

Journey of an American Sangoma

By Gretchen Crilly McKay

My love affair with Africa began many years ago. When I made my first trek in 1994, I knew my soul had returned home. Then in 1999 a consultation with a Zulu *sangoma* (shaman) changed my life.

In the summer of 1999, Traditional Doctor Petros Hezekial Mtshali, lovingly known as Baba P.H., joined Susan Schuster Campbell in the United States for a lecture tour. He gave presentations and consultations from the East Coast to the West. He found many American “traditional healers” but said that Americans had lost their ancestors.

It was during my own consultation with TD Mtshali, “Baba P.H.,” that he diagnosed me as a healer. He explained that the reason I was experiencing so many difficulties in my life was that I was not following the path my ancestors wanted for me. They were “calling” me to be a traditional healer, a long-forgotten gift inherited from both my maternal and paternal lineages. Baba assured me that if I were willing to accept the call, the ancestors would guide me on an accelerated path. His words reverberated in my head and heart. I left in tears, knowing that Mr. Mtshali spoke the truth.

I had been practicing shamanism, taking classes through the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, since the mid-1990s, but now it was time to enter the ancient teachings and initiations in Africa. Through dreams and shamanic journeying, I was being called to this path of the *sangoma* where the ancestors were honored and respected in daily life.

Traditional Doctor Mtshali lived near Siteki, Swaziland where he ran the Luvenga Traditional Clinic. A college educated agriculturist-turned-traditional doctor, Baba Mtshali has practiced as a healer for more than 50 years, specializing in cancer, diabetes, and sexually transmitted diseases; is a founding father and active member of the International Traditional Healers Organization (THO) in Swaziland; presented at the

1999 Comprehensive Cancer Care Conference in Washington D.C.; gave presentations and private consultations throughout the United States in the summer of 1999; took part in the 18th Conference on Environmental Education of Southern Africa in 2000; and, until recently, had a private healing practice and mentored *thwasas* (*sangoma* trainees), both of African and European ancestry.

African people share a common understanding of the importance of seeking guidance from deceased relatives in daily life. When they have lost touch with their ancestors, illness or bad luck may result. Then a *sangoma* is sought out who may prescribe herbs, modification of lifestyle, a career move, or changes in relationships. The client may also be told to perform a ceremony or purification ritual to appease the ancestors and bring about the desired spiritual healing. *Sangoma*, like shaman throughout the world, believe that they are here for only one purpose, to heal through love and compassion, and take an oath to cause no harm.

A *sangoma* is able to access advice and guidance from the ancestors for her patients in three ways: trance-possession, or channeling; throwing bones; and interpreting dreams. Through drumming and dancing the *sangoma* moves into a trance-possessed state where her ancestor, or *amadlozi*, enters her body and communicates directly with the patient, providing specific information about his problem. When the *sangoma* throws bones for a patient, the ancestors control how they lie and the *sangoma*, with the assistance of her ancestors, interprets the story they tell to the client. Dream analysis is also an important practice for helping clients.

An apprentice *sangoma*, called a *thwasa*, studies with a mentor for up to two years and must learn how to prepare herbs, how to incorporate spirits, how to diagnose illness through divination, and how to heal both physical and spiritual illness. Through the ritual use of *muthi* (herbal medicine), steaming, purification, dreaming, and dancing in a trance-like state to drumming, the initiate becomes bound to his or her ancestors who have chosen her for this work. The mentor's job is to work with the *thwasa's* ancestral spirits, alleviating any conflicts or problems among them.

THE JOURNEY

In July of 2000 I traveled to Swaziland to stay with P.H. and his family at their homestead. It wasn't until I got to Swaziland that I discovered how difficult this path would be. In spite of the fact that I had been traveling to Africa for years, often staying in the homes of African friends, this experience was a culture shock. The daily life of Baba P.H.'s rural homestead was different and I was ten thousand miles from home with no support. I felt out of sync and unsure of my surroundings – the perfect setting for the ancestors to take me deeply into the journey of finding my true self and connecting with my soul's purpose.

During this visit P.H. worked with me and confirmed that I was called by the ancestors when one channeled through me during drumming one night. Because my practice of shamanism in the United States had clearly indicated that this was exactly where I needed to be, I committed to take on the *ukuthwasa* training.

