

**Rosanna Tramutoli**

University of Naples “L’Orientale”

ORCID 0009-0006-0535-6614

## Cultural metaphors of emotions in Swahili and Zulu: language, body and healing practices

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes cultural metaphors of emotions related to traditional healing in two Bantu languages, Swahili and Zulu, considering the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations. Cross-linguistic studies have shown that emotional language and descriptions of character traits are an echo of cultural practices, ethnomedical resources, traditions and beliefs. Taking into account traditional healing practices in Swahili (*uganga*) and Zulu (*umuthi*), the author seeks to illustrate the cultural conceptualizations of the body that are involved in describing emotions, in order to shed light on the problematic correspondence between linguistic expression and cultural context in metaphorical processes. Examples of cultural metaphors in the two languages will show how the description of emotions draws from humoral theory, color symbolism and medical practices, which are also relevant to the treatment of diseases.

KEYWORDS: cultural metaphors, emotions, traditional healing, Swahili, Zulu

### 1. CULTURAL METAPHORS: LANGUAGE AND MEDICAL PRACTICES

This study analyzes cultural metaphors, i.e., conceptual metaphors that are culturally constructed (Sharifian 2017), in the wider cultural context of Swahili and Zulu ethnomedical practices to see which cultural traditions correspond to conceptual metaphors of emotions in these languages.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Swahili data analyzed in this paper are taken from Tramutoli (2020). Zulu data are mainly derived from bibliographical sources (e.g., Ngubane 1977; Donda 1997).

The term “metaphor” is used in this paper as a general label that also includes metonymies, idioms and semantic extensions in a broader sense since the purpose here is not to classify these expressions from a linguistic point of view but rather to reflect on the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations.

We start from the assumption that the ways in which different languages encode complex abstract concepts, such as love, sadness, anger or surprise, are not isolated but form a part of a conceptual system that is influenced by the social and cultural environment both in a synchronic and diachronic dimension. According to Sharifian, historical cultural practices, like ethnomedical practices, have left traces in the current language, some of which are in fossilized forms that may no longer be analyzable. In this sense, language is a “memory bank” for storing and communicating cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian 2014: 476).

It would undoubtedly be too simplistic to assume that there is a perfect correspondence between linguistic and cultural practices, but it is possible to observe references to ancient medical practices and beliefs in some conceptualizations of the body and linguistic expressions, especially in emotional and body metaphors.

Traditional healing practices, known in Swahili as *uganga* (or *tiba ya asili*) and in Zulu as *umuthi*, encompass practices, remedies, ingredients and procedures of all kinds that enable people to cope with diseases through the use of traditional herbs and medicines. The Swahili and Zulu terms for ‘traditional healer’, *mganga* and *inyanga*, respectively, derive from the same proto-Bantu root *\*xanga* ‘to cure’ (Donda 1997: 123), as does the Swahili noun *uganga* ‘traditional healing practices’, belonging to class 11 (noun prefix *u-*), which is typical of abstract nouns.

*Mganga/inyanga* is an expert in traditional medicine who has acquired medical knowledge accumulated over generations and knows how to use plants, roots and herbs to treat various types of illnesses, both physical and mental. Indeed, traditional healers can cure illnesses that have biological origins or are caused by witchcraft or environmental factors.

The Zulu term *umuthi* is not semantically limited to ‘medicine’ since it also refers to ‘the tree and its parts, all substances used to restore health, the art of healing practices’ in general. Specifically, two types of *umuthi*

can be distinguished: *umuthi wokuphilisa* ‘medicine for healing’ and *umuthi wokubulala* ‘medicine for killing’ (Ngubane 1977: 22).

In this study, we will show that although linguistic data, especially linguistic descriptions of emotions and feelings, largely reflect cultural conceptualizations, cultural metaphors are often difficult to examine because some expressions are “fossilized” conceptualizations that do not allow for any cognitive mapping from the source domain to the target domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), nor do they imply that current speakers are aware of the cultural roots of these expressions.

We find examples of fossilized expressions related to humoral theory (Swartz 1992; Geeraerts and Grondelaers 1995) and medical practices also in European languages, for instance, in Italian *umore* ‘humor’, *flemmatico* ‘phlegmatic’; in Dutch *zwartgallig* (lit. ‘bilious black’) ‘sad, depressed’; in English *spleen* ‘sadness’, *phlegmatic* (*phlegm*) ‘calm, apathetic’; in French *avoir du sang dans les veines* ‘be brave’. Even though speakers are no longer familiar with ancient practices, they still use these expressions, which have undergone a process of reinterpretation over time.

