

# **African Perspectives in Healing**

## **By Mary Ovenstone**

SA Journal of Natural Medicine, Issue 6, 2001

One year ago I was initiated as a Tswana Sangoma, in a lineage rooted in the Ndebele tradition. I was the first white female to thwaasa (undergo the rituals of initiation) in Botswana. Prior to that I had engaged in a lifelong and thorough search for the tools to conduct my own development and to facilitate that of others. By far the most profound internal shift for me and some of the most powerful tools I have learned were here in Southern Africa in the Ndebele and Xhosa traditions.

The African perspective was hidden from me in my life in Cape Town during the Apartheid era in the 70s and 80s. I believed, as I was readily told, that traditional Africans were steeped in superstition—mumbo jumbo, we called it. The Sangomas were called witch doctors, and their rituals and muties were considered primitive and only effective because of the placebo effect.

It was only when I returned to live here in 1999 and found a freer interchange of ideas, among white and black cultures that I looked deeper into the African way. Not only was I able to find excellent new tools to add to my work that filled huge gaps in Western psychology but also an ancient technology to anchor and work with my psychic and healing abilities, so ignored in our culture and education.

### **The Loss of Natural Healing Technologies in Western European-Based Cultures**

During the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe some estimate that as many as 9 million people—mostly women by far—were accused of being witches and were executed by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Many of these women were herbalists, healers and diviners. In most cases their crimes added up to the use of personal and natural power, which challenged the authority of the church.

The results of the terror and shame that reverberated throughout Europe are present to this day with those of European descent. We still indulge in the ugly vilification of witch-craft and shamanism—equating them with evil and devil-worship—and we mistrust or even deny innate and immanent spirituality, and the importance of feminine values is only now being revived.

The sad result has been the loss of the technologies of natural healing and of the training of shamans.

The range of fundamental psycho-spiritual-physical dynamics of all human beings is the same, interpreted differently in each culture. Yet some of the phenomena experienced by psychics, intuitives, and natural or spiritual healers the world round are ignored, even shamed in our Western-oriented societies. We must search out ancient sources of knowledge, such as in India and China, and often apprentice within tribal cultures to learn to use our gifts.

### **Signs of the Shaman: The Illness of Calling**

Sometimes the uncomfortable effects of the channeling of power through an untrained system create stresses, even illness.

In the African tradition, the signs of a Sangoma or tribal shaman are often recognized and worked with in youth. If the signs are missed and symptoms develop into what is collectively called the “illness of calling’, the person is taken immediately into a Sangoma’s compound and begins the training and ritual processes to be initiated as a shaman.

The illness of calling is associated with voices in the head, nightmares or prophetic dreams, heart palpitations, physical illnesses or syndromes (what we sometimes classify as epilepsy, dyslexia, hyperactivity, chronic fatigue syndrome and others) and often a series of accidents or financial losses that they call ‘bad luck’. They believe that their afflictions are the ways in which their ancestors are calling them, shutting doors to their old mundane ways and opening new doors to connect with the spirit world.

When these same patterns affect us Westerners, we make no distinction between a calling or an illness, and work very hard to suppress the symptoms, even resorting to drugs. The financial issues that often arise in the lives of healers and psychics are seen as proof that they are impractical and ‘airy-fairy’, and efforts are redoubled to put themselves on a better footing.

### **The Thwaasa Initiation Process**

During the thwaasa process, the debilitating symptoms of the illness of calling are healed, and the psychic abilities are trained into useful activities that serve the ancestors and, consequently, the people. The initiate, or thwaasana, is taught to consult with the ancestors in the throwing of the bones for diagnosis and prophesy, to conduct ritual processes and initiations, to interpret dreams (one’s own and others), to exorcise entities, and the use of the muties for healing and effecting desired results.

Thwaasa is an ancient psycho-spiritual technology, similar in nature to that of any Shamanic initiation process. It is conducted in safety and isolation in order to allow the thwaasana to undergo a period of transformation. Not only must he or she heal, he/she must change aspects of personality, and status and function in the world. During this time he wears and sleeps in a traditional uniform. He coils or braids his hair and smears it with red ochre mixed with motor oil or Vaseline, not to be washed until his coming-home ceremony when the taboo is lifted.

To strengthen his will and hone his focus, he must endure many hardships. He wakes at 4:00am and goes into trance for a greeting ritual, bathes and washes his clothes before sunrise, and is forbidden to sit on a chair or to stand while talking to anyone. In order to deflate his grandiosity and teach him to submit to the needs of the people and to the will of the ancestors, he is treated like the lowliest member of the settlement, doing all the menial tasks at the command of the teachers and their families. Rituals are used to work with the thwaasana's anger and aggression in order to heal inner conflicts. Muties are used for physical and emotional healing.

In addition to these practices, psychic abilities are honed and developed into useful skills. He is taught to go into trance to connect with the ancestors and spirit guides, to dance in trance, to recite the lineage of his teachers, and to make pronouncements from the spirit world. While in spirit he is taught to search for and retrieve things hidden from him by his teachers, as a precursor to being able to throw the bones and see the messages of the ancestors in the configuration before him.

The thwaasana is taken into the bush to search for and identify medicinal plants. Every animal and plant has a spirit or specific energy to provide—its muti. He learns to process them and administer them to his patients. He learns to conduct healing rituals.

In the final ceremonies the power and healing abilities of the teachers are transmitted to him. He is now what the Tswanas call a 'Big Doctor' and when he dies he will acquire the special status of an important ancestor.

## **Conclusion**

Those in the healing professions have much to learn from the native peoples of Southern Africa. The Sangoma seeks to heal his or her clients, not just help them understand and manage their symptoms as in Western psychology. He throws the bones and makes quicker, deeper and more thorough assessments of his clients than by using Western tools or analysis

alone. Sangomas have insights into and explanations for the causes of symptoms that Western psychology still cannot grasp. When faced with a patient's trauma, they view it as a psycho-spiritual-physical event, using muties and perhaps performing a healing ritual or conducting a soul retrieval that actually heals the rift in the psyche.

## **BIO**

Mary Ovenstone is an initiated sangoma, psychotherapist and hypnotherapist. Originally trained in psychotherapy in Canada, Mary has developed a psycho-spiritual framework for working with the energy patterns of the primary archetypes and a powerful way of processing blockages in the psyche. Contact tel: 021-685-1478, or e-mail: [ovenmits@iafrica.com](mailto:ovenmits@iafrica.com).