

# The Impact Of Proverbs In Traditional Healing Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the impact of proverbs on traditional healing philosophy. Proverbs are ancient wise sayings that guide people in their daily lives, serving as a concise medium through which past generations captured the essence of life. In traditional healing philosophy, proverbs convey complex information in a succinct and meaningful way. A qualitative research approach was employed, with three traditional healers from the Sekhukhune District selected through purposive and convenience sampling. The researcher used three Sepedi proverbs to elicit responses from the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that proverbs play a crucial role in explaining and summarising of traditional healing philosophy. Thorough proverbs learning is recommended to ensure smooth communication between traditional healers and their clients.

## 1. Introduction

African indigenous proverbs play a major role in people's lives. They are employed in talks to emphasise certain points and to communicate hidden ancestral information, (Phiri, Mulaudzi and Heyns, 2015). Proverbs are an important part of traditional African cultures because they help people develop the sense of peace, fairness and unity that is necessary to end conflicts and create peaceful communities. Rising immigration and increasing cultural diversity globally highlight the need to learn the correct usage of proverbs because traditional healing philosophy communicates through them and they are lost along the way (Udah, Tusasiirwe, Mugumbate and Gatwiri 2025). Mieder, (2008) state. play a crucial role in traditional healing philosophy because they contain a wealth of information. Lukong and Ruhama (2024) state that proverbs in different cultures are a mark of a rich heritage. This suggests that the information that 'mangaka' (traditional healers) provide is a direct communication from the ancestors, which underscores the importance of proverbs in traditional healing philosophy. Hogle and Prins (1991).

On the other hand, Ogden (2022) indicates that Scholars of the book of Proverbs have produced many new commentaries, numerous monographs, quite a few significant edited volumes, and a daunting number of journal articles over the last numerous years. The most critical issues include the definition of wisdom literature itself and how Proverbs relates to other parts of life, like in traditional healing philosophy. In addition, scholars have continued to contemplate the rhetorical structure of Proverbs and the editorial clustering of groups of proverbs. Researchers have also addressed the philosophy of divine retribution articulated in Proverbs and the underlying pedagogy of the sages, specifically how they conceptualized the process of moral formation.

In African societies, proverbs are used to inculcate good morals and values, as well as to communicate accepted norms and beliefs (Baker and Maluleka, 2020; Phokwane and Malatji, 2023). For instance, the Sepedi language has a rich corpus of proverbs used to express figurative meaning, which facilitates an understanding of the incumbent culture. This suggests that proverbs are specialised discourses often used by elders and traditional healers amongst the indigenous people. This study hopes to broaden the scope of indigenous knowledge by intertwining oral tradition and traditional healing. To demonstrate the instrumental role of Sepedi proverbs in unravelling hidden messages, the study focused on three selected proverbs to elucidate their role in traditional

healing philosophy.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study aimed to investigate the impact of proverbs on traditional healing philosophy because the relationship between proverbs and traditional healing is deeply rooted, influencing healers' respectful interactions with patients and serving as a medium of communication with ancestors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed Afrocentricity theory, originally developed by Molefe Kete Asante in the 20th century to advocate for rewriting African history through a debunk of Eurocentric myths. According to Asante (2007c:29), the theory derives its name from its reliance on African sources to provide an authentic African perspective on various issues. Kankwenda (1994) and Midas (2016) assert that Afrocentricity seeks to actualise and practise African aspirations, recognising and valuing African science and tradition. Essentially, the theory highlights Africanism, promoting its preservation and advancement. Its relevance to this study lies in the role of traditional healers (*mangaka*) as cultural custodians and pioneers of African heritage, hence, researchers engaged with participants in a way that encouraged them to share insights from an African perspective freely.

