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FRENCH INSTITUTE OF SOUTH AFRICA

Bodies and Politics

*Healing rituals in the
Democratic South Africa*

Véronique FAURE
(Sous la direction de)
(Co-ordinated by)

Les Cahiers de l'IFAS n°2
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SOMMAIRE/CONTENTS

BODIES AND POLITICS

Healing Rituals in the Democratic South Africa

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Deputy Editor

Introduction.....	p 1
Véronique FAURE	
Representations and Restitutions of African traditional healing systems.....	p 5
Michael URBASCH	
The Transformation of Indigenous Medical Practice in South Africa (1985-2000).....	p 23
Thokozani XABA	
Zulu divining Rituals and the Politics of Embodiment.....	p 41
Yong Kyu CHANG	
Traditional Healers and the Fight against HIV/AIDS in South Africa.....	p 61
Suzanne LECLERC-MADLALA	
About the contributors	p 75

Zulu Divining Rituals and the Politics of Embodiment

YongKyu Chang

1. *Ukuthwasa* divining ritual

Divining initiation rituals, known as *ukuthwasa* among the Zulu, signify more than particular individuals' accomplishment of becoming fully fledged diviners. More significantly, the initiates become totally reborn in the process. *Ukuthwasa* is an event during which candidates break away from their previous lives, and become new beings that are recognized as inhabiting (or having privileged access to) the divining world.

This paper provides an analysis of the *ukuthwasa* ritual through which Johannes Manzini of KwaNgwanase [1] entered the Majoy divining sodality. I will highlight how these rituals are examples of transformation in the politics of the body, relating the initiation process to Johannes's many attempts to overcome his marginalization. Entering the divining world after undergoing extensive training is also a passage between two social conditions, in which the membership of a quasi-professional sodality fills the cultural gap between the individual and the social realms. Divining rituals serve to alter the candidate's identity and consciousness, at the end of which she or he gains a new social status. As such the entry into divination practice is a micro-level response to conditions in the macro-level world structure. Indeed, the change often requires that initiates take on a new name; in Johannes's case, he adopted the name "Delani" after a great-grandfather who was a divining ancestor, and thus responsible for Johannes' divining talent.

2. Body and Social Memory

Emile Durkheim (1995: 15) once made the laconic statement that "man is double," signifying the simultaneous but none the less distinctive individual corporality and collectively social properties of human being. The social condition is formed in the collective representation of individual bodies in various social institutions, i.e. religion, politics, history, etc. Durkheim did not consider these two dimensions of body as antithetical: instead, they interact. The human body is the epitome of social mechanism, memorising social events and reproducing social text through the diverse

representations of the human body. The individual body reacts against history, and historical events are codified through the representation of the individual body. Durkheim's essential insight is that the individual body is born of social process itself, both containing and being transformed by social processes.

At the level of everyday life, however, this explanation seems insufficient; the difference of scale between the individual and society is too large. The sheer size of social institutions places them at too abstract a level when compared with the scale of individual physical bodies. This raises some questions: are there any effective social mechanisms that would bridge these two dimensions of society? If so, what are they and how do they work? This paper argues that divining rituals can provide some answers. As I will illustrate in Johannes's case, Zulu *ukuthwasa* divining initiation rituals play a decisive role in bridging the two levels. In the following sections I will analyse *ukuthwasa* after providing a summary of Johannes's life story, stressing the social marginalization and successive life crises that drove him to heed the call to enter the world of divination.

3. Divining in KwaNgwanase

Analysis of the mutual dependency of the individual body and social collectivity is not generally considered a viable project in the anthropological tradition. Probably the best example of where this has succeeded is Paul Stoller's (1995) work, in which he analysed *Hauka* possession rituals at Tillaberi, Niger. He defines spirit possession in terms of the politics of embodiment, as a contemporary reaction to previous colonial experiences expressed through bodily possession by a foreign spirit (*Hauka*). Similarly, John Janzen (1995) argues that *ngoma* possession reflects the contemporary relationship between different ethnic identities. Walter Ong's (1988) study of spirit possession on the shop floor of multinational factories in Malaysia is of particular interest to this study, in that he views spirit attacks on factory female labourers as a tactic for negotiating improvements in their working conditions. Jean Comaroff (1985) distinguishes between two distinctive rituals, initiation and Zionist, to demonstrate the viability of bodily transformation. In the former the body transforms into an adult, while in the latter (the Tshidi Zionist cult in South Africa) the initiate becomes a new person.

