

AGNIESZKA PODOLECKA

## **Sangomas, Shamans and New Age: the Hybridity of some Modern Healing and Esoteric Practices and Beliefs in South Africa**

### **Abstract**

The article analyses the phenomenon of South African sangomas, their calling, beliefs, methods of work and social reception, and places the phenomenon within shamanic and New Age discourses. Sangomas play very important role in South African society, even among African Christians. They used to be exorcists and diviners – those who were believed to contact ancestral spirits and explain the workings of fate. With time, they have become skilled herbalists, healers and local leaders. In the last few decades many sangomas started co-operation with New Age circles and started calling themselves ‘shamans’. To compare sangomas and shamans, I analyse the concept of shamanism in both academic and New Age meaning, basing my knowledge on my field study among sangomas, shamans and New Agers and I place it within the existing discourse.

**Keywords:** sangoma, shaman, New Age, South Africa, healing, divination, ancestral spirits

Traditionally, sangomas were mediumistic diviners in South African Nguni ethnic groups. Sangomas’ task was to contact ancestral spirits and ask them for advice and to unveil the future, to read from different oracles (i.e. bones, animal guts), to exorcise evil spirits and to bless people; shortly speaking – to deal with the spiritual realm. Such information can be found in missionaries and academics’ works.<sup>1</sup> However, in the last decades sangomas’ duties were broadened. Thanks to modern technologies and social

---

<sup>1</sup> J.M. Jenzen, ‘*Doing Ngoma*’: *A Dominant Trope in African Religion and Healing*, “Journal of Religion in Africa” 1991, 21, Fasc. 4, p. 291; W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Rituals and Medicines. Indigenous Healing in Africa*, Ad. Donker, Johannesburg 1989, pp. 298–279; A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, C. Hurst&Company, Uppsala 1976, p. 136.

changes, clients have become patients and their demands have overcome the divination offer. Many sangomas established close relationship with New Age circles, many apply New Age shamans' methods in their work.

In 2013 I did a field study in South Africa and Lesotho. I applied the method of participant observation (both active and passive), extended semi-structured interviews and survey research (my samples were sangomas and New Agers).<sup>2</sup> I asked sangomas about sangoma's calling, apprenticeship, rituals, traditions, mythology, I used key-words like: energy, energetic field, aura, shamanism, spirituality. Questions for New Agers included the same key-words and additionally I asked about my informants' cultural and religious backgrounds and their conscious or unconscious turning towards New Age. Some of my informants were not aware that I was conducting an academic research, others were informed beforehand. I lived with sangomas, I underwent several purifying and other spiritual rituals and I interviewed sixteen sangomas. Some of them were 'white sangomas', purposefully called in this way to distinguished them from 'traditional' or 'black sangomas'.<sup>3</sup> I also interviewed several sangomas over the Internet and compared my informants' statements with information shared by sangomas in books and interviews. My field study has proved that sangomas are no more just diviners or even spiritual healers – their abilities, tasks and duties are closer to shamans than to diviners. Many sangomas present ideology and perform duties typical for New Age meaning of shamanism.

The aim of this article is to present the 'traditional'<sup>4</sup> sangomas' work and those from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I analyse their calling, duties and abilities, especially

---

<sup>2</sup> There is no binding definition of New Age. This quickly growing phenomenon is called by many 'a movement' which I find untrue: New Agers reject organisations and structures, usually also institutionalised religions, and aim for a personal freedom. At the same time, the variety of interests is so vast that it is impossible to delineate one definition of New Age. The key interests of New Agers are: embracing ideas from many religions and philosophical systems in search for their own spirituality unique to every person, ecology, holism. New Agers often are not aware that they are part of a global phenomenon; they think they are on a spiritual quest to improve oneself. New Age key-words are: energy, spirituality, reincarnation, holistic approach to life, holistic healing, meditation, eco-awareness, uniqueness of each human being, Mother Nature rhetoric.

<sup>3</sup> The denominations 'white' and 'black' are used in South Africa with full respect and in accordance to South African law. Wreford emphasizes the fact that 'white sangomas' had to be trained by 'black' ones simply because there were no white sangomas thirty years ago. She also recalls situations when a white patient was first sent to a white sangoma by a black one because s(he) expected the white one to explain problems better within one culture (J.Th. Wreford, *Studies 'Long-Nosed' Hybrids? Sharing the Experiences of White Izangoma in Contemporary South Africa*, "Journal of Southern African Studies" 2007, 33/4, "Histories of Healing", pp. 829–843).

<sup>4</sup> The denomination 'traditional' is very imprecise and has been heavily criticised by Shaw as an invention of colonisers: they called African native beliefs 'traditional religions' in the contrary to Christianity (R. Shaw, *The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion*, "Religion" 1990, 20, p. 339). The same applies to 'traditional' healers, 'traditional' diviners, 'traditional' spiritual leaders, 'traditional' style of life etc. The term 'traditional' should be used with great care as sangoma traditions have 'multiple roots that extend across time, cultures and languages, and derive partly from pre-colonial African systems of belief' (R. Thornton, *The transmission of knowledge in South African traditional healing*, "Africa" 2009, 79/1, p. 17). Also 'few sangomas today see their knowledge as the unmodified product of the past. No two sangomas appear to believe or do precisely the same thing. The knowledge they apply is constantly in circulation, producing a diversity of regional and even personal variants.' (ibid., p. 23). Additionally, contemporary sangomas are influenced by new technology and contacts with many

those which are identical or similar to shamanic ones, and place them within shamanic and New Age discourse. I also show the cultural and spiritual environment in which sangomas operate. In this article I try to delineate the definition of shamanism and I compare contemporary sangomas' work with shamans' work, both in academic and New Age meaning.