### **Problem of the Study**

The application of proverbs in traditional healing philosophy has a significant impact, as its effectiveness depends on the ability of those who visit *mangaka* to interpret the coded meanings. Most traditional healers in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, use proverbs to explain issues that arise in their practice. However, patients may struggle to understand their meanings and implications. This study aimed to uncover the philosophical role of proverbs in traditional healing. The primary objective was to address the lack of knowledge about proverbs and their daily usage. As custodians of language and culture, traditional healers use proverbs to preserve cultural heritage and effectively convey ancestral wisdom.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study may strengthen the knowledge base on proverbs and interest about their use, ultimately facilitating seamless communication among language users by encouraging the use of proverbs in everyday communication, enhancing a general understanding of proverbs, highlighting the importance of context in using proverbs and creating a resource base to facilitate a better understanding of proverbs. The results will show the impact of proverbs in traditional healing philosophy.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **Research Approach**

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study as a form of social action that emphasises how people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand their social reality (Haradhan, 2018). The study followed an exploratory design to complement existing research on proverbs, which has primarily focused on structural and functional interpretations while giving limited attention to the relationship between proverbs and philosophy. The study relied on the knowledge and experiences of traditional healers to draw logical conclusions on the issue under investigation.

### **Population and Sampling**

The sample consisted of three traditional healers, aged between 40 and 90, from the Sekhukhune District Municipality. Purposive and convenience sampling strategies were employed to accommodate the respondents' diverse cultural backgrounds. Majid (2018) defines sampling as the process of selecting a statistically representative group from a population of interest. Therefore, purposive sampling was deemed the most suitable method for selecting an appropriate sample for this study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, during which the selected traditional healers were asked to interpret proverbs from *Marema ka Dika* (a Sepedi proverb anthology) from the perspective of traditional healing philosophy.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers employed thematic analysis in this study, a method described as identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Sakati, 2016). Participants' responses were compared and categorised into themes to determine data saturation points.

### **3. Discussion of the Findings**

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of proverbs in traditional healing philosophy. For the purposes of this study, the analysis of the selected proverbs is presented as follows:

#### **Koma ke ya kgoši le ngaka (Initiation schools belong to a traditional leader and a traditional healer)**

A traditional healer and a traditional leader are very important figures in society because they provide guidance on good behaviour and manage many illnesses in life. A traditional leader (Chief) is a direct descendant of the ancestors and the offspring of a woman who married communally using collective resources. A traditional leader may marry as many wives as he desires, but the birth of a traditional leader is an exclusive privilege reserved for a recognised mother of the nation, descended from another royal house, and married with communal financial resources. Such a woman is known as 'timamello', which directly translates as 'the one who puts out the fires' and means that whenever she enters the royal homestead, all lights must be turned off.

The first fire is lit in the royal homestead, and all other members of the community use it to start their own homesteads. A traditional leader is the first-born child of the nation's mother, fathered by the reigning traditional leader, and whose grandfather and uncle are also traditional leaders. The reason for marrying the one who extinguishes the fires is to ensure smooth royal succession and lineage, as the person giving birth to a traditional leader must come from a royal family and have the recognised royal background and credentials to raise and groom a future traditional leader. It is also worth noting that a traditional leader is not raised within the nation he is destined to rule over according to the succession plan. He is raised somewhere else, most likely in his mother's hometown, where he will be thoroughly inducted into royalty. This is done to avoid exposing his weaknesses, which could impede his future leadership, as well as to reduce the possibility of witchcraft stunts by opposing evil forces.

The following explanations represent the three traditional healers' perspectives on how this proverb is used and its applicability to their work:

#### **Traditional Healer 1:**

“When they say an initiation school belongs to the traditional leader and the traditional healer, they mean that there is no traditional leader that institutes an initiation school without a traditional healer. This implies that before an initiation school can be established, a traditional healer is called upon to strengthen the location earmarked for the occasion. An initiation school is a crossover bridge between childhood and adulthood. A person who has graduated from an initiation school is regarded as deeply knowledgeable about cultural adulthood etiquette and is embossed with cultural and human dignity. An initiation school substitutes childhood innocence and naivety with matured adulthood aura and character.”

