not destructive in and of itself, but considered too powerful for most people to handle (Berglund 1989, Flikke 1994).

Furthermore, a number of consumer goods such as soaps and candles were central ingredients in healing rituals, alongside the 'traditional' herbal remedies.² In fact, the congregation I worked with stressed the Christian message while tuning down the ancestral aspects of their heritage in order to be able to participate more freely in contemporary urban life. *Umuthi* was avoided as much as possible because of the strong connotation to traditionalism, ancestral spirits and the evils of witchcraft. Instead soaps, bath salts, Vicks and other hygienic products were preferred. These products were applied in the same manner as *umuthi*, but without activating traditional ancestral spirits who regularly demanded that 'their children' should adhere to traditional taboos and ritual practices.

Practices of ritual abstention, referred to as *hlonipa* (Bryant 1949), were experienced as incompatible with wage labor and urban life in general. Through consumption of such hygienic remedies the healers aimed at establishing a harmonious balance between the individuals and their social (including ancestral spirits) and natural

¹ *Umuthi* (plur. *imithi*) is the pre-colonial Zulu herbal remedies used in witchcraft (*umuthi omnyama*) as well as healing (*umuthi omhlope*). The same remedies can be used for both good and evil. The literal translation is tree, shrub, plant or wooden substances.

² Though I use the terms 'modernity' and 'tradition' I do not subscribe to these classifications. Rather, the emphasis I place on balance between the subject and her surroundings emphasize that the 'traditional', pre-colonial, emphasis was placed on dynamic adaptation. In other words; you are 'traditional' in the way you change and adapt to the ever changing surroundings, rather than insisting on remaining the way you were.



surroundings. For instance, my informants lived in urban townships and needed to cultivate their relations to the rural, traditional way of life of their ancestors. A majority of the illnesses I encountered were diagnosed as caused by traditionalist ancestral spirits who

did not feel respected due to their descendants' urban lifestyle. I will return to this below. Let me now outline my early approaches to the topic and how I came to see these as insufficient.

Early analytical approaches

My early approaches to the topic were largely framed within two analytical traditions, namely political economy and symbolic anthropology. I will quickly outline these approaches, their strengths and why they led me into an analytical deadlock.

Much of the South African anthropology, sociology and historiography, have been shaped within the theoretical framework of political economy - for valid reasons. Within this context a large emphasis is placed on the 1870s. This is a decade of war and conflict. The gold and diamond discoveries spurred rapid urbanization. This concurred with the dramatic economic depression in Europe from 1873-1894 (Wolf 1982) and a change in colonial policy; away from the 'civilizing mission' and towards a focus on colonies as a way to generate economic surplus to counter the domestic depression (Flikke 2005). Over the next several decades this resulted in a long string of Native Laws aimed at increasing control over the African populations. This is also the decade when the AIC surfaced, splitting off from the mission churches and establishing their own Zion; a domain where they could be free from the oppression of the colonial society and worshipping a Black savior (Barrett 1968, Sundkler 1961, 1976).

The rapid industrialization and urbanization also had dramatic effects on the natural environment. The previously naked hills were planted with imported trees, as timber was needed to fuel the industrial growth - much like oil is an indicator of economic growth in contemporary society. Water, always a scarce resource in the region, was rerouted and channeled in ways that can be traced on demographic maps over income distribution even today (Nustad 2011). Nature needed to be exploited to create growth (Sachs 1993) and changes in the natural environment was an indicator of the racist and exploitative colonial society (Flikke 2013).

Despite the fact that most of my informants were conscious of the atrocities of the Colonial, Union and Apartheid regimes, it was never conceptualized as a primary source of their suffering. Instead they were seen as secondary causes, an experience encountered by other researchers as well (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). One very common explanation given to me by a ritual expert was that Mission work and labor migration tore the clans apart in two distinguishable camps: the Christian *kholwa* and the Traditional *khonza* (Flikke 2006). I was told that this split caused disharmony within the family, thus locating disharmony in the family unit as the cause

of affliction. In a study of Bantu healing rituals Janzen shed light on this when he argued that conceptions of health are captured in the notion of leading a balanced life (Janzen 1992). In Zulu, the root *lunga*, used in greetings (wishing people health and well-being) include the notion of 'balance' (ibid.:64) and harmony with the natural and social environment. To reestablish harmony and balance is thus a goal of the healing process. In order to achieve this the rituals focused on the manipulation of places and relations to living and departed relatives to achieve healing (Flikke 2001).

