

Ullrich Relebogilwe Kleinhempel*

Covert Syncretism: The Reception of South Africa's Sangoma Practise and Spirituality by “Double Faith” in the Contexts of Christianity and of Esotericism

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0050>

Received June 6, 2017; accepted November 6, 2017

Abstract: South African Bantu mediumism (of “Sangoma” type) has moved from contexts in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and rural culture into South African Christianity, especially in the African Instituted Churches (AIC), which have adopted and transformed elements of mediumist practice and ritual. In recent years it has spread to urban culture and to white milieus in South Africa and Europe, where it is received in Esoteric contexts and beyond as a form of (alternative) “healing”. The spiritual aspects have been received as expressive of a “universal” spirituality, in particular by Jungian psychoanalysts. This reception involves reinterpretation in Jungian terms as by Ch. Bühler, which may be criticized as ambivalent. Although its concepts, phenomena and experiences exceed the Jungian or Esotericist frames of references, they are acknowledged by some, e.g., J.B.F. Laubscher. On an academic level this reception has been facilitated by approaches of anthropology of experience (V. Turner, W. Diltthey) in dissertations on the authors’ initiation and training as Sangomas, and by L-R.N. Mlisa and J.T. Wreford. In their itineraries of double spiritual or religious and therapeutic practice, epistemic repercussions on both sides and in their academic work are interesting, with observable transformations. Effects of “reductionism” can be observed where Sangomas in academia reframe their practice and its epistemic concepts in terms of Pragmatism or Positivism or of Esotericism. However, the opposite can also be observed where cosmological and anthropological concepts encoded in Sangoma experience and practice have a transformative effect on the receiving milieus of Esoteric spirituality and Jungian psychoanalysis, and of wider audiences who participate through media of television and internet, literature as well as personal encounter and practice. Even this mediated “dual practice” provides avenues for reception and adaptation in both ways, leading to stimulating debate about cultural conditioning of perception and arcane realms of reality.

Keywords: Double faith, African traditional religion and philosophy; Spiritism; Mediumism; African divination; Bantu culture; Spiritual healing; Epistemologies of healing; Syncretism; African Instituted Churches

1 Introduction to South African Bantu mediumism and its spread

South Africa’s diviners, the “Sangomas”, have found interest in major media in Europe. The public television networks of the BBC and the ARD have dedicated special reports to the phenomenon of the traditional mediumism of the Sangomas being received into the urban culture of South Africa. These reports reflect

*Corresponding author: Ullrich Relebogilwe Kleinhempel, Bavaria College, Schweinfurt, Germany;
E-mail: u.kleinhempel@gmail.com

the growing cultural presence of the phenomenon in South African culture and in its media.¹ These reports have also become known in Europe, sparking interest and reports in major public television networks such as the BBC² or its German equivalent, the ARD.³

These reports involve a challenge to Euro-American audiences, since the practice, experiences and roles of Sangomas as well as their clients seeking treatment or counselling are intrinsically connected to a spiritist world view. To Euro-American audiences this implies the confrontation with a world-view which exists merely at the fringes of European and North American culture, after its heyday in the late 19th and early 20th century, and is mostly subjected to cultural taboos. The reports in mass media enable the audiences to access these realms through information about the sufficiently strange Bantu culture of South Africa – a country with which they may yet be familiar through visits as tourists or on account of long cultural association. These reports may thus be understood as providing access to realm of experience and action excluded from the presently dominant Euro-American epistemic order and its definitions of what is accepted as “reality”.

The association of Sangoma practice with “healing” provides pathways to a more comprehensive understanding of healing beyond the reach of Euro-American medicine. In this perspective it colludes with current interest in “alternative healing”. It is supported by the empirical evidence of therapeutic success, which may allow many viewers (and authors of these reports) to refrain from final judgement as to the reality of these phenomena and to access them in a pragmatic way which works well.

For the following essay the position I follow here may be clarified with recourse to Pierre Bourdieu. Approaching a system of actions, rituals, experiences and beliefs, cosmologically and anthropologically distant and different from a Euro-American materialistic world view, Bourdieu advises about an appropriate approach to symbolic systems of thought, rituals, experience or expressive actions, such as in myth, religion and art. He demands that these should be treated, in the perspective of structuralism, as coherent and meaningful systems both in a theoretical and a practical sense.”⁴

These may capture elements of meaning and experience inaccessible to the rationalistic systems of Euro-American culture. In this regard, he refers in particular to Levi-Strauss’ studies of Amerindian myth.

On this basis of respect for the inherent rationality of a system of practices, experiences, rituals, roles and social relations, as that of which the role and practice of “Sangomas” form the centre, I shall refrain from any “reductionism” of allegedly “explaining” phenomena and convictions in this field in terms of Euro-American rationalism. Such approaches, which are gradually being overcome in South African psychiatry, have produced misconceptions about the phenomena with severe therapeutic consequences, e.g., when culturally determined and shaped patterns of spirit perceptions of possession are callously misdiagnosed as “schizophrenic,” in spite of the Bantu African knowledge and distinction between the two conditions.⁵ The attitude behind such rationalistic presumptions at “explanation” may be viewed in the line of (post-) colonial disregard of non-Euro-American cultures and as an ignorant refusal to reflect on the cultural determination of one’s assumptions about what constitutes “rationality”.

In this essay I consider two movements: the first is the transition of the role of Sangomas into African Christianity, especially in the major segment which is termed “African Instituted (or Independent) Churches” (AIC), which also includes the widespread acceptance of Sangomas and their practise by African Christians, with many Sangomas identifying themselves as Christians. This may certainly be understood as an expression of “double religious faith” from the perspective of more orthodox forms of European and American Christianity, considering that the spirits which Sangomas contact also have a religious significance in African Traditional Religion (ATR).

The second movement presented here is the adoption of Sangoma practice by whites both in South Africa and, sporadically, abroad in Europe in particular. In terms of numbers these are but few

1 Gcabashe, “My life as a traditional healer in the 21st Century”.

2 Fihlani, “Witnessing a South African healer at work”.

3 Denzel, “Südafrika - Der Heilerjunge”.

4 Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, 12.

5 Swartz, *Aspects of culture in South African psychiatry*, 5.

individuals. Mere handfuls of whites have become Sangomas so far. Only very few are active in Europe or North America. However, the resonance which they have attained in mass media, like the BBC or German national television channels and magazines, makes this a culturally significant phenomenon in which the viewers participate in this way. A certain level of knowledge and awareness of this phenomenon has developed in this way, so that more recent reports demonstrate that the authors rely on a basic knowledge of their readers or viewers about this phenomenon. The credibility accorded to the Sangomas in these reports show that they are perceived as presenting alternative models of world view and spirituality, which might be of interest to the audience. Where white Sangomas are portrayed, this includes the message that this might be a viable alternative to European (and North American) audiences too, since these whites may be understood as role models to identify with. This makes these reports evidence of a movement towards spiritual and religious alternatives and of incipient “double faith” to the degree that they are presented and received as credible.

2 On “Sangomas”

2.1 On the concept of “Sangoma” and the cosmological and anthropological basis of the role and practise of “Sangomas”

One may observe that the term “Sangoma” is hardly introduced in these articles, which indicates a degree of familiarity among German, Dutch and British audiences with it, due to the long association of these countries with South Africa through colonialization, settlement and tourism.⁶ A Sangoma may be loosely understood as a Bantu “shaman”. The word itself is from the Zulu language where it denotes a culturally specific form of shamanism. The forms of shamanism differ somewhat between Bantu cultures and there are different forms of such shamanism within them. The word has, however, acquired a generic sense for outsiders – and even within South Africa – to denote Bantu shamans in general, regardless of their specific ethnic belonging and their special form of shamanism. In this essay the concept of “mediumism” is being used to relate it to a cultural practise rooted in Euro-American culture and to emphasise that in spite of its frequent reception as a form of “spiritual healing” it involves contact to spirits conceptually, in the calling and formation of Sangomas and in their practice of healing and divination.

In South Africa Sangoma practice is a well-defined cultural complex with recognised patterns of experience, training of specialists and social roles. To apply the concept of “mediumism” to the role of “Sangoma” means to draw on a Euro-American concept located primarily in Spiritism, which raises somewhat different connotations of a cultural practise at the fringes of what is considered as reasonable from an atheistic-materialistic point of view or what is considered as deviant from a Christian point of view. This does not apply to African culture, in particular to the Bantu cultures, whose territory is mainly Africa south of the equator with some offshoots in South America, mainly in Brazil. In Bantu African culture, the belief in a spirit realm is central to traditional religion and has remained so through Christianization and modernisation. Thus, John Mbiti, a foremost authority on African Traditional Religion (ATR), explains:

...according to African views, the universe is composed of visible and invisible parts. It is commonly believed that, besides God and the human beings, there are other beings who populate the universe. These are the spirits. There are many types of spirits ... The spirits have a status between God and men, and are not identical with each other.”⁷

Mbiti classifies the spirit realm according to Bantu belief as comprising nature spirits, with the classes of sky spirits and earth spirits and human spirits with the classes of long dead and recently dead spirits – the latter being personally remembered ancestral spirits.⁸

⁶ For example, the roughly corresponding Korean term of “mudang” (predominantly female, sometimes male), or, more distantly, the traditional Japanese concept of “miko”, would certainly have to be explained to this audience first.

⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 70.

⁸ Ibid.

In Bantu religion the spirits are the mediators between the supreme divine and the world of embodied people. They participate in divine power (“uMoya”) and dispense it in different ways.⁹ The personal ancestors guide the lives of their descendants, providing counsel, healing and foresight. The relation to the spirits, in particular the ancestral spirits are the most vital realm of Bantu traditional religion. The supreme divine is traditionally addressed more rarely and only for special reasons of fate, the community or fundamental issues. The relation to the spirits has a religious significance in addition to healing, divination and to the social functions of safeguarding the unity of their descendants.

The spirits are contacted by the Sangomas through paranormal perception – making such mediumistic endowment a prerequisite for training as a Sangoma – through trance, dreams and oracular means of divination. The Sangomas fulfill several roles:

(1) as a healer, either through divination or through provision of muti [i.e., “medicine” with pharmaceutical or magic properties]; (2) as the centre of social integration and cohesion; (3) as seer or diviner; (4) as the protector of the people... and most importantly (5) as the religious head of the society and mediator between the ancestors (amadlosi) and their descendants.¹⁰

R. W. S. Cheetham, professor of psychiatry of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and J. A. Griffiths, lecturer in Zimbabwe, emphasise the integrative concept of healing of traditional Bantu culture, which combines religious and medical aspects:

The iSangoma is therefore pivotal to the religious life of the community ... She is ‘priest’ before ‘healer’, ‘healer’ because she is ‘priest’ and social psychiatrist, sociologist, ecologist, parapsychologist and an intelligent and highly communicative member of the community. ... It is for this reason that the term ‘traditional healer’ is a misnomer, and why even that of ‘priest/diviner’ fails to signify the comprehensive function, influence and status of the iSangoma or iSanusi [an honorific title for high ranking Sangomas] among the Nguni people.¹¹

Cheetham and Griffiths refer to the iSangoma in the feminine, since the majority of Sangomas are female. They indicate the high social status and respect accorded to them traditionally, which is not based on wealth, nobility of descent or political power but on their personal gifts and capability in their role.

2.2 On the reception of the role of “Sangoma” in Bantu African Christianity and its adaptation in African Independent Churches (AIC)

The role of the Sangoma has persisted through the conversion of most of black South Africans to Christianity in two ways. Firstly, many black Christians continue to visit Sangomas in spite of criticism by many churches in a form of dual religious practice. To understand this “double practice” one has to realise that the role of Sangomas is not purely religious but connected to other realms, as described above. Secondly, the majority of black South Africans belong to “African Independent Churches” or “African Instituted Churches” (AIC), most of whom are of a markedly “Pentecostal” character, emphasising the “Holy Spirit” (“uMoya”) as perceptible spiritual “energy” and inspiration which can be experienced, especially in trance and in forms of divination and altered states of consciousness and which can be accessed through prayer and can be transmitted to those who need “healing” in whichever way. This power, Moya, is conceptually close to the transcendent power and inspiration which is attributed to the spirits. In these churches of the AIC type a role and office has developed which is close to that of the Sangoma and is called the “prophet” which also comprises the role of a prayer healer.¹² With some modifications in their practice, distinguishing them, the role of the “Sangoma” has persisted in the form of these “prophets” and with them fundamental anthropological and cosmological beliefs on which they

⁹ Hammond-Tooke, “The aetiology of spirit in Southern Africa”, 53.

¹⁰ Griffiths and Cheetham, “Priests before healers – an appraisal of the iSangoma or iSanusi in Nguni society”, 299f.

¹¹ Ibid., 303.

¹² Oosthuizen, “Indigeneous healing within the context of African Independent Churches”, 73.

are based. One may therefore state that this practice has been widely received in present society which is 81% Christian.¹³

This persistent role of “Sangomas” through Christianization may be explained by the observation that African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity are complementary as to their relation to the transcendent realm. Christianity focusses on the supreme divine, unfolded in the triune God, - a realm which is not central to ATR in everyday spirituality. ATR however focusses on the relation to the spirits for most issues of spiritual concern. The function of the Sangoma is based in the latter field, whereas the priest or pastor works in the former. The role of the “prophet” in AICs somewhat bridge this gap in administering the “power of the Holy Spirit” for healing and other purposes.¹⁴ Since the roles and functions of the Sangomas and the “prophets” of the AICs do not fully overlap, especially as the former use more medical and magic herbs and more elaborate means of divination, the two roles continue to exist side by side, even where most people have converted to Christianity. Even “prophets” will consult Sangomas,¹⁵ and some Sangomas are Christians. The reception of the role of “Sangoma” and its transformation in AICs can also be viewed in the perspective of “double faith”, since it is intrinsically connected to the religious and spiritual world view of ATR. This issue will be discussed briefly further on. AIC’s claim that they have blended the cosmology connected with the role of “Sangomas” with Christianity and point out to parts of the Bible which are not usually read and “received” in European and North American Christianity. Other churches dispute this claim and accuse the AICs of covert syncretism. Their adoption of the “Sangoma” – role has, however, contributed its continued and renewed acceptance in the context of the modern societies of southern Africa.

2.3 On forms of “Sangoma’s” and on reasons for consulting them

Sangoma mediumism is one of three types of mediumism which is recognised in South African Bantu culture: the “herbalists” (iziNyanya, iXhwele) who are believed to be shown the herbs they need through dreams, the diviners of a “shamanic” type (iSangoma, iGqira) who work with a combination of oracles and intuition and who are consulted about issues of health and crises, and the “seers” (iziTunywa), who are also called “prophets” in African Independent Churches, who are said to have a natural gift of clairvoyance, even extending into the future, and who do not use oracles.¹⁶ The close association between the realm of spirits and of vital, physical, psychic and social health and well-being, and thus the double nature of “healing” as comprising spiritual and “natural” means, may be traced to the central notion of a spiritual-physical “life-force” which is central to Bantu philosophy as has been well described by Placide Tempels.¹⁷

In the context of modern South Africa, Sangomas will be consulted alongside medical doctors, priests, “prophets” psychotherapists and social counsellors. Herbalists may be consulted as auxiliary, in the way homeopathic practitioners may be consulted in Europe or America. They are perceived as taking care of aspects of healing not covered by Euro-American medicine and medical therapeutic approaches. This also applies to psychologic and psychiatric disturbances. They are clearly distinguished from afflictions involving “spiritual” aspects. For example, schizophrenia is clearly distinguished from states of spirit possession even in traditional Bantu culture.¹⁸ The recognition of this clear distinction as to symptoms and aetiology of psychiatric and psychological disturbances from “spiritual afflictions” in Bantu culture has only gradually gained recognition.

Even today some psychiatrists will ignore the Bantu perception of “spiritual affliction” as in possession states and subsume them vaguely under familiar psychiatric diagnoses. Thus, the spirit possession marking

13 Pew-Templeton, *Pew Research Report – South Africa* (2010).

14 Sundkler, *Bantupropheten in Südafrika*, 284.

15 Oosthuizen, “Indigeneous healing within the context of African Independent Churches”, 81.

16 Mlisa, *Ukuthwasa Initiation of Amagcirha: Identity Construction and the Training of Xhosa Women as Traditional Healers*, 9.

17 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 30f.

18 Wessels, “Healing practises in African Independent Churches”, 95.

the beginning of a calling to divinership may be diagnosed as “Atypical Psychosis or Severe Anxiety Disorder” whereas occurrences of “alien spirit possession” may be diagnosed as “Brief Reactive Psychosis (Hysterical Psychosis)”.¹⁹ The vagueness (“atypical”) of the classifications indicate the arbitrariness of assigning culturally clearly defined conditions to a “leftovers’ category” of otherwise unspecified psychiatric “conditions”.

In contemporary Bantu culture a basic distinction is made between “natural illnesses” (umKuhlane) and “African illnesses” (ukuFa kwaBantu), which denote those spiritually induced conditions of physical, psychic or social suffering and intrusions of unwanted paranormal afflictions and perceptions for which causes in the realm of spirits are assumed to be responsible. It is assumed that the spiritual cosmology and anthropology of Bantu culture somehow facilitate the development of such disturbances, or their perception.²⁰ This implies that in Bantu perception their beliefs are perceived as being somehow more conducive to the manifestations of spirits in dreams, visions, trance states or in various afflictions than among whites. It is not believed, however, that whites are immune to such afflictions in principle. However, considering that Bantu culture is more attentive to the realm of spirits and more appreciative and sometimes wary of the agency of spirits life, it appears that Bantu culture and the experience of reality shaped by it is more permeable to this realm, whereas phenomena of this type are relegated to the fringes of what is accepted as occurring as “para-normal” in Euro-American cultures.