### **The concept of shamanism in a classical and New Age meaning**

The terms 'shamanism' and 'shaman' came to the Western nomenclature thanks to an estranged Russian priest, Avvakum Petrov, who was sent to Siberia by Nikon, the patriarch of Moscow, in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. In Siberia Petrov met the Evenki ethnic group; their central figures were shamans, people possessing abilities and performing rituals unknown in Europe. When Petrov came back to Moscow in 1666 after his exile, he told Russians (and the news travelled to the West) about people who were clairvoyants, who possessed the ability of speaking to spirits, travelled to the 'underworld and 'heavens', who could perform exorcisms and heal in mysterious ways. Petrov did not find a Russian word to describe the complexity of the shamanic work so he adopted the Siberian word, with the accent on the second syllable. In the following centuries many other deportees to Siberia reported that peoples of Nenet, Mansi, Khanty, Ngansan, Enet, Jakut, Tungus, Manchurian and others had their religious beliefs built around shamanic figures.<sup>5</sup> Eliade states that the term 'shaman' comes from Siberian Tungus language and he agrees that it came to the Western nomenclature via Russian.<sup>6</sup>

When I spoke to my sangoma informants, both 'white' and 'black' about the usage of the term 'shaman' instead of 'sangoma', they said that sangomas and shamans mean the same for them and it is much easier to use the word known to everyone than local terms. V.C. Mutwa<sup>7</sup> added that in the times of Earth being a 'global village', where news

---

cultures. However, for the reason of communication, I will use this term with quotation marks to point the difference between sangomas trained in centuries-old traditions and those whose training has been influenced by Western elements and terminology, and the influence of shamanic thought from around the world. This will not solve the problem of 'pure traditionalism' because many contemporary sangomas claim to be 'traditional' while in fact they incorporate modern terminology and methods like New Age meditation with crystals or natural elements. Also, many sangomas combine practicing Christian faith and the belief in ancestors' powers and do not see any contradiction in being Christians and sangomas like my informant Mathobele Pita (the casus is commented by R. Thornton, op. cit., p. 20).

<sup>5</sup> N.S. Price (ed.), *The archeology of shamanism*, Routledge, London 2001, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> M. Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Polish translation: *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy*, Aletheia, Warszawa 2011, pp. 29–30.

<sup>7</sup> V.C. Mutwa is a sangoma and a New Age shaman. His books are found controversial because his version of Zulu mythology differs distinctively from myths collected by academics. Mutwa is also a propagator of UFO-related conspiracies. The belief in extra-terrestrial beings visiting the Earth is a popular motive in many mythologies but it is Mutwa who promotes the 'knowledge' about such creatures living in Africa. However, as a sangoma with over 70-year experience Mutwa is a good source of knowledge about sangomas' traditions and rituals, especially that most of his words are confirmed by other sangomas.

travelled immediately through the Internet and New Age communities help understand the meaning of shamanism, it was prudent to use a vocabulary known to everyone (March 2013). New Age interest in shamanism is the result of holistic approach to life, ecological awareness (shamans are also protectors of nature) and spirituality that crosses racial and cultural borders.

There is no binding definition of shamanism, even among the peoples who practice it. The phenomenon is described by analysing the abilities, duties and performances of shamans. Taksami, a Siberian-born ethnographer, calls it a historical phenomenon present in Siberian religious beliefs; others perceive shamanism as a religion or a set of primitive beliefs and rituals, and others as a way of life.<sup>8</sup> Eliade understands shamanism as a religion in a very wide meaning because of its connection to deities, interest in mysticism and the usage of archaic methods of ecstasy. He points to the fact that not every magus or mystic is a shaman, while a shaman must be both; (s)he also performs priestly duties and should be a spiritual leader of the community (s)he serves. A shaman is a priest but it does not mean (s)he is the only priest in the community; there are other types of priests in shamanic cultures, people who do not have the ability of possession and trans; also in many cultures a head of a family is a head of a family cult as well. A shaman is the highest of all because (s)he is a master of ecstasy, someone who can be possessed by spirits and deities and who can control the possession.<sup>9</sup> Szyjewski describes a shaman as the one responsible for contacts with the realms of spirits and gods. He means both the scary and demonic underworld and the heavens, and also the spiritual realm of nature.<sup>10</sup> Shamans are first and foremost healers and they owe their wisdom to the experience gathered in spiritual realms. In shamanic societies all sickness and malfunctioning of a body and mind is a result of an evil intervention of some spiritual entity: an ancestral spirit, a demon, a deity, hence the importance of shamans' place in their societies.<sup>11</sup>

There are several characteristics that tell a shaman from other religious and healing professions: an unconscious and conscious state of possession by spirits (the one in which a shaman gains knowledge and from which he or she can emerge on his or her will)<sup>12</sup>,

---

<sup>8</sup> N.S. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> The invisible or spiritual realms and the creatures inhabiting them are impossible to define and it is not the purpose of this article. However, some academics tried to identify the main factors of such realms: Harvey calls them 'other-than-human spirits', Eliade calls them 'creatures of underworld', Heinze calls them 'alternative states of consciousness' that can be reached by 'magical flights' and trance (Graham Harvey, *Animism Rather than Shamanism: New Approach to What Shamans Do (for other animists)* in: B.E. Schmidt, L. Huskinson (eds.), "Spirit possession and trance. New disciplinary perspectives", Continuum International Publishing Group, London 2010, pp./iii).