#### **Traditional Healer 2:**

“A traditional healer and a traditional leader (Chief) are the two people with vested powers and authority from the ancestors to establish initiation schools. If one is a traditional healer but not a traditional leader, the person can establish an initiation school; however, without the traditional healer, the school will not receive full patronage and recognition since a traditional leader cannot institute an initiation school without the involvement of a traditional healer. Furthermore, for a traditional healer to be eligible to establish an initiation school, he/she must be granted permission by a traditional leader who will sign documents from the government allowing him/her to institute the school. This is because regardless of the powers bestowed upon traditional healers to institute initiation schools, land ownership rights rest with traditional leaders.”

#### **Traditional Healer 3:**

“Even if a traditional healer is granted the rights to institute an initiation school by the ancestors, there still needs to be a provision of land where the school will be hosted. Because traditional leaders are owners of the land, traditional healers make land requisitions from them for initiation school purposes. When soliciting permission from government to establish an initiation school, the traditional leader's consent is required because the healer is the child and subject of the traditional leader.”

In interpreting the proverb that an initiation school belongs to both the traditional leader and the traditional healer, the three interviewed traditional healers provided varied responses. Traditional Healer 1 stated that a traditional leader and a traditional healer should work together in establishing an initiation school. Traditional Healer 2 explained that both figures are granted the authority to establish initiation schools by the ancestors, while Traditional Healer 3 argued that each can operate independently. However, since a traditional leader relies on the traditional healer for medicinal herbs, and the traditional healer depends on the traditional leader for land, an interdependent relationship exists between them. Moreover, a traditional healer's work involves healing people using bones and herbs that originate from the land.

Tsiane and Phokwane (2017) assert that the traditional leader and the traditional healer clearly need each other, as the healer uses animal and plant species nurtured on the leader's land to heal the leader's subjects. Dennist concurs that the traditional healer is authorised to throw the bones of animals from the land. According to Phaahla (2013), the traditional healer's role is to protect the traditional leader and the nation in times of war and sickness, while the traditional leader, as the landowner, ensures the healer has access to essential resources. This clearly demonstrates their symbiotic relationship.

The responses from the three traditional healers highlight the fundamental interdependence among people. No human being is entirely self-sufficient or completely autonomous each individual plays a unique and complementary role in the lives of others. Furthermore, these explanations emphasise that certain matters are the prerogative of elders, and younger generations should respect these boundaries. Society functions best when individuals recognise their designated roles and act accordingly. Within families, children should exercise discipline and restraint, avoiding undue interference in adult affairs. They should exhibit respect, make accountable decisions, and act responsibly. Social hierarchies and established orders serve to regulate behaviour across generations.

Human interactions should be guided by kindness, cooperation, interdependence, and communal values. As the adage goes, pride goes before a fall. According to Tosam (2014), a people's philosophy is deeply connected to their culture and life experiences. This reinforces the idea that individuals are inherently dependent on one another and cannot function effectively in isolation.

When a patient consults a traditional healer, the healer throws the bones and interprets their message. Using this method, traditional healers can diagnose various ailments and determine appropriate treatments. The approach to healing varies depending on a person's gender and age.

**Ngaka, nthute go alafa mejeletša ke a ka (Traditional healer, teach me to heal others will be my responsibility).**

#### **Traditional Healer 1:**

"This proverb shows that even if a person can be taught any kind of work, he/she will eventually show the personal experiences in life in that work in an extraordinary way. This shows that we are all different. Everyone has God-given knowledge that he/she may pursue, and a mind that, if used properly, will develop the nation.

"As a traditional healer, when I get an initiate, my responsibility is to ensure that he/she is capable of throwing the bones and talking to them and acquires knowledge about different remedies. He/she must be able to differentiate between remedies that are ingested, steamed off, or used as ointments. Many things are self-taught. A real traditional healer is taught many things by the ancestors while sleeping. Training a person to become a traditional healer only involves steaming them and teaching them how to make foam for drinking purposes because that is what will make him/her not lose memory of dreams and to understand the revelations from ancestors presented as visions."