Indeed, Cardona (2006: 126) acknowledges that

[i]t almost never happens that the explanation given by the speaker follows exactly that which we could establish scientifically, that is, going back to older stages of the language ... the speaker usually does not have, nor can he have, awareness of the older forms of his language (unless he is a professional scholar and has access to written documents) and cannot explain the form that within the language he speaks at that moment.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to being linked to humoral theory, many of these beliefs find their roots in a more universal schema of cold-hot opposition (Cardona 1995), so it would be superficial to assume that some cultural practices (such as the use of cold and hot substances) are derived exclusively from the humoral theory. Since this opposition has been attested in languages

---

<sup>2</sup> “Non accade quasi mai che la spiegazione data dal parlante ricalchi esattamente quella che noi potremmo stabilire scientificamente, cioè risalendo a stadi più antichi della lingua ... il parlante non ha, nè può avere, coscienza, per solito delle forme più antiche della sua lingua (a meno che non sia un letterato di professione e abbia accesso a documenti scritti) e non può spiegare la forma che all’interno della lingua che egli parla in quel momento”.

from different regions of the world (Africa, Australia, New Guinea), it could be considered a universal conceptual model (Cardona 1995).

Moreover, in many Bantu languages, the concept of purification is semantically related to “cold” and thus “cure” (Parkin 2013), like the Swahili verb *-pona* and its Zulu counterpart *-pholisa*, both of which mean ‘to cool, to heal’.

## 2. THE BALANCE OF HUMORS IN SWAHILI

Although it seems to be a universal thing to consider the body as a container of emotions, we should nevertheless note that, despite the similarities at the generic level, the specific container metaphors are composed of greatly differing elements (Kövecses 1995). Thus, when analyzing emotion expressions, it is important to take into account the cultural background of our concepts of emotions (in our case, the humoral theory) (Geeraerts and Grondelaers 1995), that is, we should consider the significance of the body in Swahili culture, where specific organs, such as *ini* ‘liver’, and bodily fluids, like *damu* ‘blood’ and *nyongo* ‘bile’, play a prominent cultural role.

The Swahili view of the body’s functioning is based on Galen’s ideas about physiology, which influenced Swahili through Islamic culture (Swartz 1992, 1997; Parkin 2000). The Swahili humoral theory sees four *matabia* ‘elements’ or ‘characters’, i.e., *baridi* ‘cold’, *hari* ‘hot’, *yabisi* ‘dry’ and *rutuba* ‘wet’,<sup>3</sup> as the basis of the body’s functioning (Swartz 1992: 41). According to this view, the body functions properly only when the four elements are all in balance (*muutadil* or *mizani*) (Swartz 1992: 41). Each of the four *matabia* is associated with a bodily fluid, a body part and a character trait (Swartz 1992: 41):

<i>baridi</i> ‘cold’	phlegm – lungs – impassive
<i>hari</i> ‘hot’	blood – liver – courageous
<i>yabisi</i> ‘dry’	black bile – spleen – moody, depressive, suspicious
<i>rutuba</i> ‘wet’	yellow bile – gallbladder – proud, quick-tempered

---

<sup>3</sup> Swartz (1992: 41) spells it *rughuba*.

In addition to body organs, bodily fluids seem to be culturally relevant in Swahili conceptualizations of emotions since they are also associated with people's feelings and character traits.

A person's character is determined by his/her particular balance of bodily fluids, which react differently to changes in food, weather conditions, seasons and, if they are unbalanced (meaning that the person is ill), to the specific properties of medicinal herbs. Each person's character/temperament predisposes him/her to certain emotional responses. For instance, someone with a "hot" temperament may commit terrible acts under certain circumstances. Seasons also indirectly influence the functioning of the body since external temperature affects digestion: foods that increase body heat are more easily absorbed in summer, and vice versa. Even foods and beverages are classified according to the four elements; not according to the substances of which they are composed but according to the effect they have on the functioning of the body. For example, ice is not "cold" but "dry", and honey is "hot" (even if it has just come out of a fridge).

Both the functioning of the body and the morality of social relations are described using the same "balance" metaphor. Thus, language usage supports the hypothesis that there is an important correspondence between these two theories (Swartz 1992).

### 3. THE BODY AS THE *LOCUS* OF EMOTIONS IN SWAHILI

There are several Swahili expressions in which body organs/bodily fluids appear as the *locus* of emotions or in metonymical descriptions of character traits. From a diachronic perspective, *nyongo* 'bile, gallbladder' and *ini* 'liver' of the *matabia* theory, with their related bodily fluids (bile and blood), seem to play a significant role in Swahili body conceptualizations. In particular, *nyongo* 'bile', which in the humoral theory is linked to depression (*yabisi* 'dry') and anger (*rutuba* 'wet'), has several connotations in Swahili as the seat of negative emotions (anger, resentment):

- (1) *Ana mtimanyongo.* lit. 'S/he has a bile-heart' (s/he feels resentment).
- (2) *Ana kinyongo.* lit. 'S/he has bile' (s/he feels resentment).
- (3) *Kutumbukia nyongo.* lit. 'To fall into the bile (of someone)' (to get angry).