

# CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIELD

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## *Sangoma Medicine — How it Works*

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When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge. (Albert Einstein)

To most Westerners indigenous African techniques are at best puzzling and at worst smack of witchcraft. The West is replete with technological wonders. Our communication network is a veritable marvel with the likes of satellite phones, fax machines, and the Internet. Yet ancient African wisdom has a lot to teach us about communication. There is a realm of spirit, but there is also a veil that must be penetrated if we wish to communicate with this potential source of guidance. Most Westerners do not have the techniques to pierce the veil; *sangomas* do. Sangoma medicine is very practical. If you have lost a cow, the *inyanga* can throw the bones and tell you where to go and look for it. The techniques are evidential and have stood the test of time. The explanations in this essay will shed some light on how they work and the philosophies behind their practices.

There are several *Bantu* groups in Southern Africa. The *Nguni*, who are the majority, comprise the *Zulu*, *Swazi*, and *Xhosa* and share a common language. The others comprise the *Sotho* and *Tswana* (similar language) *Venda*, and *Tsonga* (or *Shangaan*). The shamans of both groups are called sangomas and *inyangas*. The key to their healing states is the ability to harness *Kundalini* energy, usually without the use of mind-altering plants.

Distant diagnosis and distant healing have been used by these people for thousands of years. Their healers are also able to manipulate the power of belief and faith, or placebo. Placebo is a primary tool for the sangoma. In Western medicine, randomized, controlled, double-blind studies are conducted to test therapeutic effects 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. This is especially true in cases of spontaneous remission from "incurable" diseases, where studies have shown that the one overriding common denominator was a powerful belief, usually based on a strong religious or spiritual foundation, that all would be well.

While 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, or *muti*. 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. Indigenous healers are usually highly influential and powerful people who are able to 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.



Sangomas, especially the Nguni, use drumming and dancing to help channel the ancestors. All tribes obtain information from the ancestors through the mediums of dreams and the divining “bones.” A sangoma may see a plant in a dream that she will later dispense to the appropriate patient. Possession or spirit mediumship among the Nguni peoples is usually overt and extroverted, whereas amongst the other tribes 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, is 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 will change as she becomes the channel for a particular ancestor. 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. Since most of the spirits are African, they request traditional attire, but a foreign spirit can make a special request that 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 bodies. The tremendous energy and skill necessary to achieve this state can be remarkable and add conviction to the fact that the healer is in a profoundly altered state of consciousness. Many times the channel would seem incapable of performing in this fashion unless she was in fact “possessed.”

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. All tribes believe in a single Great Spirit, or God (*Umkulunkulu* in Zulu, *Modimo* in Sotho), who, however, 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.

In Nguni tradition, in addition to ancestral spirits there are terrestrial spirits, cosmic spirits (*ndzau*), and water spirits (*nzunzu*) who are very powerful. Foreign spirits unrelated to the family also exist. They may be friendly or not. Frequently 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 because, for instance, someone’s dead grandfather or relative killed them long ago. These bad spirits can be exorcised by *Femba*, a form of psychic diagnosis and psycho-spiritual surgery, or exorcism. Bad spirits are capable of causing significant harm.

Reincarnation plays an important role in African philosophy, and family members may reincarnate into their own families. Because of this, black Africans whose traditions are intact believe that “the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children.” Psychology may attribute this to unskillful parenting, which leads to hurtful influence and bad conditioning of the child. African philosophy goes further than this in holding that not only can unhappy and dysfunctional spirits affect their progeny from the beyond but also that a dysfunctional spirit can reincarnate into their blood line 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.

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: the spirit of a two-legged or four-legged animal, such as a chicken or goat, goes directly to the spirit of the ancestor to appease him or her and neutralize a grievance or problem. It is the cry of the sacrificial animal that immediately gains the attention of the spirits. A sheep, because it does not usually cry out when slaughtered, is used less frequently than goats and chickens. A cow may be sacrificed in special situations, for instance during the graduation of a student or if requested by an ancestor.

Since 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 nefarious deed, everyone is healed, and another cycle of karmic dysfunction in the family is averted or lessened. Forgiveness and acceptance are the keys here. They are 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, the problem may not only have a harmful effect on the living in this lifetime but could continue into the next incarnation.