#### **Traditional Healer 2:**

"When we steam a traditional healer trainee, we aim to release his/her ancestors to continue to administer the gift of traditional healing, visiting him/her regularly to teach him/her how to become a traditional healer. The work of a traditional healing trainer is to direct traditional healing trainees and to solve the challenges that they come across in their traditional healing journey. The information that his/her ancestors whisper to him/her in dreams is never identical to any other, and that is how life turns out to be in the traditional healing fraternity."

#### **Traditional Healer 3:**

"If a person has ancestors aiming to give him/her the gift of traditional healing, it is the ancestors themselves

who know how that gift manifests. My work as a trainer is to ensure that trainees are familiar with the art of bone-throwing and that they receive proper instruction in the use of different medicines that they will come across in their traditional healing journey.”

The explanations above are closely related. Rakoma refers to the process of teaching a person both external and internal aspects of their craft. Traditional Healer 1 states that their role as trainers is to teach trainees how to throw the bones and equip them with knowledge of various indigenous medicines. Traditional Healers 2 and 3 agree that when ancestors choose to ordain someone as a traditional healer, they also determine the method and depth of that person’s training.

This proverb emphasises that each person has a specific area of specialisation in life. It suggests that when teaching someone a skill, not everything is imparted at once—some knowledge is gained through experience. Pandian (2012) reinforces this idea, stating that proverbs promote the belief that human suffering can be prevented, alleviated, or overcome through wisdom and prudence. The purpose of proverbial wisdom, therefore, is to instil good judgment, enabling individuals to learn from the past, live in the present, and face the future with confidence.

In general, this proverb teaches that each person possesses unique knowledge inherited from ancestors. Everyone is different in their own way, making each individual uniquely important. Even though some people may look alike, they are never truly the same.

### **Ngaka e sa gapego kgomo e gapa mpa (The target of a traditional healer is either the cow or the stomach)**

The traditional healers explained the proverb as follows:

#### **Traditional Healer 1:**

“This proverb shows that after we heal a patient, we must receive payment. In the olden days, the payment was in the form of cattle because they were abundantly available, and they could satisfy the ancestors who had offered traditional healing services. If they did not have anything to give, we would choose anything we thought could serve as payment.”

#### **Traditional Healer 2:**

“As traditional healers, when we heal patients, we ask the ancestors to enable us to heal the sicknesses that are brought to our attention. Therefore, after the healing process, we go back to the ancestors for thanksgiving, which involves informing them about the form of payment received, be it cattle, a wife, or any other valuable asset. There are two kinds of cows, the one that walks and has horns, and the one that refuses to eat grass, which symbolically refers to money.”

#### **Traditional Healer 3:**

“When one goes to a traditional healer for consultation, the person should be informed about the required payment for the services offered. Sometimes patients fail to make the required payment, and they are allowed to offer any valuable items as payment.”

Every patient visiting a traditional healer must pay a consultation fee, which is determined by the healer. After making the payment, the traditional healer presents a bag of bones for the patient to blow over, a practice used to diagnose ailments. Once the illness is identified, the healer proceeds with treatment until the patient is fully healed, at which point payment is required for the services rendered.

In the past, when individuals were unable to pay, they would sometimes offer a wife—either the one who was healed or another female family member—as compensation. This practice underscores the reality that nothing in life is free; people must recognise the necessity of fair remuneration for services provided.

Mammadova (2024) emphasizes that proverbs serve as cultural artifacts that reflect a society’s values and norms. Proverbs also help in understanding cultural differences, reinforcing the principle that exploitation should be avoided. If a person provides a service, appropriate payment should be made to uphold reciprocity and fairness in society.

## **4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of proverbs in traditional healing philosophy, specifically how they are used to concisely explain life-related issues. Proverbs serve as a guide to life, offering



encouragement and helping individuals maintain a positive outlook. They provide solutions to problems and help devise preventative measures for potential challenges. The study found that proverbs enable traditional healers to communicate complex ideas in a concise manner and to convey sensitive information respectfully. Since proverbs reflect real-life experiences, they help people navigate various challenges. The study recommends that individuals familiarise themselves with proverbs and their meanings to gain a deeper understanding of life.

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