

BECOMING A *SANGOMA*:

RELIGIOUS ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD-WORK IN FRANCISTOWN, BOTSWANA¹

BY

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1. *Introduction*

In my ongoing research into the urban therapeutic scene in Francistown, a rapidly growing town in northeastern Botswana, I set out to contrast (van Binsbergen 1990a) the symbolic and organizational features of two dominant religious expressions: churches of the spirit, and mediumistic *sangoma* cult lodges. Tracing the biographical and therapeutic trajectory of a number of inhabitants of Francistown, it turns out that the social and psycho-somatic complaints of patients in both types of therapy are very similar. However, the *sangoma* cult idiom seeks to establish, in the consciousness of the clients, a coherent image of a viable and meaningful social order anchored in the village, adoricism (de Heusch's term; cf. Lewis 1990) of ancestors and continuity with the past—persuading them to embrace a traditional worldview that until then may hardly have been part of their adult consciousness. A minority of the patients become permanent adepts of the *sangoma* cult, swelling the ranks of the lodge membership which, in addition to recruited patients, comprises selected members of the consanguineal and affinal kin of the lodge leader. Through the person of their leader, each lodge is tributary to the region's dominant territorial cult of Mwali or Ngwali.² By contrast, the Christian idiom emphasizes personal rupture *via-à-vis* the rural-based kin group, exorcism of ancestral and other rural-associated spirits (foremost the *Shumba* or *Lion* cult), and reinforces the clients as participants in an urban capitalist economy experienced by them as painful, meaningless, yet attractive. Thus my project is situated in a fast growing body of recent literature on healing and socio-cultural transformation in Southern Africa.³ To me as a European researcher, Francistown

proved a painfully difficult environment to explore questions of historical African religion, even when such religion was evidently a major component in the urbanites' consciousness. The present paper describes how I struggled to solve this research problem, and in the process became so involved with the *sangoma* cult that the purpose of the field-work itself had to be reconsidered—not to say was defeated.

Botswana is the fourth place in Africa where, since 1968, I have conducted field-work on religion and therapy. Those familiar with my work have seen me pass through a rather rapid succession of paradigms: from the positivist collection of quantitative data on the recruitment of spirit mediums (*faqir*, pl. *fúqra*) in the highlands of northwestern Tunisia, via Marxist reductionism explaining away cults of affliction (particularly the *Bituma* cult) in western Zambia as a local idiom expressing the articulation of modes of production, to a symbolically somewhat more sensitive exploration of the convergence of bodily and territorial symbolism in Manjak oracular cults in Guinea Bissau.

In my first Tunisian field-work I remained an observing outsider, encountering the shocking directness of the epiphany of the sacred through ecstatic religion for the first time in my life. Parallel to the professional *fúqra* sessions as staged publicly at saints' festivals as well as in the relative privacy of a homestead, those who were not eligible for *faqir*-hood (or who had dropped out of that status because of its socio-political marginality) would frequently, as part of an evening's musical entertainment among kinsmen, friends and neighbours, stage perfect imitations of the *fúqras*' art, and it was on those occasions that I learned the bodily movements, singing and respiratory techniques attributed to the initiates. In 1970, during a 'genuine' session, I was allowed to dance along not just with the imitators but with the *fúqra* themselves; I entered into an incipient trance, but was immediately called back, primarily by my first wife who was present. The restrictive brand of social anthropology I was reading in the Netherlands at the time did not stimulate any further analytical explorations into the ecstatic experience itself, and only two decades later a long novel written in the non-academic intimacy of my mother tongue (van Binsbergen 1988) was to serve as the outlet for what I had not been able to capture and come to terms with in scholarly discourse; as much of my other literary work has been moulded out of the spill-over of field-

work experiences (but deriving its primary inspiration not from field-work *per se* but from a more general personal quest, one leg of which forms the subject of the present paper).

In my next, and much more extensive, Zambian field-work I was again drawn to the study of ecstatic religion, but while I was deeply involved with a family of cult leaders and adepts, and sponsored several sessions for that family's junior women, my personal ritual participation remained confined to shaking a rattle in the chorus and attending to complex logistics ensuring the presence of drums and firewood. I noted the amazing similarity between the Zambian adepts' dancing and trance and the Tunisian forms, and I avidly consumed papers on the spread of ecstatic cults across the African continent in recent centuries. However, the success of my Marxist interpretation of the Zambian material prevented me, once again, from sounding out the ecstatic depths, let alone plunging into them myself. The idea that the widespread ecstatic approach to healing could be more than an external research topic, could be incorporated into my own personal life, was still far from me. Instead, I was persuaded to provide an informal outlet for western medicine at my rural research site in Zambia, and this unexpected and unqualified exercise of the doctor's role gave me immense satisfaction (van Binsbergen 1979a, 1987); steps were taken to formalize this initiative through the establishment of a local clinic, to be financed with Dutch aid money, and to be staffed by the Zambian government, but this project aborted due to the absence of sustained organizational support at the local level.

By the late 1970s, my repeated field-work and this increasing involvement in the life and language of the Zambian Nkoya began to pose serious problems of personal and family boundary management in my movements back and forth between western Zambia and western Europe, but even when this had me thoroughly desorientated it was still only jokingly, flippantly, that I considered the possibility of phrasing my being torn between 'there' and 'back again' (van Binsbergen 1979b) in terms of possession by a Zambian affliction spirit—much as I had learned to interpret the cults of affliction in terms of traders' and labour migrants' boundary crossing, geographical and cultural displacement, and the linkage between distinct socio-cultural complexes termed 'modes of production'. Yet, was the situation of these African travellers not reminiscent of the anthropological field-worker's?

It was only in 1983, during new field-work on the therapeutic effectiveness of oracles and land priests in Guinea Bissau—no ecstatic religion in this thoroughly ‘Apollinic’ gerontocratic culture, except perhaps in secret women’s cults I had no access to—, that I crossed an essential boundary and became a participant-as-patient, deriving benefits of personal healing from an idiom which only months before had been utterly unknown to me. These cults did cater for the local rice-cultivating villagers, but a large proportion of their clients were returning labour migrants from Senegal and France, and in addition their clientèle comprised non-locals from all over Guinea Bissau and Southern Senegal: people who had to use a national *lingua franca* in their contacts with the cultic personnel and whose understanding of the cults’ transactions was only based on such simplified symbolic and aetiological interpretations as could be explained to them in one or two sessions. The priests’ response made it clear that in these respects their distant African patients did not fundamentally differ from me or from occasional other white (Portuguese) clients. Intrigued by the ease and eagerness with which I embraced Manjak society, a western-trained psychiatrist with whom I undertook the project jointly—in general a sober positivist—ventured an explanation which was to take on a new meaning in later years: could I be the European incarnation of an African?

The above summarizes what I brought to my field-work in Francistown in 1988. Focussing on the contemporary transformation of culture in an urban setting (which was thought to mediate between a rural-based tradition and the modern state), I was of course keen to explore the urban manifestations—if any—of the region’s Mwali cult. Yet I realized that the limited time available for field-work and language learning (a year, later fortunately augmented by shorter trips—but still far too little), the urban setting, the need to look at many other aspects of the Francistown socio-cultural scene in addition to historic religion, and the territorial claims long since pegged out by others who happened to be my closest academic friends, would prevent me from making a major contribution to Mwali studies. At the same time, considering my academic work so far it was to be expected that religion would loom large in my approach to socio-cultural transformations in Francistown, and that the urban trajectory of cults would provide

models for my analysis of other aspects of the urban society. While the scale of the urban community would force me to supplement my participant observation with the use of survey methods, I had long put aside the positivist optimism that had guided my Tunisian research. Likewise, while the project was conceived as a study of the culture of peripheral capitalism, I had become convinced that only the selective incorporation of Marxist ideas in mainstream anthropology (*embourgeoisement*, in other words) would allow us to benefit from both the gains of recent Marxism and of a hundred years of symbolic, kinship, political etc. anthropology. And yes, I hoped (rather naïvely, as it will turn out, but eventually not in vain) that new African field-work with a substantial religious component would mean another installment of the personally liberating and healing insights that had come my way in Guinea Bissau, and would further define my own existential position towards an Africa that from an arbitrarily chosen research site in my first graduate project had become my conscience, my second wife, one of the main puzzles of my life.

This should provide sufficient background for the (entirely factual) narrative section that is to follow.

