

A CASE OF IMFELO

Summary

This patient study describes a complication of a rare ceremony that is performed on sangomas (traditional healers).

Introduction

Some of the commonest complications of traditional practices occur from the toxic effects of traditional medicines. Complications also occur from surgical procedures such as circumcisions and scarifications (**ncabas**). The patient in this study suffered from a surgical complication of a rare traditional ceremony and told a remarkable story.

Patient study

The patient was a 31-year-old Shangaan housewife who was married with five children. She was helped into the consulting room by her husband as she was unable to walk properly. She complained of a painful perineum.

On examination there was a septic laceration through the anus rather as though she had had an episiotomy

done on the rectum. The husband and the patient were vague as to how this had come about.

I admitted her to hospital and treated her with sitz baths, lincomycin injections and oral amoxicillin/clavulanic acid for five days after which she was discharged on her request. She had no temperature and was otherwise healthy. I only attempted rectal examination on the day of discharge and it was still too painful to completely assess the patient. The laceration was felt to extend only just into the rectum.

During my daily visits the following history unfolded.

The patient had been trained (**twasa**) as a sangoma for the last nine months. She had undergone the final graduation ceremony (**intwaso**) in Komatipoort five days previously. At this ceremony she had had to stab a goat in the throat and drink the warm blood that spouted out. The blood had then to be vomited back into a bucket and had to be clotting. If the blood was not vomited in this fashion she would not have qualified. This is an almost standard routine

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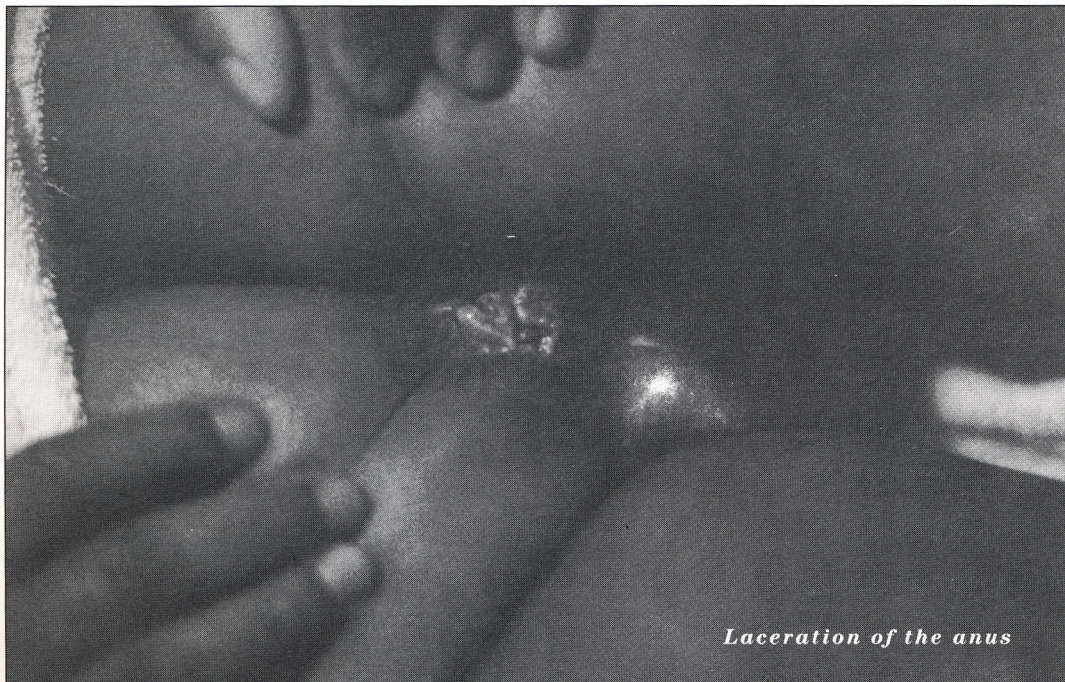
Case report;

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Shangaan;

Complications.



Laceration of the anus

for graduation as a sangoma in South Africa.

The Imfelo Ceremony

Six of them were qualifying that day and four of them agreed to undergo the **Imfelo** which is a voluntary ceremony after graduation. It is to bring the recently qualified sangoma luck in her practice and to ensure that she will be successful and have lots of clients.

The **imfelo** is a Swazi custom in which the posterior skin tag of the anus (**Tshamiwa**) is excised. The ceremony starts by the recently qualified sangoma providing a live chicken, whose feet, head and intestines she proceeds to cut out, while it is still alive. The anal tag of the sangoma is then removed. This is done with a new razor blade by a senior sangoma and the razor blade, anal skin and the chicken's feet, head and intestines are scattered by the initiate over the veld. The patient must then go on a salt-free diet for five days and drinks traditional medicine. She was instructed to wash the wound in Dettol.

Of the four of them who underwent this ceremony (three female and one male) she was the only one with complications. The others, she said, healed up very quickly.

She said the operation was performed on her by a senior female sangoma but the patient felt that the operator was inexperienced as she had cut her in the wrong place and too deeply. If the posterior skin tag was meant to have been removed then she was correct as the wound was anterior at 2 'o clock.

At a follow up visit, a week later, the wound was nearly healed. She did not return after this.

Conclusion

Various ceremonies have been described in connection with the training and graduation of traditional healers.

The **amagqira** of the Xhosa undergo the river ceremonies, the ceremony of the rope (**iseko lentambo**) and the going-home ceremony (**godusa**).¹ The Zulu sangomas have a final aggregation feast and slaughtering of a **ngwambisa** goat.²

There are similar ceremonies being performed over the width and breadth of Africa. Most graduation ceremonies follow similar patterns with local variations. No others, to my knowledge, include an 'operative' procedure as described here.

References:

1. Bührmann VM. Living in two worlds. Communication between a white healer and her black counterparts. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1984.
2. Krige EJ. The social system of the Zulus. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1950:307.