

# SOUTH AFRICAN INDIGENOUS HEALING: HOW IT WORKS

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*Sangomas* or *inyangas* are shamans, healers, priests, and prophets that have been the backbone of Bantu communities, especially in the rural areas of Southern Africa for eons. However, with rapid Westernization and the increasing allure of the commodity market, the old ways are rapidly eroding. Indigenous knowledge has always been transmitted orally, and there is little written down about the secret traditions of initiation. Hence, the bibliography listed at the end of this article is scant. This information is a result of personal experience gleaned during my own initiation into the world of *sangoma* and my subsequent experiences with these healing realms. The knowledge has been gained experientially and not by the scientific method. Some of it is secret and cannot be

revealed. The information may differ somewhat from healer to healer but the general principles are the same. Most sub-Saharan African peoples believe in the importance of the ancestors being able to guide events, and they revere them because they have this power. I mostly will be describing the traditions that I encountered during my initiation and subsequent practice. There are others.

Since *sangoma* wisdom is an oral tradition the individual's initiation will depend on the mentor and the spirit guides involved. That particular *sangoma's* healing repertoire will be somewhat different to another though the principles remain the same. The ancestors find the most efficient way to impart the information so that the healer can do the work. The way

in which they transmit the knowledge will be unique to that person's receptivity and talents.

Objective proof is not part of the experiential training. In fact, any attempt at systematic inquiry gets in the way of the process. One has to put cognitive, left-brained intellect aside. Obsession with data obliterates the intuitive. The *sangoma* or *inyanga* has a lot to teach the West about the spirit world and our ancestral roots. Science has put us in touch with a magical universe of technology. We may be technically advanced, but when it comes to psychospiritual wizardry we are really only beginners.

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## INTRODUCTION

The *sangoma*, *inyanga*, traditional or indigenous healer, uses altered states of consciousness, spirit possession, and sometimes out-of-body spirit flight to gain knowledge about any problem at hand. This ability may be hereditarily transmitted, arise out of a dream or vision bestowed by the spirit world, or occur because of selection by the tribe. Sometimes the calling arises out of a deformity, disability, illness, or even a psychosis. The ability to go inward facilitates access to alternative realities—the hallmark of the shaman. The fact that the healer has suffered usually gives her greater empathy and compassion for the feelings and emotions of others. *Sangomas* are usually called to heal by an illness that they believe is invoked by the spirits in order to get their attention. When the *sangoma* commits to *Thwasa* or the initiation process, they understand that they have been chosen to work with the spirits to heal others. Some *sangomas* are self-chosen, but those that are “called” wield much greater power. Without guiding ancestral spirits, the *san-*

*goma* is relatively impotent. The initiation is about creating a relationship with the student and the spirits who wish to work through him or her.

*Sangomas* or *inyangas* can be either women or men. There is no practical difference between them—both are “possessed” and derive their power from the ancestors. Classically, the *sangoma* works in a trance state by channeling the ancestors from the spirit world. *Inyangas* more commonly translate messages from the cosmic realm by reading divination bones and work with plant medicines. Both work with dreams, and there are highly specialized *sangomas* who practice *femba* that can be likened to psycho-spiritual surgery that rids the patient of intruding spirits. Normally, a *sangoma* will channel her own ancestors, but *sangomas* who specialize in *femba* are also able to channel the client's ancestors for information or intrusive spirits to exorcize them. To all intents and purposes *sangomas* and *inyangas* are the same because *sangomas* also use bones and plants and *inyangas* at times will trance.

All these healers have special gifts. They can divine the future, diagnose illness, find lost objects or lost people, and establish direct contact with the ancestors and the supernatural. When black South Africans visit Western physicians, they are often surprised when asked to list their ailments. Any competent *sangoma* would be able to tell them what was wrong without having to take any history.

To become a *sangoma* requires arduous and difficult training. Not just anyone is called and, though sometimes burdensome, the calling is regarded as a gift and a great honor. The goal of an ancestor who channels healing through a living relative is to help and to heal. When a *sangoma* abuses the gift, the ancestors may withdraw their support, and the healer will lose this power. Hence most traditional healers practice with great humility and acknowledge that the source of their talent is the ancestors.

The ancestors cannot communicate in a normal way because they live in the realm of spirit. Therefore, they choose to talk through trance-channeling (spirit medi-

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umship or possession states) through the divining bones, and through dreams.

The theory of reincarnation is germane to the African mindset and has a profound effect on the thinking and behavior of many Africans. Reincarnation links them to their ancestors who may reincarnate back into the same family. Healing between kin therefore continues beyond the grave.

