

White *Izangoma*: The Creation of New Significance or New Members of Traditional Healing-Divining Practice?¹

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Abstract

One of the social changes with the collapse of Apartheid in the South African society was the emergence of so-called ‘white isangomas’ or ‘white *izangoma*’. This was not the first time that people of European origins were called by *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) to *ubungoma*². The first records are dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, but the social situation (colonialism and then Apartheid) made it impossible for Whites to be trained. However, with the growing awareness of the importance of African cultures, white people who felt the calling, started looking for answers. The calling is characterized by a sickness of body and mind that shows itself in having visions and an overwhelming weakness. It is widely believed that it can be healed only through the training by a fully-fledged *isangoma*. This essay analyses white *izangoma* vocation and work, establishing if they really are part of *ubungoma*, and if they influence and change black *izangoma*’s teachings and work. The information originates from the author’s field study, written *izangoma*’s testimonials, and other academic research. The field studies that allowed

¹ As I have explained elsewhere, the denominations ‘White’ and ‘Black’ are used in South Africa with full respect and in accordance with the South African law and customs. Distinguishing white *izangoma* from black ones is customary and is used by both *izangoma* and their customers (cf. e.g., Podolecka 2016:143).

² *Isangoma* (sg.) and *izangoma* (pl.) mean people, in English called ‘sangoma/s’. *Ubungoma* is an abstract noun which means ‘sangomahood’ (performing duties and having the abilities of the *izangoma*), while *amadlozi* means ‘ancestors’. These terms are used in the Nguni languages, e.g., Zulu. Their meaning will be further explained in this essay.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the cases of white *izangoma*, called ‘sangomas’ in English and in many other languages in neighboring countries, their training with the black African teachers, and the outcomes of mixing of the so-called ‘white’ and ‘black’ cultures and religious backgrounds. I compare the white and black *izangoma* calling, training, and work in order to establish if white *izangoma* can really be called *izangoma* or if they are just a new addition to an already diverse spiritual landscape of South Africa. As it will be shown later in the text, the white *izangoma* phenomenon is met with both positive and negative approaches. Adherents of a purist attitude perceive them as white usurpers, while black *izangoma* who train white *itwasa* (apprentices), consider them equally qualified as long as they have the calling, go through the same training and initiation, and then perform the same rituals. Others welcome new ideas like *karma*, which explains that whatever happens to people is a result of previous deeds. Some black *izangoma* also allow their *itwasa* to add means of healing from other traditions or even incorporate them into their own practices. Such syncretism is sometimes considered as a betrayal of an established tradition, while in other cases, it is perceived as a natural development.

The origins of the term ‘*isangoma/izangoma*’ is not clear. Berglund recalls diviners who ‘say that the word *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*’ (Berglund 1976:186). My *izangoma* informants claim that the term ‘*isangoma*’ refers to ‘a person of the drum’, as the term ‘*ngoma*’ refers to drum music³. Drums are sacred instruments in the African

³ The term ‘*ngoma*’ also means ‘stem’ or ‘mother’ (isiZulu.net n.d.).

culture, helping *izangoma* to get into a trance and communicate with the spirits. This notion is supported by Janzen who derives it from ‘doing *ngoma*’ – the music. He states that

a ritual therapeutic setting opens with a declarative statement, prayer, or utterance, then moves on to song begun by the one who makes the statement; as the call and song is developed, the surrounding individuals respond with clapping and soon singing begins en masse, and then the instruments enter in (Janzen 1991:291).

Janzen adds: ‘[D]iscourses of healing take a number of forms: the evocation of distress and hope before others; prayers to God, ancestors, and spirits; songs...instrumental accompaniment and dance; the creation and use of *materia medica*’ (Janzen 1992:11). Different ethnic groups also have different words for healers-diviners like *izangoma* (e.g., *lethuela* in seSotho and *igqirha* in isiXhosa), but in South Africa and its neighboring countries, the terms ‘*sangoma*’ and ‘*izangoma*’ are usually used to make the communication easier. When speaking in English, all my informants used the anglicised term ‘*sangoma*’.

South Africa is predominantly Christianized, though there are large religious minorities in the country, like Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others (Chidester 2012:1). Added to these are the native so-called African Traditional Religions, which are still alive, as they are now rediscovered and practiced. Those who are responsible for keeping ancient traditions and beliefs, especially the veneration of the ancestral spirits, and contacting them, are *izangoma*. They are believed to be called to their vocation by spirits⁴. Since the fall of Apartheid in 1994, there was also a growing number of white *izangoma*. The phenomenon of white *izangoma* has been studied by several academics, some of them being white *izangoma*, or at least *itwasa* themselves. Thornton has received his calling after the apartheid collapse, when he was in his forties, already being a professor of religious studies and social anthropology at the University of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand Univer-

⁴ The entire concept of *ubungoma* is based on faith. There is no academic method to verify if spirits do exist and if the *izangoma* do contact them. However, in order to make the article easier to read, I will not write ‘it is believed’ every time I report *izangoma*’s activities.

sity in South Africa. He went through the *itwasa*⁵ period (*ukutwasa*; in English: twasahood), but refused to undergo the last exam and the formal initiation⁶. However, this experience has given him a unique opportunity to examine the phenomenon from both an academic and insider's perspective. Jo Wreford and Rod Suskin (PhD graduates at the University of Cape Town) had a similar experience. Other *izangoma* within academia are Nceba Gqaleni – a professor for indigenous health systems research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban), Penny Bernard – an anthropologist at the Rhodes University (Grahamstown), Mogomme Masoga – a professor of African and social studies at the University of Zululand, and David Cumes – a South African surgeon (Podolecka 2016:150).

The official emergence of the white *izangoma* phenomenon after the collapse of Apartheid, has an incredible social and political significance: It influences the intermingling of the black and white modalities used in healing practices, as well as the perception of the world and the concepts of health. Although the phenomenon has entered a racially divided society, it is not only likely to stay within the social strata, but also to expand. In the context of a country and a culture where society was racially divided – and this division was supported by various laws – the rise of white *izangoma* was surprising in many ways: It challenged the social system; it defied the Christian tradition predominant at the time (especially the strict Dutch Reformed Church, which supported Apartheid and established 'Whites only' churches); it introduced African culture into 'white thinking'; and challenged traditional family patterns. Many white parents who supported segregation, had to face the fact that their children were abandoning the white Christian tradition in preference to the 'heathen' and 'groundless' black 'superstitions', which made the call-

⁵ There are two ways of spelling this term: *itwasa* and *ithwasa*. I use the first one, though when I cite authors who use the other, I do not change the spelling in the quotation. *Ukutwasa* is the process of learning, the apprenticeship.

⁶ There is no way to establish how many *itwasa* do not become *izangoma* or how many *izangoma* lose their abilities and stop their work. Thornton and several other *izangoma* have informed me that about 80% of those who start training either do not complete it or stop their work. This large number of resignations is probably a result of feeling better after the process of healing the *izangoma* sickness and the lack of perseverance. Some *izangoma* claim that they were abandoned by spirits, and therefore they cannot continue their work.

ing of whites into *ubungoma* (sangomahood) even more challenging to deal with⁷.

Methodology and Ethical Issues

Data from my informants come from the fieldwork I did in South Africa in 2013, 2018, and 2019 in the provinces, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape. Fieldwork is the best way to procure primary data from a specific source, not just through the narrative of second parties, but also to understand their true meaning. Geertz emphasizes that to carry out research on a different culture, one must remember that culture is a framework for people's behavior, and every situation should be placed within the local context, without a pre-cognitive assumption based on a researcher's culture. Only then the researcher can understand the true meaning of the situation (Geertz 1973:14-15). I wholeheartedly agree with Geertz, implying that during my research, I always place people and situations within their local strata. If I do not understand some behavior or ritual, I ask for explanation with the highest respect. I also always establish if my informants are South African born, if they have gone through the calling, proper apprenticeship, and initiation-graduation, and only the ones who went through the whole process, identical to the one that black *izangoma* undergo, become my informants. The ethical clearance was a condition of receiving the grant to conduct the field research, and all my informants were aware of my intention of writing about their vocation and work.