<sup>11</sup> A. Szyjewski, *Szamanizm*, WAM, Kraków 2005, pp. 8–10.

<sup>12</sup> The term 'possession' in the case of sangomas poses a problem. Thornton argues that possession is something unconscious, a time when a person does not have his or her own will. In his opinion sangomas rather possess spirits than are possessed by them because they ask for certain help (R. Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 26.) Siberian shamans who are possessed also can co-operate with spirits and ask for help. However, during the sangoma calling spirits come uninvited and force the called one to become a sangoma (K.E. Jensen, *The Social System of the Zulus*, Shuter

the ability to enter and leave a trance through drumming and other means, 'magic flights' to other realms, controlling and co-operating with natural elements (especially fire), living 'out of time' and having access to mythical times to gain wisdom from past, presence and future (for shamans time is not linear, it is more like a circle without a beginning and an end so they are capable of gaining wisdom from mythical entities and see what future holds), the ability to recognise a reason of a sickness and the ability to heal both sicknesses and the reason and transmitting the history of his people and religious and esoteric wisdom, holistic and esoteric healing.<sup>13</sup>

There are also distinctions that a person must have to become a shaman. Though the processes differ in various cultures, certain aspects are repetitive: a calling by divinities or spirits or by being recognised as a potential shaman by fully-fledged shamans<sup>14</sup>, a shamanic sickness, a long training during which a trainee learns a secret knowledge (it is always finished by an initiation examination), a duty to find an apprentice and pass the wisdom down the generations.<sup>15</sup>

### Etymology of the term 'sangoma'

The origins of the term 'sangoma' is not clear. My sangoma informants say the word 'sangoma' means 'a person of the drum', the word 'ngoma' meaning drum music. Drums are sacred instruments which help sangomas get into a trance and communicate with spirits. They also consider drums as depositaries of their energy, though 'energy' certainly is a modern terminology, not used several decades ago. Jenzen derives the term from 'doing ngoma'. He writes: 'discourses of healing take a number of forms: the evocation of distress and hope before others; prayers to God, ancestors, and spirits; songs both out of the cultural stock at hand as well as original compositions from the wellsprings of individual emotion; highly codified dress; instrumental accompaniment and dance; the creation and use of *materia medica*'.<sup>16</sup> Cabrita derives 'sangoma' from

---

& Shotter, Pietermaritzburg 1962, p. 303; A.-I. Berglund, op.cit., p. 136). Hence I make a distinction between a conscious and unconscious possession.

<sup>13</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 30–31, B. Keeney, *Bushman shaman. Awakening the spirit through ecstatic dance*, Destiny Books, Rochester 2005, p. 95; R. Greve, *Shamanic Ecstasy and Conception of Time. Spirit Possession and Trance. New Disciplinary Perspective*, in: B.E. Schmidt, L. Huskinson, op. cit., pp. 115–116.

<sup>14</sup> In Siberian cultures a person struck by a lightning can be perceived as a potential shaman. Also shamanism can be a family inheritance; in such a case a person grows in the shamanic environment and is being prepared all his or her life. In some cultures a child lives as a candidate for a shaman until he or she receives the first vision. If the vision does not come in certain time, the candidate is withdrawn and his or her selection is acknowledged as a mistake (M. Eliade, op. cit., p. 39).

<sup>15</sup> The sources refer to all listed aspects: M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 36, 41, 52–58, 105; A. Gump, *Re-visioning shamanism, w Spirit possession and trance. New disciplinary perspectives*, in: B.E. Schmidt, L. Huskinson, op. cit., p. 18; G. Harvey, *Animism Rather than Shamanism: New Approach to What Shamans Do (for other animists)*, ibid., p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> J.M. Jenzen, 'Doing Ngoma': *A Dominant Trope in African Religion and Healing*, "Journal of Religion in Africa" 1991, Vol. 21, Fasc. 4, p. xi.

*ngoma* meaning hymn, dance, music; she agrees with Jensen that sangoma's work is related to the act of doing *ngoma* – a dynamic healing practice that incorporates music and especially drumming.<sup>17</sup> The word 'ngoma' also means 'stem', 'mother'.<sup>18</sup> Berglund states that 'diviners themselves say that idiom *ngoma* associates them with the shades (spirits) from whom they obtain the ability of divining. One diviner claimed that *ingoma* and *isangoma* were, strictly speaking, the same words and denoted diviners who, according to the old Zulu society, divined with sticks known as *izibulo*.<sup>19</sup>

Several of my informants told me that most sangomas were female. This view is confirmed by Bryant, van Nievenhuijsen and Berglund. Berglund also reports a belief that sangomas are mostly women because they can call to divination the shades from both linages – hers and her husband's.<sup>20</sup> Kendall evaluates ninety five percent of sangomas are women, he also quotes Thorpe whose evaluation is the same.<sup>21</sup> However, it is impossible to establish male/female proportions because there is no obligation to register oneself as a sangoma.

