

## **Celebrity sangomas heed the call of ancestors**

Many educated, westernised South Africans are juggling the duties of a sangoma with their professional careers, writes Bongani Mthethwa

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When Busi Zokufa was still starting out as an actress, back in her late teens, while on stage in the middle of an act, she would suddenly be seized by an urge to be violent — throwing shoes at her audience and shouting obscenities.

It took her years of anguish and pain before she realised that her time was up: her ancestors wanted her to be a sangoma.

After years of resisting, the 52-year-old Stokvel actress has finally decided to heed the call and in the next few weeks she will spend time at a secluded abode where she will be initiated into the enchanting world of sangomas.

When she fell seriously ill last year, she decided this was it. Ancestral spirits are said to make their presence known by inflicting a host of serious illnesses that cannot be cured by western medicine.

The usual symptoms that one is being called into sangoma-hood often manifest through persistent dreams, excessive amounts of bad luck and physical or mental illness.

Out of fear that her ancestors could unleash similar predicaments on her, Zokufa finally relented and is preparing to embark on her odyssey into the spirit world.

"I always knew that my ancestors wanted me to be a healer. But I'm still at a very early age where I'm pleading with them to show me the way and guide me," said Zokufa.

For many educated and westernised South Africans, being called by the ancestors to become a sangoma has been an embarrassment. But this is changing, as celebrities, academics, actresses and singers are openly heeding the call, and juggling their professions as traditional healers with their western careers.

Academic and author Mmatshilo Motsei, author Mongane Wally Serote, actress Baby Cele of Backstage fame, pop singer LaToya Mkhene, the late Brenda Fassie's lover, actress Sindi Khambule, and former Generations actress Noninzi Williams are just some of those who have come to realise their healing powers.

Recently, Linda Mkhize, a former model and daughter of KwaZulu-Natal's finance MEC Zweli Mkhize, graduated as a sangoma.

Her family threw a party at their Pietermaritzburg home to celebrate her initiation.

Those in the know say it's almost impossible to resist the call to sangoma-hood once the ancestral spirits point a finger at you.

For some time, Motsei rejected her calling to become an African spiritualist (as she prefers to call herself) because of her entrapment by the ideals of a western education and the comforts of modern living.

But as time went on, she struggled to ignore her destiny and finally listened to her ancestors.

As part of her healing process, she published a book titled *Hearing Visions Seeing Voices* in which she examines the breakdown of traditional African values and the consequences of this disconnection from African ancestral beliefs.

She calls on African legends and a deep-seated spirituality to confront and heal the emotional and spiritual wounds at a personal, family and community level.

Metro FM's programming manager Segale Mogotsi is another South African celebrity who graduated as a sangoma.

Once asked about his calling, Mogotsi had this to say: "It was not out of choice. It was a spiritual calling. I used to be a hippy, driving flashy cars and wearing expensive perfumes, but I was not happy spiritually."

In an interview with *Drum* magazine, he said: "It is too complex for a normal person to understand. It is, however, a real higher learning. But mainly messages come through one's dreams."

Mogotsi said he had been in denial since 1992, a few years after his mother's initiation, before heeding the call to become a sangoma.

"I thought I was too smart for that kind of thing and it could not affect me. I even tried joining the Zion Christian Church where they told me straight out that they could not help me, and that I had to go and appease my ancestors.

"I still thought this was rubbish, until I started losing all that was dear to me. I finally succumbed and am glad I went through it. My life is back to where I want it, but of course I am a different person now."

The phenomenon of South Africans manoeuvring between their professions and traditional healing occurs across the racial and cultural spectrum.

John Lockley, a fully fledged white sangoma known as Ucingolwendaba (the messenger), is a psychology honours graduate from Rhodes University in Grahamstown. He graduated as a sangoma in 2007, after spending 10 years training in a township.

His journey into sangoma-hood started with a dream 18 years ago, while he was on a retreat in the Tzaneen mountains in Limpopo.

In a "calling dream" a Xhosa sangoma man dressed in the old ways came to him and told him he was going to teach him to become a sangoma. When he woke up the next morning, his legs hurt.

