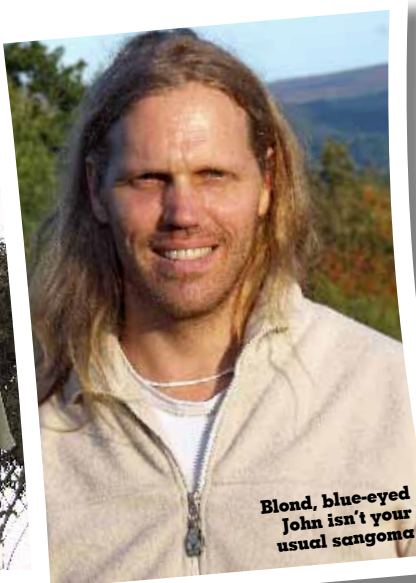




John with his spiritual teacher, Mum Gwevu



Blond, blue-eyed John isn't your usual sangoma

Born in apartheid South Africa, John Lockley left a medical career and spent 10 years training as a shaman in a quest to heal the divisions of the country's past



Four Khosa boys gather outside a hut in Eastern Cape, South Africa



A Khosa woman plays her drum



John and his ceremonial tools

# The sangoma's apprentice

The beat of the drums is hypnotic. Chalk-faced tribeswomen keep the rhythm, while sangomas – the shamans of the Xhosa people of Southern Africa – sing, dance and clap. In one of the poorest townships in South Africa's Eastern Cape, the Xhosa people are calling upon their ancestors to bless a newly initiated sangoma. Towering

over the rest of the tribe, at 6ft 3in tall, with blond hair and blue eyes, this is a new recruit with a difference. John Lockley is one of the first white men in recent history to become a fully initiated sangoma in the Xhosa lineage – the tribe that gave us Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Here, he tells the story of his remarkable journey.

temperature and had contracted tick bite fever. I realised instinctively that it was the beginning of the *thwasa*, a severe period of ill health that's part of shamanic initiation. It can only be cured through finding a shamanic teacher.

I left the army and went to university to study for a clinical psychology degree, but the *thwasa* kept flaring up. For the next 13 years I was plagued by severe illnesses including glandular fever, dysentery and hepatitis A. Doctors were at a loss to explain it. I lost a great deal of weight and became very depressed. I had several near-death experiences, too, including being washed out to sea.

I also continued to have dreams that urged me to find a teacher, but this seemed impossible. During apartheid, black and white people were segregated. Black people lived in townships and white people weren't allowed in without

a special pass. The police and army enforced this.

It wasn't until 1997, three years after apartheid had ended, that I was first able to enter a Xhosa township. I was sent there as part of a university-sponsored health initiative to promote AIDS awareness. During my visit I met a woman called Mum Gwevu, who instantly told me she'd foreseen my arrival in a dream the night before. She said she was told by uThixo, the Great Spirit, that she'd train a person from another culture to be a senior Xhosa sangoma, like her, and that she recognised me instinctively when we met.

Incredibly, she went on to recite everything that had happened to me since the *thwasa* began. She told me the illness would subside when I'd been initiated. Mum Gwevu also gave me the name Ucingolwendaba, which means bridge, connector, or healer between peoples or cultures.

Mum Gwevu saw to it that I was accepted into the tribe, but there was still animosity towards me in the first five years of my training because I was white. Each time the problem arose my teacher used to

**'It's my duty as a sangoma to help people honour their own ancestral spirits and reconnect with humanity'**

shout: 'I sometimes have dreams about white ancestors guiding me, and John sometimes has dreams of Xhosa ancestors guiding him.'

I lived with the tribe for extended periods during my apprenticeship of 10 years. My training involved assisting my teacher with mixing and preparing medicinal herbs, giving *vumisa* (future predictions) and taking part in traditional ancestral Xhosa ceremonies, which involved trance dancing.

My apprenticeship ended when one day I told my teacher about a particularly strong dream I'd had. Although I can't reveal its details

because they're considered sacred, it was the same dream that Mum Gwevu had experienced the night before her teacher said she'd finished her apprenticeship. That's how she knew I was finally ready to practise as a sangoma.

Post-apartheid, black South Africans are, at last, able to enter Western culture. In the same vein, it should be OK for white South Africans to enter indigenous culture, too. We're enriching each other's traditions through respect and understanding.