Berglund places sangomas among other esoteric professions: *inyangas* (diviners, herbalists), *sanusis* (usually male diviners who also have the ability to smell evil spirits), *sangomas* (diviners who obtain the ability to divine from ancestral spirits); to all of them Berglund refers as diviners.<sup>22</sup> Krige also presents 'traditional' classification: *inyangas* as herbalists, *sanusis* and *sangomas* who co-operate with spirits; she confirms the secret character of the tuition and work.<sup>23</sup> Thornton lists *sangomas* (healers who graduated from a period of tuition), *inyangas* (herbalists who prepare and sell herbal medicines) and *amaprofeti* (from English 'prophet', African syncretic Christians who practice faith-healing, though he emphasises the fact that *sangomas* are the only ones who can combine all those skills.<sup>24</sup>

### Sickness and misfortune among South African peoples

One of the most important duties of *sangomas* is healing which combines medicines made from plants and contacting beings from the spiritual realm, usually patients' ancestors. To understand the phenomenon of the esoteric healing in South Africa one must understand the holistic approach to life and the belief in the presence of ancestral spirits. South African peoples believe in reincarnation and accept the presence of spirits

---

<sup>17</sup> Private e-mail 2 Oct 2013.

<sup>18</sup> <http://isizulu.net/>.

<sup>19</sup> A.-I. Berglund, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 188.

<sup>21</sup> K. Kendall, *The Role of Izangoma in Bringing the Zulu Goddess Back to Her People*, "Drama Review" 1999, 43, No. 2, pp. 94.

<sup>22</sup> A.-I. Berglund, op. cit., pp. 136, 185–186.

<sup>23</sup> E.J. Krige, op. cit., pp. 298, 299, 303.

<sup>24</sup> R. Thornton, op. cit., p. 20.

in their lives as the result of it. 'Shades [spirits] are like water. They are everywhere at the same time' – repeats Berglund after his informants, and my sangoma informants agree with this description; spirits permeate the world, they are ever-present, ready to help and in some cases to harm.<sup>25</sup> This is why people still 'feed' ancestral spirits by food offerings and rituals. But spirits are not associated with humans only: there are water spirits, tree spirits etc. The difference between a soul and a spirit is difficult to explain as there is no English vocabulary that would make a precise difference in the case of living entities: trees are alive according to sangomas but in English they do not use the word 'soul' but 'spirit'. All my informants used the terms intuitively and lacked proper English names for the concepts. They all said that healing a sickness without healing a soul and unbalance in life would never result in making a patient truly healthy, hence divination and healing had to be done together. 'All Southern Bantu illness and misfortune (...) is believed to be caused by one of at least three agencies – ancestors, witches or pollution – and divination is thus essential in diagnosing which of these is responsible' for the sickness.<sup>26</sup>

In African societies every disease has its spiritual reason: a mere flu can be caused by an evil spirit or a person, or an ancestral spirit who does not feel properly remembered by descendants or feels animosity. Contemporary sangomas, especially those who use the Internet and have non-African clients, explain sickness as a result of an unbalance of energy in the body and patient's family. It is just another way of saying that sickness, just as any other misfortune in life, is not a result of a bacteria or a virus but a result of some spiritual or esoteric reason. In such situations a pill from a Western doctor will not help – the person will get well only when he or she believes that the spiritual problem has been solved, because only this solving can take both the reason and the effect away. Hence, a great need for sangomas' healing based on the balance of the physical and spiritual elements.

Other misfortunes can result from a planned action of violence or a punishment for breaking tribal rules. Sangomas, who co-operate with spirits, provide a way of locating the misfortune and offer the possibility to repair the damage. Sangomas are also believed to be able to counteract the evil done by sorcerers and witches.<sup>27</sup> Any reason can lead to bad luck or sickness. If it is not a direct misbehaving of people, then it has to be a spiritual reason – a curse from a sorcerer or witch or an admonition of braking law from ancestral spirits. All my sangoma informants used the word 'energy' as the best explanation in English, the very word not used several decades ago but very popular among holistic healing enthusiast around the world. By energy my informants meant all good and bad processes in the body-mind-soul constitution; an illness should never be diagnosed in the separation of these three elements.

---

<sup>25</sup> A.-I. Berglund, p. 106.

<sup>26</sup> W.D. Hammond-Tooke, op. cit., p. 279.

<sup>27</sup> Ch. David, *Religions of South Africa*, Rutledge, London 1992, pp. 14, 16.

### Sangomas' duties

My informants agree that the responsibilities of sangomas have evolved in last forty years, though the greatest evolution started with the collapse of the apartheid regime and the free access to sangomas by white clientele. They all emphasise the wide range of sangomas' duties: different ways of healing, divination, working with elements, energy and co-operating with spirits, both ancestral and Nature ones. Also other contemporary sangomas underline the complexity of their calling and job and emphasise the fact that even during apartheid they have rejected racial animosities and have always helped people of all social groups. M. Makeba says sangomas are good healers who treat people of all skin colours; white Africans used to come secretly to seek their help even during apartheid though it was forbidden and therefore dangerous<sup>28,29</sup> Chidester also recalls such situations: even in the colonial times and during apartheid with its witchcraft-prohibitive law, sangomas continued their practices and influenced society. They were considered by authorities as counter-acting to South African law because they sought the evil-doers and law breakers according to their directives and practiced medicine which was viewed as sorcery.<sup>30</sup>

Native African T. Siswana (a corporate administrator in a big South African bank and a sangoma) explains that today sangomas are allowed to carry their duties alongside other jobs, even if that jobs are completely different (like banking). Called to become a sangoma while working for business, Siswana accepted the calling, underwent the training and initiation<sup>31</sup> in her sangoma-mother's school and she co-operates with three spirits who 'inhabit' her. She is trained to use herbs to help people and to gain information from spirits.<sup>32</sup> Sangomas of the European descent also combine different methods, among