Working on the *ubungoma* from an academic perspective, has lately become very difficult. 10 years ago, I experienced no problems when visiting *izangoma* schools, living with *izangoma* (both white and black), visiting *muti* (herbal medicines) markets where *izangoma* sell their medicines and practice divinations, and I acquired information easily. The situation has changed dramatically, mainly due to some misrepresentations of *izangoma*'s traditions and practices, the false information in mainstream media, and cannibalism

⁷ Most of my informants report hostile reactions towards white *itwasa* and *izangoma*. Such situations are also reported by other researchers (cf. Teppo 2011:228). Added to these, some people are scared of *izangoma* and their supposed witchcraft – this applies to all skin colors (Teppo 2011:234).

incidents reported in media and academic articles⁸. It is also a known fact that albino people are murdered in large parts of the sub-Saharan Africa and their body parts are changed into amulets, and this is also often attributed to *izangoma*. In addition, some African politicians have been known to surround themselves with *izangoma*. All of the above, together with the general uprooting of younger generations from their traditions, resulted in a society which consults *izangoma*, but at the same time fears them, wants their help, but also expects to receive a curse from them – a mix of contradicting emotions that are easily manipulated by the media, making *izangoma* distrustful. This distrust is also shown by the white *izangoma*, as the media often treat them with ‘skepticism and sarcasm, at other times with enthusiasm’ (Teppo 2011:226). Also, though ‘many South Africans consider them harmless, there are also those who regard white sangomas as fools – or evil’, which further impacts *izangoma*’s trust issues towards strangers (Teppo 2011:228).

My informants constitute of over 60 *izangoma*, located in South Africa, and about 60 in the neighboring countries, Botswana and Lesotho. In order to develop a sound theory of whether white *izangoma* can really be acknowledged as *izangoma*, anthropological and comparative religious study methodologies were applied. These include open and covert participation by both full participation in ongoing activities and passive observation, in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews using closed and open-ended questions, living with *izangoma* according to their rules, and taking part in their everyday life. The covert participation method was conducted during private meetings or social gatherings. Informants knew that I am an anthropologist, although I did not take notes during our conversations, especially on intimate topics. However, when something relevant was said, I wrote it down immediately after the meeting. Interviews with *izangoma* often changed into a friendly conversation when new topics arose: The relationships with spouses (especially during chastity time), problems with family who did not want to accept *ubungoma*, inter-racial love that used to be unthinkable a few years earlier, leaving the old life behind and entering a new world. My *izangoma* informants were very generous with their trust as I have never betrayed it – no secrets are revealed in this essay without the informants’ consent.

⁸ The reports from popular media are done by Bhengu (2018), Shange (2018), and John and Swails (2018). The academic article is written by Ventegodt and Kordova (2016).

During research I also used constant comparative methods to categorize and compare qualitative data derived from everyday experiences. All methods were applied with the highest moral and ethical standards. The full names in the article are used with the consent of the *izangoma*. When informants did not wish to reveal their full names, first names or the term ‘informant’ are used.

In order to choose the informants, I used a sampling approach to select the initial sample, which

operates on the basic principle that we can get information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances deliberately selected, based on their knowledge attributes. Hence, with purposive sampling, the sample is ‘hand-picked’ for the research study based on relevance on the issue being investigated and knowledge or experience about the topic (Denscombe 2010:141).

I found informants through *izangoma* who recommended them to me on site. I did not interview *izangoma* who advertised themselves on the internet or in local newspapers because I could not check their credentials (proof that they went through the *itwasa* period and examination-graduation). Interview questions were constructed in a manner that assisted with elicit spontaneous and detailed information from the interviewees. Due to living with *izangoma* and taking part in their activities, I gained their trust, which resulted in the emergence of new themes that were not planned, for example sharing with me in-depth the mortal terror they felt when they had learnt about the calling, challenges with celibacy during apprenticeship, and its influence on existing relationships, rejection from family and churches based on racial and religious grounds, losing financial assets (i.e., properties, business, etc.).

My *izangoma* informants came from different ethnic groups and backgrounds: 25 were white or of mixed origins. I was allowed to live with some of them, participate in their rituals and be the recipient of some of their treatments, to observe not only their daily routines, but also rituals that are normally forbidden to outsiders, for example the animal sacrifices to prepare *makhozini* (ancestors’ hut) for the first usage, morning cleansing rituals (in-

cluding the vomit-inducing *muti*⁹ drinking), forgiveness of and connecting with ancestors. I was also allowed to observe the learning of traditional music (especially the drum), used for rituals and the *izangoma-itwasa* relationships. These gave me a chance to study white and mixed origins *izangoma* and their work in their cultural milieu. Most of them were *itwasa* of black *izangoma* (Zulu and Xhosa), which gave me a chance to study the mutual pervasion of both cultures. While placing the *ubungoma* within the shamanic discourse, I examined commonalities that occurred frequently and cross-culturally in various shamanic cultures, as analyzed by other researchers.

It is estimated that about 80% of South Africans consult *izangoma*. I have therefore decided to ask every South African that I met, what they knew about *izangoma*, if they ever consulted them and what they thought about white *izangoma* (Rademeyer 2013). It quickly turned out that those who had contact with *izangoma*, did not care if they were white or black. Before consulting an *isangoma*, they learnt a little about them and knew that becoming an *isangoma* requires a tough apprenticeship, and once somebody is an *isangoma*, it means that they were trained to be one. Hence, the ethnicity did not matter to the customers. Not every person who claims to be an *isangoma*, is one as there are plenty of frauds. Their customers have no knowledge of this and believe in their authenticity. Unfortunately, there is no register of any exams or at least basic knowledge of herbal medicine being recorded or confirmed with a certificate because many *izangoma* do not want to be part of the Traditional Healers Association, African National Healers Association, or other organizations.

Who are *Izangoma*?

Izangoma are people who – it is believed – were called by ancestral spirits to renounce the profane realm and start sacred lives at the verge of the physical and spiritual worlds¹⁰. There is currently no known method to prove that a

⁹ *Muti* is a medicine made from herbs, roots, and tree bark. There are two ways of spelling it: *Muti* and *muthi*.

¹⁰ Most *izangoma* tell me that about 95% of them are female, though there is no way to prove it because there is no obligation to register oneself as an *isangoma* and no statistical research has been done so far – hence we also do not know how many white *izangoma* exist.

spiritual realm exists or that spirits can contact the living. However, many people believe so, especially the *izangoma*, otherwise they would never undergo the humiliating, ego-crushing apprenticeship. *Izangoma* are first and foremost healers-diviners, whose work is to diagnose their customers' illnesses and problems *via* contact with spirits. This is done by deep meditation, trances, and different modes of divination, for example by the practice of 'throwing bones', which are actual sacrificial animals' bones, shells, coins, and little objects.

Vaughan (1994) makes a distinction between healing and curing. *Izangoma*'s medical practices are healing and one cannot compare them to Western curing. Even the definition of sickness is different: In Western medicine, people are sick when their bodies are sick, and even in cases of mental diseases, many doctors search for reasons that are physical (imbalance of hormones, enzymes, neurotransmitters, etc.). Western medicine separates biological facts from 'cultural fiction' (Vaughan 1994:285). In Southern Africa, many people believe that they will become sick when they are cursed, or because they have displeased ancestral spirits, or because they are socially displaced, etc. Hence, the body is healed by bringing back the balance of the body, soul, and mind. The *izangoma* healing has a transformative power. Vaughan emphasizes social meaning of bringing back health and social order in the process of healing: Thanks to healing rituals and relieving an individual of suffering, the whole community is re-born (Vaughan 1994:292)¹¹.