2. *A meal in the country*⁴

Nata, September 1990. At the fringe of the Kalahari desert, two hundred kilometres northwest of Francistown. Prior to this afternoon, this village had stood out mainly as the place where my nostalgia for other, dearer parts had hurt more than anywhere else in Botswana. Along the perfect tar road, near the filling station whose pumps were still hand-operated (but where the best French fries of the whole of northern Botswana were on sale, as well as a larger international assortment of alcoholic beverages than in the tax-free shops of many European airports), one could always find remarkably poorly dressed Zambians, waiting for transport which even they could afford, to reduce or add to the three hundred kilometres which separated them here from their own country—Zambia, where I was so much at home and which contrasted so sharply with booming Botswana. The aerials of the Nata police compound tower high above a few shops and a much larger number of thatched round houses, with chickens and goats and said to be largely inhabited by San people, the sedentarized descendants of

the hunters and collectors who form the original inhabitants of this land. Here one speaks Tswana or Kalanga; the San language does not belong to public life, and somatically the San can hardly be distinguished any more from the Bantu-speakers who have been placed over them as cattle lords, shopkeepers and civil servants. Ten kilometres before arriving at Nata, at the edge of wetlands which are flat and open like the polders of my native Holland, just as full of birds and cows and with the same light beckoning with watery reflections, one passes 'Nata Lodge': a camping and bungalow site, surrounded by palms and the regular stop-over for South African tourists on their way to the game parks of northern Botswana; here the lingua franca is Afrikaans, almost Dutch.

However, that afternoon picture-postcard Nata, 'where the real Botswana begins', formed the end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture.

A quarter of a century after Botswana's independence Francistown had turned out to be still in the grips of its past of mining, monopoly capitalism and labour migration, and of the racial distinctions this had entailed. During field-work in that town, in the popular site-and-service scheme where we had settled as the only European family, we had for almost a year hit on walls of rejection, suspicion, indifference, cramped displays of modernity and dissembled tradition—the common strategies by which the black urban population of Southern Africa tries to come to terms with economic and cultural humiliation at the hands of whites, and to secure an identity underground. The literature, conversations with colleagues who had wisely limited their research to the rural situation, and extensive trips with town dwellers to their rural homes, had given me some idea of what went on in the villages around Francistown. In those villages the African tradition is still rather vital: from ancestor veneration to the cult of the High God Mwali, from historic kinship structure to female-centred cults of the wilds. For many months however I was flatly denied all access to those aspects of tradition which functioned in the urban setting, in interaction with wage labour and modern formal organizations. Half the time even our greetings were not answered. Such knowledge and experience as I had gained elsewhere in Africa did not count and—to my increased indignation—my skin colour put me on the wrong side in a grim if largely tacit racial feud. In the villages we shared the porridge which had been my daily and often

only food in so many places in Southern Africa; in town, where despite the supply of bread and fast food this cheap dish is still the principal staple, it was never offered to us: 'Whites do not eat that sort of thing.' Nor did our neighbours ever offer us any other food. Little did the people know that I looked at them with the eyes of a villager from Zambia, and that my heart resounded with the perplexed cry by which children in that country challenge the infringement of their elementary rights: 'You are refusing me porridge?!' It shows our neighbours' embarrassed good will, however, that our little son Vincent was sometimes invited to eat with them.

The pressures of this field-work made us literally sick, and it was not an illness that the western physicians of Francistown could heal despite our almost weekly consultations. From a few weeks' delightful visit to the Zambian countryside I returned to face Francistown with increased frustration and impatience. I refused to play any longer the role of the despised, oft-burglared white man in a black neighbourhood. Surely it should be possible to introduce into this urban environment my knowledge of a kindred African culture, acquired in Zambia over a twenty-year period, among people whom—much to the hilarity of my Francistown neighbours—I insisted on calling 'my relatives'.

Now the time was ripe. Forced to let the role of researcher be temporarily eclipsed by that of patient, my wife Patricia and myself were allowed to step out of our prison of stereotypical whites. Already at the beginning of our stay we had met Smart Gumede, a Zulu man who after twenty-six years as a deep-water cabin steward had been called by his ancestors to become a traditional healer; he had ended up in Francistown, as far from the sea as one can get in Southern Africa. He combined his practice with a small business in vegetables, fat cakes and firewood. It was to him that we referred as a last resort, short of giving up our field-work. His response was prompt and to the point. Against the sorcery attacks we were so obviously victim to, he supplied magical substances with which to doctor our yard and bodies; the daily rites through which to administer them, helped us through our most distressful weeks in Francistown. Himself a foreigner, he invited us to take a relative view of our situation in terms not of racism but of Botswana xenophobia. And from his business he would always give me some food for Vincent whom he began to call his grandson—the first honorary kinship term to be bestowed upon us in Botswana. Also

Gumede introduced me to his homeboy Joshua Ndlovu, in his fifties a budding *sangoma* seeking to establish himself in the local therapeutic scene, but at the same time a drop-out secondary school teacher holding university degrees and diplomas. With Joshua I could discuss *sangomahood* in terms derived from anthropological textbooks. Impressed by what I could tell him about Zambian cults of affliction, he introduced us to his local network of healers and cult leaders, who rushed to our assistance by word and deed.

Soon we were introduced to a more complex and less mechanical aetiology, at the hands not of a pragmatic herbalist like Gumede (who meanwhile became my first teacher of divination) but of *sangomas*. One lodge leader interpreted my many complaints (backache, insomnia, high blood pressure, the theft of a unique book manuscript on Zambia ready for publication, of my wedding ring, and of scores of other items from our house) as springing not from the structure of Francistown society, nor from sorcery on the part of our neighbours, but from disrupted relationships between ourselves and our ancestors. We were to improve that relationship and to regain our ancestral protection and anchorage by accepting ritual obligations (such as the killing of goats in our yard, and the wearing of beads); and in the meantime the administration of herbs and fumigation were to combat the more acute suffering. We were impressed when in dramatic divination sessions the specific ancestors were identified who were held responsible for our suffering: my paternal grandfather, who had died in my father's infancy, and—a few weeks later at a different *sangoma* lodge—Patricia's mother's father's mother. These were indeed key figures of our family history, and around them much of the conflict and misery in our separate families had clogged for generations. I had sacrificed a calf, pigs and goats before, to saints and land spirits in Tunisia and Guinea Bissau, and twice a year I would still dedicate special family meals to one particular Tunisian saint, but I was loath to sacrifice to my paternal kin from whom—for what I thought were excellent reasons—I had tried to run away all my life. However, I was enough of a religious anthropologist to appreciate the therapist's insistence that my submission on this point, precisely, would produce the change I was hoping for: 'The very force which is afflicting you now, is the one which has pushed you to be a writer', as my therapist then divined. He and his colleagues had not the slightest doubt as to the applicability of their ancestral

aetiology to us. Instead of the alien collective spirits of distant places, it was our own family history we were made to come to terms with.

There are a handful of *sangoma* lodges in Francistown, and the leader of one of them, Rosie Mabutu, Mma Ndhlovu, of the Maipaahela suburb, insisted that we should frequent her establishment. For a month we would spend almost every day and evening there, sometimes staying overnight. Life at the lodge showed us the many layers of ethnic, national and linguistic identities of the members; in a place where diversity, displacement, and (in an idiom of ancestral reincarnation) movement across time were taken for granted and where all day-to-day interaction was geared to produce a viable therapeutic community of fellow-sufferers healing each other, the boundaries that had so long shut us out did not exist.⁵ Rosie and her sister (Elizabeth Mabutu, Mma Tshakayile, head of a lodge in the Monarch suburb) boasted a white man for their grandfather; my first therapist had incorporated a crystal ball, a present from a grateful white client, among his principal divinatory apparatus. From whites, the *sangoma* lodge restored us to be human beings, and here we found the first and only places in Francistown where we genuinely were at home.

But more was happening to us than incorporation into an accommodating group. We both could hardly talk, think or dream of anything else any more except *sangomahood*. Our awareness of time and space was affected as we were continuously preoccupied with powers which seemed to defy the laws of empirical reality, with reincarnation reversing the flow of time, and with divination which, ranging from past to future, put a deliberate, momentary stop to the very mechanism of time itself. The academic point that the ancestral beings did not have any empirical existence in the present time, first became irrelevant to us, then questionable. Vague ancestral beliefs had been part of my upbringing anyway, and my previous African experiences had already merged with this background and with my Christian upbringing to provide a composite worldview that was only mobilized at times of crisis; but we were very much in crisis now.

Patricia's redressive sacrifice could only be made in the midst of her maternal kin, after our return to Europe; in anticipation we solemnly dedicated and sacrificed a white chicken from the run in our Francistown yard.