The subject of this paper is an uniquely Zulu divining sodality, membership of which confers an exclusive social professional status on the diviner. I show how some members have skilfully used their entry into the sodality to transform lives that had previously been marginalized. In these cases the candidate diviners have borne considerable personal and social suffering, entering the sodality to overcome these conditions and to take on a new identity. Initiation rituals are designed to test whether the candidate's body can put up with the rigours of the discipline. The candidate's body and its textual transformation are therefore central themes in the rituals. Instead of being a passive medium, the body of the candidate "presents itself in substance and action rather than simply being an implement for reflection and imagination" (Lock, 1993: 142). The body not only carries social memories, but enacts them accordingly.

3.1. *Ukuthwasa*, textual meaning

The term '*ukuthwasa*' covers the whole period of transformation from recruitment and apprenticeship, to the final ritual performance that confers status as an authorized diviner. The root word, *thwasa*, has the following meanings: 1) to emerge for the first time; 2) to become possessed by a spirit; 3) 'witch doctor' during apprenticeship; and 4) change of season, moon, or personal state (Doke and Vilakazi, 1990: 812). The essential meaning that underlies the above definition is the emergence of a new status or condition. Applied to divining training, it suggests that a once-ordinary person emerges mystically transformed after the rituals.

There are two ways of explaining how an individual becomes a diviner (*isangoma*). Usually, the diviners themselves provide explanations in which they, once stable members of society, experience a mystical calling or vocation to the profession. Acceptance of the calling sets a ritual segregation from society in motion, although the calling itself has already set the affected person apart from others. Divining training is therefore a period of transition during which the candidate (*ithwasa*) discards his/her previous social status, preparatory to entering into the specialized professional status of a diviner. This explanation stresses the will of the divining spirits, from which candidate cannot escape. Once the spirits have selected a particular descendant, all the characteristics of the deceased diviners (now

divining spirits) are handed down through the special procedures of divining training. Becoming an *isangoma* is therefore seen as a way of confirming a privileged personal relationship between the diviner and a deceased relative.

Here we must note that there is a considerable gap between what people say and what they actually do. The second explanation provides an alternative *sociological* understanding: that divining training is a voluntary choice of the candidate. From this point of view, a mystical link is established between a divining spirit and a particular descendant, shifting the level of consciousness from the personal to the social. The practice of divination is a public undertaking as much as it is a personal realization, for divining training transforms an individual's social being into that of a protector of society (Hammond-Tooke, 1974; Krige, 1985: 297). Novices enter the divining world as desperate and socially marginalized persons. The training gives them the means of altering their consciousness in the context of a mystically-charged environment (Berglund, 1976: 151). Van Gennep's (1960) conceptualization of the "rite of passage" (1960) is a useful frame of reference, in that rituals are traditionally *bona fide* thresholds between social conditions, life and death, and so on.

The question is, therefore: when and for what purpose does a person choose to undergo divining training rituals to become a diviner? Is it purely a vocational obligation the person should follow? Or is there any hidden purpose in becoming the diviner? As I have already noted, the anthropological tradition has understood that mystical vocation was the leading explanation of this. However, my research data confirms an additional situational explanation: that the divining profession is an option for the modification of individuals' social identity.

3.2. The Story of Johannes Manzini

Johannes was born in 1964 in the village of KwaGeorge in the KwaNgwanase region of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. His father passed away when he was still a child, leaving his mother to bring up three sons and a daughter. Because her only means of livelihood was a small farm with gardens around the homestead, Johannes and his two older brothers were

forced to leave school in order to help. Already this represented something of an accepted rite of passage, since many of the men of KwaNgwanase drop out of school to seek employment. At the age of 25, Johannes left school with a standard 7 education and went to eMpangeni, a township near Durban, where he worked in a sugar refinery for several months. Although he secured a clerical job, and avoided the rigours of manual labour, the salary was low. He and his brothers therefore went to Johannesburg in the hope of obtaining better employment. He remained in Johannesburg for seven years, but his brothers returned home after failing to get jobs. Johannes moved from one factory job to another, before deciding to attend a security guard training course in 1994. After three months' training, he was awarded a certificate and employed as a security guard at a large factory. However, the salary was too low to support his mother and unemployed brothers.

