

Illness and Health as Constructions:

Narratives of *Sangoma*¹ Nurses

Maheshvari Naidu and Gabriel Darong

School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

KEYWORDS Ancestors. Biomedicine. Isangoma. Harmony. Health. Healing

ABSTRACT This study involved a group of *isiZulu*-speaking nurses who were also traditional healers or *izangoma*² within the South African *amaZulu* culture. The paper explored traditional healing beliefs and practices through the perspectives of this group of traditional healers who were *also* formally trained nurses. The narratives shared by the nurses, referred to as 'sangoma-nurses', revealed that their 'cultural' training and experiences dominated the manner in which they understood many of the illnesses that presented at the hospital. Working through the lens of social constructionism and through narrative analysis, the paper reveals that much of their views on ill health, even within the 'biomedical' defined hospital space, articulated by and large through the lens of their cultural worldviews, rather than the training they underwent as nurses. Findings reveal that the sangoma-nurses, in large part, struggled to straddle their dual positionality; as so called 'western' nurse *and* traditional *isangoma* and were often compelled to 'suspend' their traditional beliefs while at work.