

Language as a resource and a barrier: when traditional healers compete with medical doctors

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Traditional healers have been providing health services and spiritual healing in most African countries for centuries. In recent years, however, they have made inroads into the middle class where they seem to be competing with medical doctors for patients, particularly in the urban areas. In South Africa, this has triggered a protracted debate amongst employers, government, health insurance companies and the public in general on the role and place of the traditional healers in the society. While the government seems to recognise their contribution towards the provision of citizenry's well-being and has encouraged the creation of associations to bring them together and regulate their activities, insurance companies are reluctant to recognise claims they may want to submit for services rendered to their members. Not to mention employers who dismiss any letter traditional healers would like to write to justify an employee absence from work due to an illness they have treated. This paper aims at answering the following question that has not been part of that debate: why are the traditional healers becoming so popular? Specifically, it argues that traditional healers use a horizontal and a participative approach to the healing and the treatment process, whereby the patients' language plays a critical role for winning their hearts and trust whereas, by using languages such as Afrikaans or English that are only spoken by urban minority elites, medical doctors, unwittingly, alienate their patients from the healing and treatment process.