Then, in 1995, he received an urgent message from home saying that his two brothers had died in a motor accident. Not satisfied with his new job, he decided to return home. Once there, he found it impossible to obtain employment. He had also married, because he needed someone to care for his ageing mother. In desperation he even fished for a year, despite small returns and the low opinion in which the people of KwaNgwanase held that trade.

His inability to find employment gave rise to family quarrels, and in 1995 he consulted a diviner about his troubles. This was the first occasion on which he was advised to undergo divining training. The diviner also foretold that he would divorce his wife. As the diviner had predicted, he divorced and remarried two years later (1997). Johannes then consulted a second diviner who also advocated divining training, and a third diviner confirmed this. Because Johannes desperately wanted to know what his ancestors required of him, he finally went to Jabulani's homestead to request a fourth divination.

On this occasion, Jabulani and his own father diviner (who had trained him) arrived at Johannes's homestead to perform *ukufemba* (*ndawo* divination), in the course of which Johannes's great-great-grandfather was rendered (mystically) present to berate him for not heeding his demand that he become a diviner. He was told that the death of his brothers was entirely

due to his non-compliance, and that he was to proceed immediately with divining training.

By most accepted standards, Johannes might have been assessed a social failure at this stage of his life: he had not completed his education; his brothers had died; and he was both unemployed and divorced. His poor family background had created a vicious circle, and at the age of 35, he had achieved nothing. Johannes seemed to be taking the final option for his life: becoming a diviner. Although the advice to do this had, of course, come from diviners themselves, the decision was totally left to Johannes. Having already shown a preference for Jabulani's divining pattern, particularly its dance forms, Johannes entered Jabulani's homestead.

Johannes underwent divining training for fifteen months beginning in April 1998, under the guidance of Jabulani of the *Majoy* divining school. The reason Johannes chose Jabulani to be his guide and mentor was that he liked Jabulani's divining and dancing (*gida*) style. He paid R450 at the beginning of the process, with further sums at regular intervals -for example, R100 when he first performed divining dance. Altogether, his divining training fees were R2,000 with an additional monthly outlay of R80 for food. At the outset, he also had to supply two chickens (male and female) by means of which he could report to his male and female ancestors.

Ukuthwasa is compulsory for becoming a fully-fledged diviner, a cardinal marker that sets diviners apart as a distinctive group. As such, it is a form of professional legitimization. The training leads up to a series of ritual processes in which candidates master complex divining techniques and acquire practical knowledge of various afflictions, herbal medicines, and appropriate remedies. It is only after the proper acquisition of these skills that the novice is deemed qualified to practice as an authorized healer.

Most novices complain of physical and mental illness, known as divining affliction, with common symptoms being pain in the sides, headaches, black-outs, and so on. A number of scholars have used chronic ailment, even mental disorder, as the context within which to interpret the phenomenon of divination training, and its relevance to social competence

(Berglund, 1976; Buhrmann, 1984; Hammond-Tooke, 1955, 1962; Hunter, 1936; Janzen, 1992; Junod, 1927; Krige, 1943; Krige, 1986; Lee, 1969). Hunter argues that “it is certain that the preliminary to initiation ceremonies is always severe illness, and divining training (the performance of the initiation ceremony) is regarded as the only cure” (1979: 320). Some psychologists and pathologists define divining training as a kind of mental and physical affliction common among the Zulu (particularly females). Lee (1969) and Berglund (1976: 122) draw on psychological and bio-psychological approaches to describe it. Psychological anthropologists give priority to this training in the recovery of health (Lee, 1969; Buhrmann, 1984).

