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Chapter 15.

‘We are in this for the money’:

Commodification and the *sangoma* cult of Southern Africa

by Wim van Binsbergen

Introduction

My argument on commodification, conceived along the lines set out in my Introduction to the present collection, will concentrate on what at first would appear to be a clear-cut case of the old in the new: the *sangoma* mediumistic healing cult, which offers major first-line traditional diagnosis and therapy in the context of what in all respects must be one of the most commodified places in Africa, notably the rapidly growing town of Francistown in the Northeast District of Botswana.¹ The argument situates itself at the very boundary between the domestic and the market domain evoked above. The paper's title derives from the apodictive pronouncement of two senior members of the cult: ‘We are in this for the money’ – as if it is only the promise of a lucrative undertaking that attracts adepts (all of the prospective cult leaders, because of the chain-reaction or snowball-like recruitment dynamics of these cults of affliction, started out as novice adepts). However, the situation of the *sangoma* cult will prove to be far more complex than merely one of cultic commodification. Admittedly, the cult can be read as a celebration of commodity exchange and even as an encoded historical precipitation of patterns of regional exchange that have existed in the region for centuries. In this respect it shows an urban, cosmopolitan, commodified version of a cultic complex that, although relatively alien and a recent introduction in the (Kalanga and Tswana orientated) Francistown area proper, has constituted an intimate ‘home’ tradition of centuries among the Nguni-speaking peoples of Southern Africa (Ndebele, Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa). But on the other hand, in its sanctification of place and person, and its construction of an intimate community which is effectively therapeutic and identitary, the cult – whilst quietly affirming commodification as a fact of Francis-

¹ Fieldwork in Botswana was conducted in 1988-1989, and during shorter periods almost on a yearly basis until 1999. I am indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for generous support, and the Applied Research Unit, Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing, for research clearance. On the research site, cf. Tapela 1976, 1982; Tshambani 1979; Egner 1971; van Waarden 1986, 1988; Schapera 1971; and van Binsbergen 1993a, 1993b, 1994b.

town life – appears to effect a crucial transformation, through which its adepts and clients actively confront, rather than celebrate, commodification, and thus recapture a vital meaning which has been obscured by the overwhelming effects of commodification of their lives outside the cultic sphere.

The sangoma cult in Francistown, Botswana

Francistown as a ritual scene

Francistown is a European creation, with a considerable industrial and commercial sector, founded just over a century years ago, and racially segregated until Botswana's Independence (1966). A major railhead, Francistown has found itself halfway between rural villages and cattle posts, and the distant destination of labour migration in South Africa; from the latter country it has accommodated returning migrants and their attitudes, practices, tastes, fashions etc. as acquired in distant places. There is a keen awareness of ethnic differentiation and opposition in the town, reinforced again by a lively political process where ethnic mobilization and particularly the issue of Kalanga identity and assertion are major inputs. Yet if Francistown ever was a Kalanga town in the sense that the Kalanga ethnic group (as a 'host tribe') dominated both the surrounding countryside and the town itself, this can no longer be said to be the case: in addition to a major influx from Zimbabwe, people from all over Botswana have settled there, and the town's *lingua franca* is no longer Kalanga but Tswana, Botswana's official language. Though the vast majority of present inhabitants of the town was not born there, the place has developed a distinct sense of a poly-ethnic urbanism, an idiom of public urban discourse in which the particular cultural inputs from national ethnic groups and the influence from distant places have amalgamated to form some common denominator: with attitudes, types of relationships, pastimes, and places to pursue them, which are felt to be typically urban; with elaborate stereotypes characterising the various townships within the town and ranking them in a classification of wealth and prestige; and with standard collective representations and responses, concerning such matters as neighbourliness (which is hardly a value cultivated in Francistown), conflict resolution, norms of urban public behaviour in the streets, shops, workplaces, fast food outlets, and drinking places.