I have so far focused on the empirical claim that healing practices and conceptions that support these practices are best captured through the theoretical focus on 'naturecultures'. For the Zulu, the distinction between nature as external and culture as learnt and internal is foreign. The relevance of nature and culture for well-being is realized by blending the boundaries between the two and successfully manipulate both natural and cultural objects. This happens within a paradigm where health and well-being is the result of a harmonious blending of the individual with his or her surroundings.

Since the ancestral spirits were part of the everyday life world of the Zulu Zionists, the 'traditional' lifestyle of the ancestors needed to be integrated harmoniously with a modern, urban life style. Some of my informants would strive to save money to build a rondavel (traditional Zulu hut) in their back yard. Once back from work, they would kick off their shoes, get rid of their European clothing and sit down in the rondavel to commune with the ancestors, showing them respect by adapting to their ways. Hence their physical surroundings were in harmony with their own spiritual constitution, which through the presence of ancestral spirits were of a historical nature and plagued by the split between *kholwa* and *khonza*. By treating the ancestral spirits with such respect, they would create an atmosphere where it was possible to enter into a dialogue with the ancestral spirits. They would inform them of their difficult circumstances and the demands of contemporary urban life, a lifestyle they would need to engage with (for instance through wage labor), in order to secure the well-being of their family. This would heal the rift between the *kholwa* and the *khonza* and create the harmony needed for healing.



Healing: placing 'naturecultures' in the body

The Zionist congregation I had joined would meet once a month at Saturday around sunset for a ritual process that would end with a meal at sunrise on Sunday morning. We would start with cleansing ceremonies for the congregation and proceeded with a ritual process aimed to restore harmony in the family of one member who 'walked in darkness', hence suffering from 'bad-luck'. Harmony also needed to be restored between the concerned and her ancestral fellowship. Through this ceremony, referred to as an *ilathi* ('altar'), the afflicted would physically shed the bad-luck in the form of insila. Once the polluting substances were removed the congregation would physically work on a fabric, leaving their own ritually cleansed substances (insila) on the cloth. This would later be sewn into a church robe worn at future rituals. The afflicted would be covered with the good, protective substances of the congregation and transferred from a state of ubumnyama to one of *ezimhlope*, 'good-luck' or health, literally translated as 'the white ones'. The slaughter of chickens was a central part of the process, and the chicken blood would be used in the cleansing ceremony which prepared us for the next stage in the ritual process.

Around midnight we would ascend a hill in the neighborhood to be close to God for a couple of hours of praying. This hill was revealed to the prophet through a vision (Flikke 1994). Its status as a holy place was attached to the many lightning strikes that had hit the area. Also, I was told, a large snake with a head burning like a torch lived there. On our return the chickens would have been cooked along with other food items and presented at the altar during the *ilathi*. The process closed with a communal meal hosted by the afflicted. The congregation was part of the healing procedure as we were consuming food that was cleansed and blessed.

One process was hardly ever enough to reestablish well-being for the concerned. As mentioned in the introduction, they would in addition often travel to their ancestral homestead to be close to their ancestral spirits. Furthermore, they would travel to a local beach, or local crossroad such as marketplaces and bus stops, to be ritually cleansed at night. Here the polluted body dirt, *insila emibi*, was shed and washed off into the cool pure ocean, or carried away by an unknowing by-passer the next day. As mentioned in the introduction, the congregation I worked with preferred to utilize soaps and bath salts, which was referred to as *itche labelungu*, 'the white man's stones' in the healing rituals. However, they would at times use the traditional herbal remedies *imithi* (plur.) in order to show respect to ancestral spirits from the *khonza* (traditional) part of their clan.