Here such perceptions and experiences are not spoken of, kept secret shamefully, or are dismissed as delusion, with the result that those who experience such phenomena distrust their own perceptions and fear to be declared insane, since a firm cultural taboo is violated. This is well documented by the public information and counselling centre for paranormal phenomena, in Freiburg in Germany, the “Parapsychologische Beratungsstelle der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Parapsychologie“ (WGFP), founded by Prof. Walther von Lucadou.²¹ The institution has documented such experiences and has advised those who reported them as well as the public agents involved, like psychotherapists, police, medical doctors, teachers, etc. on how to classify and evaluate thus occurrences over the past thirty years.²² The extensive documentation of this publicly recognized institution about paranormal occurrences has made it amply clear that these phenomena also occur in a European context with surprising frequency, but that they are treated quite differently.

The difference between paranormal phenomena in Bantu and in Euro-American culture can therefore safely be said to exist primarily in the way in which such phenomena are perceived and communicated as real and in how they are dealt with. There is also a strong difference in prevailing attitudes. Whereas these phenomena are perceived as irrational and inexplicable intrusions in Euro-American cultures, they are given attention and respect in Bantu cultures and they are perceived to represent a dimension of an encompassing reality which comprises the “natural” and the “supernatural”.

For Sangomas it is absolutely indispensable to be able to perceive this realm and to deal with it. No one can become a Sangoma without the endowment of paranormal and “extrasensory” perceptual abilities. Candidates are subjected to a demanding process of selections, screening, examining and training of who feel called (or compelled) to become Sangomas. This is by tradition an extraordinary rigorous process, in which only those who can pass can demonstrate paranormal abilities, such as repeated tests of identifying and finding hidden objects, apart from other evidences of paranormal faculties, and who will submit to two or more years of intense training. A vivid and most detailed account of this process has been given e.g. by James Hall, an American author, who graduated as a Sangoma in a traditional training institution in Swaziland and became recognised as qualified practitioner.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

²¹ Parapsychologischen Beratungsstelle in Freiburg, [Homepage].

²² Von Lucadou and Wagner, *Die Geister die mich riefen*, 13ff.

²³ Hall, *Sangoma – My Odyssey into the Spirit World of Africa*.

2.4 On the self-presentation of “Sangomas” in the context of modern South African society, on countering fraud and defining professional aims and standards

On account of the social prestige which Sangomas enjoy, of the special powers which they are believed to have and of the income which can be made by such practice fraudsters have become increasingly common in the social conditions of modern suburbs where there is less social control and where it is easy to cheat about having passed. This has given rise to fears about both incompetent fake “Sangomas” and about those how do not follow the professional ethics to focus on healing in all of its aspects ranging from medicine and spiritual counselling to the mending of social relations, but who engage in harmful magic practices instead.²⁴ This deplorable development has severely harmed the reputation of the profession and dedicated attempts are made to counter it. Thus professional organisations have been founded, with the participation of academics, like Prof. Dr. V.V.V. Mkhize such as the South African Healers’ Organisation SOAHA to safeguard standards and practices. Thus, the website of the SOAHA states as its objectives:

South African Healers Association (SOAHA) is a community of healers, spiritually, physical and intellectually, engaged in the task of influencing the development and support of various healing practices in South Africa and recognizes the spiritual elements of these spiritual, traditional, indigenous and natural healing practices [...]

This multifaceted initiative takes the basic aim of healing to be to contribute towards enhancing what is of value in life by means of various efforts respectively, and seeks to help solve our daily spiritual life problems.

SOAHA is a fully registered NON-PROFIT COMPANY (NPC), with the office of Company Registry in Pretoria, with the aim of registering all interested Multifaceted Healers Provincially, Nationally and Internationally for the sake of promoting African Healing through Research, Education and Publications.

SOAHA has identified Five Pillars within which it will operate:

- Research and Education (Create cohesion and Relationship between Indigenous Healing and Modern Medicinal Healing Practices and Models.
- Spiritual Healing and Transformation
- Ancient Wisdom and Interconnectivity
- Connecting the Past to the Present to forecast the Future
- Connection of Indigenous Healing Models to the Modern Healing Practices”

Its major objectives are:

- (i) To bring together all Spiritual, Physical and Intellectual Healers.
- (ii) To promote Western, African and Primitive Healing in South Africa.
- (iii) Be the voice of all Healers Registered with SOAHA in different platforms, National and International.²⁵

It is noteworthy that the practise of Sangomas is being presented here in concepts of Euro-American epistemics as a comprising complementary healing practises and knowledge, and as integrating spiritual perspectives with them. The specific belief of Bantu culture that Sangomas can make predictions through oracular means and by guidance through the spirits of ancestors is being reframed perceptibly in a generic way, more compatible to Euro-American views in the phrase: “Connecting the Past to the Present to forecast the future”.

This may serve as a representative example of how the practise of Sangomas and the cosmology on which it is based is being rephrased to converge with Euro-American discourses about alternative healing as complementary to natural science-based medicine and of integrating spirituality in a comprehensive understanding of such healing and promotion of well-being. No reference is made to African Traditional Religion here or to Christianity, for that matter, but rather to African “healing”. The religious aspect is subsumed under “(spiritual) healing”. This lowers the threshold for people of no or little connection to either faith, but makes it accessible to people open to spirituality or interested in it, as in the “spiritual but not churchd” milieus of Euro-American cultures.

²⁴ Dube, “A search for abundant life: health, healing and wholeness in Zionist Churches”, 114

²⁵ Mkhize, “South African Healers Association (SOAHA)”.

2.5 On becoming a Sangoma: calling and training

One cannot become a Sangoma solely out of one's own volition and desire. A calling or clear signs of aptitude are necessary. The symptoms of such calling can appear early in life. They tend to reappear. They can cause severe disturbance of well-being and of a normal state of "being-in-life" as well as disruption of a normal ability to work and to fulfil familial and social obligations. The manifestations of a calling are thus often more often feared, because of the exigencies and consequences involved, than welcomed. L. R. Nomfundo Mlisa, a psychologist and associated professor experienced a calling and underwent initiation – "ukuThwasa" – to become an "iGqirha" i.e., a "Sangoma", in a traditional training institution of her South African Xhosa people. She wrote about it in her dissertation:

Ukuthwasa is a spiritual journey that is specifically designed by ancestors for those who are endowed with the gift of healing by their ancestors. In the past, *ukuthwasa* carried a stigma and no educated or Christian person would want to admit or show in public that she had an *ubizo* (a calling). [...] The practice is fraught with afflictions or crises and may play an ambivalent role in the life of a person. My interest to study *ukuthwasa* is based on my personal life as a Xhosa woman who was brought up as a Western-trained and educated Christian but later on in life I had to retrace and reclaim my cultural roots to become an *igqirha* (a trained Xhosa traditional healer).²⁶

Mlisa also points out that the "gift" of mediumistic perception, which is required of a Sangoma, is considered to be inherited in many cases:

My grandmother was *igqirha* and later on my biological mother became one as well. I also discovered that both my paternal and maternal families were related to (that is, both on my biological mother and father's side) *amagqirha*. I never thought I would be one and in fact I never liked *amagqirha*.²⁷

Mlisa then relates several instances of premonitions and extraordinary gifts of clear-sight and of healing powers, which she had even before she entered training. She also tells how haunting dreams as well as "dramas" of her personal life compelled her to enroll for training as an *iGqirha*, to finally resolve her condition and to find well-being again.²⁸

A common feature of the initial stage is also that someone who experiences a calling – or is haunted by it – also dreams about where the training will take place and through whom. Names of unknown persons are revealed, and places never thought of as the Cape Town psychologist and lecturer Jo Th. Wreford reports:

Then, in 1968 I had a dream which led me to my first teacher. Unfortunately, in the dream I did not see his name, but only his attire. [...] The dream told me that I must travel all the way to Zimbabwe to find him, to Myadiri, where my sister's husband came from. ... [Upon arriving there, she stayed with her relatives, waiting for further revelations:] I slept there with just a blanket over me, and asked my ancestors to tell me the name. I had an exercise book and a pencil by me while I slept. And I dreamt of two names...[Upon telling the two names to her nephew in the morning he told her that the first was of a deceased Sangoma, but the second was his son, who lived nearby. When she went to see that man, she found he was awaiting her already:] ... "when it [the door] opened the man in my dream stood there and he looked shocked, and then he said, 'Where have you been all this time? I've been waiting for you.'²⁹

These details may provide a vivid idea of the process and typical occurrences which lead to the beginning of a training as "Sangoma". They are but elements of a structured process, with typical sequences of elements occurring. To enlist them all would far exceed the space of this essay. A systematic description and analysis is given in L. R. Nomfundo Mlisa's dissertation. However, the details reported by her convey that it is indeed necessary to accept the traditional Bantu cosmology as frame of reference, since any attempt at reducing these elements to a rationalistic Euro-American world view disputes the very phenomena as "illusory" and decries the sincerity (and academic integrity) of those who report them.

