

The colour of Peter von Maltitz's skin did not stop him from receiving the calling to be a sangoma



Photo: Erika van Breda

Testing time for white sangomas shamans or charlatans?

It's no longer that unusual for non-Africans to consult sangomas but some still consider it taboo that white people can become a traditional African healer. **Brendon Bosworth** visited experts on both sides of the fence to get the full story.

I'm quiet as Zanemvula — meaning “he comes with the rain” — hovers his pendulum over a page containing a list of issues I might have. “You’ve got a problem with one of your ancestors... you probably have some guilt feelings, you’ve got a baboon with you,” muses the big man. “Father’s mother’s mother: you’ve got to go dream about her and find out what the problem is.”

“You’ve also got three demons,” he says, matter of factly. “They’re called *impundulu*, but I call them demons for want of a better word. It’s a spirit thing that comes out of the sky and causes havoc...remember this is just a read off for your subconscious.”

I’m sitting across from Peter von Maltitz, a herbalist and traditional healer or *igqirha* to use the isiXhosa term, at his consulting room in Newlands. Jars of ground herbs and plants line the shelves; a large portrait of his father peers out from the wall; *imphepo*, a wild plant burnt as incense, smokes in an ash-tray on the desk on which sit a few vials containing plant leaves in olive oil, a hunk of African potato and a plant known as *isidagwa*, the “drunk

man”. With his long white beard, red patterned wrap around his shoulders and open face, von Maltitz has the trappings of a shamanic sage. His bracing laugh, which emanates deep in his belly and bounces off the walls given any opportunity, lends me assurance despite this ill news.

He looks at me, serious now: “When you think you’re better than somebody else and you’re disgusted by them you create an energy that the demons feed off. As long as you have disgust you have demons and demons make shadows so you get depressed.”

It’s a bitter pill to swallow, being told I have a superiority complex by someone who’s known me for less than an hour, as is the revelation that I have issues with property and there’s a ghost bothering me.

“Can you take them off,” I ask meekly. He obliges, with a swift exorcism, but reminds me “more will come back unless you change”.

I tell him I feel disgusted with myself. “Don’t worry, it’s a disease of our times — especially of white people.” That booming laugh washes through the room.

Ancient traditions

For hundreds of years traditional healers have been central to African life. Spiritual diviners, called *izangoma* (or, more commonly, sangomas) in isiZulu and *amagqirha* in isiXhosa, are believed to communicate with ancestral spirits, who exist in a parallel universe, seeking guidance and tapping into the network of knowledge gleaned by clan and family members who came before them. Acting on behalf and at the instruction of these ancestors, they claim to be able to heal the ill, troubled and perplexed. Many spiritual healers are also herbalists, who administer medicines made from plants and plant extracts. It’s estimated there are some 200 000 traditional healers plying their trade in South Africa.

But the concept of a family that extends beyond the living, with ancestral spirits that can communicate with other supernatural beings, requires an understanding that can prove problematic for those with a westernised world view.

“I wouldn’t say we don’t have it [an understanding of ancestors and



Sangomas are called upon by ancestors to undergo training and initiation

Photo: Melany Bendix

spirituality] — I think we've just forgotten, or chosen to forget," says British-born Dr Jo Wreford, a sangoma, anthropologist and research fellow with the Aids and Society Research Unit based at the University of Cape Town. "Death in the West is an 'out of sight, out of mind' thing. In Africa ancestors are living beings. They're seen as existing somewhere else, keeping an eye out and watching over, making sure we do what they want — we're working on their behalf, as my teacher always says."

White sangomas claim to have reconnected with their ancestors, who have called upon them to heal. But without growing up in a black African family or belonging to an African clan by blood, can they become authentic African traditional healers in the strictest sense of the term?

A longstanding critic

Dr Nokuzola Mndende, managing director of the Icamagu Institute, a sangoma and formerly a lecturer in religious studies at UCT, is a vocal opponent of white *izangoma*. She does not deny that white people can be called to be healers of various types or that they have ancestors, but finds

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their initiation by black African sangomas highly problematic.

"An *igqirha* is someone who has been called by their ancestors to heal, whether from the maternal or paternal side," she says. "They can't be called by [somebody else's] ancestors."

"You must perform certain rituals to show you have accepted the call; your family plays a major role in this. When you

perform the acceptance of the call there are people responsible for certain duties. In the case of the Xhosa, the firstborn male at home slaughters the sacrificial goat and uses the sacred assegai; the paternal aunt makes the sacred necklace — the hair from the sacred cow is woven together with *usinga*, the ligament found in the vertebral column. When that goat is slaughtered there is a portion of meat taken first and roasted inside the kraal. It can *only* be clan members who perform this; all those things should be done by your own people in your own home."

Mndende is quick to point out that she is not being racist, but is rather sticking to distinctions between cultures. "The white sangomas are wearing the Swazi or Zulu regalia — why is it like that?" she questions. "Why are you wearing Zulu regalia if you are not a Zulu person? What is the meaning of those symbols to you?"

Mndende says she has no qualms with guiding whites in reconnecting with their ancestors, but refuses to initiate them in the Xhosa tradition. She labels black *amagqirha* and sangomas who train and initiate white *thwasa* (trainees) with a full *goduswa* — graduation ceremony — as profiteers.