All this magical and cultic activity, involving local celebrities as officiants, could hardly escape the notice of our neighbours, and it was not entirely without glee that we got some of our own back. From pariahs who did not even deserve to be lied to consistently and elaborately, we were eventually recognized, perhaps even feared, as being well-versed in the sphere of healers and spirit mediums. For many town dwellers it is there that lies the touchstone of happiness and success, the traditionally and rurally anchored ancestral censor of their accomplishments in modern life. And we were moving rapidly into that domain.

According to a general African mode of thought with which I had long been familiar (cf. van Binsbergen 1981), serious illness constitutes primarily an indication that the patient has been called to become a healer: the ancestors manifest themselves—through illness—not in order to destroy their descendant but to let him or her, via specific ritual steps, partake of their strength through incarnation. Therefore the therapies which Patricia and I myself underwent, were to be combined with training in diagnostic techniques, in preparation for an expected near future when we would be healers ourselves. Initially Patricia progressed farthest in this respect, as a member of a group of women who, under Rosie Mabutu's direction, would—both in the privacy of Rosie's lodge, and publicly, out in the townships—stage cultic dances in the black-white-red uniform of *hosannas*, adepts of the Mwali cult. From this they derived not only healing for themselves but also (once the crucial threshold of ecstasy would have been crossed, and a *hosanna* ancestral spirit would take possession of the adept's body) eligibility for the socially recognized status of healer. However, in her matter-of-factness Patricia never came closer to ecstasy than when she fainted at Rosie's funeral, whose sudden death under suspect circumstances put an end to this therapeutic episode only a month after it had started.

Our hopes were smashed once again and in fact our predicament had increased, for having progressed from being researchers to being patients, the latter role could not be brought to consummation due to Rosie's death. Mma Tshakayile (emphatically not a *hosanna* but a *sangoma*, a medium whose ancestral spirit delivers articulate messages) was supposed to take over Rosie's patients; however, in the confusion shortly after the funeral we were made to understand that this would not apply to us; little did we realize

then that this rejection was a mere invention on the part of junior adepts and junior relatives, who saw us as a threat to their own uncertain statuses.

Joshua (whom some blamed for Rosie's death—she died immediately after officiating at his house) suggested, as our only way out, a pilgrimage to the Manyangwa Mwali oracle in Zimbabwe, to which Rosie had been subservient; there surely we would be told how to complete the process of redress we had so hopefully begun under her supervision. However, Joshua's original lodge in Bulawayo could not put us in touch with Manyangwa; instead we got a letter of introduction and an escort of uniformed *hosannas* to take us to Njelele, another major Mwali oracle in the Matopos Hills. At the shrinekeeper's village, as earlier on in Francistown, we were not welcome. The reason given was that we were white. I objected that we came as distressed suppliants, not as curious outsiders, and that other whites I knew well had not been refused. But the refusal was absolute, and as I was conducting the negotiations adepts in trance aggressively crowded and growled around Patricia who was waiting at some distance. Leaving behind an eager and disloyal Joshua (who had been granted access) we heartbrokenly drove back to Bulawayo through the night. Only in later years, when I finally did make it to Mwali, did I learn how very high the thresholds for first admission to these oracles are, realizing that Joshua had taken us on a fool's errand. His later, starry-eyed account of his nocturnal experience with the Mother of Spirits at Njelele did not quite help us over our own disappointment.

When soon afterwards we moved back to the Netherlands because my allotted year of field-work was over, our prevailing feeling was one of sadness because of Rosie's death, and of continued rejection for which the mass of my more routinely collected quantitative and administrative data on Francistown society and culture could not compensate. Nine months later, and largely out of loyalty to Rosie's memory, we did stage the required major sacrifice for Patricia's ancestor in her Belgian village—appropriately sighing under the costs, and surprised that her relatives had so little of a problem with the whole thing; and this ended the matter as far as Patricia was concerned.

Not so for me. My field-work in Tunisia and Zambia had prepared me to appreciate *sangomahood* within a wider context, and the experiences at the lodge shed a new light on the data from my

earlier research elsewhere. I had supported Patricia's activities in Rosie's group in every possible way. Such esoteric knowledge as I derived from my Zambian research, a bead necklace and a shell pendant reminiscent of that period, and the skills in handling the oracular tablets which Gumede had meanwhile taught me, in the lodge environment were recognized as manifestations of a kindred spirit. Rosie had gone to the extent of giving me a set of consecrated tablets (her regular adepts would practice divination on virgin dummy tablets), and had supervised my further training in their use. What with her uniform, daily administrations of medicine, payment of a substantial entrance fee and being ritually chased across the Maipaahela river, Patricia clearly stood out as a *twaza*, a trainee *sangoma*. Since I had recently undergone therapy at a rival lodge, my own status at Maipaahela remained ambiguous: was I a visiting initiate trained in Zambia (I was *not*), or was I merely an obliging husband and sponsor who was allowed to share in the ritual, the training, the day-to-day life and the meals at Rosie's yard? It was only occasionally that I was invited to dance along with the group, although often I shared in the singing and drumming. At the same time I felt a stronger challenge than Patricia did. No doubt there was an element of inter-gender competition to this. More important was that I, as a supposedly accomplished field-worker, had experienced the barriers which Francistown society put before us not only as emotionally disappointing but also as a shameful professional failure. I kept hoping that one day, on some later research trip to Francistown, I could realize the opportunities for *rapport* which were being suggested by our contract with healers and mediums at that stage. If I was not accepted as a temporary member of that society in my western-defined role of researcher, I hoped to return in a locally-defined role, within the one urban sector which had, at long last, accommodated us. And the first messages that I managed to extract from my newly acquired divination tablets were precisely on this point: Yes, I would return to Francistown, and yes, I would then become a *sangoma*.

Already considerations in terms of a failing field-work strategy were secondary to my longing for esoteric knowledge, symbolic power, and performative beauty. After Tunisia and Zambia, my renewed contact with the ecstatic cult reminded me that this was, for me, one of the great achievements of humanity, combining display of self and loss of self, past and present, detachedly applied

performative skills and hazardous abandon. I began to think that more than twenty years of African religious research had unknowingly but unmistakably prepared me for the decisive steps I was now about to take. I realized that there would be immense satisfaction for me in having Africans accept me in an African specialist religious role, and I did not mind the respect they would, and ultimately did, accord me in that status—as they do other *sangomas*. But ultimately, when I did come back and did become a *sangoma*, I was to find an even greater reward in the chaste closeness of bodies crammed into Mma Tshakayile's small lice-infested backroom where *sangomas* would brotherly and sisterly retire after dancing; in the gentle and patient ministrations by which Kwani, at seventeen the youngest of Mma Tshakayile's *sangoma* granddaughters, tied and retied my sagging ankle rattles; the subtle stage directions, unnoticeable to the lay onlookers, by which the stepping forth and falling back of pairs of *sangomas* on the dancing ground is orchestrated, lest one dancer steals the show at the expense of the others; and the certainty of acceptance when, in the corner of one's eye, one sees the other *sangomas* rallying around from the back, ready to catch one's fall and thus taking away the last impediments to trance. I was seeking existential transformation, fulfilment and redress, much more than anthropological data, across cultural, geographical and racial boundaries.

An opportunity for renewed contact with Mma Tshakayile presented itself in August 1990, when I was to give a seminar before the Francistown Town Council, on the more down-to-earth aspects of my urban research. Checking on our former neighbours in Somerset East Extension, it turned out that the investments made during the first frustrating year had unexpectedly borne fruit, and I was received back into a very different neighbourhood from the one which I had left—now there was sociability, small talk, concern, joking, even food for me. A neighbour who the previous year had never bothered to pay us any attention, within a day had arranged the desired contact with the Mwali high priest of the southwest region (i.e. northeast Botswana), and I became an occasional but welcome visitor to his Francistown villa. How would the *sangomas*, whom I had left in the confusion after Rosie's funeral, receive me after a year? With trepidation I called at Mma Tshakayile's lodge, but immediately I was claimed by the lodge community, and found my proper place there. I was to be Mma

Tshakayile's *twaza*—but even more: she welcomed me back as Johannes, her deceased elder brother, and at Johannes' homestead in Mashelagabedi village twenty-five kilometres out of Francistown I had the uncanny experience of being shown my own, i.e. Johannes', grave. Within ten days after renewed contact, the Tunisian techniques enabled me to produce, at the same homestead, an acceptable trance in which, according to the reports I received afterwards, an Afrikaans-speaking collateral ancestor spoke through my mouth, old and tired, and asking—of course—for porridge. This was the decisive sign of my calling, and a week later—one day after my appointment to a chair at the Free University, Amsterdam, came into effect—I was initiated as a *twaza*, before a massive audience of lodge members, invitees and neighbours, and with all the trappings: my own *sangoma* uniform as dictated in detail by my ancestral spirit under trance; sacred cloths, as well as bead necklaces and bracelets which I was to wear night and day for the rest of my life; elaborate and cumbersome taboos and prescriptions relating to food, body care, sexuality and ritual for the duration of my period as a *twaza*; and (irregularly premature, but very explicitly) the right to practice traditional medicine.