Although my field data also supports the ethnographic description, divining training is in any case regarded as a process of healing in Nguni societies, where people customarily ascribe a causal relationship between health and illness, on the one hand, and the mystical and social milieu on the other. In many cases, an individual’s physical affliction is believed to have been caused by provoking a lineage ancestor. In this sense, it is a kind of punishment for the descendants’ wrongdoing. Divining training differs from this, however, in that the afflicted is usually innocent of any offence, or is at least not a first-hand offender. She or he is afflicted simply because the divining spirits want them to become diviners. This is why some anthropologists describe *ukuthwasa* in terms of ‘training’ (Berglund, 1976; Krige, 1985). Berglund however admits a twofold aim for the ritual: first, to restore personal health which it is assumed has been affected by the divining spirits, and, second, to induct the people into the profession of diviner. The illness is a badge of election that singles out an individual for special service to the community. As she or he surmounts their own illness through *ukuthwawasa*, so the ritual empowers them to heal the afflictions of others. Buhrmann (1984:26) correctly notes that there is no physical affliction without psychological and sociological causes and there is also no mental affliction without some disturbance of somatic functions. The treatment, therefore, strikes a balance between individual physiology and social influences (Buhrmann, 1984).

4. Analysis of the *ukuthwasa* ritual

Johannes’s divining initiation rituals were held at Jabulani’s

homestead. Once ritual satisfaction had been expressed regarding Johannes' s readiness, and the time and place of divining training settled by mutual agreement, Jabulani had to make certain preliminary arrangements. Being a diviner of fairly recent provenance, he first had to consult and enlist the help of Hloza, the Soweto diviner who had 'fathered' him two years previously. Jabulani visited Hloza and ordered a new set of divining bones (*amathambo*) and a divining switch (*ishova*) for Johannes [2]. Secondly, Jabulani had not been long in independent practice and had not yet planted his pair of sacred trees (*impande*: literally a branch, in this case of the *calpurnia* shrub or marwa tree, known as *umzilazembe*). One branch representing the female divining ancestors is placed within the divining hut (*umsamo*), and the other outside in the yard to represent the males. This reversal of the normal association of male ancestors with the inside and female with the outside signifies gender unification. At the same time, Johannes' s family had to bear the cost of beer and other drinks; food; sacrificial animals for the event; providing clothes for the ancestors; and transportation for guests at the initiation, as large an attendance as possible in an impressive show of support for Johannes [3].

In KwaNgwanase, the divining training ceremony lasts three days. The first day is for arousing the ancestral spirits; the second exclusively for endowment by *ngoma* spirits; and the third is set aside for the reception of *ndawo* spirits. This three-day sequence replicates in public a compressed ritualisation of the whole process of transformation from an acutely afflicted individual into a diviner. It effectively re-enacts all the stages of a rite of passage, from the setting-apart of someone weakened by calling spirits, through a transitional period of purification and skills-acquisition, to a state of proficiency and full spiritual empowerment. These steps are not replicated in an exact sequence, but they are nevertheless recalled or enacted, sometimes repeatedly, during the course of divining training.

The first day's ritual (*ukuhlela*) is a thematic return to the candidate's entry into divining training, the underlying meaning being that of withdrawal and retirement. No less than twelve diviners (seven of them being female) from the Majoy divining sodality (*impande*) assembled in Jabulani's divining hut at eight in the evening. Jabulani and the other divin-

ers first placed all his bead accessories (necklaces and bracelets, even items adorning the wall) on a red cloth (the *ibayi* won by diviners) spread on the floor of the divining hut, and carefully wrapped them up in the cloth which he then placed behind the recently erected *impande* (sacred branch). This action symbolised the massing of divining power in support of the emerging diviner. Seated cross-legged in the centre of the divining hut and facing a fully attired female diviner, diviner and novice presented mirror images of each other. Johannes held a knobkerrie in his right and a spear in his left, while the diviner held the knobkerrie in her left hand and a spear in her right. When signs of spirit possession began to appear, the whole company erupted into song and drumming. After about fifteen minutes of possession convulsions, his partner broke off the dance (*gida*) for a short rest, during which she and Johannes stretched and flexed their legs. The dance resumed, punctuated by regular breaks and with other female diviners (and eventually Jabulani himself) taking turns as partners to Johannes. Some two and a half hours after it had begun, Hloza brought the dancing to an end and instructed the drummers to stop. Johannes was wrapped in a blanket and the assembly dissolved to consume a supper of tea and bread. All the diviners lay down to sleep, but Johannes remained propped up against the wall for the rest of the night. His spirits, having been aroused, could not be allowed to depart.