There are three diagnostic methods of the *sangoma*; spirit possession (spirit mediumship or trance-channeling), the divination bones, and dreams. In the Bantu tradition, the ancestral spirit of the *sangoma* or *inyanga* comes “down” from the cosmic “Field” and possesses the healer. The spirit occupies the *sangoma*’s body while the ego or persona steps aside. In this way healers can access information that is not localized in space and time, information not readily available to those not trained as *sangomas*. The *sangoma*’s ancestors are able to speak directly through the medium of the healer to the patient, and the information is highly specific to that individual.

The practice of throwing divining bones probably developed over time because healers found spirit mediumship too exhausting. Becoming possessed is hard work, and it would be impossible to treat many patients if possession were the only method. Possession requires drumming, chanting, and dancing that are demanding of time and energy. The divination bones are an alternative way of allowing the ancestral spirits to have a conversation with the patient through the healer. Reading the bones is a little like unraveling the metaphor of a dream. The healer becomes an interpreter and messenger for the ancestral spirit, who sets up an information “field” accessible to the *sangoma* through the bones. When the bones are thrown by the *sangoma*, they do not fall in a random fashion but in a way that the ancestral spirit controls. A meaningful and usually highly accurate interpretation can be made.

Another way the ancestors communicate with the *inyanga* is through dreams. Interpretation of dreams is a vital tool of the *sangoma*. Healers often dream plant remedies for their patients, information that comes as a vision of a particular plant. Other psychic information can be sent through dreams to assist the *sangoma* in caring for the client.

## ENERGETIC MECHANISMS OF HEALING

A few words on the Kundalini, the yogic life-force principle, are necessary to explain the initiatory process. The Kundalini is primal feminine energy that rests at the base of the spine and is coiled like a serpent. In the case of the *sangoma*, it results in a trance state that allows the spirit of the ancestor to come through.

In Zulu, *Umbilini* means “the place of the two,” that mystical place where body and soul unite and become one powerful thing. *Umbilini* resembles the “oneness experience” of the Yogi. *Umbilini* like Kundalini is a manifestation of this primal feminine force that may vibrate and ascend up the body, in this instance, with clapping, chanting, singing, drumming, and dancing. This vibration or shaking can be witnessed when the *sangoma* goes into trance and becomes possessed. All indigenous Southern African people believe in a primal feminine serpent or snake residing in the lower belly that is vital for fertility and for channeling the ancestors. The Bushmen of the Kalahari call this energy *Num*.

The *Umbilini* enables the *sangoma* to cross the veil and enter the cosmic Field where the ancestors dwell. The Field is nonlocal, and within it is the universal mind or universal consciousness. Carl Jung would have called this the collective unconscious. From a Jungian point of view the *sangoma* or *inyanga* has the ability to access an archetypal world where healer encounters the guiding spirits.

If one were to visit a *sangoma* who, without knowing you, could diagnose your health situation in the past, present or future, you would be receiving information not localized in time. If at the same time he were to tell you about the health of your children living in another country, this would be information not localized in space. These kinds of shamans are now called “medical intuitives” in the West. The diagnostic information they provide with the help of the ancestral spirits can be uncannily accurate. This technology has been available to all peoples in South Africa through *sangomas* for eons.

The key to moving the Kundalini energy upward is the balance of the female and male energies, the cool moon and the hot sun, the right brain and left brain. Also for the energy to move one must go beyond the constraints of ego.

The universal healing energy that is channeled through the *sangomas* and any true healer is just love in disguise—to heal, one must open the heart. There is a veil between the worlds; between matter and spirit, between this and that. Key to opening up the veil is love. Entheogens or mind-altering plants can open up the heart and allow one to go beyond ego. Unlike shamans in the Americas, where many reasonably safe plants with these properties abound, *Sangomas* rarely use them. In South Africa, these types of plants have a very narrow margin between mind-altering effects and death.

## THE ANCESTORS AND FOREIGN SPIRIT GUIDES—“POSSESSION”

The *sangoma* is able to communicate with the cosmic, the terrestrial, and the water spirits as well as the ancestors. The ancestors are not gods and were never believed to be so. They were to be honored and revered but not worshiped as one would pray to God. All tribes believe in a single Great Spirit, or God who is seen as too remote and inaccessible. The ancestral spirits are there to mediate between the living and God. Since the spirits are linked to the cosmos, the land, and the water (hence shells are often present in the healer’s repertoire of bones) they can provide information that is not confined to the space-time continuum.

*Sangomas* use drumming and dancing to help channel the ancestors. All tribes also channel information from the ancestors through the mediums of dreams and the divining bones. Possession or spirit mediumship among the *Nguni* peoples (Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa) is usually overt and extroverted, whereas among the other tribes (Sotho, Venda, Tsonga) it is more often implicit rather than explicit. However, there is much overlap among the different tribes, and drumming and possession by ancestral spirits are common to all groups. Trance channeling or spirit mediumship, however, was historically more part of the *Nguni* custom.

