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Social Science & Medicine. Part B: Medical Anthropology

Volume 15, Issue 3, July 1981, Pages 367-378

Healing and cultural transformation: The Tswana of Southern Africa [1]

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7987\(81\)90062-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7987(81)90062-4)

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Abstract

This essay calls into doubt the quest for "theoretical closure"™ in the study of African systems of healing. The notion of "theoretical closure"™ may be understood in two ways, one empirically derived and the other epistemological. The first is based on the assumption that "medical systems"™ form a natural and discrete empirical domain, a view ultimately grounded in arbitrary or ethnocentric analytical criteria. The second sees such medical systems as parts of ahistorical and closed social systems. Both serve to render medical anthropology parochial in relation to the mainstream discipline and unable to seize the potential offered by the study of healing to illuminate important general problems, such as the articulation of thought and action, of individual experience and cultural form, and of structural order and historical process.

The study of healing in societies which have relatively recently been incorporated into world systems raises the urgent need to devise models which permit the examination of

world systems raises the urgent need to devise models which permit the examination of socio-cultural orders in time how they are both reproduced and transformed. This can no longer legitimately be viewed as the "opening" of "closed" systems: rather, it requires understanding how the dynamic processes of particular small-scale societies engage with encompassing politico-economic forces. Healing is crucially bound up with this, for its knowledge and practice give form to key conceptions and values in all cultures, and play upon the identity of physical and social being. The context of affliction is an important locus both for the reinforcement and the reformulation of socio-cultural categories.

The case of the Tswana of Southern Africa is employed to suggest how a focus upon healing systems in time is entailed in the study of wider processes of perpetuation and change. It is the interrelationship of these processes in particular socio-cultural and temporal contexts which is the key to understanding both systems of healing and systems in general.



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[1] This paper was prepared with the assistance of a Bio-Medical Research Support Grant (PHS 5 507 RR-07029-14) from the Division of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. I am indebted to John L. Comaroff with whom I have discussed the ideas developed here.

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