

# Journey of an American Sangoma

By Gretchen Crilly McKay

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

Throughout Africa traditional healers hold an esteemed and powerful position in society. Their role is that of physician, counselor, psychiatrist, and priest. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other official groups acknowledge the potential effectiveness of traditional healers as primary health givers and their importance in the fight against HIV and AIDS. WHO also supports the integration of western medicine and traditional healing, encouraging referrals between the two groups. In Southern Africa the Traditional Healers Organization (THO) is recognized by the government and WHO as professional specialists, promoting quality indigenous systems of health care in the rural areas.

African people share a common understanding of the importance of ancestors in daily life. When they have lost touch with their ancestors, illness may result or bad luck. Then a traditional healer, or *sangoma*, is sought out who may prescribe herbs, changes in lifestyle, a career change, or changes in relationships. The client may also be told to perform some ceremony or purification ritual to appease the ancestors. Master healers believe that we are here for only one purpose, to heal through love and compassion.

A *sangoma* is a traditional healer of southern Africa who is “possessed” by his or her ancestors, or *amadlozi*. The *sangoma* is a mediator between people and their ancestral spirits. It is a calling, not a chosen profession. An apprentice *sangoma*, called a *thwasa*, studies with a mentor for up to two years and must learn how to prepare herbal medicines, how to interpret dreams, how to incorporate spirits, how to diagnose illness through divination with bones, and how to heal both physical and spiritual illness. Through the ritual use of *muti* (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 ancestors, alleviating any conflicts or problems among them. I believe that embodying one’s ancestors is a gift representing a close link with God through the ancestors. A *sangoma* may not cause any harm - the calling requires that the healer use her gifts only for good.

A *sangoma* is her ancestors. They reincarnate in her to accomplish a work that needs to be done, a return to the work of healing. It isn’t that the *sangoma* has no will or life but she lives life in accordance to the will of the ancestors who work through her body. They are loving and want joy for her.

In the summer of 1999, Traditional Doctor Petros Hezekial Mtshali joined Susan 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 he said that, overall, Americans had lost their ancestors. It was at my own consultation with P.H. that he diagnosed me as a healer. He said that the reason I was experiencing so many difficulties in my life was that I was not following the path my ancestors wanted. They were “calling” me to be a traditional healer and they would

guide me on an accelerated path. His words reverberated in my heart and head. I left in tears, knowing that Mr. Mtshali spoke the truth.

Traditional Doctor Petros Hezekial Mtshali, lovingly known as P.H., lives near Siteki, Swaziland where he runs the Luvenga Traditional Clinic. A college educated agriculturist-turned-traditional doctor, Mr. Mtshali has practiced as a traditional 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); 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 continues to see patients and mentor *thwasas* both of African and European ancestry.

In July of 2000 I traveled to Swaziland to stay with P.H. and his family at being called by my ancestors when they trance-possessed me during drumming one night. I had been practicing shamanism in the United States for several years and the ancestors had been using this work as a “tool” to reach me prior to finding P.H. Now they flourished under this ancient ancestral tradition, changing and enriching my life forever.

I spent several weeks with P.H. and other healers. 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 (herbs that are the food of the ancestors) and daily steaming were also a regular routine. Purification ceremonies were performed to initiate me into the work with my ancestors and P.H. began teaching me an African system called “throwing the bones.”

Throwing the bones is an ancient 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 *sangoma*. 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 from a bag 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.

When I returned to California I continued the daily ritual of eating the bubbles and practiced throwing the bones, using my shamanic training for guidance. I spent the next year working with my ancestors and preparing to go back to Swaziland to finish my training. 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.

Traditional doctor Mtshali told me that he must teach my ancestors to wake up, to give me their unlimited sight. The first step in achieving this was dancing my ancestors. Evening rituals were followed by dancing where one of my four ancestral spirits were asked to find hidden objects. Through these exercised the ancestors were teaching me their way of communicating with me for the purpose of locating illness within a client. 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. P.H. wanted to know where each ancestor was from, what their mission was, and what attire they wanted to wear when they were embodying me.

At sunrise one morning I was instructed to prepare for a visit to the prophet for more divination and direction. 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 Miriam's (P.H.'s wife) translation I was told that I had both maternal and paternal ancestors with me but there was some conflict between them as to who was in charge. They were not working together as a unit which is necessary for a healer to be successful. He also said that I had a foreign ancestor, a *mundawe*, who would be working through me in the future. 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 ancestor. I repeated this ceremony morning and evening for the next five days.

At the end of this period, on a cold overcast morning, we headed to the sacred river for the purification ritual. Miriam, Martin (a Bushman *sangoma* 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 was 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. 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 road to the sacred pool, two white egrets landed next to the car, on my side. A blessing and encouragement indeed!

Once we had reached the site we had to hike into the mountain, carrying supplies for the ceremony. At the top of the hill there was a fifty foot waterfall surrounded by ancient forests which cascaded into a pristine pool. It was magnificent! 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. I was 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 ancestral spirits of the place and prayed. We each held one of the chickens we had brought for sacrifice near the pool and prayed to our ancestors. I held mine as the prophet went through the beheading which would have been very difficult for me had I not been praying and thanking the chickens for their willing sacrifice while they had been at the homestead. I had peace, 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 objects in with me which the ancestors had instructed me to bring -- a mirror and a brass bracelet to bind me to my ancestors. The prophet prayed and dunked me as he sang. The morning had remained overcast and cool but as I stood in

the water I felt a powerful light come into me and I began to sing a beautiful 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. It was one of the most amazing, sacred experiences of my life.

After two rigorous months of sacred work I graduated in front of 100 beautiful Swazis, a dear friend from home, and a handful of white South Africans. In order to qualify I had to be trance-possessed throughout the day by my ancestors. Under their loving guidance I found my hidden goat and other objects. I participated in ancient sacred ceremonies and reveled in the wonder of it all.

Several days prior to graduation two friends from the U.S. arrived to represent my American family and friends. Maureen Phelan became my "sister" and constant companion, helping me throughout the two weeks that she was there. Jessie Haugabook took video tape of various events. It was so good to have familiar faces from home to support me during my graduation ceremony.

The "tests" began on Thursday afternoon when I had to find and identify the cow that was a gift to my ancestors from the Mtshali family. On Friday, visitors, including neighboring *sangomas*, began to arrive. The celebration began Friday evening and continued until Monday with food, drumming, dancing, and ceremony. Saturday was the actual graduation day when my qualification took place. Throughout the day I was involved in rituals, ceremonies, dancing, finding hidden things like my goat, and participating in a water ritual which ended in a ceremony where energy-infused *muthi* was put into my body. It was an incredibly sacred experience.

After all the festivities were over, the rhythm of life returned to normal. Days were filled with working around the homestead, cleaning my goat skin, cooking, and carrying water back to the house either from the tank or the reservoir.

The work of a *sangoma* in America is different than in Africa. We are a blend of many ethnicities and cultures — our ancestral heritage is mixed and many of our clients are disconnected from their ancestors. How do we restore these relationships and heal our lineages? We come from diverse backgrounds - Irish, Scottish, Celtic, African, Nordic, Germanic, Latin, European, Asian roots. Our heritage must be expressed in a new way, different from the manner in which our ancient ancestors expressed themselves. Yet it is essential that we reconnect for the healing of ourselves and our families.

I am honored to serve as a bridge between the ancestors in the Other World 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 answers, guidance, and healing or core issues, bringing forgiveness and peace for the ancestors, living family members, and future descendants. *Thokosa!*