Although I have a background in clinical psychology, I've left this behind to concentrate full-time on bringing Xhosa shamanic culture to the West. I give talks, workshops and one-to-one sessions in the UK and South Africa. I know it's my duty as a sangoma to help people honour their ancestral spirits and to reconnect with Ubuntu (our humanity and inner dignity). When we do this, there's less of a desire to destroy or put down others.

I've been running my Ubuntu workshops since 2007 and use sacred ceremony, powerful rituals with plants, Xhosa songs and trance rhythms to encourage

this connection. My work in the UK feels timely, because there's an emerging 'green' consciousness here, a sense of reconnection with the earth and nature, and with the dream world.

There's also a growing interest in exploring family lineage, which you can see in the popularity of such TV series as the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* People want to feel connected with the many lives that have enabled their own existence. By uncovering the stories of those in our family tree, we can connect with our ancestors in a very physical sense.

New scientific research suggests we're all descended from one small African tribe who crossed the Red Sea and began to populate the rest of the world. It's uplifting to feel that in this sense we all have African in our blood, we all have ancient African ancestors, and we all long to sing the same song: *Masembo, masembo... Remember, remember... the old ways of the ancestors...* **SPiRiT & DESTiNY**

• For more information about John's workshops and one-to-one sessions, visit [www.african-shaman.com](http://www.african-shaman.com)

My name is John Keith Kelly Lockley. Kelly is my mother's maiden name, and in the Xhosa tradition it's important to honour our maternal lineage as well as our fathers' line. Sangoma is a Zulu word that means 'people of the song', as we go into trance through song and rhythm to connect with the ancestral realm. We also receive spiritual direction through our dreams to heal and guide the community.

Sangomas are shamans, and shamanism predates the world's major religions. It's an ancient healing tradition that's cross-cultural. Many peoples, including the Inuit and the Native Americans, draw on similar beliefs and practices.

In the days of the British Empire, sangomas were labelled 'witch doctors' by Christian missionaries. This led to the misconception that we practise black magic, but authentic sangomas only work

with the light of the ancestors to lift people's spirit energy and heal.

I was born in 1971, into a South Africa divided by apartheid, to an Irish mother and a Zimbabwean father. When I was born I had a band of lighter white skin around my eyes. I found out much later that in Xhosa culture this is one of the signs that a person will be called to be a sangoma.

At 16 I began to have vivid dreams that would manifest in reality. It was years before I understood what my dreams were asking of me.

Then, in 1990, at 18 years old, I was conscripted into the South African Army and trained as a medic. I was helping to rehabilitate soldiers who were fighting in the Border War between South Africa and Angola when I had a particularly strong dream. In it I was the apprentice of a Xhosa man, draped in traditional animal skins. I was familiar with South

African indigenous culture and recognised him immediately as a sangoma. I was asking him to train me and teach me about suffering. He told me I'd have to suffer greatly to truly understand.

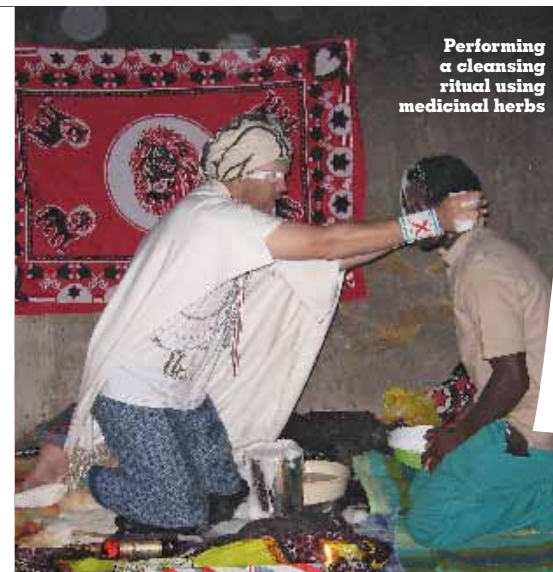
When I awoke the next morning, I knew becoming a sangoma was my calling. I had a severely high



With Mum Gwevu and her husband, Tata



Sangomas in training have their faces painted white



Performing a cleansing ritual using medicinal herbs



Carrying out healing work on a remote farm