Great as the fulfilment was, I was under enormous tension and, with the classic novice's syndrome, passed the night before initiation fearing it would be my last. One of my few white friends in Francistown has severely warned me: not having grown up in Southern Africa, I could not possibly know what I was dabbling in, suggestion and hypnosis were the *sangomas'* stock-in-trade, and the least I was asking for was being turned into a zombie for life; or was I courting Rosie's fate? On the day of the initiation I took my research assistant Ennie Maphakwane along as my witness although it was her first visit to the lodge; and for further protection I went to the extent of collecting from the other end of town Mma Mpofu, a motherly lady whom we had met/subsequently lost touch with in 1988 and whom I had found out only in 1990 to have been Rosie's senior adept. On our way, picking up additional firewood at the house of one of Mma Mpofu's in-laws who happened to be a Zionist church leader, I asked him to pray with us for protection and blessing; fully aware of his relative's ritual status, he yet obliged graciously, and far from charging for the firewood, brought it along to Mma Tshakayile's yard in his own truck. All my precautions proved unnecessary. The ceremony (which included the

standard ‘anti-cooking’ of the sacred foam of the *mpetlelwe* root over my head, the drinking of blood from the cut throat of a dying goat; its gall was smeared onto my feet and its inflated gall bladder tied to a string for me to wear as a pendant) was entirely public, out in the open yard; at no point was I to eat or drink anything that was not shared with others. The main language at the lodge is Ndebele, and most of its members are ‘paper’ Batswana from Zimbabwe, but to my relief it turned out that I was to be initiated along with a woman my own age, Mma Nleya, whose father and husband had come from western Zambia and with whom I could speak Nkoya—she answering back in the related Luvale language. To humour my white spirit Mma Tshakayile had shown considerable inventiveness of *bricolage*, and thus from her large stock of paraphernalia European hats were produced for her and me to wear during the ceremony, the goat’s meat was not to be cooked but barbecued (for Southern African whites like their *braai*), and the fried meat was displayed not on the ground but (whitemen’s fashion) on a table. In single file the lodge population followed Mma Tshakayile and and forth, over my sacred white cloth that was extended between the lodge’s arboreal shrine and that table, and in passing everyone would take a single piece of the meat. Scores, later hundreds of people from the surrounding Monarch compound flocked to the yard, cheering, ululating—especially when a triumphant Mma Tshakayile cried out to describe one by one the parts of my uniform, showing them to the audience (‘these are the trousers of my son’, ‘this is the shirt of my son’)—and partaking in the free meal that was to follow. The situation became decidedly hilarious when an army jeep drove up from the barracks at the other side of Nyangabgwe Hill: boys who has seen me shirtlessly seated in the shrine with the foam cooking over me, had rushed to the military because ‘at Mma Tshakayile’s they were flogging a white man to death’; for the only occasion they had seen a man take off his shirt at a public meeting was when corporal punishment was meted out at the customary court, and it had been more than half a century since a white man had received that relatively mild punishment in Botswana (Crowder 1988). The boys did have a point, though; I shall come back to this.

When we retired to Mma Tshakayile’s house in the late afternoon, the tension was released and I had a long crying fit. Mma Nleya came up to me and comforted me: ‘Does it hurt so much,

my brother?’ To Mma Ndhlozi, a South African lodge member, sister-in-law to Mma Tshakayile and the one to interpret my spirit’s Afrikaans, my reaction was only too obvious: had my grandfather not cried for a (wooden) gun to be added to my uniform, when he spoke through me only an hour ago during my second trance? ‘*Die ou doppie*’ (that old chap) was getting impatient about his gun, that was all. The absence of psychologizing appears to one of the strengths of *sangoma* aetiology. Her husband, a *sangoma* who, as a retired labour migrant from South Africa in his late sixties, made a living as a guard at the still almost exclusively white Francistown Club, needed even fewer words; he clutched me and with an emphasis which contorted his face and body, managed to bring out ‘I—I love you’.

Whereas my spirit was henceforth to guide my therapeutic practice by means of dreams and inner voices, Mma Tshakayile deemed it necessary that on her recommendation I would become a member of the same association of traditional healers she and her senior adepts belonged to: the *Kwame (Legwame) Traditional Association of Botswana*. (Kwame—with its Tswana form Legwame—is the name of the first of the standard four divination tablets, ‘the senior woman’.) In case I would ‘Lose a patient’, or would have to carry medicine including game trophies across the national borders, this guild would protect me before the Botswana government, by which it had been recognized. Long ago it had been founded by a herbalist of, again, Zambian origin: Mr. G.R. Sinombe, who was still its president. For a few years Gumede had been its treasurer and general secretary, but he had stepped down during a period which in the association’s file at the Botswana Registrar of Societies’ office (where I had consulted it earlier as a matter of routine, unaware that I would ever join) had stood out as one of financial crisis.

Meanwhile Sinombe had settled in Nata, in the centre of the northern Botswana region which his association covers. It was thither that I travelled three days after my initiation, in a rented car, along with Mma Tshakayile’s granddaughter Molly who despite her youth was herself already a great *sangoma*, with Molly’s husband Tapson—a Zambian and a renegade *twaza*—, and twenty-year old Jane, one of Sinombe’s eighteen children, and fellow-student of Ennie’s who herself had to remain behind in Francistown in order to attend her typing class.

The previous night Ennie and I had visited Jane, to ask her where we could find her father. It turned out that he had left for the town of Selebi-Phikwe, in order to sell the bar which his ex-wife, Jane's mother, had built over the years. Jane had been bitter about this transaction—the court had assigned this property to the children issued from the dissolved marriage. At the same time Jane admitted that she had nothing to complain about. Her father supported her, paid her typing lessons, provided for the two children (aged six—!—and two) who had kept Jane from educational achievement despite her considerable intelligence, rented a spacious room for her in a nice house in a Francistown suburb, and had supplied her with the expensive bed and spring mattress, with a gas stove, and a wardrobe full of clothes. 'My husband? That is my father. He is the one who looks after me.' Her father had not been angry at all when she had those children; he had merely instructed her to go back to school after a year, and this she had done. She was not interested in her father's work as a leading healer and land priest, considered it boring, and preferred to play cassettes with funk music on her new cassette recorder—the only consumer item she had not got from her father but from a boy friend, and him she hoped to marry one day. Not unusual in Botswana girls' rooms, colour pictures of beautiful women in various stages of undress were pasted above her bed, and likewise cut from a glossy magazine there was the headline 'ME IS ALL I CAN BE'—endearing in a town where the awkward imitation of South-Africa imported styles of dress, hairdo, speech, recreation and consumption had been the only form of local culture that I had been allowed free access to; at the same time the proud adage seemed to confirm that very imitation. Jane was already in bed, a friend and Ennie sat on the edge, and I leisurely occupied the only chair. I brought out my divination tablets and challenged Jane to throw them so that we could see how serious she was in rejecting the profession of her famous father. And although at her Nata homestead she must have met virtually all prominent healers from the region and witnessed many divination sessions at close range, she let the tablets bluntly drop onto the concrete floor as if totally ignorant of the proper way of handling them; they bounced off in all directions. Diviners tend to make idiosyncratic additions to the standard set of four tablets, and one of my own peripherals is a cowry, a cherished religious object in Southern Africa; a giggling Jane called the attention of her friends

to its resembling the human vulva. Even after I had shown her how to cast the tablets in a more respectful manner, the combinations that formed confirmed what she had said: she was destined not to follow in her father's footsteps but to have a leading role in an office, a company.

'Ennie tells me that you are interested in Ngwali. Well, you can ask whatever you want, I know all about it. My father has a 'Hill', a Ngwali shrine just outside our yard in Nata, and of all houses in the yard my own is closest to the shrine, so I have heard and seen everything that takes place there. Sometimes people come to consult the oracle; then my father has an assistant and perhaps that one, or my father, produces the voice of Ngwali.'