The word *sangoma* comes from the Zulu word for a drum, and it is the sound of the drum that brings forth the spirit. The drumming is accompanied by special songs and chants. When the spirit enters the body, the *sangoma*’s voice may change as she becomes the channel for the ances-

tor. Sometimes she will speak in tongues and often with a different accent. The ancestor who presents will often be quite fastidious and demand a certain cloth or garment. *Sangomas* usually have an array of these and will wear a specific cloth depending on which spirit is addressing the group. Because most of the spirits are African, they request traditional attire, but a foreign spirit can make a special request which then must be honored. Many *sangomas* will dance to work themselves into a trance or will be “danced” at the will of their ancestor once she or he enters their body. The tremendous energy and skill necessary to dance in this way can be remarkable and add conviction to the fact that the healer’s profoundly altered state of consciousness has enabled the spirit to take over the body to dance. Many times the channel would seem incapable of performing in this fashion unless she was in fact “possessed.”

In addition to ancestral spirits there are terrestrial (or bush) spirits, cosmic spirits and water spirits who are very powerful. Foreign spirits unrelated to the family also exist. They may or may not be friendly. Sometimes they have known the grandparents while they were alive and now are “hanging about” in the ethers with them. Some foreign spirits, on the other hand, are up to no good, and these “intruders” may cause mischief or get in the way of the energy flow of the living. Malicious foreign spirits may also be present, for instance, because someone’s dead grandfather or relative killed them long ago. These bad spirits can be exorcized by *Femba*, a form of psychic diagnosis and psycho-spiritual surgery or exorcism. Bad spirits are capable of causing significant harm.

### THE ROLE OF REINCARNATION

Reincarnation plays an important role in African philosophy, and family members may reincarnate into their own “blood line.” Because of this, black Africans, whose traditions are intact, believe in a Biblical sense that “the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.” Psychology may attribute this to hereditary biochemical derangements or unskillful parenting which lead to hurtful influences and bad conditioning of the child. African philosophy goes further than this, believing that not only can unhappy and dysfunctional

spirits affect their progeny from the beyond, but also that a dysfunctional spirit can reincarnate into the family and recreate the same dysfunction in a future generation. As an example, an alcoholic grandfather who has passed on reincarnates into the family line, perpetuating the alcoholic syndrome. All ancient wisdoms believe in karma or the law of cause and effect. We come back in order to perfect what we did not do in our previous life time and many times we come back into the same family to do so.

It is the healer’s duty to intercede between the living and the dead and to make restitution.

Animal sacrifice is the most powerful way of appeasing the spirits. Since the ancestors, though dead, are still human, they respond very favorably to any attempts to acknowledge, thank, respect, greet, and “feed” them. Sacrifice is the ultimate atonement.

Because ancestral spirits may reincarnate into the same family, it is crucial to heal the sins that may have occurred in the past such as murder, theft, abuse, and so on. By reaching out, forgiving, and healing the spirit who perpetrated the crime, everyone is healed, and another cycle of karmic dysfunction in the family is averted or lessened. Forgiveness and acceptance are critical here. It is best achieved while everyone is alive, but in African tradition, forgiveness and healing can occur even when the spirit has passed on. If the sin is not addressed and forgiven, the problem may not only have a harmful effect on the living in this lifetime but could continue into future incarnations.

Spirits sometimes feel the need to complete the healing work they never finished as a sentient being and will choose a suitable person who is alive to act as a channel for their mission. Spirits do not have free will on the other side and need the living to complete their work and improve their karma. By allowing them to help us they in a sense can come “alive” again.

Some of the Bantu’s healing concepts may appear Biblical because they are in touch with “original truths” that go back millennia. The commandment of “honor your mother and father . . .” is germane to African thinking and the respect goes all the way back to the grandparents, great grandparents, and beyond. An interesting

Harvard study performed on medical students in the 1950s and still ongoing demonstrated that the single most important factor mitigating in favor of good health in these doctors was a good relationship with the parents. It is noteworthy that of all 10 commandments this is the only one that says; “. . . so that your days will be long upon the earth.” *Sangomas* would endorse the fact that anyone who gives this respect will be protected in life and in health.

### THWASA

*Thwasa*, which comes from the word for moon, is the process of self-discovery and recognizing one’s spiritual links and destiny. Metaphorically, the *Thwasa* student begins as a new moon and matures into a full moon to become an *inyanga*, the one who doctors. The person who is called becomes “possessed” by the ancestors who draw attention to their needs by making the elected one ill. The symptoms can take many forms: psychosis, severe headaches, abdominal pain, shoulder and neck complaints, among others. The patient may go to a Western-trained doctor who will be unable to find anything wrong. She may then see a traditional healer for treatment. The *sangoma* will divine and say that she is “possessed” and that the only recourse is to become a *sangoma*. The “*sangoma* sickness” mysteriously disappears after initiation has begun. The process of being called and then initiated is called *Thwasa*. Failure to respond to the calling will often lead to more illness until the person concedes and goes to be trained. Alternatively, the potential *Thwasa* student can work through a *sangoma* to enter into a dialogue with the spirits, explaining why she cannot undergo training at this time. Ancestors are reasonable and if respectfully approached and told why this calling might not be possible, they may relent but an explanation would be required.