"If a sangoma doesn't take you to your own family (to perform initiation and graduation) it's a fake," she asserts.

Colour-blind callings

On the other side of the spectrum is Philip Kubekeli, managing director of the Traditional Medical Practitioners, Herbalist and Spiritual Healers Association. In 1996 he dreamed that von Maltitz, who he'd met at a meeting of healers, should be trained as a traditional healer and has been involved with training white *thwasa* since.

The octogenarian is genteel. "A white person is the same as another person, there is no difference. I understand that they also have their ancestors which they must respect," says the time-wizened traditional doctor.

When people complained that Kubekeli was giving away their culture to white people — this was in 1994 — he said: "I am free, spiritually, physically and mentally, so I'm a free man. I can go all over the world teaching each and everybody about communication with the ancestral spirits. Not of mine, not of my culture, but his or her own culture".

Philip Kubukeli is adamant that people of all races can communicate with their ancestors and become traditional healers



Photo: Erika van Breda



Families play a major role in sangoma initiation rituals

Photo: Melany Bendix

“I call myself a sign-post,” he explains. “I stand pointing my hands on either side for everybody who wants to communicate with their ancestral spirits. White, black, green, blue, coloured; everyone can come here.

“Some of the white people are clever; they are high spirited, really. I have been very successful in training them,” he adds.

He also doesn’t see any problem with white sangomas wearing traditional beads and explains that African symbols are used by whites as well: “They are a sign of communication with the ancestral spirits”.

Kubukeli’s all-inclusive view seems to be more widely held than Mndende’s exclusivity argument. At least according to the white sangomas interviewed by *The Big Issue* who claim that, aside from isolated experiences of hostility, they have been welcomed by the black community.

“From black people I’ve only had incredibly positive reactions,” says Anel Hamersma, a white sangoma who’s been

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practising for nine years and is based in Table View. “I’ve never had a black person come up to me and ask me to defend myself. The only people I’ve had react badly are white Afrikaners — my people,”

she says, laughing.

Von Maltitz also dismisses criticism that white sangomas are merely pretenders, saying charlatans of any colour are quickly rooted out. “In [traditional African] society the sangoma has to tell you where the pain is,” he says. “Patients will test if you’re the right doctor; if you can’t tell them what their pain is they’re not going to trust you. If I can give them the right answers then they accept me.”

Not an easy path

According to sangoma lore, the call of the ancestors is usually experienced as physical and emotional malaise — *ukubiswa* — the “sickness of calling”. Hamersma’s experience was particularly traumatic. “I couldn’t sleep; I had a lot of terrible nightmares, of being ripped apart by things. I thought I was going mad and knew if I didn’t find the right person to help me I was going to die,” she recalls.

After muddling through a string of therapeutic options — a homeopath,

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psychologist and psychiatrist — she was told by a reiki practitioner who was treating her for lameness in her body to visit a sangoma, which she refused to do since she wanted nothing to do with “spirit stuff”. But out of desperation she went a few months later. He told her the ancestors were calling her to do this work and she soon set off for Botswana to train under two white sangoma brothers.

The training period can take from months to years, depending on how spiritually developed the *thwasa* is and how in tune he or she is with the ancestors. Sangomas use specific rituals and training methods, which have been passed down through the generations. Cleansing rituals, which can involve the use of enemas or emetics and steaming and smoking, are commonly performed.

Thwasa also practise “seeing” and invoking ancestral spirits, with teachers constantly testing their abilities. Emphasis is placed on dream interpretation. The traditions of the North, the Zulu, Swazi and others believe that sangomas actually become possessed by their ancestors and much of the training is focused on teaching *thwasa* to channel these beings, working themselves into trance states through dancing and controlling this state of experience.

Humility and obedience to one's teacher underpin the *ukuthwasa* (training) period. Both Wreford and Hamersma caution that in this climate of utter subservience there is room for nefarious sangomas to abuse their positions of power.

“Very often people are abused by their teachers, sexually abused. If your teacher isn't whole and happy they might take

advantage of you,” warns Hamersma.

The *goduswa* ceremony comes with its own set of challenges not for the faint-hearted. A bull and a goat must be sacrificed on behalf of the ancestors. In her book *Working With Spirit: Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*, Wreford describes how, as part of her six-day graduation, the goat was anointed and then stabbed with a spear in the shoulder. She then had to put her mouth over the wound to suck the blood. Once the animal had been slaughtered the gall bladder was removed and her teacher squirted the contents into her mouth, instructing her to also rub it over her face and hands. The bull's throat was



Entranced: Sangomas invoke ancestral spirits

Photo: Melany Bendix

slit in front of her. Both animals were skinned and dismembered; their carcasses, skins and heads placed at the foot of the mattress on which she and her teacher slept, where they remained for two nights, the pile growing smaller each time the meat was feasted upon. Such was the lead up to the main event, where she danced on her knees in what she depicts as an entranced “state of possession” before a “jury of *izangoma*”.

I put it to Wreford that surely, at this point, fly-by-nights and those not dead set on becoming a sangoma would opt out. Her answer is telling: “The people who have dropped out have dropped out at much earlier stages, they don't get that far.” **TBI**