#### *Thwasa*

Spirits sometimes feel the need to complete the healing work they never finished while in human form and will choose a suitable family member who is alive to act as a channel for this mission. The person who is called becomes "possessed" by the ancestor who draws attention to her needs by making the elected one ill. The symptoms can take many forms: psychosis, severe headaches, intractable stomach pain, shoulder, and neck complaints, among others. This patient may go to a Western-trained doctor who will be unable to find anything wrong. However, a traditional healer will immediately recognize the syndrome, tell the patient that he is possessed by the ancestors, and inform him that he must undergo initiation. Failure to respond to the calling will often lead to more illness until the person concedes and goes to be trained. This training process is called *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 potential *Thwasa* alternatively 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 masterful the healer and the more potent the ancestors, the more effective the *muti*. This phenomenon is another example of the combination of placebo and distant healing. The *mutis* 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. In the West we now know that people can be healed by distant healing or prayer even if they are unaware that they are 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. In most of the studies the findings were so convincing that, if the prayer had been a drug, the doctors would have wanted to use it for all patients.

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, container, or special request to the ancestor for healing. Since the ancestors have access to universal healing energy, they have the ability to cure anything. Each muti carries a different message about what is needed for that particular problem. There is a mutual understanding between healer and ancestor based on tradition, dreams, and empiricism as to what plant to use for a particular problem. Different tribes and various healers may use the same plant for distinct effects.

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 may be adopted to bring rain, and bark or roots that are red can be utilized to treat blood or menstrual disorders. In this way there are some similarities with the principles of homeopathy.

Medicines can be administered in various ways: 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 (such as marital problems), 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 one's 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. In some traditions there is no walking in the *ndumba*; instead the healer will hobble forward on her knees. Snuff, preferably made of home-grown tobacco, is a frequent offering used in rituals. A sage-like plant called *mpepo* is burned to attract the attention of the ancestors. Since the ancestors cannot communicate with the living in the normal way, special techniques to "bridge the 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, and then they will repay the gesture in kind. The ancestors are always fed when there is a ritual involving food or sacrifice. Sorghum beer or regular beer or wine may be offered at the same time.

Many tribes have an amaryllis plant in the homestead where the ancestors reside, and offerings will be made to this plant while holding conversation 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 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. Trees are important, and some traditions support the idea of a "trouble" tree to which someone can go and tell one's troubles.

Femba, the African equivalent of psychic diagnosis and surgery, is used to get rid of malevolent or intruding spirits that are getting in the way of a person's progress in life. Houses or dwellings of any sort, farms,

garments, belongings, cars, and businesses 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.

#### *The Role of the Sangoma*

To the sangoma, each helper spirit, foreign or ancestral, 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 in human form. For instance the ancestor who helps read the bones may have been a sangoma while alive, the other an herbalist, and another a business person.

#### *Witchcraft and Illness*

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 that they can work more effectively against their competition.

There are three main causes of illness: the ancestors, witchcraft or sorcery, and pollution. Illness can also just be physical and have no clear explanation, or it may come directly from God. Even benevolent ancestors may indirectly cause illness by turning away from their progeny. If the ancestors feel that they are being ignored, they may cause harm by omission rather than commission. In feeling neglected, they may abandon their loved ones and no longer afford them protection. Sometimes an ancestor may want a loved one to join him on the other side, which can result in sickness. Malevolent ancestors, and especially vindictive foreign spirits who may have been wronged, can also cause illness, misfortune, accidents, and even death for the descendants of those who have wronged them. All these possibilities can be counteracted by the right 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 relationships 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 are usually female, and the trait is thought to be inherited. A sorcerer is usually male, and the attribute is acquired.

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", a area of influence which is non-denominational or spiritually neutral. Evil messages go through the "Field" just as effectively as do healing ones. Illness and misfortune can also occur because of hexes imposed by these malevolent people. The general term *witchdoctor*, sometimes used by



whites in South Africa to embrace all traditional healers, is not only inaccurate but also demeaning and insulting. Most of those who work in the "Field" work on the light side for the sake of good and not bad.

Sorcerers use herbs, poisons, and body exuviae of their victims (hair, nails, urine, and so on). The law of contagion states that once two things are in contact they can affect one another. Hence the importance of exuviae for sorcery. The hair or nail from the victim can be used with harmful muti to cause illness or even death.