Health and the smell of naturecultures

It has been argued that in the Euro-American cultural context, nature is primarily consumed visually (Urry 1990) and is understood as something external that 'comes to us' and is experienced through

I was intrigued by the use of modern consumer goods until I read *Reaction to Conquest* (Hunter 1936). Here Monica Hunter referred to a white trader in Transkei who around 1915 killed a big python. In the head of the python he found some rocks that he used in his bath every evening, growing very rich in the process. Incidentally 1915 is the year all commentators has singled out as the year the AIC started its rapid growth (Barrett 1968). These rocks were referred to as 'the white man's stones' (*itche labelungu*), the same as the bath salts I was cleansed with almost hundred years later. This indicates that there is a need to conduct historical research and focus on the body, body politics, and the cultural constructions of the senses in order to analyze the healing rituals. Further archival research revealed that a sanitation hysteria that plagued King William's Town during the latter half of the 1870s, was dealt with through the washing of public spaces where the European and African populations would meet; such as markets, hospitals and prisons. The strong industrial detergent Jays Fluid was utilized for these purposes back then, and was still the primary ingredient used by my Zulu Zionist informants when premises were being cleansed of evil.

So far we have seen how sickness and health are viewed as aspects of the natural and built environment in the form of substances, *insila*, that can both pollute and heal. Furthermore, I have shown how substances such as herbal remedies, blood, and hygienic consumer goods are manipulated to affect negative consequences of both nature and the built environment. These are approaches to 'naturecultures' that cannot be captured through political economy, nor through studies of British colonialial transplants of alien plants and animals in efforts to recreate their home country in the areas they settled (Lien and Davison 2010, Lien 2007).

The ritual blending of nature and culture I met through the Zionist ritual practices are meeting points of an unequal and highly contested character. The colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid societies continue to change and reshape both nature and culture (Flikke 2013), yet the implications of these changes are contested. My Zulu Zionist friends enjoyed most aspects of urban life, and the key to success was to use physical substances (*insila*) — natural as well as consumer products — to ritually adapt and merge their experiences and inner spiritual constitution with the external natural and urban, social environments. In one area these practices struck close to the Victorian colonialists perceptions of the environment.

our senses. As Urry later emphasized, it is the visual environment that give particular significance to involvement of the other senses (Urry 1992). Two points are problematic in this context. First, the



primacy given to sight should not be taken for granted. Second, I encountered some archival material that made me think that my initial research was based on a faulty ontology.

Starting with the first of the two, visual primacy has not always dominated western culture. The travelogues of the early explorers of Africa are full of meticulous notes on temperatures, humidity, wind directions and altitudes. I have suggested that these may be read as medical notes on how to travel as safe as possible in the tropical environment (Flikke 2003b). As several commentators have pointed out, the European view of tropical nature was an imaginative construct, more than an empirical description (Stepan 2001, Comaroff 1993). During the 18th and nineteenth century disease was increasingly viewed as an integrated aspect of the tropical environment. Furthermore, Schoenwald, quoting the sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick, pointed out that smell was the central sense to be used when the Victorians navigated the urban environment filled with the threats of diseases, death and decay. According to this humoral theory of health, rotting organic material released the poisonous gas miasma, which was the primary disease vector in the epidemics that regularly plagued the cities of Europe in the nineteenth century. The Victorians considered that "all smell is, if it be intense [...] disease" (Schoenwald 1973: 681).

As pointed out by the Comaroffs, the Europeans were also preoccupied with the 'greasy African' as a source of disease (Comaroff 1993,

Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Here the grease was imagined as a source of miasma making European travelers keep their distance (cf. Fabian 2000, 81). In this context it is worthwhile investigating how the Victorian colonialists and the African populations sensed transformations of the natural environment during the nineteenth century. In my case smell surfaced as a significant aspect of locating diseased people and places. One of the areas this surfaced was the production of hygienic articles, which grew to become Africa's second largest industry after mining (Burke 1996b). These products were both gendered and racialized along the lines of smell where the more carbolic smelling products were made for African manual laborers (Burke 1996a and b).

