

Ancestors calling

Cultural practice of *ukuthwasa* and the workplace

When a worker is 'called' by his or her ancestors to become a traditional healer how is the employer going to deal with the matter? Does the law recognise this and what can be done when that situation arises at the workplace? **David Bogopa** investigates.

September is heritage month in which South Africans celebrate in various forms. Organisations and companies have programmes in place for celebrations. Further, 24 September has been declared a holiday in South Africa and workers, employers and the community at large get the opportunity to go to cultural festivals and also to visit heritage sites across the country.

The activities are in line with the South African Constitution of 1996 which clearly stipulates that every individual has the right to practice his or her own culture. However, employers and employees often find each other at the crossroads when it comes to the understanding of *ukuthwasa* practice. The difficulty with understanding *ukuthwasa* leads to a situation where trade unions and employers find themselves at loggerheads because leave policies in different organisations and companies do not provide for this process or practice.

Ukuthwasa is an Nguni word referring to a practice or process of one training to become a traditional healer. Normally it is not seen as a person's choice to

become a traditional healer but a calling by ancestors. Scholars who have written and explained the practice include Hunters (1936), Fortes (1965), Vilakazi (1965), Hammond-Tooke (1974 & 1989), Pauw (1994), Munthali (2006), Bogopa (2007 & 2010).

This article is based on a qualitative study which involved conducting interviews of employees who were directly affected and those who were not. Although 22 employees from public and private sectors were interviewed only three examples are used in this article to illustrate the point. To supplement the interviews journal articles, books and newspaper articles were also used during the research, the objective of which was to critically look into the practice of *ukuthwasa* at the workplace.

The purpose of the research was to provide an anthropological explanation on *ukuthwasa* with the view to bridge the gap between workers and employers. Lastly, the research makes recommendations that will hopefully assist in terms of closing the gap or improving policy within companies and organisations in South Africa.

UKUTHWASA VERSUS CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

Increasingly employers and employees find each other at the crossroads regarding the practice of *ukuthwasa* and those without the means of production (employees) end up being dismissed from work. For example, some employees have been charged and dismissed, while others had to resign from work because of *ukuthwasa*.

The first case study is of a male employee in his late thirties. He was charged and dismissed because the employer suspected that the employee reported to work drunk almost every day. The employer lacked the understanding that when the person is in a process of *ukuthwasa* he sees visions. These visions are complicated in such a way that it needs the assistance of a traditional healer to explain since it also involves ancestors.

The second case study involved a female employee in her mid-forties who had to resign from the workplace because ancestors were calling her to become a traditional healer, which required her to go through *ukuthwasa*. Her 65 days leave days were exhausted and her sick leave days were not



Colourful ceremony: Traditional healers say their prayers at Moletsi Moshate, Limpopo.

sufficient to apply and go through *ukuthwasa*. Further, the leave policy at her organisation did not provide for this particular cultural practice. The above mentioned employee had no option but to resign from work so that she could head the call from ancestors because failing to do so might end up in death.

The third case study is of a female employee in her early thirties from Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape who had to resign because her traditional healer training was to take place in Cape Town, Western Cape, where her trainer was based. Various factors compelled her to resign from work, namely: the proximity between work and the place of training and that the company's leave policy did not accommodate this type of training.

The fourth case study is of a male employee in his late forties. He also had a calling from his ancestors to become a traditional healer. Fortunately, he had his 65 days sick leave days plus his 30 days non-accumulative days as well as ten days accumulative leave days allocated for that particular year. Further, he had an extra 25 days accumulative from

previous years. The above total leave days amounted to 130 days inclusive and negotiations were held between his union and the employer and it was mutually agreed that the 120 were used as paid leave for six months. He had to take a further three months on an unpaid leave basis. The above arrangement worked very well for both the employee and employer although it was done outside the leave policy procedure.

In all four cases the union branches attempted to engage the employers but the negotiations on three cases were not successful because the employers opted for a rigid approach of applying policy pertaining to leave days, which did not assist the employees facing these situations. In one case at least negotiations paved a way for an employee to comply with his ancestors' call.

Findings

The research points to different findings. Firstly, it is evident that leave policy across the spectrum does not cater for *ukuthwasa*, which contradicts the notion of diversity enshrined in some organisational documents. Secondly, employers have a tendency of

applying policies in a rigid manner, which is of great concern because employees end up being unfairly dismissed or unintentionally opting for resignations. Thirdly, employers have a tendency of treating everything raised by unions suspiciously forgetting that organised labour is there to ensure that employees' rights are protected. There are attempts to organise workshops by companies and organisations to discuss cultural practices such as *ukuthwasa* so as to find a way forward.

Policy transgression can be detrimental at times, for example, currently leave policies within companies and organisations do not accommodate the practice of *ukuthwasa* and yet unions and employees expect employers to act differently on the matter. On the other hand, companies and organisations apply policies in a rigid way without at times taking into consideration the issue of cultural diversity.

Further, organisations and companies as custodians of these policies need to structure each policy in line with the Constitution of South Africa with the view of minimising conflict. *Ukuthwasa*

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is a cultural practice in Africa which has been practised in many cultures around the continent and the complexity of this cultural practice is that no one knows the exact time it will occur, since it involves ancestors.

What is peculiar is that in these companies and organisations there are African people who form part of the management structures and also have a better understanding of *ukuthwasa* and yet they have done nothing to influence decisions within their work environment. Further, what is interesting is that at some stage they might also be affected because this practice knows no boundaries. It is therefore prudent for organised labour, including the employers in South Africa, to ensure that the practice of *ukuthwasa* is accommodated within the leave arrangements in all companies and organisations. All stake holders need to be invited for input with the view of forging a way forward.

Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations to the way forward:

- Leave policy should be reviewed in organisations and companies - both public and private - with the view of accommodating *ukuthwasa*, largely because it has been around for many years in different cultures and will continue to exist.
- There is a need to apply leave policy in a more flexible manner in cases where employees are going through *ukuthwasa*. Normally, the *ukuthwasa* process takes a period of three months to a year and therefore to assist the employees affected, the 65 leave days allocated could be combined with the non-accumulative leave days including the accumulative leave days to accommodate the employee. Further, the executive human resources directors can grant some extra leave days at their own discretion and also advise the employees affected to take unpaid leave when the days have been exhausted. The above suggestion is possible because in some cases women take four to six months maternity leave.
- Organisations and companies must align their leave policies in such a way that it complies with the Constitution of the country which states that every person must practice his or her culture freely. Complying with the Constitution will minimise the cases taken to the Constitutional Court and will save time and financial resources.
- Regular workshops should be organised between top management and organised labour with the view of deliberating properly about the subject matter with an invitation extended to the workforce to bridge the gap between important stakeholders.
- Wellness programmes should be designed in such a way as to be utilised to address this matter should it arise since it is beyond anyone's control.
- The country must revisit the basic conditions of employment with the view of tapping in or accommodating this practice because failing to do that will continue to haunt those affected workers.
- Anthropology as a discipline can be used to understand the subject matter in a holistic manner since the majority of anthropologists in the country have conducted research in this area.
- Further, anthropologists are better equipped to provide solutions or explanations since they rely on research techniques such as participant observation and interviews which will come in handy in reflecting both the etic and emic perspectives on the practice of *ukuthwasa*.
- Finally, further research on this practice, particularly with reference to the work environment, is greatly needed. ¹⁸

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