---

<sup>28</sup> Colonialists were fully aware that local chiefs had the support of 'their' sangomas and used them to constitute their power. They not only asked sangomas to find the traitors or opposition but to exercise *umuthi* (traditional medicine combined with spirituality) to ensure their power. As a result, at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, British and Boers started hunting sangomas down. All anti-witchcraft laws forced on native Africans turned to be unsuccessful. Healers and sangomas were active during many uprisings against colonialists (e.g. in Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and local uprisings in 1906 known as Bhambatha Rebellion). Knowing the importance of medicine men for the Zulus, colonialists decided to grant the most amenable sangomas some rights. The Code of Native Law from 1891 allowed their work as 'biomedicine' doctors. This law was exclusive to Natal only and it did not succeed in limiting the number of sangomas nor visibly diminishing their influence on the society (B. Carton, J. Laband, J. Sithole (eds.), *Zulu identities. Being Zulu, past and present*, Hurst & Company, London 2009, pp. 314–316). The Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 issued in 1957 forbade all 'supernatural practices and punished not only sangomas but also those who sought their help. Still, sangomas continued to work.

<sup>29</sup> M. Mekeba, J. Hall, *Makeba: My story*, Bloomsbury, London 1988, pp. 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> D. Chidester, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> The term 'initiation' can be used to describe the final examination (the graduation after the apprenticeship) or it can mean the whole process of tuition. In the case of sangomas, it is usually used to describe a graduation from one step of the training to another. In Zululand I witnessed an initiation from the beginners stage to the *twasa* (officially accepted candidate for a sangoma) stage and it was called 'initiation'. Another initiation takes place when *twasas* are initiated as fully fledged sangomas.

<sup>32</sup> <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-04-05-00-the-new-generation-of-sangomas>.



my informants: L. Clutney combines Western energy-work with Zulu sangomas' wisdom gained during her apprenticeship and initiation in South Africa and she also works as an interior designer; R. Rotgieter combines methods learnt from a Peruvian shaman of the Incan tradition with sangomas' methods and he also works as a restaurant manager. There are also practicing sangomas among academics: Nceba Gqaleni is a professor for indigenous health systems research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban, RSA), Penny Bernard is an anthropologist at Rhodes University (Grahamstown, RSA), Jo Wreford is a sangoma and a PhD graduate at the University of Cape Town (RSA), David Cumes is a South African surgeon. 'Traditional' sangomas, especially women, living in rural areas work the fields and carry all domestic duties.

Scholars and my sangoma informants agree that sangoma's work is a combination of different kinds of healing which in the Western cultures are separate professions: doctors, psychologists, priests, psychopomps, exorcists – all those professions combined make sangomas very skilful healers and important members of the society.<sup>33</sup>

My informants told me that sangomas had always been the most important people in their societies simply because they had the greatest wisdom. They are not only properly trained but they also closely observe what is going on in their societies, they know all clans' affairs and are often asked for help in problem solving. They have always been asked to advising chiefs and blessing warriors before battles. Chidester confirms that chieftains usually needed ancestors' support and validation of their leadership and authority and adds that sangomas also 'supervise' crops because they are believed to control weather and bless crops and cattle.<sup>34</sup> Such spiritual help (prayers, blessings) place sangomas in the same ranks as priests of other religions: they not only strengthen the morale of the army but also make warriors believe that if they die their souls will be properly taken care of.

### **The calling of a sangoma**

It is very difficult to find a sangoma who chose his or her vocation. None of the scholars reports such occurrences, Berglund even writes that 'nobody can become a diviner [sangoma] of personal choice'.<sup>35</sup> One of my informants, N. Sekonyela from Lesotho, is the only sangoma I met (and heard of) who did not suffer during the calling. He told me he had dreamt about this profession all his life, had always wanted to follow his mother and grandmother's steps; both were sangomas. All my other informants underline the ordeal of the calling: day-dreams and hallucinations, hearing voices, talking to unknown or mythical creatures, physical exhaustion. None of them expected the calling and most tried to get help from doctors and psychologists to get rid of the horrors of their visions

---

<sup>33</sup> G. Attilio, *Sangoma*, Frederick Muller Limited, London 1962, p. 198; A.-I. Berglund, p. 176; D. Chidester, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> D. Chidester, op. cit., pp. 20, 25.

<sup>35</sup> A.-I. Berglund, p. 136.

and pain. Wreford calls the calling process and apprenticeship (*ukuthwasa*) ‘an emotional ordeal’. ‘Becoming a healer – the experience of *ukuthwasa* – is a process. It is based on experiencing cumulative incidents and ordeals that are said to familiarise the candidate with communication with non-material realities. Strange, unusual, or unexpected events – public, or intensely personal and private – pepper the training and continue into practice’.<sup>36</sup> None of my informants considers the calling and the training a pleasant time.

Scholars’ informants confirm the scary character of calling dreams and describe them as unclear, not understandable and often making people scream of fear. The spirits contact the chosen ones in many other ways: they can manifest their presence by belching, sneezing, yawning and hiccups, they can also ‘enter’ a person and cause pains in shoulders, sides, upper back and lower neck; this is understood as a preparing for the apprenticeship.<sup>37</sup>

Sangoma’s calling means possession by ancestors and communicating with other kinds of spirits. The initial visitation of spirits and the recognition of a sangomas’ sickness calls for certain actions: a called one must find a fully-fledged sangoma who will heal and educate and then initiate him or her. All my sangoma informants told me they did not believe in accidents in the case of calling and finding the proper tutor: even if they chose a teacher, there was a spirits’ intervention in it. And none of them doubted that they were proper persons for this ‘job’, although none would choose it for himself or herself because of the hardships sangomas must endure all their lives.