A Maiden (of sorts) of Mwali, like the ones who in the past carried the pots with beer and accompanied the black bull to the shrine on the hill, where they would dance and request rain; but now a trainee typist, holding court in a chaste nightdress in a high concrete-walled room full of funk music, and deliberately slighting the Voice? And that after the whole of Francistown for a year had refused to say another word, as soon as I shifted the conversation to Mwali.

'My father tells me that Ngwali has always been there, that she is older than God. But surely that is impossible?' 'Not necessarily. Look in the Bible, don't you have one here?' Like many Francistown girls, she had a Bible within reach, and I opened it at the Gospel of John. 'Here, don't you see. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."' Mwali is that Word. Perhaps you must look at it this way: before you can exist *as God*, the principle of *existing* must have established itself. That first existence, which makes everything else possible, is the meaning of *Mwa-li*, literally.'

To lend force to my explanation I made the high-pitched cooing sound (like a taperecorder reproducing human speech at manifold-increased speed) which priests of a major cult of the land in Guinea Bissau, five thousand kilometres of African continent away, let pass as the voice of their god. I still owe that god two pigs for the birth of Vincent. Jane is surprised. 'Have you then been to Mwali already? How do you know that voice?'⁶

No, I have not yet been to Mwali, at least, when I went there in distress I was rejected. I am exhausted after these weeks of prepara-

tion and the initiation itself; the interminable nocturnal dance sessions at Mma Tshakayile's, stamping and scraping the rough soil with my bare feet; the insomnia and nocturnal agitation alternated with vivid dreams that invariably revolved around *sangomas* and the presence of Mwali; my raids on the shops and banks of Francistown and through the villages in the region in order to procure the many requisites for the initiation (the prescribed clothes, cloth, beads, a goat, firewood, beef, rice, meal and other food, a considerable sum of money) in so short a time; and in-between a trip to the capital in order to complete my general data on Francistown. And now I am lying on Jane's bed (or is it Jane's sister's?), in their white house at Sinombe's homestead in Nata, and I listen to Jane's stories while she cooks porridge for me and for Molly and Tapson whom we can see outside through the open door, sitting under a tree and getting drunk on the cans of beer which I bought for them. The house is round and through the window lined with a neat steel frame I can make out, at a distance of fifty metres, a small thatched structure—the Mwali of Nata, unimpressive as compared to the rocks and caves I had hoped to see at Njelele, but deceptively close; although it would still take me another year to be allowed inside. Jane had resolutely declined my offer to go and buy chicken-and-chips at the filling station, one kilometre down the road; instead we bought some meat from her father's butchery and now she is cooking a meal for us on just such a gas stove as she has in Francistown. It is three o'clock, and in two hours' time the bus will arrive with her father, in his pockets the money from the sale of the bar. Jane wears a smart dress from a South African mail-order catalogue, but she has wrapped an African cloth over it. I myself am overdressed too in this village environment, with my jacket and tie, for I have come to collect my second doctoral degree. Jane has shown me her photo albums, and the uniform of her sister who is a *sangoma* like me and who turns out to have the same sacred cloths—but she is no longer active in the field. Jane tells me about the annual conventions of the healers' association, when she and her sister have to cook for scores of members, who fill the place with their discussions and ritual dances. She tells me about her two children, whom she gave birth to all by herself, without the slightest effort or fear. She breastfed them herself, and she had plenty of milk, however small her breasts are at other times, she says; and while stirring the porridge with one hand she proudly taps her bosom with the other. The

night before, when reaching for the tablets which had leapt away, she had bent so far out of the bed that her nightdress could no longer hide her breasts, and the recollection makes me smile. She is sweet, but I do not fancy her nor she me. Something else is the matter:

‘I am very strong. All things of life go well with me. I can live in town or in the village, wear a dress or a wrapper, it makes no difference. I am who I am. I am Ngwali. My children are healthy and I shall have plenty more. This goes back to my grandmother. She was my mother’s mother, but when my father thinks of her he still has to cry, he loved her that much. Even though he divorced my mother. *Mma Botshelo* she was called, Mother of Life. She died a few years ago when she was already very old. And last year we had a ceremony in the family; then I received that name. Since then I have been the Mother of Life, and I feel it in everything I do.’

Tears fill my eyes. After a year’s struggle in the desert of commoditified mass culture, it had yet to be in Botswana that, in ecstatic trance, I had come to be fused with the symbols of Africa more than anywhere else before; and now the Mother of Life has led me to the Mother of Spirits. Awaiting the arrival of the priest, her father, she prepares food for me. Does this mean that the shattering events of the last few weeks, in which only the previous night she assumed an overt role, had been nothing but a strategy on her part, aimed at arranging another meeting with me? I had met her a few times earlier on the crossroads of my life. My children were named after her. My poetry is about her. My scholarly and literary writing is a longing for her, an attempt to fulfil her mission and to find mercy in her eyes.

‘Frankly speaking, I am not interested to be just a typist. You know what I really want to do? To write! I want to be an author. I would start by writing a book about the life of my parents, and how one experiences that as a child and how it makes one suffer. Then it would help, I think, if one is good at typing. For my brother’s wedding I wrote a long poem and recited it in front of the people. My father was so impressed that he gave me a hundred Pula on the spot.’ Many people in Francistown have to work a month for that kind of money.

Years ago my own life as a writer had started, too, with the desire to put the sorrow of my childhood on record; but even somewhat earlier, as a thirteen or fourteen year old, I had taught myself how

to type. In the meantime I had arrived at a point where I was prepared, certainly in those weeks, to trade my status of writer for that of *sangoma*, to unite—not in lasting printed words but in bodily rhythms and public displays of an elaborate uniform, of dancing and trance which will fade without a record—with the symbols I have been chasing all my adult life, acquiring an African status which in my own society can only be considered a case of tropical sunstroke. Whereas Jane, who had received as a birthright that which I was yearning for, was groping for the only type of transformation—literary enshrinement—that would allow her to usher her inheritance into the modern world she belonged to just as much. ‘By all means, Jane, write. I myself have published a pile of books. I shall help you to publish yours.’ In the beginning was the Word.

As if to celebrate her alchemistic fusion of the old and the new, the village and the town, the earthly and the celestial, Jane Sinombe takes a sachet of Knorr freeze-dried curry soup from a shelf, tears it open and sprinkles the powder onto the gravy in which the beef is simmering. Now this traditional meal will never again taste like it did only last year in my Zambian village. It tastes better, and makes one want a second helping. And I am grateful that she fills the plates for Molly and Tapson and serves them outside, so that just the two of us, inside, can cherish this moment together a bit longer.

After the meal there is nothing more to be said, and we step outside to join the tipsy couple, in the cool of the late afternoon. Soon we hear a bus pull up on the tar road, a hundred metres away. A tall, vigorous man of middle age enters the yard, in his trail a few subordinates who carry all sorts of luggage. Like any minister of religion or land priest in Botswana Sinombe is dressed in plain black, but with a surprising twist: a leather hunter’s hat with feathers, a knickerbocker and a short leather coat. He has a protruding stomach, and a round face with the largest cheeks I have ever seen. After a brief stop at the main house he crosses the spacious yard towards us. Jane ostentatiously ignores her father’s arrival; she pushes a Tswana hymn book into my hands, and together we start singing *Rock of Ages* in that language. Is it then God we are welcoming? Or Tom Bombadil, after all? (Tolkien 1990). We are halfway through a second hymn when Sinombe addresses us playfully in flawless English.

‘Good afternoon. I must say this for you: at least you can sing. I bet you were not expecting somebody like me in this place, were you?’

On the collar of his coat I see the golden letters DOEANE—CUSTOMS; he controls a Southern African boundary. Molly follows him inside the house and makes her report. With such recommendation, who needs another formal examination; becoming a *sangoma* means, among other things, that specialists are prepared to stake their reputation in testimony of the novice’s accomplishment, in a very real parallel with academic procedure. A quarter of an hour later I am a somewhat prematurely registered African doctor, with a certificate to frame and hang on the wall, and a license to carry with me, complete with photograph and rubber stamp. There is no formal congratulatory speech but I feel as triumphant as when I obtained my first doctorate. Sinombe’s book of receipts turns out to be finished, but he borrows a page from mine and on it graciously acknowledges the registration fee of thirty-five Pula.

