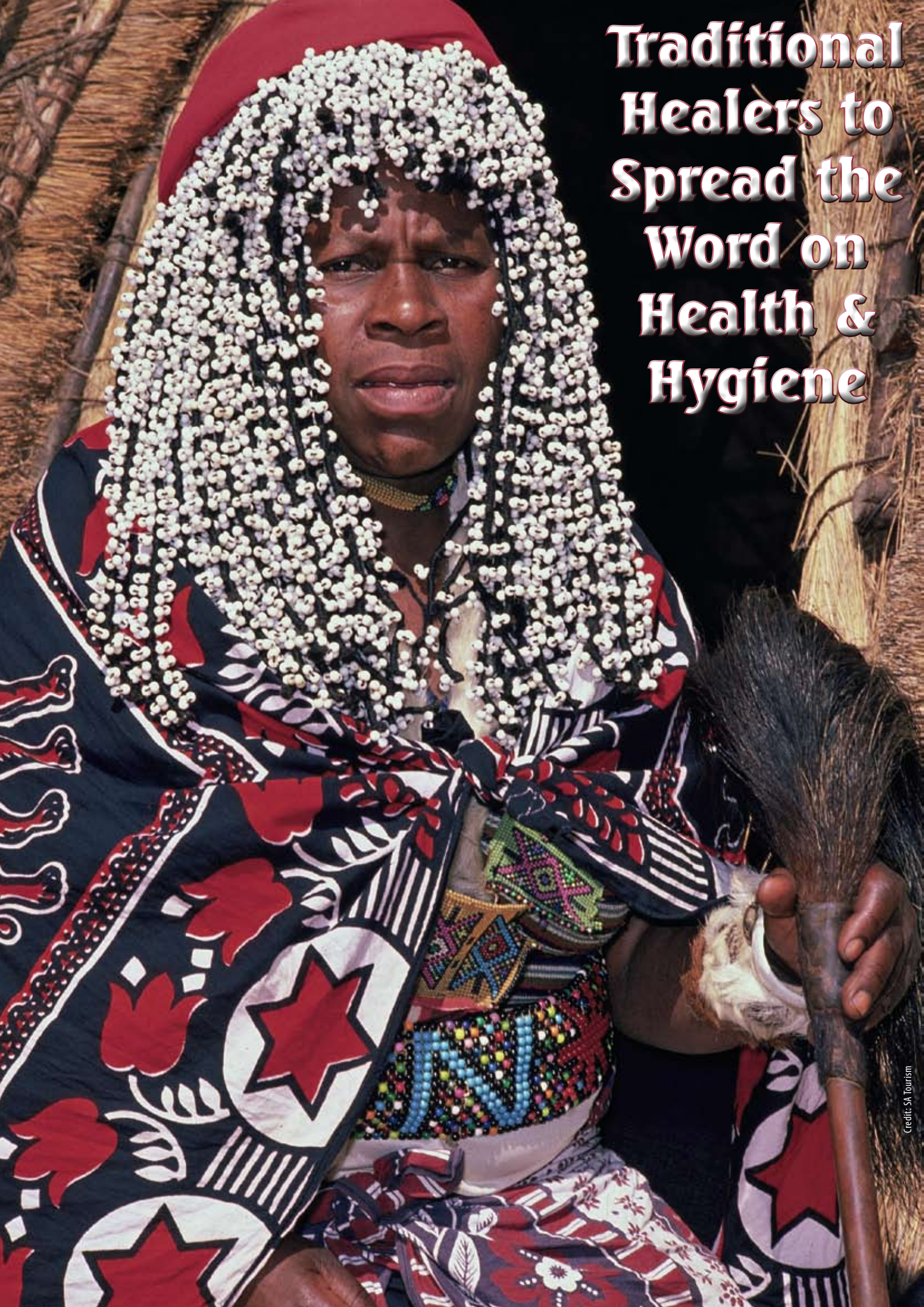


# Traditional Healers to Spread the Word on Health & Hygiene





## *Traditional health practitioners have an important role to play in sanitation, health & hygiene initiatives, a study funded by the Water Research Commission (WRC) has found.*

Experience has shown that hardware, i.e. the installation of physical sanitation infrastructure, does not necessarily improve community health unless complemented by comprehensive health and hygiene education. If households do not adopt improved hygiene practices, improving their access to safe sanitation will not make much of a difference to their health and well-being.

In South African communities, people's day-to-day practices and behaviours related to health are often influenced by traditional health practitioners. Considered the custodians of communities' culture and indigenous knowledge they more often than not hold a high position of trust and status among the people they serve.

Traditional health practitioners are characterised by modes of healing that include a more or less shared herbal pharmacopoeia, and distinctive practices of divination and possession by ancestral spirits. Indigenous to South Africa in this category are sangomas, inyangas, herbalists, traditional surgeons and faith healers. Other traditional health practitioners found in South Africa are Buddhist, Chinese, Hindu, Muslim and European herbalists, and homeopaths among others.

Despite the existence of a variety of traditional healers in South Africa, they have historically been located on the fringes of the broader medical health system, although they are the first port of call for many South Africans. In fact, research indicates that up to 80% of the country's population regularly make use of traditional health practitioners.

According to consulting firm Sigodi Marah Martin (SMM), which was appointed by the WRC to undertake the study into the potential role of traditional health practitioners in

sanitation promotion, these healers are generally more available and more affordable for ordinary people than conventional doctors. They usually also offer more flexibility in payment. "This makes traditional health practitioners a possible key partner in the advancement of sanitation, health and hygiene education."

This conclusion can also be gleaned from traditional health practitioners' involvement in HIV/AIDS programmes in different countries, particularly in Africa. Some challenges for their involvement remain, however, including the paradigmatic differences between the biomedical and traditional health disciplines as well as the historical relationship of traditional health practitioners to the legislative context and formal healthcare

infrastructure, notes SMM in the final WRC report.

"The present moment in time when there is legislation being put in place which gives formal recognition to traditional health practitioners offers a definite opportunity to leverage and engage the expertise of these healers in addressing backlog legacies and in the process bridging the critical gap between hardware installations and changing daily community practices around healthy, hygiene and sanitation issues."

To order the report, *Involving Traditional Health Practitioners in Health, Hygiene and Sanitation Education and Promotion (Report No: 1521/1/07)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; E-mail: [orders@wrc.org.za](mailto:orders@wrc.org.za).

### TRADITIONAL PRACTICES RELATED TO HEALTH, HYGIENE AND SANITATION

The practice of rubbing one's hands with ash and washing one's hands with bile from animals to ensure clean hands was particularly

important in areas where water was not readily available.

Historically, people relied on rivers and streams for bathing and washing laundry, while water from springs was used for consumption. These water sources were respected and there was no dumping of rubbish near rivers and streams. Rubbish was rather dumped in a special place where it would later be burned.



For the same reasons no defecating would be allowed near or in water sources. Traditional health practitioners

told researchers at workshops that children would be told fairy tales to adopt hygienic toilet practices. For example, children were told if they defecated on the ground and not covered their waste with soil they would not be blessed by the angels. Children were also warned that if they urinated in a water source and a crab drank their urine they would change sex.