The *kuthwasa* initiation period is difficult and involves testing, not only of psychic ability, but extreme physical and mental endurance as well. Surrender and trust are required throughout the training and daily rituals are performed to prepare the initiate to pass various tests and graduate.

I spent several weeks with P.H. and other healers during this first visit. Everything I was instructed to do was focused around prayer, ritual and ceremony. The sacred was in every act, every bit of work. There were morning rituals followed by the unfolding of daily activities: chores, going to town, work for the ancestors. A morning and evening ritual of eating bubbles (*muthi* that is the food of the ancestors) and daily steaming were also a regular routine. Purification ceremonies, including animal sacrifice, were performed to initiate me into the work with my ancestors and P.H. began teaching me an African system of throwing the bones.

Throwing the bones is an ancient African divination tool for diagnosing illness and problems connected to ancestral issues. The practitioner collects shells and objects that her ancestors choose to personalize her set but the actual bones come from the mentor. They have been gathered according to sacred law and then are blessed before being given to the *thwasa*. The process of defining what each object represents is time consuming and requires much interaction with the ancestors. When the bones are thrown onto a mat, they create a story that the practitioner must “read” and share with the client. Through a loving and carefully told story, the person seeking guidance evokes his or her own inner healer and connects with the ancestors who want to assist in their curing process.

After a few weeks with Baba P.H., I returned to California, agreeing to come back the following summer to complete the *ukuthwasa* process and graduate. At home I continued the daily rituals to honor my ancestral spirits and practiced throwing the bones, using my shamanic training for guidance.

In the summer of 2001 I returned to P.H.’s with the intention of completing my *thwasa* training and qualifying as a *sangoma*. My goal was to learn to communicate with my ancestors, making them strong in me, for the purpose of healing others.

I was quickly immersed into the traditional training and life on the homestead. Dancing, where one of my ancestral spirits was asked to find hidden objects, followed evening rituals. Through these exercises I was learning to listen to the guidance of my ancestors and to see through their eyes, which would be important when I needed to provide guidance for a client or locate the source of illness within the body.

The drummers would begin the traditional rhythm for calling the ancestors and I allowed the spirit of an ancestor to enter my body. As an ancestor trance-possessed me I would feel an urgency to dance and move the spirit through the room. After dancing for some time, the ancestor would sit down and the mentors began asking the ancestor if they had anything they wanted to say. Baba P.H. wanted to know where each

ancestor was from, what his or her mission was, and how he could be of assistance in the integration process.

At sunrise one morning I was instructed to prepare for a visit to the prophet for more divination and instruction. We drove many miles into the *highveld* along rocky unpaved roads until we came to the home of the prophet, a Zionist priest. He spoke only siSwati but through P.H.'s wife, Miriam, I was told that I had both maternal and paternal ancestors with me but there was conflict between them as to who was in charge. They were not working together which is necessary for a healer to be successful. He also said that I had a foreign ancestor, *amundawe*, who was a prophet but not active yet. To rectify this situation I was to receive purification at the sacred waterfall. I was also told that I must pray to my ancestors, both paternal and maternal, morning and evening, honoring each one individually to the best of my ability, asking them for their support and guidance.

Thus began the first phase of aligning my ancestors. In the quiet protection of a papaya tree I called out the names of each one, remembering their lives and the gifts passed on to me through them. I repeated this ceremony morning and evening for the next five days.

WATER SPIRIT INITIATION

At the end of this period, on a cold overcast morning, we headed to the sacred river for the purification ritual. The entire day was full of omens and blessings beginning with a white goat that appeared at the side of the road as we left the homestead. As we began the journey along the dangerous path to the sacred pool, two white egrets landed next to the car, on my side. A blessing and encouragement indeed!

Miriam, Jonga "Martin" Mayeza (a Bushman *sangoma* from Cape Town visiting the homestead), several other Swazis, and myself went high into the mountains to an ancient waterfall and river for the most sacred of ceremonies. The drive to the prophet's house had been long and treacherous but the road to the river was ten times

worse! The little “ancestor bus,” a bright red Volkswagen I had rented, kept trudging on but sputtered and died many times during the trek.