Preparations for the second day's rituals began at eight in the morning and took two hours, which included digging a vomiting pit in the homestead courtyard. On completion of the preparations, Johannes was led out of the hut. The ritual sacrifice of a goat was carried out, with the animal stood against Johannes's back for the act, after which he was subjected to a symbolic stabbing at the hands of Jabulani. Next, Johannes underwent a prolonged period of purging, using an emetic medicine. On completion of this phase, he was led back into the hut, while the goat was slaughtered and prepared according to ritual prescriptions based on Johannes's choice of divining ancestor. He was then instructed to boil the selected portions of goat, after which he transferred these portions into a second specially prepared container. Johannes then ate these from the dish as a ritual assistant drew it into the courtyard, after which he underwent a further prolonged purging session. The afternoon was devoted to the *imfihlo* test, in which Johannes

was required to find hidden objects that his mentor and assistants had secreted in different places. In a trance state, Johannes carried out an interrogation of his teacher and assistant, after which he successfully recovered the hidden items. The *ngoma* ceremony closed with the performance of the diviner dance (*izangoma gida*). Johannes emerged from the divining hut, clad in full diviner attire, and danced solo for about ten minutes.

The final day, sealing the ceremony with the candidate's domestication of an *ndawo* spirit, began early. *Ndawo* is a powerful entity without which diviners can claim no authority in KwaNgwanase. The combination of *ndawo* with the domestic *ngoma* spirit in the KwaNgwanase sodality is unique, and the third day of the initiation ritual is devoted to cementing the *ngoma-ndawo* alliance [4]. Although the senior diviners were to officiate, all the visitors from the Majoy sodality were woken to act as witnesses [5]. When preparations had been completed, the novice and the assembled company made the thirty-minute walk to the Mahlambane River (*hlamba* literally means "wash, swim and undergo purification"). In a freshly prepared clearing on the river bank, two chickens were sacrificed over Johannes, who then completely immersed himself in the water for almost a full minute.

When he came out of the water, his eyes had a stunned look about them, clearly a good symptom indicating that Johannes's body had successfully invited an *ndawo* spirit into it. After drinking a freshly-prepared medicine, his body was subjected to ritual cutting on the forehead, tongue, joints, back and chest into which further medication was rubbed. On completion of this Johannes dressed in full *ndawo* attire and the ceremony was effectively over. It had taken hardly thirty minutes. The party returned to the homestead, where Johannes demonstrated his *ndawo* possession and dance. The officiating diviners then declared their satisfaction with the ceremony and pronounced Johannes to be a member of their sodality. The formal closing ceremony began in front of the divining hut, with only those who had officiated at the *ndawo* ritual in attendance. Here the gall bladder (*inyongo*) of the sacrificial goat was attached to the back of the new diviner's head as a symbol of legitimacy. The party then moved to the ritual arena (*ikandelo*) where three holes were cut in the middle of the sacrificed goat skin, one for the head, the others for the arms, and Johannes was invested with this

goatskin vest (*imindwamba*). A final round of incisions brought the proceedings to a final conclusion.