The previous day I had prepared this visit by means of a long conversation with a cousin of Gumede’s, a former mayor of Francistown. ‘Ask him for protective medicine, *inyatola*, for you will need that now,’ my friend had told me. And so I did, adding a passing reference to Gumede—I might find out more about the conflict that made him leave the association. Sinombe scarcely rose to the bait, insisted however that he had ‘raised those boys, back in Bulawayo,’ and that he was not dead yet, and then showed me to a nearby open spot in the forest, where laid out on an unsheltered table, and suspended from the branches of a large tree, were the medicines. Proudly Sinombe drew my attention to an elaborate bead headdress of the *Shumba* cult—another loose end in my research beginning to fall into place today; the paraphernalia had belonged to Mma Botshelo but he kept it here, in a spot where Jane, as she later told me, had never been allowed to go. ‘Nothing is ever missing from my stock,’ Sinombe said. ‘I do not employ guards, but I have my own guards to protect this place.’ He selected two types of arboreal medicine, cut of each type a piece that would fit in the palm of a hand, dropped the pieces onto the soil and made me pick them up. They would protect me, not (as I had expected) in a context of intra-cultic rivalry, but from my fellow-Europeans, when these would see me embrace what they would

denigrate as 'kaffir things', Sinombe explained. 'That will be another ten Pula.'

Perhaps some other time, he explained, at the instigation of Mma Tshakayile, he could take me to the Mwali shrine. I was however invited to attend the Kwame association's Annual General Meeting, due to take place the next weekend.

The next morning, back in Francistown, I reported to Gumede at his consultation room in the Somerset East compound, under the very smoke of the large new Nyangabgwe Hospital. I proudly showed him my license. My master had long since joined a rival professional organization, and chose to be dismissive: the license was a useless piece of paper, and Sinombe was finished anyway, a dead man; but I could see he was immensely pleased. Five clients were waiting under the shelter next to the surgery. 'Anyway, why don't you help me attending to them, I am too busy, must start cooking my fat cakes.' With the first patients I only helped to fetch and unscrew glass jars with medicine, scrape roots into powder, and give second opinions on the fall of the divination tablets; the last patient I was allowed to treat all by myself. We shared that morning's takings. He sent me on my way with yet more protective medicine his cousin had told me to ask for from him, too.

Ten months later, as I am finalizing this paper for publication, I have just spent another month at the Monarch lodge. I was welcomed back as a *twaza*, and after reporting on my spiritual progress (dreams, ritual observances) since my departure in 1990, I was given additional paraphernalia (including Molly's great gift, a necklace consisting of a python's full set of vertebrae). Elsewhere in Francistown I started a modest practice as a diviner and healer, giving in to insistent popular demand. With Kwani and others I roamed the forest around Matshelagabedi for a week, learning to recognize and dig up the major *sangoma* medicines. I had my *twaza* infant hair ritually cut, and was chased across the river like Patricia two years earlier (dropping coins to placate the Great Water Serpent, who is the *sangoma*'s ally but also his doom). I was once again examined on my dexterity in divination. And after these preparations I was pronounced ready to come out as a *sangoma*, killing another goat, drinking its blood from one bowl with just Mma Tshakayile, having my divination bones washed in the remainder of the blood, undergoing a repetition of last year's gall ritual, and for the first time in a year eating 'inside meat' (heart, liver,

intestines) again. The well-attended ceremony took place in Matshelagabedi, where Molly's and Kwani's mother (herself a major *sangoma*) had brewed the ancestral sorghum beer, and it worked out (with elaborate libations and prayers at the village's ancestral shrines, in which to my alarm I was to be a major officiant) to be as much a *sangoma*'s final coming-out ceremony as my public installation as Johannes-reborn. What the latter entails in terms of a life-long commitment to, and responsibility for, Mma Tshakayile's large family now dispersed over two villages and two urban compounds, I have not yet had the courage to work out. Next year we are to travel to Zimbabwe and, among other tasks, visit Johannes' surviving cousins and nieces there.

After paying Mma Tshakayile the huge standard fee (incidentally, she helped me pay a substantial part of the expenses of the coming-out party), the time had come for her to take me to Mwali, for my definitive empowering as a healer. She would have preferred to go to the major shrines in the Matopos Hills, but since there were only a few days left before my scheduled return home she settled once again for Nata. This time, even Molly was not senior enough for this assignment, and I travelled with Mma Tshakayile, her sister Mma Tedi, the Kwame association's Vice-President Mr. A. Magambule from Francistown (another Zambian), and the lodge's most junior *twaza*, whose task it is to wait on Mma Tshakayile. It was strange to spend another day at Sinombe's compound waiting for the sun to set, watching Jane's sister (who does not know me) go in and out of their familiar round white house, and realizing that without Jane present I was reduced to an outsider, that happy personal shrine of our transcultural encounter being closed to me once more and probably forever. In the afternoon Sinombe spent two hours alone with me and told me everything I wanted to know about himself, his life history, and his position in the cult; 'I am not God; I am not Jesus; I am *uMbetsi*, "the Saviour" '. Still, and despite substantial financial offerings, the threshold to Mwali was not yet to be crossed. Sinombe (carrying a leopard skin on his shoulder), his two female acolytes and Mma Tshakayile and Mma Tedi (the four women covered under white acrylic bedsheets) proceeded to the oracle to ask permission for me to enter, and I could just hear the Voice in the distance, but when they came back they reported that, while acknowledging me as an accomplished healer, it would only admit me inside the oracle once I returned with a

leopard skin on my shoulder: spuriously alleged to be my culture's traditional regalia—a divine confusion with ermine?—but certainly a sign of seniority in the idiom of the *sangoma* cult (and as such immediately and heatedly contested back at the Monarch lodge). Meanwhile I was to read Psalm 121 twice daily: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help...'

Already the next morning I was lucky enough to trace an affordable leopard skin with the Francistown company that had tanned the skins of my three ceremonial goats so far. I returned to Nata, was admitted, and timidly spoke with God.

3. Discussion

Why should the preceding section take the form of a narrative, alludingly evoking rather than describing, let alone analysing, phenomena that would be of interest to the detached student of African religion: cultic organization, symbolism, ritual structure, performance, the flow of cash, grace, and power?

One reason is that successful boundary crossing, as a field-worker and a human being, into an originally alien religious specialist domain primarily produces knowledge of a kind that is systematically different from the kind of knowledge ethnography is made of.⁷

There is no doubt that 'becoming a *sangoma*' offers me as a researcher a vast range of information, both of esoteric knowledge, and of social and bodily patterns which may not be as accessible to the participant observer who remains an outsider. But at the same time the very process of crossing by which that knowledge is gathered, renders the immediate academic processing of that knowledge into mainstream anthropological discourse not so much illegitimate (for I am under no obligation whatsoever to treat my ancestral-derived *sangoma* expertise as secret) but irrelevant.

The practical knowledge I claim to have acquired (enough to convincingly play the role of a *twaza* novice and to come out as a fully-fledged *sangoma*), is at the same time more profound and complete, more personal and idiosyncratic, and (as all practical knowledge) more superficial and patchy, than that which my learned colleagues have produced on this topic over the decades.

What does it mean that this knowledge is practical? That it can produce social action that, in the appropriate setting for which it is

meant, is recognizable and compelling for other actors, and therefore effective. One of the central questions that I can now further explore is one that has fascinated me for the last twenty years:⁸ *to what extent is mediumship learned, socially patterned behaviour?* Obviously, someone who is capable of repeatedly producing an acceptable trance in a culturally alien setting can contribute towards an answer on this point; but such an answer will not be attempted in the present paper, for it cannot be based on introspection alone even though such would not be unusual in the study of ecstasy and mysticism. The performance, in trance and in divination, is to some extent moulded by institutionalized expectations shared by the fellow-specialists and (at a much less specific and systematic level) by the lay audience. At least as important however is the gradual unfolding of new expectations and the invention of new—progressively convincing and acceptable—patterns by the specialist in the course of the performance itself.⁹ Here a central role is played by *seduction*: a—culturally specific—communication technique which evokes, on the one hand, boundaries (prohibiting access to symbolically charged bodily zones, but also to specific items of knowledge, action, etc.) and, on the other, a conditional promise to transgress those boundaries. In this seduction lies the success of any performer, including the diviner and the shamanistic medium. The prestige and power attaching to these roles only partially derives from a permanently institutionalized social attribution of respect to fixed positions, and largely from the constant flow of interaction, presentation of self, seduction, between specialist, fellow-specialists, and lay audience. In the way of communication and interaction techniques, there is much to be learned here for the novice, and much to be appreciated for the academic student of these phenomena. Although this performative element in mediumship has been stressed ever since Leiris' work half a century ago (Leiris 1980) its reliance on improvisation and non-verbal communication makes it very difficult to penetrate with the aid of established ethnographic methods.