### MEDICINE OR MUTI

The medicine or *muti* that is used is based on plants and, sometimes, different animals. This *muti* may have pharmacological properties, but one cannot isolate the power of the remedy from the strength of the healer or that of the ancestors. The more powerful the ancestors, the more masterful the healer and the more effec-

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tive the *muti* will be. This phenomenon is an example of the combination of placebo and distant healing. Pharmacological companies frequently are disappointed when research of these plants of power proves them no better than placebo whereas they may be very effective if given by the *sangoma*. From the *sangoma's* standpoint the vital ingredient missing here would be the power of the ancestral spirits assigned to the plant to do distant healing or the relationship with the spirit or the energy of the plant itself.

*Sangomas* are also able to manipulate the power of belief and faith, or placebo. Placebo is a vital tool for the *sangoma*. In Western medicine, randomized, controlled, double-blinded studies are conducted to test the true pharmacological action of a drug, unimpeded by the placebo effect, or the patient's belief that the drug will work. We know that the patient's "Inner Healer" is able to cure many maladies if there is a strong belief in the treatment being administered. In various trials, the placebo or dummy medicine often leads to at least 30% of the patients showing a response. Although Western doctors are focused on eliminating the placebo effect, *sangomas* are masters at enhancing it, using their powerful rituals and their own charisma. Placebo is augmented with ceremonies and plant medicines which act as "containers" for the healing. The *muti* is always prescribed with a heavy application of attention, intention, action and affirmation, which have now become part of a modern, integrative, or holistic, approach.

Whereas placebo works directly on the Inner Healer through the power of belief to effect healing, distant healing works via the Field to cause healing without the benefit of faith.

Distant diagnosis and distant healing have been used by *sangomas* for thousands of years. Indigenous healers can enter the cosmic field and invoke the help of the spirits for healing. When the ancestors are invited to help with the healing, the remedy goes beyond placebo and would be called distant or remote healing.

*Mutis* also often have powerful symbolism; for instance, lion fat may be used to promote courage. Each time the *muti* is used, it may be accompanied by a ritual that confirms the intention and acts as a powerful affirmation to the Inner Healer, and as a prayer to the ancestral spirits. In

the West we know that that healing by distant healing or prayer works even if the patients is unaware she is being healed or prayed for. There are an increasing number of double-blind studies, conducted by Western doctors, showing that distant healing or prayer is statistically significant in improving the outcomes of patients afflicted with certain diseases.

The effect of *muti* may be a sophisticated version of distant healing, if the *sangoma's* prayers and ancestor's intentions accompany the treatment. The *muti* can also be regarded as a password or special request to the ancestor for a particular healing. Since the ancestors have access to universal healing energy, they have the ability to cure almost anything. Each *muti* carries a different message about what is needed for that specific problem. There is a mutual understanding between healer and ancestor based on tradition, dreams, and empiricism as to what plant to use for that problem. Different tribes and various healers may use the same plant for different complaints and that implies that the ancestral spirit and placebo rather than pharmacological effect are doing the healing. For instance one healer may use a plant for constipation and another healer the same plant for diarrhea. The plant is a "prescription" to the spirit world to invoke the healing.

The homeopathic Law of Similars, which is not based on solid science, states that if things resemble each other they are linked and can affect one another. In other words, like affects like. For this reason, reeds that shake in the water may be employed for tremor, snake venom may be used against snake bite, black smoke adopted to bring rain, and bark or roots that are red can be used to treat blood or menstrual disorders. Hence the principles of *muti* are somewhat similar to those of homeopathy. The *muti* is like a request to the ancestor for a particular healing much in the way one would get a written Rx from a doctor to take to the pharmacist. Since placebo alone is therapeutic in at least 30% of cases just filling the prescription may heal the problem. The *sangoma* with his skillful intuitive diagnosis, spectacular dancing and powerful rituals may enhance the placebo effect significantly. The *sangoma* takes no history, makes no physical examination but uncannily comes up with

the diagnosis through trance, dreams or with the bones.

The problem may not be related to physical health and if there is marital disharmony causing "dis-ease" it will be reflected in the bones and remedies will be given. *Sangomas* do not distinguish between disease and "dis-ease." The one will eventually lead to the other. *Sangomas* go to the source of the problem and correct it.

Medicines can be administered in various ways, such as bathing, steaming, or inhaling. They can be taken by mouth or by enema, rubbed on the body as a salve, and, in special circumstances inoculated or rubbed into an incision. There are medicines for every eventuality; physical illness, mental illness, social disharmony and spiritual difficulties (for instance to align with the ancestors, to get rid of offending spirits, and so on). There are also love potions, medicines for dreams and luck, among others.