Black and white people ask *izangoma* for holistic healing, as explained by Soози van der Linde, a white *isangoma* from Bloemfontein, trained in the Zulu tradition. She adds:

A sangoma is a channel for ancestral spirits. They are able to go into a trance or make contact with spirits and communicate with the ancestors and spirits to find out what the cause of, for instance, an illness or 'bad luck' is. They are also referred to as spiritual healers or 'traditional' healers, who heal with spiritual energy. I was told by a black sangoma that the reason I am a spiritual healer is because I

¹¹ Vaughan (1994:295) also points out that missionaries were often considered as healers – not as doctors – provided by the government because, apart from fighting sickness, they also wanted to heal souls and bring people to God. Many prophetic churches in Africa are based on these healing practices.

channel energy into what I do – so if I heal with water, I can access the healing spirit in the water where other people cannot do it and, thus, cannot heal with water¹².

Izangoma healing is called *ukwelapha* and its aim is to restore a person to a state of being well (Thornton 2017:2). This means that the entire wellbeing of a person is being treated, and the patient is supposed to become healthy, not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually (including settling affairs with ancestral spirits). Briefly speaking, a person is supposed to become integrated and happy. This is the core of the *izangoma* healing. *Izangoma* healing results from contacting the spiritual realm, while both the diagnosis and healing are holistic. For example, if the soul is sick (e.g., a person has committed a crime or is in mourning), then the body reacts with illness and the mind loses its clarity and concentration. Hence, *izangoma* search for reasons of illness in the mind, body, and spirit, and they will heal all three. This is done by a psychological advice and *muti*, and asking the patients' ancestors for help. If the reason has roots in a family situation, a ritual will be required. Historically speaking, *izangoma*'s abilities to heal were the most important. Before a public health system was established, indigenous African healers were the main doctors. *Izangoma* combine *muti* with the help of the spirits, while the *izinyanga* (the herbalists), with a deep knowledge of local healing plants, prepare herbal remedies. Both *izangoma* and *izinyanga* have to go through a long apprenticeship and learn from their experienced teachers, but *izinyanga* do not involve spirits in their healing practices. *Izangoma* are usually more respected, but also feared¹³.

Izangoma are also advisors and have been since ancient times. Even today, politicians and business people use their advice or ask them for ceremonial blessings when they sign a contract. A well-educated professional would drive their BMW car and take their expensive laptop to the *izangoma* and ask them to bless their car and their business (Draper 2004:217). I heard such stories many times, for example from Johan Claassens, who is a white

¹² Private correspondence, March 2018.

¹³ Flint recalls many stories, passed down by generations, about kings and chiefs who lost 'control over *izangoma* and these healers, and hence were victims of their abilities. This shows *izangoma*'s high position in their societies' (Flint 2008:81).

izangoma and a lawyer: He holds two PhD degrees and works for the South African business people and officials¹⁴. His customers use both his legal and *isangoma* advice. My other informants also work for business people and local chiefs. Such behavior is historically rooted, as *izangoma* have always been perceived as having superior powers, hence they were advisors to kings and chiefs and often helped them to secure their political power (Flint 2008:81). Therefore, it should not be surprising that contemporary black African business people draw from this tradition and try to secure their wellbeing with *izangoma*. However, the search for *izangoma*'s help with business affairs became also popular among the Whites who believe in *izangoma* powers.

Because *izangoma* work with spirits, they are also exorcists, psychopomps, mediums, and clairvoyants. Customers come to them to plead with the ancestors when they suspect that their problems are caused by the ancestral spirits. The subject of consultations ranges from healing to advice on marriage and business, as well as on cooperation with spirits. All my *izangoma* informants in the past 10 years have declared that they have customers from all cultures: Whites, Blacks, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and a growing number of foreigners.

All *izangoma* and researchers state that a person does not choose to be an *isangoma*, but receives the calling that must be obeyed. Berglund, who did a thorough research among *izangoma*, writes that 'nobody can become a diviner of personal choice' (Berglund 1976:136). This belief is shared by all my *izangoma* informants. The *izangoma* sickness is the first signal that a person is being called to the vocation. It causes a breakdown of the whole system: The person's physical health deteriorates, they are haunted by visions and dreams, they hear voices, and see people and creatures that others cannot see. *Izangoma* and the people who believe in their powers are convinced that all these phenomena are delivered by spirits, who 'constantly mediate through them – which does not exclude white sangomas' – this happens through all their lives as *izangoma* (Teppo 2011:226).

All my *izangoma* informants are of the opinion that Western medicine, including psychiatry, cannot help with the sickness when a person must accept the calling and go through *ukutwasa*, the apprenticeship – only learn-

¹⁴ Private conversation, March 2018.

ing from a fully-fledged *isangoma* can heal the body and mind and bring emotional composure.

White *Izangoma* – a New Invention?

Although it is widely believed that white *izangoma* came to exist at the fall of Apartheid, this belief is challenged by Thornton and by many *izangoma* that I met during my research:

‘White sangomas were reported as early as in the 1930s but because of colonial and then later apartheid realities, it was impossible for them to be trained. Apartheid had many holes in legal regulations that forbade sangomas’ work, so white people managed to use them to get consultation. However, the proper training means living with your teacher, leaving your mundane life behind and submitting to difficult rules’¹⁵.

This was not possible during Apartheid with its racial segregation rules. Thornton claims that white *izangoma* do not differ from the black ones. He explains that the ancestors are ‘disembodied minds in the sense that it’s your ancestry, so everybody has ancestors and it’s African traditional way of understanding how our past controls us’¹⁶. Teppo also emphasizes the fact that even though Apartheid regulated what was proper for Whites and what was not (being *izangoma* definitely was not, as it was illegal), white *izangoma* had ‘operated underground for years’ (Teppo 2011:227). Their emergence from the underground was possible, not only due to the end of Apartheid, but also due to a slow change in the religious landscape of South Africa since the 1960s, when Pentecostal and Charismatic churches established themselves in this region and offered less institutionalized and more relaxed forms of Christianity. Additionally, the New Age movement is blooming in big cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg and its interest in *izangoma* spirituality helped white *izangoma* to work openly (Teppo 2011:227).

Izangoma regard themselves as mediators between the physical and the spiritual realms – this belief has existed in the black cultures for centuries

¹⁵ Private conversation with Thornton in Johannesburg, February 2018.

¹⁶ Interview, 2011.

and now it has been adopted by the white *izangoma* and their customers/patients. Because of their contacts with spirits and those living ‘some-where in between the realms’, they are often addressed as relatives, especially by the elderly people, who are ‘greetings ancestors’ and ‘greetings spirits’. This also happens with the white *izangoma* when they are dressed in the *izangoma* attire and recognized as *izangoma* (Teppo 2011:232). Many of my *izangoma* informants are of the opinion that even though they were born White in this life, they had black ancestors in the past, and that skin color does not matter – after all, everyone has ancestors.

Some white *izangoma* complain that Apartheid disadvantaged them because they were forbidden to initiate and practice. Cumes says that the collapse of Apartheid changed the situation for the better and ‘now the spirits had mandated, and things had changed’ (quoted in Chidester 2012:130). In contemporary South Africa, Whites are allowed the same freedom of being *izangoma* as black people. Teppo’s informants narrate that ‘spirit has no colour’ (Teppo 2011:233). Chidester points to the diverse reception of white *izangoma* in South Africa and to the resistance that some black *izangoma* have to initiating Whites into *ubungoma*. Many black *izangoma* prefer to keep their beliefs and culture within their cultural strata and not intermingle them with the Whites’ influence (Chidester 2012:200)¹⁷. This is true. However, it is difficult to argue if there is a need to preserve the ‘purity’ of their culture or if it is a form of racism. All my black *izangoma* informants support Teppo’s informants’ sentiment that spirits do not have skin color, and therefore see no reason to judge potential *itwasa* because of their ethnicity.

White *izangoma* explain their appearance on the South African scene as follows: ‘Ancestors go back to the first humanoids, to the moment when they first used stones to make tools. Knowledge is passed genetically; wis-

¹⁷ Some people who opposed the notion that Whites should be allowed to *ubungoma* are well educated, e.g., Dr Nokuzola Mndende who is a Xhosa *isangoma* and the creator of Icamagu Institute, aiming to preserve the native African religious heritage. The gathering Mndende organised at UCT was a chance to humiliate Reid and other white *izangoma*. Such behavior was criticized by Dr Jo Wreford, an anthropologist and *isangoma* (Chidester 2012:200-202). Reid’s calling and *itwasa* is related later in this article.

dom is to be learnt. And one of the things to learn is that your skin color makes no difference for spirits'¹⁸.