²⁶ Mlisa, *Ukuthwasa Initiation of Amagqirha: Identity Construction and the Training of Xhosa Women as Traditional Healers*, X.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., Xiff.

²⁹ Wreford, *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*, 104f.

The training can last for several years. Traditionally it is conducted in an institution, called iNdumbo, which requires the candidate to live there and to follow a full-time programme of rituals, pilgrimages to special “sites of power”, vigils, procedures of purification, instructions about herbs and traditional pharmaceutic and magic medicine, training sessions for the development of the mediumistic gifts of the candidates, instruction in the use of systems of divination, repeated examinations of their abilities of clairvoyance and of diagnosis, apprenticeship in spiritual diagnosis of patients and consultants, periods of seclusion and stages of induced trance, the identification of personal mentor spirits and the development of the ability to perceive the spirits guiding or obsessing clients etc., and final graduation exams before a board of Sangomas and public recognition by their guild. J. Hall gives a conscientiously detailed report of these elements.³⁰

2.6 The practise of Sangomas: diagnosing, counselling and curing

The divinatory means and the clairvoyance of the Sangomas is required and involved in the counselling of patients. A session commences at the practice of a Sangoma with a client coming for advice. Sitting on a reed mat a Sangoma will ask the client about his problem and will then, in most cases, throw the “bones”, i.e., symbolic objects which are acquired each in special circumstances. The pattern which they form gives the Sangoma a general indication of the fields concerned, like social relations, the profession, the family, the body, the soul, etc., and the persons involved, as well as spirit factors. The capability of a Sangoma is confirmed if he or she can interpret the precise details of the constellation of the “bones”. At this point the ability of clairvoyance is required. In the further process, some points can be refined in a to-and-fro dialogue between the Sangoma and the client. The session concludes with the counsel by the Sangoma comprising a diagnosis of the cause of misfortune, about factors involved and about remedies and procedures to solve them. This may comprise the administration of “traditional medicine” (“muti”) with pharmaceutical and/or magic properties. It may also consist in the advice of rituals required for the healing of the condition of affliction. It may also consist in advice on action, in the realms of social relations, the work field, psychology, medicine or spirituality. Hall offers some detailed descriptions of such sessions.³¹ A video in a series about “Life after Death” on South African TV records a brief counselling session.³²

The reasons for consulting Sangomas are many. In present black South African society Sangomas are consulted for those aspects of afflictions which a medical doctor, a psychotherapist, a social worker, a professional counsellor or coach or priest cannot take care of or to integrate their therapies with aspects which are perceived as relating to the realm and influence of spirits. Of course, the delimitation as to what belongs into the field of the “natural” and what into the realm of the spirits, and in some cases spiritual varies according to circumstance and the individual client. However, research shows that convictions of the proper and unique abilities of Sangomas and about their special powers and fields of influence have not waned in South African society. There is widespread consensus that spirits and spiritual factors influence people’s lives and the course of events. Harmful magic is also practised and constitutes a much-feared shadowy aspect in the practice of some Sangomas, who engage as sorcerers and who are loathed as breaching the traditional ethos of “healing” in whichever way.³³ When such causes are identified, Sangomas will be called upon to identify such causes and means of protection against their influence. Disturbances can also be identified in the immediate relation of a person to the ancestral realm.

The role and practice of Sangomas and the reasons their clients seek their help have undergone transformations in their transition from rural pre-modern Bantu society into the modern, predominantly black South African society. They have rearranged themselves and have been adapted to the conditions of a modern welfare state and industrializing society. The institution of the “Sangoma” has remained intact. It is

³⁰ Hall, *Sangoma – My Odyssey into the Spirit World of Africa*, 40ff.

³¹ Ibid., 162ff.

³² *Cultural Conceptions of Life After Death*.

³³ Oosthuizen, “Indigeneous healing within the context of African Independent Churches”, 78.

in the process of being redefined in the context of modernity. This also involves a new social prestige. It has become possible for academic professors or lecturers to identify themselves publicly as qualified Sangomas, as e.g., L. R. N. Mlisa, J. Th. Wreford, or Dr. Nokuzola Mndende, founder of the Icamagu Institute for research on African Traditional Religion³⁴ which collaborates with the University of Port Elizabeth (Nelson Mandela Metropolis). These professionals attest to the new appraisal of the institution of “Sangomas” as essential part of the African cultural and spiritual heritage. The adaptation to modern society is also evident in various websites run by Sangomas, as will be discussed further on. The transition to modern urban society raises a host of problems to creating institutions for training in an urban context, especially for those persons who cannot afford leaving their professional lives for years, as is traditionally required. This creates problems for the thoroughness of training and of its quality. The standards of training and examination are affected and means are sought to counter these threats, to safeguard the quality of the profession.

The reasons for visiting a Sangoma and the expectations vary individually and with cultural context and with the belief system of the individual client. For those people who share traditional Bantu cosmology, which applies to most Bantu people and to some whites to varying degrees, in South Africa, consensus exists between them and the Sangomas they consult. The extent to which whites have become admitted to training as Sangomas over the recent decades indicates the extent as to which this is gaining acceptance among whites in South Africa. (It is safe to say though, that this is by far not the majority.) The admission of whites has not gone undisputed in Bantu society, since the spirits are perceived as being an essential part of the own realm connected to social and ritual obligations. However, a reluctant admission of whites has prevailed.³⁵

2.7 A view across the ocean: Bantu mediumism and the transformation of “Sangomas” in Brazil

The practise and role of Sangomas has been transferred to Brazil and has continued in new forms here. Whereas in Bantu Africa Sangomas represent a central cultural institution, they have assumed a new function in the context of Brazilian society, where Bantu Africans were marginalised as a subculture, and socially to varying degrees, depending on the status of being enslaved. In this context the Sangomas became cult leaders, presiding over “terreiros”, ritual communities, in which they performed their priestly, mediumistic, counselling and healing practise. Such communities persist to this day, preserving essential elements of the Bantu heritage.³⁶ Here they became essential to the social cohesion of their communities³⁷ which distinguished themselves as sub-cultures also by means of these more or less tolerated syncretistic religious communities in a context dominated by a white oligarchy and the Roman Catholic Church.

3 The spread of “Sangoma” practise into white milieus and to Europe and America in the light of theory of syncretism

3.1 The phenomenon of spread and its context

The phenomenon of the spread of Bantu mediumism into non-traditional milieus and into predominantly white milieus, both in South Africa and abroad, in Europe, is remarkable since it attests to a considerable degree of “double faith” in South African society – and possibly in European societies too. The concept of “double faith” has been applied to movements of religious and spiritual reorientation and transition, ranging from the time of Christianization in Europe, especially in Russia, where the concept “double-faith”

³⁴ Icamagu Institute, [homepage].

³⁵ Hall, *Sangoma – My Odyssey into the Spirit World of Africa*, 216ff.

³⁶ Amorim, *The bantu performance of the caxambu: between ancestry and contemporaneity*.

³⁷ Cf. Elias and Scottson, *The established and the outsiders. Sociology of power relations from a small community*. 21-25, 178-179.

or “dvoeverie” is significantly applied, to the reception of pre-Christian and non-Christian spiritual views and practises in the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, in cultural movements of spiritual, religious and epistemic reo-orientation in Russia, Germany and Austria³⁸ and in Brazil.³⁹

In European and North American societies interest in Sangoma practice can be understood on the background of “neo-shamanism” in the field of “alternative spirituality and healing”. Here elements of the training of Sangomas are taught in workshops for people interested in developing their intuition, as by Elke Waclawiczek in Graz, Austria.⁴⁰ The Irish-South African Sangoma John Lockley offers individual counselling, divination and workshops in Europe as advertised on his website.⁴¹

3.2 The spread of Bantu mediumism as instance of “double faith” in the light of syncretism theory

I shall outline a theoretical approach on this process and how current developments may be understood in this perspective, with possible implications for the future.

Ulrich Berner, emeritus professor of science of religion at Bayreuth University, developed a theoretical model for the understanding of syncretistic processes based on systems’ theory. His approach implies an understanding of religions as “systems”, which means structural coherence and systemic properties like self-referentiality, a distinction between structural and “semantic” elements – to draw on linguistics – and observable coherence, which means that changes to one part of the system may affect its entirety and bring about active changes to the whole. It also implies that syncretism involves an encounter of two systems. He explains this [in my translation]:

Two systems may merge to become one when the boundary between the systems is uplifted and the heterogeneous elements can be called elements of a new encompassing system. This process could be called ‘syncretism at systems’ level’. On the other hand boundaries might also be reinforced, if one system defines its relations to another and delimitates its own realm. . . . the encounter between different systems can also lead to the arising of new elements by which the system concerned transforms itself. . . . These processes could be called ‘synthesis’.⁴²

In cases where two religions or forms of spirituality are practised alongside each other a syncretistic process may have happened which can be called “harmonising relation” in which “the boundaries between the systems remains sustained, but the relation of competition is abolished.”⁴³ This approach enables us to understand even seemingly disconnected coexistence or parallel participation in mutually exclusive or differing practises as expressions of a syncretistic process. It is not necessary for a new synthesis to have been achieved to speak of syncretism in this case. Even dual practice can be understood as an expression of a syncretistic process underway.