## RITUALS

Reverence for the ancestors is very much part of the *Thwasa's* training and will continue throughout the healer's life. When entering the *ndumba* or healing hut where the ancestors reside, one takes off ones shoes, bows down on entering, and claps twice as a greeting. *Pahla*, or praying, is done kneeling down, and each sentence is punctuated by a clapping of hands. Snuff, preferably made of home-grown tobacco, is a frequent offering used in rituals. The plant *mphepho* (*Helichrysum*) is burned to attract the attention of the ancestors. Because the ancestors cannot communicate with the living in the normal way, special techniques to "bridge the cosmic field" are required. *Sangomas* will drink foam or bubbles made of water mixed with special *muti*, which is soul food for the spirits. By feeding the spirits, one draws the ancestors near. The ancestors are always fed when there is a ritual involving food or sacrifice. Sorghum beer or regular beer or wine may be offered as well.

Many tribes have an amaryllis plant in the homestead where the ancestors reside, and offerings will be made to this plant while conversation is held with the spirits. Members of the village will check in with the plant on arriving or leaving to report and to ask the ancestors for favors and

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safety along the way. Depending on the tradition, a tree, a forked branch planted in the ground, or even river stones may be used in the same way.

*Femba*, the African equivalent of psychic diagnosis and surgery, is a way of exorcizing malevolent or intruding spirits that are getting in the way of a person's progress in life. Houses, dwellings, farms, garments, belongings, cars, and businesses all can be spiritually cleansed by *Femba*. *Femba* not only involves exorcism of malevolent spirits but can also be a reconditioning of the spirit body to eliminate illness, imbalance, or a block in energy flow.

To the *sangoma*, each helper spirit has a role to play. One may assist the *sangoma* in reading the bones, another may help with plant remedies, and yet a third may want to come and dance. Others may be there to manage financial and business affairs. Depending on the talent of the spirit, the knowledge of the *sangoma* will vary. Some have more powerful ancestors than others. Usually the ancestor assists the channel with the expertise he or she had while alive. For instance the ancestor who helps read the bones may have been a *sangoma* (in my case) the other an herbalist, and another a business person. Each will offer expertise in their particular field.

## CAUSES OF ILLNESS

Illness can be thought to arise from the following factors:

1. **From God or the ancestors.** On rare occasions, it is thought that the Great Spirit can cause sickness. Sometimes the ancestors will want a living soul to join them on the other side and this may account for illness or death. When a grandparent is about to die and leave the planet, the newborn is about to enter it—hence both are close to the spirit realm. The grandparents in life and in death are the spirit guides to the child while the parents attend to his or her material needs. A loving, deceased grandparent may visit a spirit who may have just incarnated on the earth plane in the dream time and accidentally lure it away back to spirit world. This may account for the mystery of crib death and it is interesting that there are many rituals to protect a newborn child during the vulnerable

first few months of its life. Ancestors may also cause illness by omission rather than by commission by turning away and not affording protection to their progeny.

2. **Intrusive spirits.** The role of intrusive or earth bound spirits has already been partly discussed. These may show up as “shades” in the bones. Earth bound spirits may not pass over to the other side due to confusion and their spirit may get lost between the worlds. This can occur due to traumatic death from suicide, murder, war, drugs, alcohol, accidents etc. The Zulus have a remedy for those who die away from home whose spirits may get lost. When they transport the body back home, usually by train, they will reserve a seat for the spirit and put the branch of a buffalo thorn tree on the seat. The buffalo thorn is unique in having both straight and hooked thorns. The straight thorn is symbolic of the spirit going up to heaven and the hooked thorn signifies the body that will be returned to the earth. When the spirit sees this it will understand it is dead and accompany the body back home to be with the ancestors.

It is important to realize that war veterans who are haunted in their dreams may in fact be receiving visits from vengeful spirits they had killed in combat. A *sangoma* might disagree with the psychological treatment of war veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and say that their nightmares were attributable to intrusive spirits. Zulu warriors in battle long ago would disembowel their victims to release the spirit and also apologize to them and say that it was nothing personal. Furthermore, these warriors on returning from war were ritually cleansed by *sangomas* to exorcize any ghosts that may have attached.

3. **Pollution.** Pollution, which might better be called ritual impurity, occurs as a result of contact with some occurrence or phenomenon that is impure and is recognized by the Zulu as “dirt” or “dirty.” Causes of pollution include miscarriages, abortions, birth (especially of twins) illness, crime, death (especially murder), burial, menses, preg-

nancy, sex, a journey, eating the meat of an animal that died of disease, and pork. A husband is polluted for up to a year after the death of his wife or child, and a wife for up to a year after the death of her husband. Cleansing rituals are dispensed that usually involve bathing with *muti*.