Sangoma’s sickness can be compared with the shamanic one – in both cases a novice goes through a strange illness and experiences visions from ‘the other realm’. Shamanic sickness is well researched by academics. Such phenomenon occurs in many cultures; Eliade recalls Siberian, North and Southern American and Australian peoples. No matter if the sickness is a result of a traumatic experience, imagination or whether spirits really exist, a person who goes through the process strongly believes in its reality. Visions explain and justify the calling and validate the shaman’s role as a person who moved from *profanum* to *sacrum*.<sup>38</sup> Frazer writes: ‘Certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity; while the possession lasts, their own personality lies in abeyance; the presence of the spirit is revealed by convulsive shivering and shakings of the man’s whole body, by wild gestures and excited looks, all of which are referred, not to the man himself, but to the spirit.’<sup>39</sup> My sangoma informants compare their calling to the calling of shamans from other parts of the world. They are certain that this process is needed to ‘shed an old skin’ like a snake and to start a new life in the servitude to people. Pita told me that the calling is the process of purification and gaining wisdom, the initiation examination is the final change from old life to the new

---

<sup>36</sup> Joanne Thobeka Wreford, *Talking with the White: Sharing the Experience of White Sangoma in Contemporary South Africa*, “CSSR Working Paper” 2006, No. 150, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> M. Kohler, *The Izangoma Diviners*, Department of Native Affairs of the Union of South Africa, Pretoria 1941, p. 9; D. Berglund, op. cit., pp. 136–137.

<sup>38</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 51, 53.

<sup>39</sup> J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, Polish translation: *Złota galąź. Studia o magii i religii*, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 2002, p. 93.

one. Other informants confirm her explanation and agree that in spite of the hardness of *ukutwasa*, it is definitely needed to mature and take the responsible role of a sangoma.

Like in shamanic cultures of Asia, Americas and Australia, each sangoma calling is unique because novices have different backgrounds and life baggage. People coming from 'traditional' African families have different issues than those of the Christian or European descent. It is also exceptional because each person has a unique experience and must deal with his or her unique problems and limits. The first great challenge is to believe in the calling, which is highly incomprehensible for those who are brought up in Christian environment. Nonetheless, during their calling and training apprentices are taught beliefs and rituals important for their tutors and they learn to accept them; they have to learn the ways of life and the beliefs of the community they are going to serve as sangomas. My white sangoma informants all state that at first they refused to accept the calling and renouncing Christianity, even if they were not practicing Christians. However, when Western doctors and psychologists had failed to cure them, they finally accepted that the only way to get healthy was through the process of sangoma tuition and initiation. None of them was forced to reject their family, they were in fact encouraged to serve Africans of European descent and foreigners but at the same time were trained to act like native Africans.

### **The training and the initiation of a sangoma**

When the first stage of healing is complete and the called one is able to learn properly, he or she is initiated to become a *twasa*. Being an apprentice means subjugation to the mentor, utmost obedience and humility. When I was staying with sangomas in Zululand, two apprentices were preparing for their initiation. It involved ritual cleansing in water and steam, chicken offering (during which they had to eat uncooked entrails of the animal) and sacred tuition to which I was not admitted. On the day of the initiation the nearby sangomas came for the celebration and the new *twasas* prepared food for neighbour villagers.

The training is called 'ukuthwasa'<sup>40</sup> and the apprentice is called 'twasa'; the tutor carefully chooses his or her *twasas*, or rather believes that ancestors chose for him or her. *Ukuthwasa* is 'regarded as a spiritual or religious experience, a gift from those *amadlozi* who protect yet judge their descendants'.<sup>41</sup> 'The idiom *ukuthwasa* describes a coming out afresh after a temporary absence or disappearance. It is generally applicable to the moon and the seasons of the year. *Ukuthwasa* is also applied to a diviner novice who, having completed the time of instruction with an experienced diviner, appears again on a public

---

<sup>40</sup> There is no obliging orthography of the word 'ukutwasa'. It can be written with or without 'h': *ukutwasa* or *ukuthwasa*. In this article I use the second spelling.

<sup>41</sup> J.A. Griffiths, R.W.S. Cheetham, *Priests before healers – an appraisal of the iSangoma or iSanusi in Nguni society*, "SA Mediese Tydskrif", 11 December 1982, p. 960.

scene, reveals divinatory abilities and is officially acknowledged as a diviner'.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars use the term 'ukuthwasa' to describe the whole process of a sangomas' sickness, not just the emerging and the initiation. Wreford confirms that visions and dreams she and other sangomas she knows experienced, were so vivid and disturbing that they were driving them to madness; only diagnosis of spiritual possession and accepting the calling saved them from madness.<sup>43</sup> In sangomas' practice 'a strong emphasis [is put] on their counselling role and *ukuthwasa* in particular was often spoken of in terms familiar to a psychotherapeutic process'.<sup>44</sup> Hirst says the calling 'is not necessarily dealing with an illness or disease as defined in Western medical science', it is rather a psychological and social disorder that can be healed in specific conditions.<sup>45</sup>

Because sangomas are responsible for the wellbeing of their communities they learn how to protect them and how to ensure the common good. It involves healing, communication with spirits and rituals. The vastness of their responsibility calls for rigorous training. Mutwa describes it as an ordeal in his book: 'During my more than two years of initiation into sangomahood, I was subjected to very, very strict discipline. I had to wake up every morning – some two or three hours before sunrise – and I had to beat my potful of sacred mixture into froth. It was a mixture of ground roots and herbs whose purpose is to clean the entire system and to open up his head – to make him even more sensitive, to make him see more – to make his powers of divination even sharper, more accurate than ever.'<sup>46</sup> When the mixture was drunk, a twasa regurgitate it.<sup>47</sup>