Our emphasis here is not on the syncretistic developments in South African culture, in its reception of traditional Bantu mediumism into Christian culture, but on its reception in the context of European (including white South African) cultures. The segments of society or the milieus which receive Bantu mediumism may understand themselves as Christian. In many cases, however, they may be more aptly defined as either esotericist or positivist (“secular”) with the boundaries between the latter often being fluid. This requires some preparedness to adopt the foreign spiritual formation – in our case Bantu mediumism – into their own world view, belief system or even practise. The limits hereby are on the one hand a total conversion to the new system; the other a wholesale rejection of its elements and convictions, as well as practices, which amounts to a mere taking note of but not adopting in any way.

³⁸ Kleinhempel, *Rainer Maria Rilke’s translation of the Slovo o Polku Igoryeva - The Song of Igor’s campaign as a document of dvoeverie and its translation by Rainer Maria Rilke in the context of his religious quest*.

³⁹ Kleinhempel, *Spreading an Arcane Religion on the World Wide Web: Paradoxes of Transmission of the Contemporary Mysteries’ Cult of Umbanda*.

⁴⁰ Waclawiczek, *Schule für Meditation, Intuition und afrikanischen Schamanismus*.

⁴¹ John Lockley, [homepage].

⁴² Berner, *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffs*, 85.

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

The latter approach may be exemplified by an attitude which may find Bantu mediumism “interesting” in the sense of bizarre or of a challenge to one’s own views to be answered, or in the field of science of religion, represented by the positivistic approach of “Cognitive Science of Religion” (CSR). It may go without speaking that “hard-core positivists” of the “cognitivist” camp may be reticent about the claim of Bantu mediumism at accessing a realm of spirits. The manifestations of spirit possession in trance, or of incorporation of spirits in dance will be decried as theatrical “role play”, or as J. T. Wreford declares in her participant observer study of Bantu mediumism of South Africa in a critical evaluation of such reductionist approaches towards trance possession:

It is not difficult to see why the anthropological accounts of trance and possession have often favoured a theatrical interpretation, and in this presentation, whether unconsciously or subliminally, there is an almost inevitable element of theatre... The possessed, once having taken the stage, as it were, performed according to ancestral directions to enact a symbolic re-presentation of an ancestral self.⁴⁴

Wreford counters this tentatively from a philosophical view, stating:

Yet there is more to it, for episodes like this signal a temporary victory over the more usual, and more limited, view of the objective world that we generally translate as ‘real’.⁴⁵

Her dissertation “Working with Spirit”, which covers her personal initiation into Bantu mediumism, goes well beyond this cautious assessment, which appears as a polite reference to positivist beliefs, in its description of transcendent agencies and of their manifestation. Wreford also arrived at the boundaries of positivistic epistemics, as had Victor and Edith Turner before her,⁴⁶ in their fieldwork in Zambia.

3.3 Syncretism, double faith and the “anthropology of experience”

This approach of entering the field of a foreign religion or spiritual practice in a practical way need not be one of full conversion. Indeed such conversion is a somewhat ideal concept, since it implies a full theoretical and practical knowledge of that faith, equalling that of those were born into the faith, or even exceeding it, to make up for deficits in experiential familiarity.

The opposite to mere reductionism, which seeks to “reduce” the foreign belief system or spiritual practice to the co-ordinates and tenets of one’s own belief system – including that of positivism (or “cognitivism”), can be the conversion to the foreign belief system. It can also be manifested by following an “anthropology of experience” and by entering the field of the foreign belief system on its own terms as far as possible. This approach has been developed by Victor Turner in his reception of Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of “Erlebnis” and its application to anthropology:

The formulation of an anthropology of experience belonged to Victor Turner. ... For Turner, however, the immediate inspiration for an anthropology of experience derived from the German thinker Wilhelm Dilthey (1833- 1911) and his concept of an experience, Erlebnis, or what has been „lived through. „ Indeed, the revitalizing message that Dilthey offered presents us with a new anthropological ancestor, in the tradition of the human sciences and hermeneutics, as opposed to the more familiar ancestral line of Emile Durkheim, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and the many later varieties of French and British structuralism.⁴⁷

The point about Dilthey’s approach is that the researcher ought to enter the horizon of his object of study, to think, to feel and to experience from this perspective in order to fathom the web of meaning and to grasp the meanings of concepts and symbols in coherence. If one keeps a critical stance towards the Cartesian split of mind and body, it is evident that “embodied experience” as of a participant observer is part and parcel of

⁴⁴ Wreford, *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*, 162f.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*.

⁴⁷ Bruner, “Experience and its Expressions”, 3f.

this approach. Dilthey was of course aware that this approach was an ideal, limited by the frame of thought and the mind-set of a researcher, who could never fully “go native”. Still he was adamant that only by taking the system of meanings, perceptions and symbols of an object of anthropological study serious, and by learning to think and to perceive on its lines, would a researcher have any meaningful access to the object of study. This would not preclude critical reflection and the distance of an observer. However, he argued, if the researcher was not prepared to enter into the horizon of his or her object, its coherence of meanings would never fully reveals themselves.

Victor and Edith Turner have experienced this existentially. Having arrived at a realization of the sterility and sometimes circularity of the sociological functionalistic approach in research of Bantu rituals they studied, whose complexity and multiple meanings as well as the associated observable effects far surpassed the premises of social functionalism,⁴⁸ they arrived at the point where they decided to move on and to take the systems of meanings guiding the phenomena and rituals they studied seriously.⁴⁹

Subsequently, they embarked on an approach inspired by Dilthey’s concept of “experience” to include elements of participation and of performance in their anthropological studies. This implied one to take the cosmological notions and beliefs of the cultures they studied seriously. This has paved the way for participant-observer studies, especially about mediumistic and “shamanistic” practises, which involve altered states of consciousness, and phenomena considered “super-natural” by tradition of which, according to positivism, do not exist at all, and are thus to be dismissed as fictitious, forgery or as delusions and are blankly disputed. The anthropological dissertations of Lily-Rose Nomfundo Mlisa⁵⁰ and of Jo Thobeka Wreford⁵¹ on their respective initiations into Bantu mediumism (or “shamanism”) in South Africa are so far unique for their combination of experiential validation, their verification by having passed full examination as traditional diviners by the traditional community of Sangomas, who conduct the training and pronounce graduation, with state-of-the art anthropology in their dissertations on their own calling, training and qualification as Sangomas. L.R.N. Mlisa, an ethnic Xhosa, comes from a people where Bantu mediumism is embedded in traditional cultures J.T. Wreford, an ethnic English, encountered it in Cape Town in an urban environment, where she lives. Both are employed in academia. There are a few other studies by people who have embarked on this training, such as the report by Wim van Binsbergen,⁵² but these may be considered to be the most penetrating.

These studies have paved the way for Bantu shamanism to be taken seriously both as an object of academic studies and as a spiritual practice, both locally and abroad. It has certainly contributed to its spread beyond its traditional milieus.

3.4 Stages of spread of Bantu mediumism in forms of double religious or spiritual practise

The first major step of Bantu mediumism in Southern Africa from its original religious context has been its reception by churches of the “African Instituted” type (AIC), who combine a charismatic protestant theology and liturgy with some elements of Bantu mediumism and with elements of African traditional religion. They have incorporated both the “prophet” type of mediumism, as well as the “shamanic” type of the Sangomas. These churches constitute a major segment of South African Christianity. They have attained a certain blending of the elements of African Traditional Religion (ATR) with Christianity, which led to a re-evaluation and re-definition of some spirit concepts of ATR and modifications in the associated mediumistic practises.⁵³ It has sometimes been argued that in spite of some convergence in concepts which

⁴⁸ Turner, “Body, Brain and Culture”.

⁴⁹ Turner, *Among the Healers. Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing around the World*, Westport.

⁵⁰ Mlisa, *Ukuthwasa Initiation of Amagcirha: Identity Construction and the Training of Xhosa Women as Traditional Healers*.

⁵¹ Wreford, *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*.

⁵² Van Binsbergen, “Becoming a Sangoma: Religious Anthropological Fieldwork in Francistown, Botswana”.

⁵³ Sundkler, *Bantupropheten in Südafrika*, 265ff.

allowed for the development of this form of Africanised Christianity, the integration of the complex of spirit possession and veneration has created an unresolved tension within this form of Christianity⁵⁴ which might be judged as a form of double faith within a Christian church.

This development may be viewed as one of a transition of Bantu mediumism from the context of African Traditional Religion into an Africanised form of Christianity. This frequently happened in the same rural African cultural context, which allowed for many forms of ritual practises and beliefs to remain constant and to be preserved through slight, though notable modifications.⁵⁵ This form of Christianity has also spread to urban areas, but culturally it remains deeply enrooted in rural African tradition.