4. **Witchcraft and sorcery.** Although *sangomas* usually work on the light and not the dark side (as witches do), they are frequently called to consult about problems that are related to witchcraft. They have to know how to counteract hexes and also have to protect themselves and their homesteads from witches' antics, which sometimes can even involve attempts at poisoning. *Sangomas* have remedies for their patients and themselves if they are concerned about witchcraft. Witches are known to consult *sangomas* not only for help but also to uncover their secrets so they can work more effectively against their competition.

Although a healer can heal someone far away, a sorcerer can create disease and even death from a distance with a hex. White and black magic have been known for millennia and are now being validated by science. These malevolent effects can be local or nonlocal. Nonlocal influences work through the Field without the knowledge of those who are affected. Local effects work directly with the knowledge of the victim through the nocebo effect (opposite of placebo). The key to nocebo and placebo is the belief system of the patient, the absence or presence of hope, belief, trust, and faith. *Sangomas* are masters of the placebo effect; sorcerers work with nocebo. It is worthwhile stressing the fact that witchcraft can harm someone even if that person does not believe in it. Just as distant healing can be effective, so too can distant harming through sorcery.

Malevolent ancestors, and especially vindictive foreign spirits who may have been wronged, can also cause illness, misfortune, accidents, and even the death of those who have wronged them. Problems can be countered by prayers, rituals, *muti* and sacrifices. Ancestors who have turned away can be encouraged to return and defend their descendants against malicious or intruding spirits. Illness is therefore frequently connected to human relation-

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ships between the living and the dead. However, if these relationships are perfectly functional and healthy, the *sangoma* will look to witchcraft or sorcery and pollution for the cause of the problem. Diagnoses are made with the help of *Femba*, trance-channeling, dreams, and the divining bones. There is usually a remedy for any dilemma.

Witchcraft and sorcery arise from a heart of envy. Therefore, anyone can be a witch or a sorcerer, for instance, a wife who is jealous of her husband or a businessman or politician seeking to eliminate the competition. Witches and sorcerers work on the dark side with the help of evil spirits. They too have real power and are able to manipulate the “Field,” which is nondenominational, or spiritually neutral. Evil messages go through the “Field” just as effectively as do healing ones. The general term witch doctor, sometimes used by whites in South Africa to embrace all traditional healers, is not only inaccurate but demeaning and insulting. Most of those who work in the “Field,” work on the light side for the sake of good and not bad. In South Africa, the word *witch* has a dark connotation as opposed to some Western thinking, where witches can be either light or dark.

Sorcerers use herbs, poisons, and body exuviae of their victims (eg, hair, nails, urine). The Law of Contagion states that once two things are in contact, they can affect one another. The hair or nail from the victim can be used with harmful *muti* to hurt or harm.

Witches use “familiar,” which they ride or send to perform their treacherous deeds. Familiars include spotted hyenas, baboons, polecats, weasels, genets, wildcats, snakes, owls, and bats. The Tokolosh (English) or *Thikoloshe* is a dwarflike being with one buttock and oversized genitals, and witches are said to use them as sexual consorts. The Tokolosh cannot climb, and hence many blacks, raise their beds up on several bricks to protect themselves from intrusions at night.

The commandment, “thou shall not covet . . .” is really an edict against witchcraft since at the source of all witchcraft is the principle of envy. Witchcraft is universal and not only confined to indigenous societies. The witch or sorcerer is “the traitor within the gates.” Their power resides in their not being known to be malevolent

so that they can continue to work unimpeded. Any hex can be countered but only if one is aware that it exists.

### TOTEM OR POWER ANIMALS

The dead can communicate with the living not only by means of spirit mediumship, dreams, and divining bones but also by using animals. Among the Zulu, snakes feature prominently, especially mambas and pythons. The python is usually a favorable message from the beyond, the mamba a warning. Some diviners have communication with the ancestors through a spirit animal (*intyala*), which can come in the form of a lion, leopard, or elephant and to which due respect must be accorded. The energy implicit in different animals is given great importance when it comes to the divining bones. Some clans have surnames that are given according to their totem animal such as *Ndlovu* that means elephant.

### THE DIVINING BONES

The divining bones are not strictly all bones but comprise shells, money, seeds, dice, domino-like objects or even dominos themselves, and other objects that have been appointed by the *sangoma* and the spirit to represent certain polarities (for instance a miniature car to represent a journey). Animal bones from lions, hyenas, anteaters, baboons, crocodiles, wild pigs, goats, antelopes and others form the large majority of the objects in the *sangoma's* bag, and there are bones for all psycho-socio-spiritual events. The bones represent all of the forces that affect any human condition, anywhere, whatever their culture. The primal energies and attributes the animals represent hold enormous power. For example, the hyena represents the thief that comes in the night, and a hyena bone is often used to locate a stolen or lost object. The anteater is the animal that “digs the grave” and an anteater bone may be used where death is concerned, or it may represent a deceased person or his spirit.