'I didn't spring out from a stone. I have ancestors. And in my case, some of them took part in battles with Zulus. When my ancestors, who died in battle, met Zulu after the battle, together they saw the nonsense of fighting on racial and religious grounds and they decided that if there would be a proper child in my family, he or she would become a sangoma. This child is me. Other white or multi-ethnic sangomas also have ancestors; we all do, and ancestors decide whom to call'¹⁹.

Gogo Phakathi, a white *isangoma* trained in the Zulu tradition, went through the ordeal of *ukutwasa* and had many challenges finding her ground in this new and strange phase of her life. She was faced with ostracism in the beginning, but then she moved to Mpumalanga and then to Durban, where she was immediately accepted. She is now helping the poor people in townships as well as wealthy, white customers. People who require her help, do not mind her skin color, they just put their trust in her training received in the traditional way, and her well-established reputation as a good healer. They believe that her ancestors advise her in the same way as the black *izangoma*, and they can see the symbols of her graduation, which she wears all the time.

'Ancestors don't see culture. If you are made to be a healer, be a healer and be proud of who you are. It's not easy for us, white people, to be a traditional healer because they put a stamp to your name and when you go somewhere, they say "this is a sangoma". I don't like that name, I'd rather prefer "traditional healer" because people

¹⁸ Private conversation with Chris Reid, a white *izangoma*, trained in the Xhosa tradition, and who trained many *twasas* of various ethnicities. *Nthombemhlophe* is traditionally a name given to females. Reid, who died in 2021, never made it a secret that at heart he was a woman (private conversation, February 2018).

¹⁹ Private conversation with Sarah Weber, a white *isangoma*, trained in the Zulu tradition, February 2013, and repeated in e-mails.

are sometimes scared of sangomas' powers and they do not know that sangomas are to help, not to harm', Phakathi avers²⁰.

Claassens also states that his calling came from ancestral spirits. He was scared of his calling and that it was not understood or approved of by his family. Even today, many years after becoming a respected *isangoma*, he is met with rejection, especially from some Christians, who feel strongly about their beliefs. Claassens, who was a successful business person, was firmly established in a white culture and was not in the least interested in the *izangoma* tradition when his *izangoma* sickness started. He sought help from many doctors, but no one could help him. Only when his body and mind were ravaged by the *izangoma* sickness to a point that pushed him beyond being scared of the non-Western treatment, he found his Zulu teacher and went through the entire required process, the same as any black apprentice. He then trained many *itwasa* himself, both black and white. He has clients of all ethnic backgrounds. When I visited the Fertility Cave near Clarens (a sacred place for *izangoma* and Charismatic Christians) with him, I met his former customers and other *izangoma*, and I personally witnessed their questions about his work and his former *itwasa*. Black *izangoma* recognized him as one of their own and remembered that he lived in the cave with his black *itwasa*. They respected him as much as the black *izangoma*²¹.

All black *izangoma* admit that we all have ancestors and – though they do not know what it is like in other parts of the world – in South Africa, the ancestors have always had a very strong influence on the living, and were free to choose whoever they wanted for the calling.

'After all', Gogo Regina, my Ndebele informant from Pretoria said, 'death is just a transition from one realm to another, it's not the end, it's the beginning of the new stage of life. Souls come back to live on Earth many times, so at some stage of reincarnation everybody can be black or white. And this means that spirits can call you to *ubungoma*, no matter if you are white or black or colored in this life. And we also train each other, Blacks train Whites and Whites train Blacks, so why shouldn't it be possible to have callings among Whites even centuries

²⁰ E-mail, August 2018.

²¹ Private conversation, January 2019.

ago? It is just easier now, when there is no more law that forbids such training'²².

The same view was presented to me several times by Muvo Ngcobo, a Zulu *isangoma* who trains *itwasa* from various ethnic groups: 'If a soul is ready to become a sangoma, ancestors will call it and help to go through the training, no matter in what color of the body the soul is born'²³. Siyanda D, another Zulu *isangoma*, stated:

'Why would skin color be important for ancestors? You think that calling the Whites is a new thing? No, it isn't. They had been called for ages but didn't know what it was, so they went crazy, sent by relatives to psychiatric hospitals. If they had found their *izangoma* teachers, they would have been saved. In the beginning, black sangomas were not sure what to think – you know, the whole Apartheid hatred made us skeptical – but we got used to them and accepted them when we saw that they work hard and are able to do the job properly. They are as good sangomas as black ones'²⁴.

The Calling and Training of an *Isangoma*

An *isangoma* calling is also called the 'sangoma sickness' or 'calling sickness' that cannot be healed by Western medicine or any other modality of healing, except accepting *ukutwasa* and going through the apprenticeship process. It has been widely described by academics (e.g., Berglund 1976; Hammond-Tooke 1989; Van Binsbergen 1991; Wreford 2006) as well as black and white *izangoma* (e.g., Mutwa 1964; Campbell 2000; Cumes 2004; Claassens 2017; Lockley 2017). The sickness is publicly accepted as the first step to becoming an *isangoma*. It is characterized by a plethora of symptoms: Losing control of the body, mind, and soul, hearing voices, seeing shapes and smelling scents that no one else can and that are attributed to being created by the spirits. The feeling of losing control over one's life, being lonely and misunderstood, and the horror of a sickness, incomprehensible and scary, are

²² Private conversation, February 2018.

²³ Private conversation, March 2013.

²⁴ Private conversation, January 2019.

consistently reported by all the initiates that I have interviewed. *Itwasa* often seek help with psychiatrists and other doctors, but so far, all the *izangoma* that I interviewed and being reported by other researchers, agree that no matter how many doctors they have consulted, none could help diminish the effects of the calling²⁵. Additionally, *izangoma* who published books or articles about their histories or gave interviews, clearly state that *izangoma* sickness is the beginning of the calling, *ukutwasa*. For those who are not familiar with the process, it was a shock. Campbell, who did management advising work when her calling started, reports: ‘Like many Western-educated Africans and Europeans, I considered traditional healers part of a primitive – and very foreign – cultural past’ (Campbell 2000:17). Later she reports that her sickness and *ukutwasa* were the process of not only learning, but also healing.

It is widely believed that if someone rejects the calling, the sickness can be fatal. All my informants claim that the sickness can be healed only by a fully-fledged *isangoma*, someone who recognizes the ancestral calling and knows how to teach *itwasa* – the cooperation with spirits. This process of learning is a process of healing, called *ukutwasa*, and it is a journey that all *itwasa* must take. It is a journey of becoming a healer, an educational training that helps the person to come to terms with the calling, to heal both the *izangoma* sickness and the familial traumas, and also to teach various healing techniques, both based on plant-lore and on the cooperation with spirits. All my *izangoma* informants – white, mixed-race, and black – told me that spirits are ‘dead’ people, and people usually die, leaving behind some unsettled matters. These matters influence the state of *itwasa* because they feel the longings of their ancestors and must somehow respond to them. Hence, every *ukutwasa* is different and must be handled individually. The aim of the *ukutwasa* is also to change an unwilling possession into a conscious one, in order to make contacts with spirits in a real dialogue cooperation.

Ancestral spirits are not the only ones with whom *itwasa* must learn to deal. Wreford recalls Dr Kubukeli, who states that before *itwasa* establishes a proper relationship with their ancestral line, they must ‘deal with the

²⁵ I have met only one *isangoma* who wanted the vocation since childhood. Natefe Sekonyela from Lesotho wanted to follow his mother’s and grandmother’s vocation – both were *izangoma*. The ancestors refused him the calling several times, but finally, when he was 21, they granted his wish. He did not suffer during the calling, probably because he asked for it (private conversation, March 2013).

ithongo, the general spirits' (Wreford 2008:51). These can be 'the people of the river, or the people of the forest – even sometimes, the people of the mountains' and even animals (Wreford 2008:50). All 'living dead' are supposed to help *izangoma* become better healers and diviners (Wreford 2008:53)²⁶.

