‘It chose the beautiful ones…’

It was only the illness and dying of people that I remember. And the funerals, Oh! My brother Elias [Plaatje, an evangelist] had just caught the ‘flu and died in the same ‘flu. The ‘flu really comes with the soldiers from overseas. Because people didn’t even know what was causing that fever. Oh, it was terrible. People working in the mines who had died – they just made one grave for them. The children eight to twenty were mostly dying. Even the doctors could do nothing… I was supposed to get married in 1918, then the ‘flu came and I got sick. I was in Kimberley for buying my wedding gown… the ‘flu was very strong over September and October and over by November and towards December. …Even the Europeans in Barkly West had to collect this ‘wel-alis’ bush. You only collect that bush in the veld and boil it…

Martha Bokako (born 1890), interviewed 22 November 1980 by Andrew Reed (p.95)
the use of iodine; carbolic acid; copious amounts of brandy, and even champagne in one account; the rubbing of tissue-salts, and the use of fresh and boiled milk, especially for pregnant women and children – also ring in unison. The accounts in this book are moving and suggestive of experience and memory knitted together as the basis for some forms of shared community for the witnesses and survivors – reminding us that the depth of this common bond could have provided the basis for a very different way out of the crisis.

Two key themes stand out. First, the movement of people (miners, traders, soldiers, workers, herbalists, wedding parties, families, school children, bankers, prisoners, farmers) speeding up through trains and new motorised transport forms, and on the water via engine-propelled ships, driving epidemics across vast territories. And second, the power of metaphor to cement memories. Phillips includes a section of black-and-white photographs of people affected by the epidemic, and of newspaper advertisements and covers of sheet music and fictional writing inspired by the 1918 ‘flu. In the early 1920s, Reuben Thlakele Calusa, a prodigious South African born composer, crafted several influenza-linked songs that were published by Lovedale Institution Press. The ethnomusicologist, Austin C. Okigbo, traced the lyrics and sheet music through archives and through pressed recordings of these songs made in London in the 1960s, analysing the lyrics of Influenza 1918 that was devoted entirely to the ramifications of the epidemic in the Cape, along with the song Intandane (orphan).

In the first stanza of Influenza 1918, Caluza wrote (here translated into English by Okigbo and his researcher):

In the year nineteen eighteen
We’re killed by the disease called influenza
Which finished our beloved relatives
Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers
In other households no one was left
It took young women and men
It chose the beautiful ones

It even took the good-looking men
It took the teenagers
It took even the young maidens
It took the engaged ladies
It took the strummers [bridesmaids]
Even the grooms
It was like there was a black cloud
over the earth.

Black and grey clouds filled the mindscapes of the survivors. Angela Gilham (nee le Roux), born in Cape Town 10 years after Martha Bokako, recounted her own harrowing memories of the ‘flu, in an echo of Caluza’s song. She wrote a lengthy and gripping account which ended:

...I sincerely trust that I have not bored you with this lengthy tale but I am so thrilled to think how my own life was lengthened at that sad period whereas so many young people were sent to an untimely death. Oh! It was dreadful. Even when October comes each year and skies become grey, my thoughts still go back to 1918.

Angela Gilham (born 1901), interviewed 8 June 1972 by Richard Collier (p.29)

References