There is a protocol for consultation with any *sangoma* or *inyanga*. The consultation takes place in the *ndumba* or healing hut. Usually shoes are removed, and on entering, one kneels down and claps to greet the spirits. The client places a fee under the mat on which the bones are to

be thrown. Sometimes the healer will burn *mphepho*, a plant with a pleasant smell. Some *sangomas* will light candles. Before throwing the bones, the healer invokes the ancestors by giving snuff or tobacco, kneeling, clapping, rattling and chanting a song. The purpose of all these rituals is to call the ancestors into sacred space to help the client. The healer's bones are contained in a skin bag. The healer asks the patient to pick up the bones and put them into the bag. The client shakes the bag of bones, places a pinch of snuff in the bag as an offering, blows into the opening of the bag, states his or her name, and empties the bones on the mat. Traditions vary depending on the healer's training or on prior instructions given by the spirit who is “throwing the bones” for the healer. Sometimes more than one *sangoma* is present, and the others will chorus the reading of the main healer by chanting the word *siyavuma* (we agree) after each interpretation.

First, a general reading is given and then specific questions are answered. Each question requires a separate throw of the bones. The first throw is general in scope and defines any problems the patient may have—work, money, home, spouse, children, sorcery, ancestors, and other specific situations. There is a bone for just about every polarity of the patient's psycho-socio-spiritual state of being. When the reading is completed, the ritual is closed, by kneeling down again and clapping in appreciation to the spirits before leaving the hut.

Different traditions assign different meanings to the bones or objects, and each particular teacher will have her own method, which she passes on to the student. Although there is an intellectual component to divining – the healer has to read the message that is laid out – the reading is also highly intuitive. The *sangoma* is “possessed” by the guiding spirit who passes on intuitive messages to help the healer to “see” the problem at hand. The information forthcoming hence often extends beyond what the bones reveal. The bones also function as a way of getting the rational left brain out of the way so that the right brain can do its intuitive work. The ego is put aside since it is the ancestor, and not the healer, who is providing the information. This also allows the *sangoma* to reveal information that would be un-

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heard of in psychotherapeutic circles; for instance, “your husband is no good and things will not go right for you until you send him away.”

There is an understanding between the healer and the spirit as to the meaning of the bones and how they line up in relationship to each other. In fact when the bones are thrown, they do not fall in a random pattern but rather in a distinct arrangement which can be read by the *sangoma* whose training has taught him to diagnose past and present ailments and somewhat predict future occurrences with extraordinary accuracy. It seems that a mini-Field of attention, intention, and coherence is set up between the healer, the patient and the ancestor that allow the bones to lie in an intelligent pattern. The metaphor they represent is then interpreted by the healer.

The reading is usually concerned with what is happening at that moment in the patient’s life. Because the healer is reading a metaphor, she may get the wrong image and have to change direction. Divining is like interpreting someone’s dream, and only the owner of the dream will know if the meaning rings true. The information is given humbly and democratically. The healer will ask the client if she agrees and, if so, will continue along the same line of exploration. If the client disagrees, the healer will look at the same polarity in a different way and reinterpret. For instance money and energy are interchangeable. The bones may reveal that the client has no money when in fact the problem relates to a lack of energy or vitality or being “burnt out”. Usually the patient is well aware of what is going on in his life. The bones will highlight or focus on a problem that requires attention and that may have been ignored or denied.

The healer is attentive to the fact that there is always free will and that anything can be changed. For instance, if the ancestors advise against taking a certain person for a spouse, and the partner is adamant that she wants him, then *muti* can be dispensed to make the potential partner more acceptable. Rituals can be offered to the ancestral spirits to remove any black shadows that might be darkening the future of the relationship. Bone readings are usually concerned with helping people deal with their current dilemmas, such as intrusive spirits, witchcraft, health or “dis-ease,” money and business, bad luck children,

spouse, life path, spirit, heart, ancestors, and so on. But the bones can also warn a person not to take an upcoming journey, and they can highlight a past event that has bearing on the present. The future can always change because of free will and the number of possible variables that can arise. Therefore, far-reaching and accurate prophecy is sometimes difficult since free will is ever-present to shift the variables and alter the future.

If one were to ask a *sangoma* how dowsing works, she would say that the ancestor was moving the dowsing stick in the direction of water. Similarly, *sangomas* will sometimes use special devices that “point,” or indicate direction, to help them glean information from the ancestor. For instance the healer may place different *mutis* around the mat and see which the pointer indicates is the most suitable for the client.

The bones are the psychospiritual Computed Tomography (CT) scan of the *sangoma* and speak to the cosmology of the human condition; Western medicine has sophisticated technology to diagnose the physical but nothing like the bones that can diagnose the psycho-spiritual. Even psychotherapy falls short in many instances and does not even acknowledge that some of these forces exist. Some churches used to do exorcisms for involuntary possession but now send the afflicted person for psychotherapy. Dreams can also help us with the psycho-spiritual but unlike the bones dreams cannot be “called.” We may ask for a dream but not get one. The power of the bones is that they can be called when information is needed.