Thornton refers to the image of water snakes and reminds us that the whole process of *ubungoma* is also called *eyamanzini* which means 'being under water'. The called ones have dreams and visions that seem real and in which they go to a river and immerse themselves into water. 'Wisdom is like water, it enters *itwasa* and sangomas all the time. For the healer, knowledge is water and water is the medium through which power and knowledge move. This is why the healer experiences being "under water" as knowledge. It is the central mystery of *ubungoma*' (Thornton 2017:75-76). In his dreams, Sekonyela was also trained by a water snake for a long time²⁷.

Berglund explains that ancestors can enter an *isangoma* and make contact with people in this way (Berglund 1976:89). The fact that spirits can manifest themselves in material ways like wasps, lizards, or snakes, and are treated as an incarnation of a dead person, was reported to the first researchers, for example to Farrer, who also reports that, because of such beliefs, some snakes are worshiped (Farrer 1879:137). Mutwa believes that river snakes usually transmit wisdom from the ancestors and this is why bathing before sunrise is important – it not only teaches discipline and clears the mind, but also gives spirits, who dwell in the water, a chance to communicate²⁸. My white informants also admit visions of being taught under water. Their initial fear was quickly changed into understanding that water spirits had no desire to kill them²⁹.

Wreford explains that the calling is the main factor that connects black and white *izangoma* who come from totally different backgrounds, and

²⁶ Wreford tries to compare the *isangoma* spiritual healing with the Jungian idea of collective unconscious, from which people 'draw out ancestral messages and patterns from the past to resolve them [problems] in present' (Wreford 2008:53). Although it is not the aim of this article to analyze *izangoma*'s beliefs in spirits with the help of Western psychology, it is worth mentioning that such comparisons are being made.

²⁷ Private conversation, March 2013.

²⁸ Private conversations, March 2013.

²⁹ Private conversations and e-mails, 2012-2019.

that ‘there should be no surprise, since the experience of the *izangoma* is driven and directed by the candidate’s connections with his/her ancestral influences, which of necessity leads to idiosyncrasy’ (Wreford 2007:830-831). Wreford cites leading academics, as well as her *izangoma* teacher: ‘The initiate learns to listen and act “on behalf of” as well as at the behest, of ancestral urgings’ (Buhrmann 1984:94). As they develop their interactive dialogue, the *itwasa* follows ancestral promptings to a program strictly coordinated with her own ‘inner progress’ (Janzen 1992:89). That these processes are often embedded in the ‘dark side of life’, should not surprise, nor should its significance for healing be ignored (Obeyesekere 1990:287). In tapping into ancestral channels, the sangoma and *itwasa* learn to recognize and deal with the skeletons rattling in the family vaults (Van Binsbergen 1991:316; cf. Wreford 2008:103). Wreford recalls the story of her teacher, Nosibele. Nosibele was depressed and distraught all the time. In one of her visions she saw a man from Zimbabwe to whom she should go for help. She left her husband and managed to cross the border and find her teacher who told her that he had been waiting for her for five years. In order to ease her tribulations and to make peace with the haunting spirits, she risked ‘community opprobrium’ (a mother abandoning her family) and stayed with her tutor (Wreford 2008:94).

Wreford recalls that her calling and *ukutwasa* was an unexpected ordeal and quotes Mantel in her book: ‘The reader may ask how to tell fact from fiction. A rough guide: anything that seems particularly unlikely is probably true’ (Wreford 2008:1). This seems to be a very adequate comment to everything *itwasa* must go through when they get the calling. It is a nightmarish experience, especially for the people who have never had any contact with *izangoma*, shamanism or spirits. It is an ordeal even for those who know *izangoma* from early childhood. My black *izangoma* informants describe their calling and apprenticeship as the worst nightmare whereby they were forced to change their lives and follow the path they never wanted or intended to explore, and when they refused it, they felt weaker and sicker. Mutwa describes his *ukutwasa* as an unforgettable ordeal in which he felt ‘constant nausea, loss of appetite, and constipation [combined with] great thirst and sleeplessness’ and severe pain in his ribs and head (Mutwa 2003:3). He was so weak that he finally became unable to rise from his mat; at the same time he started having ‘disturbing visions’ (Mutwa 2003:4). He recalls: ‘Even though I am 92 and close to grave, I can still feel the dominant fear of losing

my mind and soul'. He also told me that his white *itwasa* went through the same sickness as the black ones³⁰.

All my white *izangoma* informants expressed the same feelings: Fear for their life, rebellion against accepting the new fate, and trying to 'trick' the spirits to retain their 'normal' lives. Not understanding what happens to their bodies, why they see and hear things that nobody else can, makes people scared. Understanding means healing the fear and restoring health in the body, mind, and soul. In isiZulu, the calling by spirits is called *ubizo* (Edwards 2013:670). Sometimes the term '*ukuvuma idlozi*' is used, meaning 'accepting the spirits' and agreeing to go through the apprenticeship process. Once the will of the spirits is accepted, the healing starts (Berglund 1976:142). The process of the calling is very individual and depends on each person's spirituality. During *ukutwasa*, 'spiritual-intuitive energy is mediated. The resultant energy reflects the power and spiritual nature of ancestral work. The energy takes different forms as ancestors breathe through the diviner (*ukububula/nokubhonga kwedlozi*)' (Edwards 2013:670).

The same symptoms are described by white *izangoma*. Thornton describes the process of *ukutwasa* as 'healing the exposed being' because all senses and emotions are 'raw' and also because *itwasa* and then *izangoma* are exposed to death and illness of other people – hence they should go through them themselves in order to understand and not be consumed. The person of *profanum* (the profane or mundane world) must 'die' and the person of *sacrum* (sacred or spiritual world), the healer and medium, must be born (Thornton 2017:24). The process involves total obedience towards the teacher and the will of spirits who help to choose the tutor. Berglund's informants state that 'the tutor is either indicated by the shades [spirits] themselves in dreams or chosen by the novice depending on personal inclinations' (Berglund 1976:150). Kohler informs that choosing a mentor is a difficult and sometimes time-consuming process. It often happens that the first *izangoma*, contacted by future *itwasa*, feel that another tutor is needed, so they contact spirits and ask about their choice. Then the called one is sent to the *isangoma* who is identified by the spirits (Kohler 1941:12).

Chris Reid recognized his calling because he had been interested in shamanism and also read about *izangoma*, but it did not make the process any easier for him. His body weakened, he started hearing and seeing things that

³⁰ Private conversation, March 2013.

were not real for anyone else. He was taught by a Xhosa *isangoma*, mostly intuitively because his teacher did not speak English and Reid had yet to learn isiXhosa. *Ukutwasa* was a lesson of humility, a rejection of the ego, pride, and selfishness. *Itwasa* must learn humility, that is why they serve teachers on their knees. The rejection of the ego is crucial because it leads to allowing the spirits to first crash the *itwasa*'s personality and then help to build it anew³¹.

Khanyathongo, a white *isangoma* who prefers to be referred to with his initiation isiXhosa name, was a computer programmer. He completely lost control over his thoughts and could not concentrate on anything. No medicines or counseling could help him. Finally, he found an *isangoma* teacher, who explained that what he was experiencing was an *isangoma* calling. For Khanyathongo, the calling, the sickness, and learning process, were horrifying but also liberating:

‘Finally you get all the answers. It is a healing process because you learn that there is nothing wrong with you, that you are not mad, you were just born for another kind of life. It is difficult because it touches all deep parts in you, makes you learn and control your deepest fears, but once it is done, your body heals and you can enjoy life again’³².