The exact process of morning cleansing and preparing for tuition differs in regions and schools but it is an important part of twasas' training. Berglund's informants associate it with being born: a foetus lives in waters and a baby is born with waters, hence ablution is a part of leaving the old life behind the novice and being born to the new servitude.<sup>48</sup> Kohler recalls morning river baths and visiting a white river snake which guards earth needed for medicines.<sup>49</sup> My informant who was trained in Pretoria needed seven years because of funds problems. She said that there had been times when she was subjected to the hardship of cold morning baths but there were also times when she was allowed to get up at sunrise and to avoid river baths, especially in winter. Apprentices I observed in Zululand were not able to bathe every morning because they lived and trained in high mountains. The stream near their settlement was too shallow but during the ritual

---

<sup>42</sup> A.-I. Berglund, after Bryant and Colenso, p. 162.

<sup>43</sup> J.t. Wreford, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>45</sup> M.M. Hirst, *The Healer's Art: Cape Nguni Diviners in the Townships of Grahamstown*, PhD thesis, Rhodes University, East London 1990, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> V.C. Mutwa, *Zulu shaman. Dreams, Prophecies and Mysteries*, Destiny Books, Rochester 2003, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> The mixture is also used after cleansing ceremonies, water and steam ones, and it is also applied to patients though for different reasons. I was given it after the steam ceremony. The flavour was so disgusting, bitter and mud-like that it caused regurgitations at once. I was told it was the final act of cleansing my body and mind. Two twasas underwent the steam ceremony with me and they had to drink it as well, with the same result.

<sup>48</sup> D. Berglund, op. cit., p. 147.

<sup>49</sup> M. Kohler, op. cit., p. 17.

ceremonies I witnessed, they were laid flat in the stream by sangomas so that the whole body was underwater.

During *ukuthwasa* the apprentices undergo the celibacy period, strict diet and total obedience to their teachers; they also have to learn patience and humility. It applies to both hetero- and homosexual twasas, also to the married ones – spirits and training come first, a spouse must understand it. It is a part of the humility learning and rejecting the ego process, and is supposed to help sangomas serve their communities well in the future. Arden describes walking on her knees and having her head bowed most times during the training and the initiation.<sup>50</sup> My informant told me she had to walk on her knees for two kilometres from her aboding to her teacher during her initiation to prove the humility and surrender to spirits' will.

During *ukuthwasa* future sangomas learn contacting spirits, healing, divination and travelling to the spiritual realms. My informants told me that if a sangoma couldn't solve a problem, s(he) should ask spirits, either by calling them or by getting into trance (usually helped by drum beating). Many Asian and North American shamans travel to the spiritual realm (often called 'underworld') to gain wisdom and knowledge how to cure and solve problems.<sup>51</sup> Also Berglund, Shooter and Krige report a belief in the underworld among the Zulus, where ancestral spirits live. The image of the underworld is inconsistent and differs in places but it generally resembles the world Zulus know: with trees, rivers and mountains. Kohler reports incidents of visiting heaven by sangomas. Berglund, after Tyler, states that even among modern sangomas this belief is still existent.<sup>52</sup> My sangoma informants explained it to me as a place when a sangoma's soul goes during trans or dream and where it sees and feels what is needed; what it looks like depend on a sangoma's need.

When a twasa's learning seems complete to a tutor, (s)he calls spirits for advice. Once a permission for the initiated is granted, a twasa can undertake the examination. I witnessed the situation when a twasa was not initiated because – according to the tutor's words – spirits wanted the twasa to undergo one more cleansing ritual. The initiation was postponed for a week.

The final initiation is an examination that proves skills and abilities required by a sangoma; it is also a blessing from the tutor and spirits, after which the society is informed about a new sangoma. Twasas have to take ritual baths before the initiation and the date is accepted between the tutor and the spirits. Vivid dreams that precede the initiation also involve cleansing: spirits take an initiate to a river pool, smear him or her with white clay and prepare for the role of a sangoma.<sup>53</sup> The graduation<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> N. Arden, *African Spirits Speak: A White Woman's Journey into the Healing Tradition of the Sangoma*, Destiny Books, Rochester 1999, p. 218.

<sup>51</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 31, 51.

<sup>52</sup> A.-I. Berglund, op. cit., pp. 370–371; E.J. Krige, op. cit., p. 284; M. Kohler, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> M. Kohler, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> "The use of this term 'graduation' by *sangomas* themselves, rather than the often heard 'initiation', points to their own sense of professionalism" (R. Thornton, op. cit., p. 18). Still, the term 'initiation' is used by other

involves finding hidden things, proving the knowledge of herbal medicine, the ability to communicate with spirits and to divination. It also involves a ritual killing of an animal, usually a goat or chickens, rarely a calf. The entrails of the animals are used for ritual purposes, some of them and some of the bones are burnt, and meat is shared among guests. The bones of the initiation animal become the first bones that a sangoma uses for divination and healing purposes. Berglund reports tutors take some of the entrails home (liver, heart and lungs). What is eaten and when depends on schools. Berglund states: 'Evidence shows that there are not two novices' initiations which are exactly alike. Variations are at times quite noticeable, very much so with popular diviners'.<sup>55</sup> The bladder of the animal is inflated and must be worn by the initiate in his or her hair. Mutwa explains that this signifies the readiness of the spirit to communicate with the initiate at any time.<sup>56</sup> Heinze reports the tradition of inflating the bladder and placing it on a new sangoma's head. 'The fact that they [the bladders] are filled with air indicates that the spirits are constantly available, even though entering the altered state of consciousness through dancing, singing, or drumming is usually necessary to contact them'.<sup>57</sup> A traditional gift for the trainer is a blanket, the information confirmed by all my sangoma informants.<sup>58</sup>