## DREAMS

For most of us the easiest form of access to the cosmic infinity and to realms not localized in space and time is the dream world. According to the *sangomas* and other ancient wisdom, our dream state is every bit as real as the waking state and all we have to do is decipher the cosmic conversation. We have to understand the metaphors and the passwords. These may be highly individual and it is up to each one of us to find our own individual “Morse” code.

*Sangoma* say that there are basically two types of dreams, instructional and nonin-

structional. Carl Jung called these instructional dreams, “Big” dreams. The ancestors usually work in metaphor, and often we need to unravel the message. On occasions we will see our spirit guides in our dreams. These events may be visitations rather than dreams.

Important dreams often have a different quality. They may be numinous or luminous, in Technicolor or have a heightened intensity.

*Sangomas* are specialists at interpreting dreams and this may be because they are used to reading the metaphors presented to them by the bones. *Sangomas* dream about patients coming to them and about specific plant remedies for those patients. Even though they may never have seen that plant before, they will go into the bush, find it, and then dispense it. *Sangomas* appreciate that these spirit dream messages usually occur in the early hours of the morning. They say this is when the ancestors are active. Physiologists would say this is the period of REM, or rapid eye movement sleep, which still does not discount the possibility that guiding forces are present.

Dreams like the bones, because of free will tell us “what to see and not what to be.” They open us up to a nonlocal, space-time continuum which can give us information that makes our lives easier. We are perfectly entitled to ignore the advice and accept the consequences.

Bone divination and dream information can support one another. Both can transmit similar information to the *sangoma* either literally or metaphorically. I recently dreamed that someone I knew in South Africa was severely emaciated and ill. When I went back for a visit I had him tested, and he proved to be HIV positive. Had I thrown the bones, the display would have shown the bone designated for him misaligned and off center and in proximity to the crocodile bones (which indicate disease) both oriented in a negative polarity. This would have given me the same information as the dream and an identical outcome. I could have confirmed the dream with the bones but there was no need to in this case. The important difference between the bones and dreams is that the former can be “called” at any time, the latter unpredictable so.

The *sangoma* is always confronting opposition from witches, sorcerers and intru-

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sive spirits from the other side. They can access the *sangoma's* dreamtime and all dreams are liable to pollution from trickster spirits. The Field like the Internet is impartial to messages, light or dark, both have free access. Just as there are viruses, Trojan horses, pornographic pop ups etc. on the web so there are dark energies in the spirit world that want to corrupt the *sangoma's* dream files. The advantage of the bones is that they are far less vulnerable to sabotage since they are protected by the sacred space or "fire wall" of the *ndumba*. These dark forces are part of the interplay of light and dark and part of the design of the polarity balance set in place by the Great Spirit.

### CONCLUSIONS

Ancestral reverence and the different healing techniques described are highly valued in African society and have been in force for eons. *Sangomas* are able to communicate with the dead. This phenomenon is quite alien to Western thinking, and is easily dismissed and even ridiculed. Yet dead spirits may play a much bigger role in our health, wealth, and happiness than we may think.

Possession by the dead can be voluntary, as in the case of the *sangoma*, or involuntary, and spirits can possess their hosts without permission. Voluntary possession is probably best called spirit-mediumship. Involuntary possession is rare and is highly undesirable. It takes the form of possession by a malevolent alien spirit. The spirit can take over the body and persona of an individual and wreak havoc.

It may appear as if guiding spirits take away free will. This is only the case with

involuntary possession but not so with spirit mediumship where the ancestor acts as a guide to the channel. It is regarded as a boon and a privilege to have been chosen to be a *sangoma*. Every one of us would welcome having a loving mentor who bestows gifts and can see and understand things that normally elude us. *Sangomas* and their ancestors are fallible. Although the spirits have the advantage of not being confined to the space-time continuum, they are still "human" and not Divine.

The Bantu peoples are still much closer to their original primal selves than we are. In the West we are victims as well as beneficiaries of our religion, education, culture, and conditioning. We are unable to fathom how disconnected we are from our primeval humanness. This is both good and bad. Our Western education has brought us many technological marvels, but we should not doubt that we have paid a huge price for them.

Africa, on the other hand, has aboriginal psycho-spiritual technology that we are only now beginning to appreciate. We need to recognize how much we have forfeited and how much we can learn from native peoples who are still in touch with their original energies and can access these realms with such ease. We invent fancy names for mystical phenomena, such as coherence, physiological arousal, cathartic conversion experience, congruence, medical intuitive, distant mental influence on biological systems. African healers have known these principles for eons. In fact theirs is the original medicine. We should call our standard allopathic techniques complementary and alternative. We are going back to what we once knew.

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