Apart from that, other churches of a less “African traditional” character have acquiesced in many instances to their members consulting Sangomas, many of whom are themselves Christians⁵⁶ of different denominations. The phenomenon of “double faith”, it may be noted, is thus not only present in the practice of those who consult Sangomas, but also among the Sangomas themselves. L.R.N. Mlisa is an example hereof herself, since she combined the roles of a lay pastor with those of a Sangoma, a clinical psychologist and an academic lecturer.⁵⁷ This multiplicity of roles – which are each demanding in their own right – is facilitated, as she states, by interfaces between African pagan and Christian belief systems⁵⁸ as well as in the objective of counselling, as may be added.

In a similar manner, Bantu mediumism has also entered urban South Africa and is practised by numerous diviners in urban areas.⁵⁹ Here a vibrant culture of mediumistic practice has developed, some of serious practitioners, however, also of a burgeoning fraud.⁶⁰ Here it is practised either in conjunction with Christianity or with varying degrees of a secular orientation. This necessitates different adaptations. As an element of urban culture, practised also by educated classes, Bantu mediumism has entered the mediums of the internet and television.⁶¹ In the context of the ongoing secularisation in urban milieus, Bantu mediumism has become a venue towards religious and spiritual reorientation for some among urban blacks, as A. Gcabashe, a prominent Johannesburg Sangoma explained in a video-lecture broadcasted by a South African cultural association⁶² and also among whites. Here Bantu mediumism has become a vehicle for spiritual transformations, either away from Christianity or away from secularist non-religiosity – or even from a temporarily Buddhist background, as a prominent white Sangoma, John Lockley, explains.⁶³ As a medium of transition, it is bound up with varying states of “double faith” including various shades of explicit or implicit syncretism.

In the reception in Europe, interest in Sangomas is located at the interface of health and spiritism. It is framed as a “healing practice” also as a form of “alternative healing”. These designations are essentially pragmatic, focussed on the outcomes and cover up of the differences between the spiritual Bantu African world view and the chiefly positivistic attitudes of European and American cultures. The term “Western culture” shall be avoided, since it too Anglo-biased and suggestive of a uniformity of culture which does not exist and may be considered an ideological construct. However, there are certain common features in European and American cultures, such as a widespread positivistic outlook, recent interest in “alternative healing”, a tradition of Spiritism, and the reception of psychoanalysis as culturally received anthropology, which condition the interest in “Sangoma” mediumism and of its selective reception. Here too, a few persons have gone to South Africa to train as Sangomas, such as the Austrian Elke-M. Waclawiczek,⁶⁴ who founded a school for South African shamanism in Graz.⁶⁵

54 Anderson, *Moya – The Holy Spirit in an African Context*, 74ff.

55 Sundkler, *Bantupropheten in Südafrika*, 277.

56 *Cultural Conceptions of Life After Death*.

57 Mlisa, *Ukuthwasa Initiation of Amagcirha: Identity Construction and the Training of Xhosa Women as Traditional Healers*, 2009, xii.

58 *Ibid.*, iv.

59 Wreford, *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*, 12.

60 Nakajubi, “Beware the charlatan Sangomas”.

61 Fleming, “South Africa’s hi-tech healer”.

62 Gcabashe, “My life as a traditional healer in the 21st Century”.

63 John Lockley - *Sangoma*.

64 *White Sangoma in Soweto*.

65 Waclawiczek, *Schule für Meditation, Intuition und afrikanischen Schamanismus*.

3.5 Bantu mediumism and the implicit “double faith” in its academic and medical reception

In South African society the high rate of people visiting Sangomas for counsel and for healing, in addition to visiting a medical doctor, has been noticed and has given rise to different evaluations. In some cases this is perceived as expression of a superstition to be overcome, or, condescendingly, as an expression of limited facilities of health care which compel people to seek inadequate forms of symbolic healing. In this view Sangoma practice is insinuated to be a form of placebo at best, as suggested in a study by Kate Wilkinson, which was refuted by Leif Petersen, with reference to his own empirical studies.⁶⁶ Studies however have shown that people tend to visit clinics or medical doctors and Sangomas with different expectations and for different purposes, even if both can be subsumed under the concept of “healing”.⁶⁷

In accordance with the narrow “medical” perspective, much debate focusses on the role of Sangomas as providers of “traditional health care” – a somewhat outdated concept in an age where general hospitals and public health services have now become available to the general population in South Africa for decades. A debate on how many South Africans consult Sangomas highlights this. Discussing a widespread, but unsubstantiated claim that 80% of black South African visit a Sangoma as first medical practitioner,⁶⁸ a commentator, Leif Petersen, points out to his own research, that Sangomas are not primarily visited for medical purposes, but – on a substantial scale, if lower than 80% - concurrently with medical doctors and independent of them.⁶⁹ The reduced perspective on Sangomas as (mere) providers of traditional medicine and symbolic cures, fails their complexity and spiritual dimensions. Jo Thobeka Wreford, a Cape Town academic and anthropologist, who also followed a call to training as a Sangoma to develop and unfold her mediumistic gift, criticises the “unilinear interpretations” of this phenomenon, which exclude a recognition of the cosmology on which it is based.⁷⁰ The religious, cultural and social aspects are mostly ignored in this reception, that is, the spirits also have a religious role and meaning.

These debates show on the one hand, that the sociological reality of Sangoma practice as a culturally firmly embedded practise of dispensation of a spiritually-based healing, and even its effects, have been acknowledged on the basis of what J.T. Wreford calls a “sacred pragmatism” of healing, which can encompass agnostic approaches regarding the spiritual and religious aspects involved.⁷¹

4 The invocation of C. G. Jung as a venue for the integration of an esoterically inspired school of psychoanalytic thought with the religious spirit world of Bantu mediumism as instance of an implicit dual spiritual practise and syncretism

4.1 Bantu mediumism and changing attitudes to the phenomenon in academia: Victor and Edith Turner

Bantu mediumism has proven to present a challenge to the sense of “reality” of researchers from a background of European cultures ever since they encountered it. The life-changing encounter of Victor and Edith Turner with this realm in Zambia, which triggered their conversion from Marxism to Roman Catholicism, has been but one of these effects.

⁶⁶ Petersen, *Wilkinson, Kate*.

⁶⁷ Wessels, “Healing practises in African Independent Churches”, 94.

⁶⁸ Wilkinson, “Do 80% of S. Africans regularly consult traditional healers? The claim is unproven”.

⁶⁹ Petersen, *Wilkinson, Kate*.

⁷⁰ Wreford, *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*, 55.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

4.2 The integration of psychoanalytic and spiritist approaches on the basis of esotericism as approach to Bantu mediumism: John B. F. Laubscher

Others have sought to accommodate what they observed and experienced on the basis of Esotericism, such as the South African psychiatrist and psychoanalytic Bernard J. F. Laubscher, who encountered it through his close cooperation with a Sangoma during many years of practice at a psychiatric hospital in the heartland of Xhosa culture.⁷² Laubscher largely accepted the spiritual world view and cosmology of Xhosa traditional culture, on which Sangoma practice is based. He did so on the basis of his own exposure to the Spiritism of Europe which he encountered during his studies in Scotland and in accordance with his adherence to an esoteric strain of Freemasonry, the Scottish rite. Moreover, he recounted moving examples of spiritually significant paranormal experiences of his own.⁷³

Laubscher describes the experience of his esotericist and psychoanalytic world view merging with that of his Xhosa Sangoma friend and informer, Solomon Daba, as follows:

He was taking me on a mental journey into the hidden world of Xhosa thought. The feelings and perceptions which underlay the awareness of the pagan mind and give it a wisdom which raises him and gives him the distance of dignity and makes him feel the satisfaction of a deeper contact with life which somehow means more to him than the knowledge and power of other people. I for one could not help becoming aware of some common universal level of consciousness in which our thinking was having its existence. Indeed that we were in tune on a certain universal level of the Cosmic Mind. The union of understanding transcended his red blankets and my European clothes, my education and his illiteracy, we were in contact with a stratum of the Cosmic consciousness. We were mentally floating in a world transcending space and time. It was then the word „Ukutwasa“ [i.e. the state of being called by ancestral spirits to become a Sangoma] that showed the way. The Xhosa Isanuses [i.e., designation for high ranking Sangomas] describe many facets of this strange experience of ukutwasa, the chief characteristic, however, remains an awareness of things and events far beyond the world of our senses. Ukutwasa can take you out of yourself and even visit the Abantubomlambo [i.e., the “River people”, a class of spirits believed to reside under the water who disclose esoteric knowledge and special psychic powers] , and gain a contact by means of which wisdom can flow. It was at that moment that an intuitive flash like sheet lightning in a Transkeian night, suddenly laid bare a landscape of psychic significance.⁷⁴

This text is significant, since its subtext is an equation of psychoanalytic insight and knowledge with spiritual knowledge. Laubscher evokes an experience of epiphany, where his esotericist and psychoanalytic world view merges with that of his (illiterate but highly qualified) Sangoma friend on the basis of what Laubscher feels to be a “Cosmic Mind” – a decidedly esotericist and spiritual concept. To him this merger of horizons, which discloses an intuitive understanding of central concepts of the Sangomas’ world view, comes as a moment of spiritual revelation. It did not lead him to “convert” to the Bantu spiritual cosmology nor to African Traditional Religion. Rather he saw this encounter as disclosing hitherto un-accessed realms of a “cosmic”, i.e., spiritual reality into which he had been initiated both through his training as a psychoanalyst and through his esotericist beliefs.⁷⁵ Thus, Laubscher saw this encounter and voyage of discovery, which might be diagnosed as an instance of “double faith” as the discovery of complementary ways of access to a common arcane spiritual reality.