The three days' ceremonies developed four major interrelated themes: sacrifice, purification, communion, and confirmation of powers. That the goat sacrifice took place on the shoulders and back of the diviner-to-be, closely followed by a symbolic enactment of his own death, indicated both a strong connection between him and the victim, and that in a sense he was himself a sacrificial victim smeared in blood. His symbolic death expressed the loss of his previous identity and his dedication to the service of his ancestral spirits in his new role of diviner. His body was then purged and purified of the remaining dross of his old existence in readiness for being joined to the world of spirit. The communion rite required him to consume those parts of the sacrificial goat that most closely identified him with the presence of the afterlife that is home to the divining spirits. The effect of these ritual actions was that he symbolically became assimilated to his *ngoma* guiding spirit. That Jabulani partly joined in this communion in a display of community was both a recognition, and a strengthening, of the spiritual bond that had been forged between them during the period of seclusion and training, and would continue to define their future relationship. Finally, the change that had been ritually wrought in Johannes had to be publicly authenticated in a test of his prowess, that this *ngoma* spirit has indeed given him the power to reveal what is hidden and to make visible what is absent. Only then could he show himself before all, in full regalia, as a legitimate diviner.

Both ritual and process are essential to the diviner's training; both are human symbolic constructions; and each displays its own inherent pattern and structure. Here I provide my interpretation of the structure of the culminating ritual before turning attention to that of the longer divining training process. We have noted how the second and third days of the ritual are dedicated to the activation of the two kinds of spirits (*ngoma* and *ndawo*) that together complete the spiritual armoury of the KwaNgwanase diviner. The first day lays the groundwork for this by sparking the novice's capacity for spirit possession in the company of the family (*impande*) of diviners which is receiving him or her as a "bride". During this ceremony

the candidate's biological family attends as witnesses. The ritual proceeds with the pooling of the assembled mystical resources (beads) and the devotion of this collective power to the individual candidate, who must then remain apart to assimilate what (s)he has received. The identity and nature of the spirit possession remains indeterminate, lending credence to the supposition that the candidate has been primed, or charged like a battery, with the spiritual force of the diviner family.

The two forms of spirit infusion differ radically from each other in that where the *ngoma* possession occurs in the ritual spaces of the homestead, a significant part of the *ndawo* rite is conducted at a river. As nature, or a wild place, a river is appropriate as the abode of undomesticated spirits, who by definition do not belong to any known family or descent group. They are outsiders to the mystical economy of the home, which falls under the supervision of ancestral *ngoma* spirits. The latter, although they are not disposed to harm, need to be cultivated to prevent their slipping away and leaving their diviners exposed. On the other hand, *ndawo* spirits inhabit a realm beyond the ambit of cultural norms, and are seen as dangerous predators who can indiscriminately attack and harm the unwary. Only persons revealed by divination to exercise a legitimate claim may approach them, and even then the encounter is not without risk. In a sense, they must be seduced and pacified with the offer of a family and a home. The movement in the third ritual from homestead to river and back again is therefore to fetch and domesticate these wayward foreign spirits.

The logic of the second and third ceremonies follows a procedure which might be interpreted as achieving ever-closer familiarity, intimacy and unity with the spirit(s) concerned. Stripped down to essentials, the ritual sequences are:

Day 2 (*ngoma*): Sacrifice -- Purification -- Communion -- Possession

Day 3 (*ndawo*): Sacrifice -- Immersion -- Incision -- Possession

We have already noted the role that sacrificial animals play in these sequences. The sacrificial method used in these rituals sets them apart from other ancestral sacrifices, because in this case the candidate is in close proximity to the victim and is drenched with its outpouring blood. This is a clear

statement of identity, an act of self-immolation in which the candidate offers his/her life to the spirit. During the *ngoma* rite this is followed by rigorous purging to attain a state of purity suitable for sharing with a divining spirit, but comparable purification is omitted from the *ndawo* ritual. Although immersion may be interpreted literally as a form of cleansing, there is no need for bodily expulsion of any possible remnant of evil influence: the body is already sufficiently cleansed to receive the *ngoma* spirit(s). Instead, the immersion is as much a form of communing with *ndawo* spirits as was eating the sacrificial meat in which the *ngoma* spirits are said to share. Further opening to reception of the *ndawo* spirit takes the form of incisions (*caba*). Not only do the cuts provide access for the spirit, but they are also fortified with strong medicines because of the inherent danger of the undomesticated *ndawo* spirits.