Witches ride or send "familiar" to perform their treacherous deeds. Familiars include spotted hyenas, baboons, polecats, weasels, genets, wildcats, snakes, owls, and bats. Witches are said to sometimes ride these animals backwards sometimes or even to use the rib cage of the larger familiars to transport themselves. 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 black Africans, to protect themselves from intrusions at night, will raise their beds up on several bricks.

It is thought that most witches can only operate over short distances and that the witch's power becomes ineffective if the victim moves to another home a reasonable distance away. Homesteads can be protected from witches by muti containing the blood or fat of an animal (a sheep, pig, or goat). The muti can be impregnated on wooden pegs or smeared on stones that are driven into or buried in the ground around the homestead. Since the power of the witch has *Fisa* (Sotho for heat), it can be neutralized by sea water and urine, which are cool.

Sometimes witches and sorcerers are used as scapegoats. Before the arrival of Europeans in the African interior, witches were sniffed out and eliminated by the head sangoma who attended to the chief. In this way unfavorable circumstances, such as drought, could be blamed on the witch and be officially corrected.

Pollution 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 or ritual impurity include miscarriages, abortions, birth (especially of twins), illness, war, crime, death (especially murder), burial, menses, pregnancy, sex (a sangoma who needs to perform a sacred ritual will cleanse him/herself after sex), a journey, meat of an animal that died of disease, and pork. A husband is polluted for at least one month after the death of his wife or child, and a wife for one month after the death of her husband.

#### *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.

#### *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). 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 polarities. The bones represent all of the forces that affect any human being, 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 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.

Quantum physics has taught us that the observer has an effect on the way quantum particles behave and reflects how a similar Field of "coherence" may be occurring with the divining bones. Experiments at Princeton University (Princeton Engineering Anomalies Laboratory, or PEAL) have shown that human thoughts can influence a machine called a Random Numbers (or Events) Generator (RNG), not only in the present but also in the past and in the future. Shifts in the random numbers can even occur if the projected thoughts are sent by individuals miles away from the machine. Robots that move along a fixed predetermined path can also be made to change their programmed route by an outside observer. The intention of the diviner, the patient, and the ancestors or some force from the Field may change the way the bones lie when they fall. This means that the throw is not random but instead is predetermined by the spirit that presides.

Before throwing the bones, the healer invokes the ancestors by giving snuff, kneeling and clapping, and rattling or chanting a song. 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 asked and answered. Each question is answered by a separate throw of all the bones.

Different traditions assign different meanings to the bones or objects, and any particular teacher may have her own method, which she passes on to the student. The Thwasa student will need to stay with this particular system because an agreement is made among the ancestor, the mentor, and the student so that all three of them understand how each bone is assigned. Although there is an intellectual component to divining, the reading is for the most part highly intuitive, and the bones act as a way of getting the rational left brain out of the way so that the right brain can do its clairvoyant work. The sangoma's ego is put aside since it is the ancestor, and not the healer, who is providing the information.

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 that can be read by the sangoma whose training has taught him to diagnose past and present ailments and to predict future occurrences with extraordinary accuracy. It seems that a mini-Field of attention, intention, and coherence is set up among the healer, the patient, and the ancestors and allows the bones to lie in an intelligent pattern. The healer then interprets the metaphor the bones represent.

The reading is usually concerned with what is happening at that moment in the patient's life. Since 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 patient if she agrees and, if so, will continue along the same line of exploration. If the patient disagrees, the healer will read another polarity or look at the same polarity in a different way. Correct interpretation will come with the help of the ancestor and as the patient gains experience over time, but is seldom offered dogmatically. Usually the patient is well aware

of what is going on in her 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 or sacrifices offered to ask the ancestors to improve the relationship. Bone readings are usually concerned with helping people deal with their current dilemmas—marital discord, money trouble, and other problems. But the bones also can 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 brought to bear on the present moment. Far-reaching and accurate prophecy is difficult since free will is ever-present and may shift the variables and alter the future.

### *Conclusion*

It is an interesting reversal that, as more and more black people in South Africa are drawn to a Western way of life, more and more whites are seeking out the wisdom of ancient Africa. Sangomas are ubiquitous in South Africa, and they continue to play a pivotal role in the health and wholeness of the post-Apartheid new South Africa.

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