In this respect Laubscher went further than later colleagues. About a decade younger, the psychoanalytic Vera M. Bührmann of Cape Town, struck friendship with a Sangoma in the Eastern Cape, about which she wrote.⁷⁶ Bührmann, however, tried to integrate the spiritual cosmology of the Sangomas into her frame of a somewhat secularist line of psychoanalysis, even though she referred to Jungian concepts. The difference to Laubscher may be clearly noted, where she writes:

I perceive the fantasies about and the images of the ancestors ... as expressed in the Xhosa cosmology as projections from their unconscious, especially the collective and cultural layers. The ancestor and witch concepts are, therefore, archetypal.

⁷² Laubscher, *The Pagan Soul*, 47.

⁷³ Ibid., 193.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 202.

⁷⁶ Bührmann, *Living in two worlds. Communication between a white healer and her black counterparts*.

This was not a preconceived idea of theory on my part, but it developed when I became aware of the power and influence of these beliefs and images or symbols. This theme will be the golden thread throughout the rest of my book.⁷⁷

This statement is a far cry from the respect of Laubscher for the world view of the Sangomas as fundamentally equivalent to his own, of an esoterically augmented psychoanalysis. Bührmann's approach is reductionistic, and implicitly not respecting the insistence of Sangomas on the reality of the spirit realm. Evidently she feels concepts like the "collective unconscious" or the "cultural unconscious" to be scientific without any reflection on the esoteric aspects they have in C. G. Jung's world view and anthropology. Jung certainly formulated these hermeneutical concepts in a language of "scientism", making them accessible to a positivistic environment of his, but these very notions indicate transpersonal realms believed to be effective, which are - regardless of the claims to their empirical verification as effective in psychoanalytic treatment in Jung's tradition - definitely transcendent and esoteric. Bührmann reduces the Sangoma cosmology to manifestations of the "psyche" in a gesture of scientism, thereby negating their reality, and dismissing them as "fantasies". Other than Laubscher, she apparently did not seek to attain an enlargement of her world view and experience through this encounter, but focussed on what she could underwrite from her point of her world view, ultimately reducing the Sangoma-related practices, experiences and beliefs to mere "evidences" for her own Jungian beliefs. Presenting these as "scientific" allowed her to dismiss as unscientific anything that did not fit these parameters.

4.3 Reframing Bantu mediumism in Jungian terms of a "transpersonal", "extended self" as pathway of legitimisation in an esoteric context and its ambiguities

On this background it may appear as astonishing that some fascination with Sangoma practices, experiences and world views persist in the Jungian sphere. This is perfectly attested by the announcement of an international conference by the International Association for Jungian Studies on 27th – 30th July 2017 in Cape Town, entitled: "International Conference - 'Spectre of the Other'".

In the abstract of her presentation L. R. N. Mlisa describes the function of C. G. Jung's concepts for an understanding of Sangoma concepts in the context of European and American cultures as follows:

Ukuthwasa will never be understood in western terms without inclusion of the Jungian Psychological perspective. The presentation charts experiences that thrive from phenomenological experience of undergoing ukuthwasa and the ability to make sense of "self" and understanding of others during that journey. The phenomenon of ukuthwasa involves a complex nature of experiences through symbolism, rituals, dreams and connection with ancestors, to mention a few. Jungian psychology assists to unfold the mythology of connection with ancestors and the universe and how to reflect and interpret the diverse experiences a person is confronted with. Such experiences open a whole world view of "oneness", with people and nature in general. ... To conclude, amaXhosa have to be grateful to Carl Jung's theory and conceptualization that assisted in interpreting and articulating most of their divination systems' process in ways that gives broader perspective and connection with other cultures to create both the sameness and otherness among cultures.... More so, the theory supports the reality of inner sense; inner being which is spirituality and has no culture or religion.⁷⁸

This abstract is interesting in regard to our topic since Mlisa is trying to inscribe the cosmology of the Sangomas into the framework of C. G. Jung's thought, augmented with keywords of esotericism. This sets out with "ukuThwasa" the state of being called as a diviner and being in training. The state is marked by dreams in which personal and generic ancestors as well as other guiding spirits appear in dreams or indirectly in paranormal events and perceptions. Mlisa mentions these. Bowing to Jungian epistemics, however, she de-emphasises the difference to Jung's system, where paranormal events are not rejected as imaginary, but are related to an extended concept of the Self, in which the "collective unconscious" marks the field of the transcendent or the realm of spirits in ATR. In a scientific movement or gesture, Jung sought to include or "incorporate" the transcendent in an extended concept of the "Self", thus making

⁷⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁸ Mlisa, "The Spectre of the 'Other'".

it more accessible to a positivistic-minded era. By implication Jung distanced himself somewhat from the elder Spiritism of the early 20th century as developed and especially codified by Allan Kardec.⁷⁹ In a certain way Kardec had sought to reverse the “introjection of the transcendent”, which characterised the spiritual philosophy of the cultural movement of European Romanticism.⁸⁰ C. G. Jung picked it up again, which accounts for some tensions in his system, especially where he describes extraneous paranormal phenomena. His hermeneutic interest as a psychoanalyst, however, lay with the correlation of such events with the psyche of his patients. Mlisa picks up the spiritually significant concept of “oneness”, which is central to Esotericism. She relates it to an assumed common basis of general human understanding in a way similar to that done by Laubscher. However, she distances herself somewhat from Sangoma cosmology, with the phrase “mythology of connection with ancestors and the universe”, insinuating it to be merely a system of metaphors of internal states, in a way resembling the approach of Bührmann. The latter part of this expression is definitely of Esotericist character, since the “universe” is not a key concept of ATR, but rather the frame in which Sangomas seek to access special realms of it, i.e., those of ancestral and of nature spirits.⁸¹

Connecting to these key motifs of Esotericism and of Jung's thought Mlisa observably tries to overcome the “otherness” of ATR and Sangoma cosmology and to inscribe it in the framework of Jungian thought and of modern Esotericism with its introjection of the spiritual and its rejection of difference as regards world views and religions. Meanwhile, the claim to “one-ness” is embedded in mystical traditions worldwide, but have yet to be formulated as an ideal, seeing that different religions will describe the “ultimate reality” quite differently, (see e.g., the opposition between the Hindu doctrine of “Atman” and the defining Buddhist “An-Atman” doctrine.) In this movement Mlisa refutes the definition of Sangoma cosmology as one connected to ATR and claims universal evidence based on its introjection into a wide “Jungian” concept of the “soul”: “the theory supports the reality of inner sense; inner being which is spirituality and has no culture or religion”. With this manoeuvre she inscribes Sangoma practice and spirituality in the Universalist Esoteric discourse in a way resembling the earlier “Orientalist” discourse of European and American cultures,⁸² which had become the basis for the reception of Yoga and of Zen, regardless of the special religious systematic connections. Accordingly she de-emphasises any “otherness” and claims for reception on the basis of “sameness”, facilitating the reception of Sangoma practice as a universally accessible spiritual practise on the basis of Esotericism and of the Jungian tradition in particular. It is significant that she has been invited to deliver a keynote speech at an international Jungian conference, since it indicates that the Jungian associations involved in the event are willing to expose themselves and to learn about concepts, practices and experiences as Bantu mediumism and the therapeutic practice of Sangomas. The prominent presentation by Mlisa as a representative of this tradition, as a trained and graduated Sangoma herself, in conjunction, it may be assumed with the qualification as psychotherapist, may be understood as a move of deliberate reception. Seeing that Mlisa took note of the spiritual aspects of Bantu mediumism and seeks to reframe them in Jungian terms may be evidence of a process of reception which includes dual religious participation or “double faith” not only on her side but also from the other side of the conference hosts.

5 Conclusion

Bantu mediumism has shown to be adaptable to various religious contexts, in particular in its historic reception by African Instituted Churches and African Christianity in general, which happened through tolerated or deliberate dual religious practice and beliefs. At present, the reception of Bantu mediumism into Esoteric milieus, as exemplified by the Jungian tradition and psychoanalytic milieu, can be observed,

⁷⁹ Kardec, *Philosophie spiritualiste des esprits contenant les principes de la doctrine spirite sur l'immortalité de l'âme, la nature des Esprits et leurs rapports avec les hommes*.