He explains his healing as an intense learning process:

‘The most important thing is to unlearn everything you know, disengage the rational mind. It is easier for more chaotic, unorganized people than it was for me, a business professional. And I did not speak isiXhosa! But learning the language was less important than learning intuitively. Of course, I had to learn names of plants and medicines but more important was feeling plants, their resonating energy, and learning intuitive recipes how to make a proper *muti* for clients. The more I learnt, the healthier I was becoming. Spirits stopped haunting me, they started cooperating and transmitted their

³¹ Private conversation, February 2018.

³² Private conversation, February 2018.

wisdom to me. I know that it was my destiny and thankfully my wife and children accepted my calling and are very supportive'³³.

Nokykhenya, who is a Malayan *isangoma*, was trained in the Xhosa tradition and reports similar visions and disorientation. She comes from a strict Christian family. She knew nothing about the *izangoma* tradition when her calling started. She could see creatures that did not exist in the real world and heard 'dead' ancestors talking to her. She was weak, suffering from insomnia. She sought help from doctors, but no medicines helped. She states that she was lucky to quickly find an *isangoma* who diagnosed the calling and explained that this kind of sickness could only be treated through acceptance and tuition. She welcomed the idea and today she is very happy to be an *isangoma*, even though she had to spend several years in subjugation to her mentor and she had to reject everything she used to believe. She also had to endure the initial rejection of her family, though with time they accepted her new way of life³⁴.

Siri Barker, who is a white *isangoma*, trained in the Zulu tradition, was born in South Africa, and at the age of 21, she emigrated to the United Kingdom, where she stayed for 20 years. At some point of her life she lost everything: Her partner, her job, and her house. She also got cancer which was recurring. 'It came and went, and doctors could not understand why'³⁵. She felt constantly drawn to Africa, even though she was in love with an English person and consciously she never wanted to go back to South Africa. She started hearing voices, seeing animals, and felt sick all the time. It was then that she decided to return to South Africa. It took her several months before she met an *isangoma* who diagnosed the illness as *ukutwasa* and told her to find a teacher. Once she started her *ukutwasa*, the sickness began to fade, though she had serious problems with her tutors: She had to do her *itwasa* twice and both her tutors died soon after she completed her training. Then she had a third tutor. Currently she is healed and cooperates with the spirits to help her customers. She narrates that her process of *ukutwasa* was

³³ Private conversation, February 2018.

³⁴ Private conversation, February 2018.

³⁵ Private conversation, February 2018.

the same as that of the black *izangoma*, going like all *itwasa* through the sickness and training that heals it³⁶.

Claassens was a rich business person, owning his own game reserve, with no interest in *izangoma*, when he started having visions and his body was sickened. One day he found himself driving to Soweto, a township in Johannesburg. There, on the outskirts, he found a squatter camp called Snake Park, where he found an *isangoma* who became his teacher. His family was horrified. Albeit being a successful white man, he sold his Porsche and moved to the township to live with black people, wear funny clothes, and dance barefoot. He spent most of the time kneeling and serving his teacher, exactly the same way as her native *itwasa*³⁷. For Claassens, it was the beginning of healing and the start of a new life. He states that during *ukutwasa* he gained “‘the sight”, the ability to see people’s sicknesses, the ability I heard about from some other *izangoma*’ (cf. Mutwa 1964:429). When he was healed, most of his family accepted his calling. Today he has *itwasa* and customers of diverse ethnicity³⁸.

Accounts of an unrecognized sickness, seemingly untreatable by any known Western medicine, are very common in Southern Africa. Every white and mixed-race *isangoma* report that they had a period of sickness that allopathic doctors could not heal. The only cure was *izangoma* training, which is exactly the same as in the case of a black *izangoma*. Black *izangoma* informants who decide to train Whites, also narrate that in the case of white *izangoma*, the process is the same. This proves that neither race, nor origin matters when one is called, while the sickness is the trigger to finding a teacher, who will provide training, which will also be a healing process. All my informants are adamant that without the calling and going through *ukutwasa*, a person cannot become an *isangoma*.

³⁶ Private conversation, February 2018.

³⁷ The kneeling in front of the teacher and other people is part of crashing the ego, understanding therefore that the *izangoma* life is about serving other people. All my informants report this humiliating process and the relief they felt when it finally stopped after their initiation. Such cases are also reported by other researchers like Teppo (2011:228-229).

³⁸ Private conversations, February 2018 and January 2019. Claassens describes his calling and spiritual training and work in his book, *Africa calling* (Claassens 2017).

The Work of *Izangoma*

The work of a fully-fledged *isangoma* starts with their initiation, which can also be called an examination. This is a public affair for all *izangoma* – to let the community know that a new *isangoma* is at their service. The ritual also allows other *izangoma* to check if the candidate is trained enough. This does not mean that *izangoma* are afterwards relieved from learning duties. On the contrary, they are obligated to continue learning all their lives and to go through fasts, cleansing processes, and other rituals, which enhance their powers.

The spectrum of the *izangoma*'s work is extensive. All leading scholars report that healing the body, mind, and soul is the core of the *izangoma*'s work. They also help social healing and reconciliation regarding historical traumas that influence the wellbeing of people (e.g., Krige 1936; Sundkler 1961; Berglund 1976; Flint 2008; Thornton 2009; Chidester 2012). White *izangoma* also support this view, believing that to become healthy, means the harmony of all aspects – physical, spiritual, and mental – and these can be achieved by listening to the advice of spirits and administering *muti* (e.g., Arden 1999:38, 57; Berglund 1986:171-173; Cume 2004:12-13, Krige 1962:300; Lockley 2017; Thornton 2009:17). Healing can be done by means of *muti*, psychological advice, or calling spirits because sickness is often believed to be caused by spirits: 'Combining *muti* with rituals for ancestors is believed to be the most effective way of being sound and healthy'³⁹.

The most important aspect that distinguishes *izangoma* from other healers is their ability to communicate with spirits. There are different means of achieving this. The amaZulu⁴⁰ use bones, which are not only actual animal bones, but also shells and small objects. When customers come to *izangoma*, they often do not speak about their problems, as they expect the *izangoma* to get into a trance or to throw the bones and discover the problems and their meaning, thereby finding a resolution for them. The knowledge about health issues could come from studying the human body and symptoms visible on the skin, eyes, and the body language. Once customers hear information that they consider useful and their needs are answered, they come back in times of need, thereby starting a relationship with a specific *isangoma*. Knowing the customer well, certainly helps *izangoma* to provide advice.

³⁹ He is a Ndebele informant. Private conversation, February 2018.

⁴⁰ *AmaZulu* is the plural for *Zulu* and refers to the Zulu people.

John Lockley, a white *isangoma*, trained in the Xhosa tradition, explains the importance of ancestors and staying in touch with them: Without forefathers, no one would have the gift of life, therefore people should honor the gift of ancestors by singing and dancing and food offerings – these give ancestors energy in the afterlife, and then they give energy to the living (cf. EvesVolcano n.d.)⁴¹. Lockley explains that in the Xhosa tradition, *izangoma* usually do not use bones, but go into a trance in order to contact the ancestors, though sometimes the traditions are mixed, and then they throw bones like the amaZulu. Sickness often shows the lack of energy that should come from the ancestral spirits because they were forgotten and, hence, they do not protect their living descendants. Sometimes healing an individual is sufficient, but when the problems are more severe, the *isangoma* has to treat the whole family through special rituals that are supposed to uplift their energy and their connection with the spirits (EMAVoicesOfTheEarth n.d.).

When *izangoma* throw bones, the bones' patterns indicate the course of action that should be taken. It can be easy (e.g., a small offering of food and conversation with the spirits) or it can involve a ritual killing. The animal used for the sacrifice is usually a goat, though some problems can be pacified through sacrificing chickens. *Izangoma* and their customers believe that an animal agrees to be killed. Some informants tell about goats, which would leave the herd and approach the *izangoma*. They then would not want to leave, allowing themselves to be transported and slaughtered. This is supposed to give them a better life in future. Personally, I have witnessed a chicken being chosen. Ngcobo needed chickens for a sacrifice, in order to bless a new *makhozini* (ancestors' hut) in which rituals are performed. He spent 30 minutes in the coop, waiting for hens to approach him and 'allow' themselves to be sacrificed⁴².