The culmination of both days' rituals takes the form of the initiand's possession by the respective spirits accosted in each ceremony. The two climaxes differ, however, and this reflects the distinction between the two kinds of spirit. On the one hand, the candidate puts his or her *ngoma* possession to the test in the form of the smelling-out ritual. On the other hand, it is only possible to speculate about why the *ndawo* possession of the final day requires no proof. The candidate's exposure to the *ndawo* divining spirit, compared to his or her exposure to the *ngoma* spirits, comes about rather suddenly towards the end of training. Moreover, the *ndawo* divining performance (*ukufemba*) demands a degree of theatrical ability, mimicry, and variation of voice in which the novice apparently receives little or no training.

These rituals are just the end-phase of a broader social process, one that begins with the individual's decision to answer the calling and submit to the tutelage of a chosen diviner. It is essentially a transformative process which takes place in four distinct dimensions before the candidate's actions become independent of it. These are:

- 1) transition from a state of physical and psychological affliction, to an achieved state of personal well-being: a once-stricken person becomes an adept and a healer;
- 2) a raw recruit is processed into a 'fully cooked' (ritually empowered) diviner;

- 3) movement from inherited and imposed *social* disability, to publicly endorsed *professional* proficiency; and
- 4) in what is probably the most crucial component of the change, the transformation proceeds from manifest control by spirits to a demonstrable capacity to control spirits. From being the plaything of calling spirits and suffering their impositions, the novice patiently learns how to control them until as a diviner they can be summoned at will to carry out his/her work.

These transformations are effected in several complementary ways. Most obviously, they are achieved by removal of the candidate from society into a protracted period of seclusion, that is only terminated when he or she is integrated into an elite social corps. Secondly, they are achieved by discipline and training in techniques of disorientation and introspection. The third way is through the observation and accumulation of pragmatic knowledge about medicines and procedures. Finally the transformations are certified by medium of the ritual endowment of the diviner's authenticity.

6. *Ukuthwasa* rituals and the politics of body: why enter the divining profession?

While much has been made, quite legitimately, of the processing of a raw recruit into a fully fledged diviner, I want to avoid the implication that the novice merely submits passively to the impress of events without exercising any influence on the outcome. There is sufficient evidence to show that the process does not suppress the elements of agency and choice, but that these elements are inextricably entwined with it. Clearly, the trainer has more freedom for making decisions; but this does not mean that the novice has no resources for swaying a decision his/her way. The process thus can be seen as an interaction between the two, a low-key battle of wills to control the more crucial decisions, most notably in identifying of the calling spirits, and even in calling the *ndawo* spirits. Here, the training diviner initially has the edge in being able to pluck revelation from spirit possession. But, as the novice grows in experience and confidence, (s)he can play the trump card of personal truth revealed in dreams. To illustrate how this works, I will briefly relate the case of Gugu, a female novice whom I interviewed twice during her training, with a three-month interval.

In the first interview, she related how the *isangoma* who became her trainer revealed that her calling came from Gugu's maternal great-grandmother. Paradoxically, the latter had reneged on her own calling and, after an abortive attempt to pass the burden to Gugu's mother's sister, had settled on Gugu herself. At that stage Gugu professed no knowledge of who her *ndawo* spirit might be. Three months later she had drastically changed this account. She had produced her own *ndawo* legend from her dreams, in which he had revealed himself as an unusually dark-skinned Sesotho speaker, a traditional healer who had been killed by Gugu's maternal forebears for supposedly practising 'black magic'. His terrible revenge had led to the death of five of her mother's siblings, but he now wished to negotiate reconciliation through Gugu. On the basis of her dreams, Gugu had switched her calling spirit from the maternal to the paternal line.

To understand this reversal, we need to appreciate Gugu's family situation. Because her parents were unmarried, she took her surname from her mother. On the other hand she was counting on her father's financial support to see her through her apprenticeship. In her dream, her paternal grandfather told her that he was "frustrated with the name Nkosi (her mother's surname). They must marry soon. Your father is responsible for everything until you come out (of divining training). He must build a hut for your (his) ancestor". Gugu used this dream to prevail on her father to make a down payment on *lobolo*, sufficient to allow her to change her name to Hlatswayo. Gugu's agency in this is all too clear, and in the second case she had successfully negotiated a personally advantageous change of guiding spirit.

