



AFRICA'S MEDICINE MAN

Delve into the Zimbabwean clinic of **Melusi Mpsi Ndlovu**, one of Africa's most respected traditional healers and a bridge of knowledge between Africa and the world beyond.

By CINDY-LOU DALE

The heat is intense. So are the many faces sitting outside the tiny thatched hut in Mpsi Village on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls. No one appears to be discouraged by the queue. They're waiting to seek a cure for their ailments with Melusi Mpsi Ndlovu, a proud Ndebele tribesman, and one of the world's most distinguished traditional healers.

The 'Chief', as Ndlovu is commonly referred to, is surrounded by wooden bowls filled with an assortment of herbs, twisted plant roots and strips of tree bark. The elderly gentleman in front of me has a cut that wouldn't heal, someone else has a swollen ankle and a lethargic child complains of headaches.

For poor Zimbabweans, there's nowhere else to go. Traditional medicines are their first and last defence against diseases that wreak havoc on their lives. Even though Western medicine is recognised in Africa, it has not substituted but rather supplemented the ethnic health approach. Thus, practitioners like Ndlovu remain central to the lives of many.

Ndlovu is a charismatic and distinguished medicine man known throughout Africa as a traditional healer, and internationally famed in the alternative medicine field. His wisdom has been sought twice by the late Queen of England and the British House of Lords. He regularly consults with major British and American pharmaceutical companies on cancer cures, but also opposes their attempts to patent traditional African herbal medicines. Prestigious universities send PhD students to learn of his snakebite cures; the Red Cross has called on him to remedy a cholera epidemic in central Africa; and he regularly hosts specialist doctors and associate professors, who stay in the humble village of Mpsi for weeks on end, learning his remedies.

Ndlovu has no formal education, yet he's sophisticated. He's sharp-witted, but without malice. There's a gentleness about him that I'd almost forgotten could exist in a man, yet he's bulletproof and stands as if he owns the ground beneath



from left: traditional African healers still play an important role in many communities; Ndlovu in the village boma (community enclosure); a selection of roots, bark, herbs, plants, and roots the Chief uses when creating his treatments.

his feet. He’s in good shape too - tall, well put together. You’d guess his age to be around 45. Yet, on enquiry, I learn he was born in 1944. “Here, in Mpisi,” he says, “the average villager lives to see the age of 100. Currently, our most senior citizen is 119.”

He explains that before the arrival of modern medicine, traditional treatment once protected and restored the health many in the West take for granted. It plays an important role in the developing world, with many cancer patients using old traditional remedies as primary therapy.

“Traditional herbal medicine,” he continues, “is found in naturally occurring plant and animal-based substances, which has minimal to no industrial processing. People consult traditional healers whether or not they can afford modern medicines. It’s a belief system, integral to the lives of most Africans.”

“People forget all the indigenous knowledge we have, and now they’re enslaved to civilisation, the same civilisation that planted these healing roots, yet they don’t extract from them. God, He will judge me if people are suffering. It is my duty to capacitate them so that they can heal themselves, so that they can have a good life, a healthy life, and a long life!”

As is the case with the Ndlovu, knowledge of traditional medicine has been passed down through generations, mainly orally, and mostly without substantive documentation.

For the next hour, he speaks of anticancer agents found in plants and some of those he uses: Taxol (bark extract) for the treatment of breast, ovarian and lung cancer; Vincristine (rose periwinkle) for leukaemia, Hodgkin’s disease, lymphoma, rhabdomyosarcoma (soft tissue tumours), neuroblastoma (cancer that forms in nerve tissue) and Wilms’ tumours; Etoposide (mayapple plant) for testicular, prostate, bladder, stomach and lung cancer; Irinotecan (tree stem) for colon and small cell lung cancer; and Topotecan (tree bark) for cervical cancer. Ndlovu explains his preparations and how the medicine is administered; it depends on the plant and which parts are being used, sometimes it’s an ointment, taken orally, inhaled, mixed with food or macerated into a drink.



from top:
The Chief in his office; Victoria Falls straddles Zambia and Zimbabwe; a gathering of traditional healers.



“There is only one time of absolute silence: halfway between the dark of night and the first light of day. All animals and crickets fall into profound silence, as if pressed quiet by the deep blackness of the night. This is when unnatural sounds startle you awake. This silence is how I know it is not yet dawn nor is it the middle of the night, but the place of no-time, when all things sleep most deeply and when their guard is dozing. And this is when I collect my plant medicines.”

Ndlovu’s face becomes folded and deep. “There are some things Western medicine cannot fathom. You see, doctors who train in Western sciences focus only on the biomedical causes of disease. We traditional healers have a holistic approach. Some divine the cause of an illness by throwing bones and listening to the channelled curative advice of dead ancestors while others, like me, have in-depth knowledge of plant materials and their various healing powers.”

Before daybreak I tiptoe out of my hut and stand quietly for a while, trying to read the mist-smudged darkness. In the distance, a shape drifts silently out of the bush – it is Ndlovu, returning from his predawn plant gathering, laden with baskets containing herbs, roots, tree bark and possibly the cure to someone’s cancer. ▀

from top:
The mighty Victoria Falls; a face mask hanging in the eaves of the boma.