Animal sacrifice raises moral concerns. This was a problem for Hood, a white *isangoma* from the Midlands, who was a vegetarian when his calling started. He recounts that during *ukutwasa*, he learnt to connect to the natural environment, and he managed to understand animals (the ability that many *izangoma* claim to possess). During his meditations, animals spoke to

⁴¹ John Lockley was called at the age of 18 in 1989, when he served as a medic in the South African army during wars in Angola. Because of Apartheid, it took him seven years to find a teacher (Lockley n.d.).

⁴² Private conversation, March 2013.

him, including goats which are used as sacrificial animals all over Southern Africa. He told me that the goats' spirits said to him: 'We chose this incarnation to improve ourselves and help humans improve. What gives you right to stop us? If we come to you when a sacrifice is needed, you should let us be sacrificed'⁴³. Making an animal sacrifice is often more difficult for white *itwasa* and *izangoma*, simply because they are not used to killing animals, as they buy their meat packed in plastic at the shops. Nonetheless, white *izangoma* are expected to learn how to perform the same sacrificial rituals as black ones, which shows that their training by black *izangoma* is the same as in case of black *itwasa*.

Health problems can be cured not only by settling matters with spirits, but also with *muti*. *Izangoma* learn the healing properties of plants during their training. Like everywhere in the world, some plants have healing properties and are used by natural healers. *Izangoma* use herbs not only for physical healing, but also for rituals and communication with spirits. The most popular herb is *imphepho*, which is dried African sage. All my *izangoma* informants have stated that they use *imphepho* to heal and cleanse the space when customers come for a consultation, to call spirits, to clear their minds, and to cleanse newborn babies: 'The herb is in use since ancient times' said Ngcobo. 'I learnt about it from my teacher and he had learnt from his and so on. It's one of the first herbs *izangoma* have ever used and it's sacred. That's why each evening, when we sit around the fire, we all clean ourselves with its fumes'⁴⁴. Ngcobo cooperates with white *izangoma* and treats them as his equals.

White *izangoma* face problems that black ones do not. Traditionally, *izangoma* meet their customers in *makhozini*, an ancestor's hut. It looks like a rondavel – the round huts that are still being built in rural areas. Very often, building *makhozini* is a social effort: Women usually build the mud walls, while men do the thatched roof. If an *isangoma* lives in a predominantly white district, especially in a secure complex, building a rondavel is out of the question. Then a room at the house or an apartment is used as the 'spirits' room'. Reid, Siri Baker, and Claassens have invited me to their homes where they performed rituals. Often white neighbors are very reluctant to 'native traditions' such as the initiation of *itwasa* or cleansing rituals outside. When

⁴³ Private conversation, February 2018.

⁴⁴ Private conversation, March 2013.

drum beating, dancing, or other activities that could disturb the neighbors, are required, they perform the rituals in the countryside. The same applies to building a steam hut or a bonfire. White *izangoma* are forced to move the rituals to places of nature, often seeking out sacred places, such as the Fertility Cave, mentioned above, or isolated landscapes.

White ‘Real’ *Izangoma* or rather New Age Shamans?⁴⁵

Chidester considers white *izangoma* ‘a trend in contemporary neoshamanism in which aspiring Euro-American shamans are turning African traditions as a source of authentic dreams, visions, and connections’ (Chidester 2012:120). My informants emphasize the same process of *ukutwasa*, contacting spirits and using dreams, no matter to what ethnicity the *isangoma* belongs. Dreams have always been important for African *izangoma* and other ‘medicine people’ as means of communication with spirits and getting answers on how to deal with certain problems. Such information was given to researchers in the 19th and the 20th century (e.g., Callaway & Jung, quoted in Wreford 2008:53) and they are also expressed today. Dreams were ‘given force through an energetics of dreams’ (Chidester 2012:113) and demanded practical responses, even though informants complain that during colonialism, dreams became less vivid and meaningful. Many Zulus believe that, since the British had power over their land and lives, the power of dreams was partially transferred to the colonialists. Ancestral spirits were believed to communicate with their families through dreams, addressing certain problems and showing the way

⁴⁵ In an article in 2016, I wrote: ‘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; they 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 and shamanism. 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 keywords are: energy, spirituality, reincarnation, holistic approach to life, holistic healing, meditation, eco-awareness, uniqueness of each human being, Mother Nature rhetoric’ (Podolecka 2016:143). New Agers like to take part in shamanic workshops and many try to gain shamanic wisdom.

of resolving them. Dreams were considered ‘calls to action’, showing the way of life, giving meaning and enabling *izangoma* to help their communities. Hence, lacking part of that power, negatively influenced their abilities. Chidester points that in the 21st century, the situation is different because dreams are also ‘claimed’ by non-Zulus, e.g., white *izangoma* (Chidester 2012:112-113).

The same sentiments are experienced by other South African ethnic groups. The claim to use dreams as a source of knowledge is done by both black and white *izangoma*. All my informants emphasize the importance of dreams. Chidester points to the fact that dreams have become part of the pop culture and are used by people whose credentials as *izangoma* are not sufficient, e.g., white sangomas whom Chidester considers part of neoshamanism (Chidester 2012:114)⁴⁶. The denomination ‘neoshamanism’ is perceived as offensive by white *izangoma*, who often consider themselves part of the shamanic phenomenon, but definitely not part of the neoshamanism. The term underestimates the vocation and ability of real shamans, who went through the ordeal of the calling, apprenticeship, and initiation. Many white *izangoma* are not European or American, but are South Africans by birth and upbringing. However, Chidester points to the fact that numerous white *izangoma* offer their services in the United States, even though they ‘have not required formal initiation to claim indigenous African authenticity’ (Chidester 2012:120). Chidester’s argument to put all non-black people who claim to be *izangoma* within neoshamanism is considered unjust by those who had to go through the ordeal of *ubizo* and *ukutwasa* and, subsequently, new and often difficult lives as *izangoma*. My informants put emphasis on their calling and training, and agree that a weekend or a few weeks’ training is not enough to be called an *isangoma*. They also condemn the practice of offering short trainings to everyone who wants it. In such a case, the person can be called a neoshaman or a New Age shaman.

White *izangoma* often call themselves ‘shamans’. However, this does not undermine their value as ‘real’ *izangoma*, as they use social media to consciously attract customers. Black *izangoma* who do not advertise on the inter-

⁴⁶ Chidester (2012) analyzes several cases of Whites who call themselves *izangoma*, and Blacks who – in his opinion – are neoshamans rather than traditional *izangoma*. The analysis contains the case of Credo Mutwa, whose work as an *izangoma* and New Age shaman I have analyzed in two articles (Podolecka 2018; 2022).

net, rather use the term ‘*izangoma*’ or ‘*sangoma*’. They are rooted in their communities and are locally known. For native Africans, the term ‘*izangoma*’ or ‘*sangoma*’ has much more profound meaning than the term ‘shaman’. *Izangoma* calling and sickness are not unique to Southern Africa. This is a phenomenon present in shamanic cultures around the world. It unites people who are called to leave the world of *profanum* and step into the realm of *sacrum*, where they can communicate with spirits and deities.

Izangoma sickness can be compared with shamanic sickness: In both cases, a novice goes through illness and visions from ‘the other realm’. Shamanic sickness is well researched by academics. This phenomenon occurs in many cultures: Eliade recalls Siberian, North and Southern American, and Australian peoples (Eliade 2011:216). 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 it is real. Dreams are supposed to explain and justify the calling and validate the shaman’s role as a person who moved from the world of *profanum* to *sacrum*, and is ready to lend their expertise to the community to make people’s lives better (Eliade 2011:51, 53)⁴⁷. The process of healing is also a process of training during which novices learn how to venture into the spiritual world and to learn from it. This is one of the reasons why *izangoma* use the term ‘shaman’ to describe themselves, especially when engaging with the Westerners⁴⁸.