"I looked down to see large welts and boils on my legs. I had contracted tick bite fever." And then began "a series of unfortunate events" that would last for seven years.

In an interview with Grocott's Mail in Grahamstown, he said: "I got tick bite fever twice, glandular fever, hepatitis, bilharzia. I was swept out to sea. I snapped my leg, broke my toe. I was so sick it felt like I had 1000 volts of electricity in my stomach. I had a near fatal accident, I couldn't sleep. I lost weight, I went to doctors but no one could help. I had exhausted the 'white' options."

And, as they say, the rest is history. Nowadays Ucingolwendaba continues to dream and follow his dreams.

Another prominent white sangoma is Penny Bernard, an anthropology lecturer at Rhodes University who received her calling in 1997. Bernard, who grew up in Zimbabwe, was doing her master's thesis on the phenomenon of water spirits in Southern Africa and their role in the calling of sangomas.

"I was in a crisis-ridden period. Strange things were happening that were beyond my comprehension. There was a presence in my space guiding me — things were happening that I couldn't explain. I was having an existential crisis," said Bernard.

A series of "coincidences" led her to a Zulu sangoma called Baba, who goes underwater for training. Bernard's training in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands lasted five years and ended with a ritual in Zimbabwe in 2002 where she graduated.

But what do we make of this new phenomenon of prominent and unknown South Africans of all races becoming traditional healers?

Lockley said that if someone were called in their dreams by their ancestors, regardless of their culture, colour, language and social status, they were brought down to their basic humanity.

Nceba Gqaleni, a professor for indigenous health systems research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said a number of people were rediscovering their identity and using the rights enshrined in the constitution to pursue or exercise their faith. He said that while becoming a sangoma might in fact appear to be a passing fad, it was a deep spiritual occurrence — along similar lines as famous people turning to Christianity.

"We have seen many football stars praying on the football pitch, showing writings in praise of Jesus after scoring a goal. Some like to express their belief publicly," said Gqaleni.

He said research indicated that 80% of South Africans consulted traditional healers and used their medicines.

He believes the products and services of sangomas and izinyanga would improve if their profession became recognised through legislation, which would also open the door for education and training.

"A tolerant society gives people space to practise their faith without judging. We

need to move beyond tolerance to a celebration of diversity. We must celebrate the fact that 80% of South Africans appreciate our traditional healers," he said.

Anthropologist Professor Michael Whisson said throughout history, but especially when people were coping with rapid changes in their cultures, the sick and unhappy turned towards healers, whose explanations of misfortune made sense to them.

"A few may see this as a 'fashion statement' but nearly all (sangomas) begin by seeking healing themselves. Most are 'wounded healers' whose insights are drawn from their own experiences of suffering and healing. Celebrities suffer the same insecurities as anyone else," he said.

Whisson said science was unable to answer the sufferer who asked "why me, why now?" in other than very general terms. It couldn't offer an explanation of sin or evil.

"As long as some people ask those questions, there will be others willing to offer answers in an idiom which makes sense to the sufferer.

"Some sangomas, psychiatrists and clergy are compassionate and insightful, others are greedy and controlling," he said.

But Whisson warned that the danger of "spiritual" healers in any culture is that they delayed or discouraged clients from seeking healing from scientifically trained doctors — and hence often made their clients' conditions worse.

"However, the most powerful therapy for many disorders that have their roots in the human psyche is the knowledge or belief that the therapist understands and that one is personally loved. Busy doctors and nurses often fail to provide that therapy and their patients go elsewhere.

"Another important factor is that there is simply no adequate medical care for millions of South Africans, and for them the traditional healer and sangoma is all that they have — and many do have a sound empirical knowledge of herbs and other remedies," said Whisson.

Zokufa said some people were under the impression that they did this for fun.

"It's a very difficult thing to undergo. I wouldn't understand if anybody would do this for anything other than a calling."

Throwing those shoes at her audience was not fun at all. And as she progresses on her spiritual journey, she will begin to understand the meaning of it all.

**Find out more about John Lockley and his work at**

[www.african-shaman.com](http://www.african-shaman.com)