If the religious complex discussed in this paper can be compared to a language, 'becoming a *sangoma*' means becoming sufficiently proficient in that language to conduct a meaningful if still imperfect conversation with native speakers; alternatively, writing an ethnographic treatise on the *sangoma* complex would amount to producing a generative phonology or syntax of the same language, in

a meta-discourse that completely abstracts from concrete speech situations and that would be virtually meaningless to the native speakers. Both forms of outsider appropriation are presumably legitimate and presuppose rather extensive knowledge; but the types of knowledge, and their relevance to both outsider producers and native speakers, are different—and my choice of a narrative rather than a discursive analytical format here is to remind the reader of just that.

In the context of practical knowledge also a peculiar feature of the *sangoma* complex needs to be appreciated: the absolute preeminence of ancestral and divine empowerment (charisma) over technical skills. Healing is conceived, in this complex, as the realignment of the natural and the supernatural, and therefore the *sangoma*, with his repeated and publicly recognized ancestral manifestations—as the embodiment of the ancestors in the world of the living—is the healer *par excellence*, in principle *regardless* of the level of his specific technical skills. Of course, the classifications underlying the divination process and the *sangoma* pharmacopoeia, the specific rituals, song texts, drumming rhythms and dance movements, require a considerable amount of specialist knowledge acquisition—but the scope for improvisation (legitimated by reference to ‘dreaming’) and free variation is enormous, and virtually any deviation from accepted practice can be justified by reference to idiosyncratic ancestral revelations. In fact, in the competition for a share of the ritual market such idiosyncracies may be rather attractive. The ultimate test lies always in the spiritual manifestation, and this more than anything else explains the (otherwise incredible) ease and speed with which I, a blundering outsider but with some experience in ecstatic religion, could embark on a crash course toward accomplished *sangomahood*. The greatest distortion would be to make the *sangoma* appear as a Southern African psycho-analyst with seven years of academic and clinical training behind him;¹⁰ on the contrary, ecstasy offers a *shortcut to charisma*, and is therefore a literal Godsend to those of us who for social-structural reasons (because we are women, or junior siblings, or foreigners, or whites in a black environment) have no proper claim to the established *ascriptive* routes to religious authority.

There is meanwhile a more fundamental reason for my reluctance to make, at this stage, ethnography out of the images and

experiences I have evoked in a narrative form in the preceding section. This is the issue of humility of the initiand (and of the fieldworker, who is an initiand even if he or she never becomes a *sangoma*) versus the arrogance implied in the penetration of a Faustian rationality.¹¹ A comparison with academic approaches to religion in North Atlantic societies may help to bring out what I have in mind. Since the Enlightenment, objective studies of religious phenomena (of the extent to which these involve man-made organizations and material apparatus, and produce such human interactions and speech acts as could be studied by the social sciences, psychology, psychiatry etc.), have developed side by side with theology which, while an academic subject, is more typically a pursuit for 'believers'. The relationship between these two domains has been very uneasy at times; only a few years ago Wiebe (1984, 1986; cf. Dawson 1986) in a contentious article has insisted once again on the need for greater rigour in their separation, particularly the need to keep empirical studies clear from theological influences. In African religious studies, this echoes the criticism Horton leveled as from the 1970s against the 'devout opposition' of Christians (and Muslims), whose personal religious convictions are alleged by Horton to prevent them from being totally objective in their approach to autochthonous African religion and to world religions in contemporary Africa (Horton 1975: 394f, and 1984). Now, my feeling is that, in rather similar terms, the expanding community of students of African religion and ritual might be taken to form a kind of 'devout opposition' in this respect, that with the exception perhaps of a few African-born anthropologists and a few mental cases like myself, the imposition of alien (albeit not so much Christian but agnostic, reductionist, Marxist etc.) interpretative projections has become a consensual point of departure for scholarly debate on African religion. Much as we may respect African religion, as students of African religion we normally assume that it is within our field of competence to explain it away in sociological, anthropological, economic etc. terms: '*African gods do not exist*' is the *a priori* informing African religious studies today.

Christians, Jews and Muslims can seek refuge in theology and there continue to produce such intellectual commentary on endemic religion as for the better part of two millennia has been the backbone of European and Middle Eastern intellectual life. In doing so their intellectual efforts are not necessarily less relevant

and less commanding of respect than the intellectual products of academic students of creative literature: they provide a systematic commentary that does not necessarily de-construct, deny, assault, appropriate, explain away, or destroy the living, creative subject matter of their discipline. Where, then, is the equivalent of theology for the study of African religion? Is it to be found in so-called African Theology (cf. Schoffeleers 1988)? Perhaps, but we have reason to doubt whether, in the latter context, adequate use is made of the massive systematic, theoretical and methodological knowledge we as empirical students of African religion have built up over the decades. Where is, today, the intellectual refuge where one can ethnographically 'comment' on African religion without destroying it?

I refuse to deconstruct my knowledge of *sangomahood* if, in the process, that means that I am professionally compelled to kill its powerful images on the operation table of intellectual vivisection. At the same time, it would be a waste not to ultimately subject this knowledge to the kind of systematic academic commentary I and especially many of my colleagues have shown ourselves capable of. Can one anthropologically discuss African religion without condescending reductionism? Is there a viable theology of 'animism'? Until I have found an answer, I propose to work on a novel whose working title will be *Servant of the ancestors*.

Back to humility; although doubtless I am not the humblest of persons. I said the boys who interpreted my *twaza* initiation ceremony as a whiteman being flogged to death, had a point. Let me spell out what I meant. To the extent to which the destructively taking-apart (as distinct from illuminating intellectual commentary) of African religion has become the accepted stance in our field of scholarship, and to the (largely overlapping) extent to which specifically the African people of Francistown cannot deal with *sangomahood* and related aspects of their symbolic universe without being conscious of its rejection by the dominant White and Christian culture of twentieth-century Southern Africa, to that extent becoming a *sangoma* is an act of atonement, and of deliberate humility.

The white outsider discards his particular 'uniform of colour' (Hilda Kuper) for that dictated within the local ancestral idiom and completed by directions from the God of the Land. The bead bracelets, never to be removed in one's lifetime, represent the

ancestors' coagulated semen out of which the human skeleton is formed—but also the iron shackles of bondage to the lodge, its leader, and *sangomahood* in general. The downcast eyes and stooped posture when dancing convey submission. Each exchange of greetings and formal conversation between the *twaza* and senior lodge members, each welcoming of a spirit taking possession of a fellow-dancer, and the termination of each sequence of dancing and singing, involve elaborate acts of bodily submission in the form of prostration, kneeling and clapping. It *hurts* to dance for hours barefooted on the African soil and on the rough concrete floors of popular housing, and it produces massive cloven callouses typical of African village women and never found among shod Europeans. It hurts, and it heals.

The initiand is humiliated, as well as glorified. Once allowed in, having progressed from visiting stranger to incorporated *twaza*, he or she occupies the lowest rank at the lodge. I noted this change in my own position with a satisfied chuckle: I had been seduced to enter a rank where I found myself at the beck and call of lodge members young enough to be my daughters.

At the same time there was undeniable glorification in the face of the lay audience, whose respectful enthusiasm was far from lost on me. What did my becoming a *sangoma* mean to them?

Because of its history of a hundred years of mining, migrancy, monopoly capitalism, and land alienation, Francistown and the surrounding Northeast District have been far more subjected to conditions of racialist¹² humiliation than any other part of Botswana.¹³ The inroads of mass consumption and the imitation of South African and worldwide patterns of electronically-based mass culture (merely additional aspects of capitalist penetration) also contribute to this. Attachment to the Mwali cult, traditional healing, ethnic identity, have gone underground and proved extremely hard to bring to the surface. 'Whites do not eat that sort of thing.' In that urban context someone who is unmistakably another whiteman publicly, in front of hundreds of onlookers, embraced the very cultural forms which, for fear of humiliation, had had to hide from the public domain dominated by white culture. Little wonder that in the next few days the story spread like a bush fire over the fifty thousand inhabitants of Francistown. I had it recounted to me several times, while my informants did not realize that it was me. These accounts clearly revolved around an element of satisfaction,

of restored self esteem, on the part of the narrators; they engendered a similar sensation in me. The production of academic ethnography is a legitimate and inspiring act of cultural vindication and preservation, but so is casting bones for my African clients and, when the occasion arises, reminding them of their ancestral obligations.