In the classical academic understanding, shamanism occurs in traditional ethnic cultures and is connected to religious beliefs. However, in the second part of the 20th century, shamanism became a focus point for New Agers and is now a part of the global New Age ideology:

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

⁴⁷ For more information about shamanic calling and sickness, cf. Lewis (2003); DuBois (2009); Znamenski (2013); Niatum (2014); and Jokic (2008).

⁴⁸ On the internet one may find *izangoma* who openly call themselves shamans, among them some of my informants, e.g., Mutwa, Claassens, Weber, Reid, and Lockley. Mutwa also refers to himself as an *isanusi*, the sage that not every *izangoma* can become. I have never met a white *izangoma* who would be considered *isanusi*, while other researchers do not report such cases.

strongly believe in the spiritual life and the fact that humans and Mother Nature have souls, they turned their interest to shamanism (Podolecka 2017:157).

They get in touch with *izangoma* (whom they perceive as shamans) and shamanic cultures from many parts of the world, and they organize trainings during which they learn how to draw energy from the natural environment and how to connect with nature. After several weeks of training, they often call themselves shamans. Westerners who have no academic or practical knowledge about shamanism believe in their ‘powers’ and pay for their workshops. Such people certainly cannot be called shamans or *izangoma*, for several reasons: They neither experienced the shamanic/*izangoma* sickness, nor did they suffer the hardship of a crashing ego and rebuilding themselves during a long apprenticeship. Claassens warns against believing every person who claims to be a shaman or an *izangoma*. Before the end of Apartheid, it was extremely difficult for white people to be trained, but after 1994, the influx started:

‘Many black sangomas saw it as an opportunity to make money and trained people who did not have a real calling but were simply spiritual. Also, many black sangomas who advertise themselves in newspapers as specialists in finding your true love in 28 days or healing all your sicknesses are fake. The real calling is very strict and it’s painful, so if someone doesn’t go through the sangoma sickness, *ukutwasa*, he or she cannot be a sangoma’⁴⁹.

White *izangoma*, who are trained in more than one system, often tend to mix healing methods, but it does not mean that they are impostors. Many went through *ukutwasa* and are properly initiated. Hood met me in his *makhozini* and told me about his work as an *izangoma*. Even though *makhozini* is an *izangoma* ancestors’ hut, it was decorated with symbols from South American shamanism and the Hindus because before he accepted *ubizo*, his *izangoma* calling, he was trained in other traditions. Those symbols are part of his personal history. Mixing modalities is not a problem for Hood. He finds it important to make the customer comfortable. When asked about my

⁴⁹ Private conversation with Claassens, February 2018.

problems, he used a Peruvian way of diagnosis because I had knowledge of how it worked, and he thought that I would feel safe when he used it⁵⁰.

Hood is not the only white *izangoma* who, in the beginning, tried to avoid his African calling and thought that he could choose an easier way. Lorna Clutney, a white South African who emigrated to the USA, received her calling at a mature age and began her training in native American shamanic tradition, combined with homeopathic healing used in Western medicine and in spiritual practices, connected with the belief in reincarnation and ancestral guidance. However, in 2010, her ancestors forced her to go for *ukutwasa* to South Africa⁵¹. Jeanne-Marie, a white South African, received her calling when she was a 19-year old psychology student. After she obtained her BA degree, she tried to reject the calling by engaging in training in physical rehabilitation. Then she studied Andean forms of energetic and spiritual healing and was initiated to the first and second levels of learning at the Inkari Order⁵². Rian Potgieter also tried ‘to trick the spirits by other training’ and became a Reiki master (a natural healer) and was initiated into the Peruvian shamanic tradition and eventually became an *izangoma*. He treats patients with either *izangoma* or the Peruvian shamanic methods⁵³.

Those white *izangoma* who try to combine different kinds of healing practices, recommend meditation to their customers/patients and talk about karmic burden, which must be addressed and healed if someone wants to live a healthy and prosperous life. However, not every white *isangoma* believes in mixing modalities, even if – apart from being an *isangoma* – they are also trained in American or Siberian traditions. Reid, Claassens, Weber, and other white *izangoma* have a wide knowledge of different shamanic traditions, but when they treat their patients, they use methods from the African tradition. One of my Ndebele informants had *itwasa* in Europe. Another young woman was trained in Siberia, but when she came to South Africa, she received the calling into the African tradition. She shared her Siberian shamanic wisdom

⁵⁰ Private meeting, February 2018.

⁵¹ Private conversation, March 2013.

⁵² Private conversation, March 2013. The Inkari Order is a movement, which does not require a membership and is open to everyone. The organizers emphasize the power of love and forgiveness, claiming their ideology is mainly based on ancient Peruvian spirituality.

⁵³ Private conversation, March 2013.

with her teacher, but currently she never mixes the two traditions⁵⁴. White *izangoma* are not revolutionizing the black *izangoma* tradition. They rather follow it and are proud of being part of it. They also do not choose their patients/customers and their *itwasa* on racial or cultural grounds. They are proud to fit in, no matter how educated they are.

According to all my informants, real *izangoma* are those who underwent *ukutwasa*, were initiated, and work in the South African tradition. They can be trained in other traditions as well and use other techniques, but without *ukutwasa* and public recognition of their training and graduation, they are not *izangoma*. *Izangoma* have the same duties and prerogatives as Siberian or native American shamans, so I find it justified to call them shamans, though – as I have already mentioned – it happens in big towns and usually among white or mixed-origins *izangoma*. People who underwent a few weeks of ‘*izangoma* training’ and work on their spirituality, are more New Age ‘shamans’ or just fakes because in every shamanic culture the rules of calling and training are strict and undiscussable.

Conclusion

Even though there are black *izangoma* who oppose the initiation of Whites into *ubungoma*, the increasing number of white *itwasa* is a proof that more and more black *izangoma* are open to cooperate with white ones, and this process is unlikely to stop. As *izangoma* of all skin colors frequently try to bridge racial prejudices, they often ‘mediate effectively between racial and cultural categories [and] this mediation is an essential element of...ancestral calling’ (Teppo 2011:238). They are mediators between the following worlds: Physical and spiritual, modern and traditional, African and Western, and *ubungoma* and other shamanic traditions, though the latter is rarely observed among black *izangoma*. All my informants, both *izangoma* and their customers, did their best to convince me that there was no racial issue in the case of professionalism and the abilities amongst the white and black *izangoma*, as long as they were called by spirits and properly trained and initiated. Racism happens in every society and when someone is a racist, they will divide people on the base of skin color, and choose an *isangoma* of their own color or ethnic group. Yet, in the 21st century, where racial mixing in South Africa is a

⁵⁴ Private conversation, February 2018.

progressive factor, it becomes more and more difficult for black *izangoma* not to cooperate with the white ones, either on a teacher/student basis or during ceremonies and spiritual gatherings. All white *izangoma* that I have met, were trained by the amaZulu and the amaXhosa, but some of my Ndebele informants told me that they had also trained white people. All white *izangoma* that I have interviewed in the last 10 years, report the same ordeal of calling and training as that of the black *izangoma* – these are the same requirements for all races. White *ubungoma* is a growing phenomenon and – as many white *izangoma* are better educated than black ones – their knowledge about different healing techniques also mixes with the traditional African *izangoma* healing. White *izangoma* are both the creation of new quality (especially those who add non-African shamanic practices to African ones) and new members of traditional healing-divining practices. They cross many boundaries in order to satisfy their customers’/patients’ needs. These are racial and cultural boundaries between which they mediate religion and medicine, combine urban and rural beliefs and traditions, and bring white and black people together. White *izangoma* are sometimes influenced by the New Age energy work and traditions of various shamanic cultures (in this way they differ from traditional *izangoma*), but they often pass their wide knowledge on to their black *itwasa* and in this way they slightly influence the native traditions. On the one hand, it is a novelty (black *izangoma* talking about chakras and karma), and on the other, white *izangoma* are often more grounded in African traditions than the black ones who grew up, being uprooted, and influenced by the non-African traditions. In spite of resentment showed by some towards white *izangoma*, the latter deserve to be accepted in *ubungoma* if they go through the same process of becoming *izangoma* and fulfil the same duties as their black counterparts.

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