Personal motives may also play a significant part in the way individuals choose to respond to the calling itself. It is clear from virtually all the diviners' life histories I have recorded in KwaNgwanase, of which Johannes is typical, that they had ignored or resisted the suggestion that their suffering constituted a calling, maintaining the semblance of a 'normal' social life for some indefinite period. What, then, constitutes the crucial moment in which they actually decide to follow the calling? Clearly, their general condition had not suddenly become so unbearable that they could claim (as they do) to see no other way out.

It appears likely that, at least in part, economic considerations tilted the balance between escaping *from* the calling and escaping *into* the calling. Their reduced circumstances were thus a precondition they could parlay into a route to economic betterment. Clearly, the story of Johannes (Delani) supports this interpretation. For an initial capital outlay, admittedly quite steep under the circumstances, one gains access to a potentially lucrative form of self-employment. Indeed, the returns from the business of professional divining are far from insignificant. Moreover, once the business has been successfully established, there is nothing to prevent the diviner from diversifying into other ventures. In depressed rural areas like KwaNgwanase, therefore, the divining profession is itself a form of entrepreneurial activity that can provide an ideal platform for further entrepreneurship. Perhaps more acutely than other entrepreneurs, however, the diviner is caught on the horns of the entrepreneurial dilemma: balancing the ideal of public service with the pursuit of self-interest.

7. Conclusion

South Africans have found that the social wounds of the past are too deep to be healed in a short time. Furthermore, the country is faced with a critical social crisis in which many significant social statistics have indicated a deterioration of conditions: the official unemployment rate has increased from 19.3% in 1996 to 25.2% in 1998; the Human Sciences Research Council estimated that murder, rape and burglary could go up 25% between 1998 and 2005; the number of people infected with HIV is escalating exponentially; and the private think-tank Idasa (Institute for Democracy in South Africa) recently announced that child poverty in South Africa is increasing, particularly among African children living in rural areas.

Traumatized by a culture of violence and the catastrophic AIDS epidemic, the South African social body (in Durkheim's sense) is searching for new cultural answers. Because macro-economic factors have limited the state's capacity both to deliver on development needs and to meet the social challenges of transformation, small-scale social groups are beginning provide alternative methods of coping. The revival of traditional rituals provides a good example of this tendency. Faced with the escalating AIDS

epidemic, Zulu traditionalists have revived virginity testing (*Mail & Guardian*, 29 September 1999). Female bodies so certified are highly sought-after in some quarters, and prized in terms of future marriage negotiations. Public shame and pride are simultaneously guaranteed through new or revived rituals. It is not surprising that political symbols and practices are saturated with religious references to social healing and reconstruction: ritual stands at the centre of it.

Notes

1. KwaNgwanase, where I conducted field research into divining practices, is located in the north-eastern part of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
2. In the Majoy divining sodality (*impande*), the diviner seeking qualification must foot the bill for these items, about R1,500 for the bone set and about R500 for the switch.
3. The cost of mounting such support is formidable, especially in the context of slender family resources. Johannes had no income, apart from a monthly pension of R359 from the company that had employed him and his mother's pension of R500. Clearly, they would have had to rely on financial input from other kin.
4. "Ngoma-ndawo alliance" is a term I have coined to encompass the special character of the KwaNgwanase diviners. Generally, a diviner is simply known as an *isangoma*, but "ngoma-ndawo alliance" indicates the unique spiritual union between two different groups of divining spirits.
5. *Impande* (divining sodality) literally means "roots" and can be interpreted as a "divining family". Members have a symbolic kin-relationship, such that once a divining candidate has successfully testified and becomes a diviner, (s)he becomes a "daughter" of a training diviner. The training diviner in turn becomes "father" (*baba*) diviner to the divining candidate. As training diviner to Johannes, therefore, Jabulani is his sodality father. Likewise, Hloza is Jabulani's sodality father. The symbolic kin-relationship built in this way means that Hloza, Jabulani and Johannes all belong to Majoy's ancestral line. Membership does not entail the obligations and duties associated with ordinary kin structures, but members observe a tight unity in order to compete with other divining sodalities.

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