Alfred Gell has pointed out that smell is an 'anticipatory sign' that leads our attention directly to its source when sensed (Gell 1977), leaving little room for idiosyncrasy and interpretation. Studies seem to agree that smells are culturally and historically structured. In the words of Rachel Herz: "nothing stinks, but thinking makes it so" (Herz 2006: 202). Furthermore, smells are processed in the limbic system, which is the emotional center of the brain (cf. Flikke 2013). This means that the olfactory significance of the world is established through externalization. This leads back to my second objection to epistemologically tuned studies of Zulu healing practices: they are built on an insufficient ontology. This ontology is one which is largely built on the 'one world, many interpretations' rather than having the body as starting point for projections of 'many worlds'.

The direction of the senses

My early work was largely concerned with analyses of meaning. I had analyzed the symbolic contents of the ritual proceedings, and elicited how it made sense in view of Zulu culture as well as the colonial contact zone. I furthermore presented the internal logic of the procedures and argued that it was a creative technique which enabled Zulu Zionists to adapt to, as well as engage with, the larger South African community (Flikke 1994, 2001). The problem with these analyses was how the ritual procedures looked too exotic and based on misunderstandings of the disease vector. I knew this was wrong since a couple of my informants were trained as nurses and worked in hospitals in and around Durban. Why then did they persist with water, soap and bath-salt when the diseases they battled needed to be treated with antibiotics, ARVs, clean drinking water, sanitary measurements, and so on? And why did it work? I witnessed, over and over again, lives being changed in significant ways through these procedures.

The way the historical documents frequently coupled health, sanitation and olfaction revealed a need to investigate how the Victorian colonialists and Africans entering the South African labor market, would perceive of these contact zones. Would the smell of soap evoke the same associations as they do today? What would soap signify and how would people interact with it? How did the

Africans experience being washed with soap, and how would the olfactory traces of soap be experienced? There is, in other words, a need to shift focus from epistemology to ontology. In order to approach these questions, there is a need to understand the body as historically structured and approach it through a phenomenological perspective.

Csordas formulated this starting point for analyses in a rather lucid manner when he wrote that the phenomenological approach to:

embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture. (Csordas 1990)

What this means in practical methodological terms is to try to stop taking the world 'out there' as a starting point, trying to trace the meaning it might have within local epistemological terms, but rather look at the world we live in as starting in our bodies and externalized through our senses.

As already mentioned, these hygienic consumer goods were gendered and racialized. The products for African male laborers were



strongly carbolic and easily detected from quiet a distance (Burke 1996a). Within the historical and cultural framework of Victorian South Africa where strong organic smells were considered disease, it is not unlikely that Europeans who were dependent on African labor would use their noses to pick out the workers. Those that smelled of soap were conceived as disease free. In this context the Africans who washed with soaps would be hired on a more regular basis than the unwashed, and hence have a better economic foundation, eat better and in general be blessed by 'the white ones'

(ezimhlope, meaning 'good luck'). There is in other words an experiential reality behind the contemporary Zulu Zionist healing rituals that is beyond the grasp of epistemologically tuned approaches. The central factor in this particular nature-culture nexus would be olfaction. In order to correctly capture the significance of smell in Victorian bodies, there is a need to acknowledge that the colonial and postcolonial Zulu Zionist bodies were differently structured in relation to smells.

Concluding remarks

The repositioning of the body as the subject of culture has substantial consequences for the line of questions drawn up in social science analyses. In my case the shift from viewing the body as the object of culture, to its subject, enabled me to reframe my questions in a way that brought African subjectivity, experience and externalization to the foreground. The archival discoveries made it obvious that the contemporary Zulu Zionist healing practices were not only based on Victorian sensibilities; they also made me aware of the fact that my previous analyses were based on a faulty ontology. If we take the phenomenological methodology of Csordas seriously and start with the body and follow the senses out into the world, it becomes clear that the contemporary healing practices are based on African experiences and interactions with the British Victorian colonial society. When all strong organic smells are conceived as disease then the

nose would be a guiding factor when hiring African laborers. Those who washed with soap would thus increase their chances of securing a job. With increased income, health would improve with it. Soap would in other words lift people from darkness (ubumnyama) to the blessings of enlightenment (ezimhlope), just as I experienced a hundred years after these practices were born in the colonial contact zone of Victorian South Africa.

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