⁸⁰ Schweizer, *Anthropologie der Romantik*, 109.

⁸¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 74ff.

⁸² Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge – Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, 109ff.

as ongoing since the early 20th century. The appeal to the scientific character of Bantu mediumism, as defined by Jungian thought, facilitates this process. By downplaying the cosmological differences to Esotericism and to Jungianism in particular this transition is facilitated. However, considering that Bantu mediumism contains “embodied meanings” and experiences as well as phenomena which far exceed their bounds, it may well be expected that these “receiving milieus” might be challenged to alter their views to accommodate the received Bantu traditions. It appears that Mlisa and others, who try to bridge this gap in their own dual participation – in Esotericism and in ATR – seem to be aware of the difference albeit to de-emphasise it. It may be a conscious, deliberate and calculated move or it may also be the expression of a condition of “double faith” in which that which is common to both faiths and world views is sought. Its dynamic effects and repercussions in both ways remain to be seen.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Alan. *Moya – The Holy Spirit in an African Context*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991.
- Berner, Ulrich. *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffs*. (Publications of the special research department of Orientalistics at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen, vol. 2), Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1982.
- Bruner, Edward M.. “Experience and its Expressions.” In: Turner, Victor and Edward Bruner (eds.). *The Anthropology of Experience*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 3–30.
- Bühmann, M. Vera. *Living in two worlds. Communication between a white healer and her black counterparts*. Wilmette, Ill.: Chiron Publishers, 1986.
- Griffiths, J. A. and R. W. S. Cheetham. “Priests before healers – an appraisal of the iSangoma or iSanusi in Nguni society.” In: Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C., Stephen D. Edwards, W. H. Wessels and Irving Hexham (eds.). *Afro-Christian religion and healing in southern Africa*. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press: 1989, 295–303. (original publication of this paper in: *South African Medical Journal*, vol. 62, Dec 11, 1982)
- Hall, James. *Sangoma – My Odyssey into the Spirit World of Africa*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam, 1994.
- Hammond-Tooke, William David. “The aetiology of spirit in Southern Africa.” In: Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C., Stephen D. Edwards, W. H. Wessels and Irving Hexham (eds.). *Afro-Christian religion and healing in southern Africa*. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press: 1989, 43–66.
- Kardec, Allan. *Philosophie spiritualiste des esprits contenant les principes de la doctrine spirite sur l’immortalité de l’âme, la nature des Esprits et leurs rapports avec les hommes; les lois morales, la vie présente, la vie future et l’avenir de l’humanité, selon l’enseignement donné par les Esprits supérieurs à l’aide de divers médiums, recueillis et mis en ordre par Allan Kardec*. Paris: Union Spirite Française et Francophone, 1860.
URL: <http://www.oconsolador.com.br/linkfixo/bibliotecavirtual/frances/le-livre-des-esprits.pdf>
- Kleinhempel, Ullrich Relebogilwe. “Rilke’s Translation of “The Slovo o Polku Igoryeva” (“The Song of Igor’s Campaign”) in the Context of His Spiritual and Poetological Development”, *ALITER*, 8 (2017), 3–32. Available at <https://independent.academia.edu/UllrichKleinhempel>
- Kleinhempel, Ullrich Relebogilwe, “Spreading an Arcane Religion on the World Wide Web: Paradoxies of Transmission of the Contemporary Mysteries’ Cult of Umbanda”. In: Pakhomov, Sergey (ed.), *Mistiko-ezotericheskie dvizhenie v teorii i praktike - mistitsizm i ezoterizm v mire tekhnologii, VIII mezhdunarodnaia nauchnaia konferentsia*. St. Petersburg, 2017: ASEM, 60–71.
- Kleinhempel, Ullrich Relebogilwe. *Spreading an Arcane Religion on the World Wide Web: Paradoxes of Transmission of the Contemporary Mysteries’ Cult of Umbanda*. [ASEM conference presentation], St. Petersburg, 19th November 2016.
URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310506056_Spreading_an_Arcane_Religion_on_the_World_Wide_Web_Paradoxies_of_Transmission_of_the_Contemporary_Mysteries%27_Cult_of_Umbanda
- Laubscher, Bernard J. F. *The Pagan Soul*. London: Neville Spearman Ltd., 1975.
URL: <http://downloads.astro-theology.za.org/tps.pdf>
- Lockley, John. <http://www.johnlockley.com/>
- Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989 (2nd ed.).
- Mbiti, John. *Introduction to African Religion* (2nd rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann, 1991.
- Mkhize, Velapho V., [ed.]. “South African Healers Association (SOAHA).” UMSAMO Institute[homepage], 1. April, 2013.
URL: <http://umsamo.org.za/wpp/south-african-healers-association-soaha/>
- Mlisa Lily-Rose Nomfundo. “The Spectre of the ‘Other’” [Abstract of Keynote Presentation]. in: *International Association for Jungian Studies - International Conference ‘Spectre of the Other’*. Centre for the Book, Cape Town, South Africa, July 27–30, 2017, 15. URL: <http://iaap.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IAJS-2017-Conference-The-Spectre-of-the-Other.pdf>
- Mlisa, Lily-Rose Nomfundo. *Ukuthwasa Initiation of Amagcirha: Identity Construction and the Training of Xhosa Women as Traditional Healers*. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2009 (Diss. Phil. 2009 at UOFS, Centre for Africa Studies).
URL: <http://scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11660/2171/MlisaL-RN.pdf?sequence=1>

- Nakajubi, Gloria. "Beware the charlatan Sangomas." *Mail & Guardian*, 06 Nov. 2015.
URL: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-11-05-beware-the-charlatan-Sangomas>
- Parapsychologischen Beratungsstelle in Freiburg, <http://www.parapsychologische-beratungsstelle.de/>
- Petersen, Leif. [comment on article by] Wilkinson, Kate, "Do 80% of S. Africans regularly consult traditional healers? The claim is unproven." *Africa Check*, 31st July 2013, 11:07 July 31st, 2013. URL: <https://africacheck.org/reports/do-80-of-south-africans-regularly-consult-traditional-healers-the-claim-is-false/>
- Pew-Templeton: Global Religious Futures Project. *Pew Research Report – South Africa* (2010). URL: http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/south-africa#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2014
- Schweizer, Stefan. *Anthropologie der Romantik*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2008.
- Sundkler, Bengt G. M. *Bantupropheten in Südafrika*. Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1964. (original title: *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- Tempels, Placide. *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris, Présence Africaine: 1959. (transl. from the French translation, *La philosophie bantue*, of the Dutch original: *Bantoe-Filosofie*, de Sikkels, Antwerp: 1946).
URL: <http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/FTEnglishTranslation.htm>
- Turner, Edith. *Among the Healers. Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing around the World*. Westport, Ct.: Praeger Publ., 2006.
- Turner, Victor. "Body, Brain and Culture." In: Turner, Victor (ed.). *On the Edge of the Bush. Anthropology as Experience*. 249–273, Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1985.
- Turner, Victor. *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Van Binsbergen, Wim. "Becoming a Sangoma: Religious Anthropological Fieldwork in Francistown, Botswana." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21(4), 309–344.
- Von Lucadou, Walther and Peter Wagner. *Die Geister die mich riefen - Deutschlands bekanntester Spukforscher erzählt*. Cologne, 2012: Bastei Lübbe.
- Waclawiczek, Elke-M. *Schule für Meditation, Intuition und afrikanischen Schamanismus*. Graz.
URL: <http://www.schule-mia.at/werist.html>
- Wilkinson, Kate. "Do 80% of S. Africans regularly consult traditional healers? The claim is unproven." *Africa Check*, 31st July 2013, <https://africacheck.org/reports/do-80-of-south-africans-regularly-consult-traditional-healers-the-claim-is-false/>.
- Wreford, Jo Thobeka. *Working with Spirit – Experiencing Izangoma Healing in Contemporary South Africa*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008 (Series Epistemologies of Healing, vol. 3).

Videography:

- Cultural Conceptions of Life After Death*. [series: Voyage of the Planet], 15.04.2008.
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCXXYMisq0>
- Denzel, Thomas. "Südafrika - Der Heilerjunge". *Weltspiegel - ARD*, 15.08.2016.
URL: <http://www.daserste.de/information/politik-weltgeschehen/weltspiegel/suedafrika-heilerjunge-100.html>
- Fihlani, Pumza. "Witnessing a South African healer at work". *BBC News*, Johannesburg, 7 May 2013.
URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22306869>
- Fleming, Lucy. "South Africa's hi-tech healer". *BBC News website*, Johannesburg, 30 March 2009.
URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7969109.stm>
- Gcabashe, Amanda. "My life as a traditional healer in the 21st Century". *TEDx Talks*, TEDxJohannesburg, 29.02.2016.
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXZlmM-cXZM>
- John Lockley – *Sangoma*. 17.02.2015. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Haqf4xl00k>
- White Sangoma in Soweto*. 11.03.2010. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUEnwF4QRtM>
- (all websites last accessed on 2.11.2017)