### **The place of sangomas within a shamanic discourse**

There are certain aspects in sangomas' work that match those of shamans: sangomas communicate with spirits and deities, they can be possessed and use the possession for the benefits of their community, they know herbal-lore and prepare their own medicines, they use drums to communicate with the spiritual world and they use psychic powers in their work. All these abilities are learnt during the apprenticeship and the learning process is finished by an exam-initiation. This is a moment when a person of *profanum* turns into a person of *sacrum*. Sangomas also emphasise the importance of the initiation: they finally, irrevocably accept their calling, change their life from free will to the submission of spirits, they enter a closed circle of those who possess sacred wisdom unavailable to mundane people. According to Berglund, sangomas experience a symbolic death and re-birth, a symbolic experience of shamans in many cultures. In pools, sangomas often have visions of a woman giving birth or suckling and such a vision is connected with death and re-birth symbolism.<sup>59</sup> My sangoma informants explained to me that sangoma's initiation is a death ritual but not in terms of a physical death; it is a death of old habits and old way of life. It does not require 'ascending to hell' or long-lasting seclusion but

---

scholars and my sangoma informants.

<sup>55</sup> A.-I. Berglund, op. cit., p. 171.

<sup>56</sup> V.C. Mutwa, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> R.-I. Heinze, *Shamans of the 20th Century*, Ardent Media, Irvington Publishers New York 1991, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> N. Arden, op. cit., pp. 211–213, 220; A.-I. Berglund, p. 164.

<sup>59</sup> A.-I. Berglund, op. cit., p. 147.

passing the examination which proves that they have been accepted by ancestors. The acceptance of ancestral guidance change learning *twasas* into teaching *sangomas*. They accept a new life, a new role, in which they are both servants and co-workers of spirits; they live where spirits ask them to live and fulfil *sangomas*' tasks according to the spiritual guidance but at the same time they spiritually rule their society and they have rights to demand help from spirits.

The listed *sangomas*' duties and abilities are identical or very similar to the duties of shamans in the academic meaning. In the New Age meaning, shamans have access to secret knowledge, the secrets that can be revealed to those who are ready, secrets which make people's lives more fulfilled, like working with elements or Mother Nature. A good example of a *sangoma* and a New Age shaman is V.C. Mutwa who uses New Age terminology of energy and Nature. In his books, interviews and websites, he freely talks about good and bad energy creating health or illness; he also advises perceiving Earth and natural environment as a source of energy available to everyone and gives advice how to use them. 'It is neither unusual nor supernatural at all. It is a part of our beautiful human nature'.<sup>60</sup> Taking energy is a secret wisdom but the one that can be shared with all people.<sup>61</sup> If shamans can take energy from trees, ordinary people also can; it is only a matter of learning how to do it and this is one of the basic trainings on New Age shamanic workshops. Many contemporary *sangomas* organise retreats where ordinary people can live alongside with *sangomas* and *twasas* for some time, learn how to call energy from Nature by speaking to trees, rocks and water, and undergo some rituals (usually purifying and balancing the energy).

In the classical, academic meaning of shamanism, the phenomenon occurs in 'archaic', ethnic cultures and is strictly connected to religious beliefs. However, in late 20<sup>th</sup> century shamanism became a part of global New Age. New Agers adopt chosen beliefs from different ethnic cultures and 'process' them so that they fit their upbringing and needs. Shamans believe that humans have souls and in many cultures they extend this belief to the animal and plant-life; the spiritual world that shamans contact is made of souls (spirits). Because New Agers strongly believe in the spiritual life and the fact that humans and Mother Nature<sup>62</sup> have souls, they turned their interest to shamanism. They perceive *sangomas* as shamans because *sangomas* help people contact the spiritual realm, both ancestors and Nature; *sangomas* heal and propagate natural methods of healing and living.

As I stated before, shamans play many roles in their societies. They are priests (with all priestly duties), exorcists, healers, diviners, the keepers of historical knowledge, myths and traditions and so are *sangomas*. Many contemporary *sangomas* call themselves 'shamans' and are cited by New Age websites. Open for market demands, they co-operate with New Age publishers and host guest from all cultures trying to find appropriate communication,

---

<sup>60</sup> V.C. Mutwa, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> Private conversation with Mutwa, March 2013.

<sup>62</sup> When I write 'Nature' with the capital N, I mean New Age meaning of the word: an animated natural life where every human, animal and plant is filled by a life energy or soul.

vocabulary and services for all. It does not make them shamans instead of sangomas. They are sangomas and they perform shamanic duties. They are both 'traditional' and adjusting to the modern world.

It is neither sangomas or New Agers' wish to establish if sangomas are shamans or not. They accept both terms as means of communication. I conducted my study to check if the exchangeable use of these terms is justified and if sangomas can be called 'shamans' in the academic discourse or is it justified only in non-professional New Age rhetoric. I have found that in the case of many contemporary sangomas, calling them 'shamans' is justified, though it requires an explanation each time the term is used. Many contemporary sangomas use other shamans and New Age methods and vocabulary, and it makes them 'hybrids' of 'old, traditional' roles and modern shamans.