Becoming a *sangoma* is an act of subversion, academically, but certainly socially in the context of Southern African towns. Allowing that process to end in a reappropriation of *sangomahood* by reductionist academic discourse (even when produced by myself), would defeat the whole purpose of the struggle I went through, and would betray the audience in what they experienced as symbolic liberation. Let us not be kidding ourselves: however sympathetic and courageous 'going all the way' in field-work might appear to be, the radical criticism that all this amounts to just another form of cultural appropriation and subjugation,—and even a very vicious form—is not easily dismissed. The danger of betrayal is constantly around the corner. Since nobody is born as an adult religious specialist, all acquisition of esoteric specialism (in field-work, as in 'real life') necessarily involves appropriation, but the latter has to be redeemed by a commitment to expectations such as exist *within* the religious complex that is being appropriated. This redemption is absent in the habitual anthropologist's appropriation and manipulation of 'data'. Therefore there is no way back: becoming a *sangoma* means the obligation to remain active *as a sangoma*. The point is not whether I believe in the continued capability of deceased kinsmen to manifest themselves in the empirical world; the point is that I have made people believe in me as a carrier of such manifestations, and that I must not fail them. Even if ultimately this may not rule out the possibility of the same sort of enlightened, systematic anthropological commentary that, for instance, allows Roman Catholic priests to write doctorates on the seminary as a social system, or even as a bedding for religious fulfilment or disenchantment.

One final remark, therefore, on 'becoming a *sangoma*' as a strategy of anthropological data acquisition. The relation between the strategic, voluntaristic versus the compulsive, inescapable elements does constitute a problem that, again, cannot be resolved by introspection, and whose discussion brings out the essential dilemma of the present paper: the intermeshing of two realms of

discourse—an external academic one on the one hand, and the idiom of *sangomahood* on the other. When prior to returning to Francistown in 1990 I gave a paper (essentially van Binsbergen 1990a) at the University of Cape Town, Harriet Ngubane on the basis of her own extensive rural research in this field (e.g. Ngubane 1977) questioned the (unintended) suggestion that one could *opt* to be a *sangoma*: as she rightly stressed, one has to be chosen by the ancestors, and fascination and desire are not enough. Implied in her point was a question of birthright: why should we as European temporary immigrants in Southern Africa stumble into *sangomahood* whereas she as a Zulu anthropologist, no less keen than we had been, had not been able to pass the test of ancestral election? Was it not more likely that we were merely faking, or—to put it more neutrally—were making more out of an ‘exotic’ experience than the experience deserved? I take these points very seriously, and much of the present paper has been written in implicit reply to them. Whatever the differences in symbolic emphasis, commercialization, ascriptive basis, extent of personal *bricolage* etc., between rural and cosmopolitan *sangomahood* (cf. note 5), the fundamental assumption of ancestral choice is the same in both varieties. However, my wife and I did display all the symptoms (the ancestral burden or ‘brooding’, felt as pain in the back and between the shoulders; the nocturnal agitation; the dreams), and that was one of the reasons why we were accommodated at the Maipaahela lodge. It was suffering, not a taste for sensation,—a search for community and personal transformation, not for ‘data’—that drove us to the lodge. Like my wife, many lodge members never achieve mediumistic trance but that does not in the least prevent them from dancing along in uniform with the other *sangomas* who are accomplished mediums, and the *hosannas* who fall in rigid trance, saturated with Mwali.

My other work in progress on Francistown is there to show that I am not unduly giving in to the post-modernist temptation of eclipsing our research subject by the personality of the anthropologist. Still, now that the study of African religion has become a well-established industry, it is remarkable that so little has been written on what it is to do anthropological field-work on religion; and that what little has been written is often of an autobiographical nature (for a recent example cf. Lobo 1990). Perhaps this is the one field in anthropology where it is really impossible to maintain the

pretence of the researcher as passive, as justifiably absent from the finished product of polished academic discourse.

We still know far too little about the anthropological activity as boundary crossing, and how this reacts with the participants' own boundary management. Dealing with other people's existential questions, existential questions of our own cannot be avoided; nor can these all be suffocated under increasingly convoluted and elegant discourse, no matter how many levels of structure, transformation, binary and ternary logic they may contain. In the study of religion, boundaries while being maintained are being crossed: in the religious life of the participants, in uncountable ways; in the anthropologist's work, from the fragmented observation of the participants' real life to the finished anthropological account; and in the anthropologist's life, which far from being sealed off by impenetrable boundaries, merges with the lives of his or her hosts in the field, and is uniquely enriched in the process.

1. The field-work on which this paper is based was undertaken in Francistown and surrounding areas, Botswana, in April-May 1988, November 1988-October 1989, August-September 1990 and June-July 1991. I am greatly indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for funding and encouragement; and to the Applied Research Unit, Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Republic of Botswana, for local support. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Seminar on 'Symbol and Symptom', Catholic University of Louvain, January 1991, and at the Seventh Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, Satterthwaite (Cumbria, U.K.), April, 1991. I am grateful to Robert Baum, Robert Buijtenhuijs, René Devisch, Ørnulf Gulbrandsen, Adrian Hastings, John Janzen, Murray Last, Cesare Poppi, Matthew Schoffeleers, Elizabeth Tonkin, Richard Werbner and David Zeitlyn for stimulating comments; mention of their names must however not be taken to imply that these colleagues are in agreement with the argument and mode of presentation of the present paper.

2. Cf. Werbner 1989; Ranger 1979, 1985; Schoffeleers & Mwanza 1979; Daneel 1970; Mtutuki 1976; and references cited there.

3. Cf. Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989; Werbner 1989; Comaroff 1985; Hammond-Tooke 1989; Schoffeleers 1991; Janzen 1991; and references cited there.

4. An earlier Dutch version of this section was published as van Binsbergen 1990b.

5. In these respects, and in the flexible incorporation of both the rural-orientated tradition and of the money economy, capitalism and mass consumption, the variety of *sangomahood* as found at the Francistown lodges, despite its manifest stress on Zimbabwe Ndebele ethnicity (under which layers of different ethnic, national and linguistic identities are implied in the case of many adepts) differs from the entrenched rural-based forms of Nguni divinerhood (as described by e.g. Berglund 1989; Lee 1969; Ngubane 1977; and references cited there). Yet

much of the symbolism and conceptual framework, which is sometimes fragmented or lost in the 'cosmopolitan' variety as found in Francistown, Bulawayo etc. (also cf. du Toit 1971; Staugård 1985; West 1974), goes back to the rural origin and can only be understood in that context.

6. In fact, Jane was mistaken; the Voice commonly heard at the Nata oracle is that of a wise and cunning old man, sneering and cackling, but manifestly comprehensible to those familiar with the Humbe dialect of Shona. The West African oracle does not produce comprehensible human speech and requires interpretation by the priests.

7. I realize that this is a contentious position. Many anthropologists have crossed similar boundaries through initiation, and have happily used the experience as a data-collection strategy. Some of the dilemmas arising in this connection are discussed in Fidaali 1987 and Jaulin 1971.

8. Cf. van Binsbergen 1972, reprinted in 1981: ch 2.

9. The *praxeological* dimension; cf. van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985: introduction.

10. A tendency to be found in several of the contributions to Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989.

11. Of which, incidentally, my *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981) may well have been one of the worst examples (as Fernandez suspected at an early stage; Fernandez 1978).

12. The word 'white' occurs with an irritating frequency in my narrative account. Of course, I use this as a dominant participant's concept as found in the societies of Southern Africa. Part of the issue at hand in this paper is the tenet of racialism (the linking of culture with endemic somatic characteristics) *as against* the tenet of the social sciences that all culture is learned, that therefore the boundaries between alien cultures can be crossed (e.g., I suppose that 'becoming a *sangoma*' could serve as an example of such crossing), and that any claimed association between cultural forms and somatic characteristics is fundamentally accidental and immaterial although social scientists should study such claims as socio-cultural constructs peculiar to a certain society. The racist dimension of the rejection we experienced in the field was all the more shocking since in field-work elsewhere in Africa my somatic difference from my participants had not prevented *rappport*, not even in an urban environment like Zambia's capital Lusaka—but there, admittedly, I chose to concentrate on an urban minority, the Nkoya, whose orientation towards their rural homeland created such a high density of intra-group interaction and social control that relations between the researcher and that migrant community were hardly representative for generally prevailing urban relations in Lusaka at the time. Incidentally, that somatic difference vis-à-vis one's African informants is not necessarily a handicap, is clear from the puzzling experiences of the African anthropologist Yamba (1985).

13. Cf. Kerven 1977; Schapera 1971; Selolwane 1978; Tapela 1976, 1982; Werbner 1970, 1971.

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