Once we had reached the site, we gathered the ceremonial supplies, and began to hike into the mountains. Eventually we reached a magnificent fifty-foot waterfall surrounded by ancient forests that cascaded into a pristine pool. Large yellow butterflies flitted everywhere. The prophet’s assistant lit a fire. Each of the participants spit in the four directions and Miriam put *muthi* in a bucket with water from the sacred river for bathing. We were instructed to light seven colored candles and place them near the pool. Martin and I threw coins into the river as an offering to the Water Spirits of the place and prayed. We each held one of the chickens we had brought for sacrifice near the pool and beseeched our ancestors to help us through this test. I held mine as the prophet went through the beheading which would have been difficult for me had I not been praying and thanking the chickens for their willing sacrifice while they had been at the homestead. I was peaceful, feeling that they were surrendering in agreement. It was as if this was their destiny and they knew it.

Throughout each phase of the ritual the prophet was in trance, praying in siSwati. One by one he called each participant into the freezing pool, first Miriam, then Martin, and finally me. I took several objects in with me that the ancestors had instructed me to bring, things that would bind me to my ancestors. The prophet prayed and dunked me as he sang. The morning had remained overcast and cool but as I floated in the water I felt a powerful light come into me, a connection to the Divine, and I began to channel an angelic song. I felt the light surging through my body, lifting me in ecstasy. The prophet told me to dunk myself in the frigid water seven times, praying throughout the process.

Afterwards we washed with the *muthi* and changed. The chickens had been cooked and we spit some of it in the four directions and then some into the river before enjoying the delicious meat. It was one of the most amazing, sacred experiences of my life.

GRADUATION

Several days prior to graduation, two friends from the U.S. arrived to represent my American family. Maureen Phelan came to be my "sister" and constant companion, helping me throughout the two weeks prior to graduation. Jessie Haugabook, who later came back to *kuthwasa* and graduate as *sangoma*, took videotape of the three days of ritual and ceremony. It was so good to have familiar faces from home to support me during my graduation.

The tests began on Thursday afternoon when I had to identify the cow that the Mtshali family was gifting my ancestors. Initially I doubted my ability to find the right cow; however I allowed my ancestors to guide me and with little effort I was able to walk right up to the chosen one. It was a good beginning!

On Friday, visitors, including neighboring *sangoma*, began to arrive. The celebration began in the evening and continued through Monday with food, drumming, dancing, and ceremony. Many of the guests stayed three or more days.

Saturday was the actual graduation when my qualification took place. In order to qualify I had to be trance-possessed throughout the day. There were tests, ceremony, dancing, finding hidden things, and participating in a water ritual that ended in a cutting ceremony where energy-infused *muthi* was put into my body. After months of rigorous preparation, I successfully graduated in front of a large group of beautiful Swazis, friends from home, and a handful of South Africans of European descent. Under the loving guidance of my ancestors, I found my hidden goat and other objects. I participated in ancient ceremonies and reveled in the wonder of it all. It was an incredibly sacred experience with great celebration.

After the festivities were over, the rhythm of life returned to normal. Days were filled with working around the homestead, cleaning my goatskin, cooking, and carrying water back to the house either from the tank or the reservoir. During this time I began to internalize the months of *ukuthwasa* before returning home.

SANGOMA IN AMERICA

The work of a *sangoma* in America is different than those in Africa. Americans are a blend of many ethnicities and cultures. Our ancestral heritage is mixed and most of my clients are disconnected from their ancestors. How do we restore these relationships and honor the ancestral lineage? The diversity of Americans' cultural heritage must be expressed in a new way. Yet it is essential that we reconnect for personal and family healing.

My years I spent with Baba P.H. in Africa were priceless. The power of For me the path of the *sangoma* has brought personal and family healing. The training I received in Africa has merged with my shamanic training in the United States. The world is changing and shamanism evolves to meet the needs of our changing world. I am honored to serve as a bridge between the ancestors and their descendants on earth. As I work with clients who are seeking healing for family patterns and hereditary dis-ease, I discover that the ancient path of the *sangoma* offers solutions, guidance, and healing of core issues, bringing forgiveness and peace for the past, the present and the future. *Thokoza!*

FURTHER READING

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