This public discourse also defines, on the level of lay participants and everyday conversation, the major medico-religious complexes and their characteristics (cf. Staugård 1985):

- the clinic or hospital, where generally high-quality cosmopolitan health care is dispensed at considerable costs of time and frustration but against nominal fees (P0.50¹ per treatment);
- healing churches, with prophets (*baprofiti*) as cultic leaders; with services in which drumming, dancing, singing, speaking in tongues and laying-on of hands are major in-

¹ P1 was about US\$0.50 by the late 1980s, when my main fieldwork on the *sangoma* cult was conducted.

- gredients, they form the dominant public religious expression, and as dispensers of spiritual and material treatment they feature prominently in people's health strategies;
- *dingaka*, traditional healers (the principal ones organized in various local professional associations) using a material divination apparatus (usually the widespread system based on four divining tablets making for sixteen basic combinations) and a wide selection of traditional and neo-traditional medicines; and finally
 - *basangoma* (henceforth *sangomas*, singular *sangoma*) spirit mediums whose distinctive feature vis-à-vis the *dingaka* is the inclusion of drumming and trance in divination and treatment, and a greater emphasis on ancestral rather than sorcery explanations of disease and other misfortune.

People cannot help being aware of these medico-religious complexes. Cosmopolitan medicine, besides being invoked as a first resort in cases of illness, forms a regular component of administrative procedures regulating employment, absence from work, immigration etc., its physical locations dominate the urban scene, and the career opportunities it offers especially to women are greatly aspired. Healing churches exist by the score in Francistown, and they proclaim their existence by signboards, the sounds of singing and drumming not only at weekends but also several evenings and nights through the week. Members can often be seen in the street in their colourful uniforms specific to a particular church. Many display the fact that they are adherents and are being treated in the church by colourful strings of cotton around their wrists and necks; adherents of the major healing church, the Zion Christian Church (Z.C.C.),¹ wear enamelled badges on their everyday clothes wherever they go. *Dingaka*, operating in and from treatment rooms they insist on calling 'surgeries', are generally less conspicuous; even the licensed ones rarely put out signboards, although every inhabitant in town has knowledge of a number of them and can easily find recommendations to others. The same applies to *basangoma*, who however identify themselves by strings of beads around the neck, wrists and occasionally ankles, not only in the elaborate display customary at their professional sessions, but also, less conspicuously, in everyday life. This does distinguish them from the *baprofiti* and their adherents who never wear beads, more so than from the *dingaka* some of whom have gone through rituals and continue to adhere to cults also prescribing the wearing of beads: beads form together a catalogue of the bearer's past sacrifices and current cultic attachments. The commodity angle is important from the outset of our argument: all beads in Francistown are imported glass beads exclusively available from the retail trade, and trade beads have been major commodities and currencies in the region for centuries.

At the level of public discourse, people are only dimly aware of the esoteric specialist knowledge around which these various medico-religious specialist shape their professional activities. Most townsmen patronise not just one of the complexes but a combination, with this proviso that *sangomas* with their prolonged and expensive treatment searching deeply and expensively into the patient's existence and history, normally are only referred to as a last resort.

¹ Cf. Comaroff 1985; Schoffeleers 1991; van Binsbergen 1993a; Werbner 1986.

Poly-ethnic public discourse in town classifies not only major medico-religious complexes and superficially attributes distinctive traits and evaluations to them, it also offers a common-sense aetiology, a provisional classification of symptoms and likely causes necessary for initial crisis mobilization (of kinsmen, neighbours, colleagues, fellow-church members, employer and health specialists) in the urban environment, and stipulates an initial strategy of health action – to be refined once a particular medico-religious complex has been approached, and to be revised or extended whenever that complex does not soon respond satisfactorily. In this connexion one major common-sense aetiology, far from peculiar to Francistown public discourse, is to interpret certain complaints (e.g. chronic headache, swollen extremities, eye trouble, persistent bad luck) as signs of being possessed by spirits, and of certain family conditions (notably the prevalence of such possession in previous generations, handed down in chains of cultic affiliation) as conducive to these complaints.

Francistown finds itself well inside the catchment area of Southern Africa's major High God cult, that of the High God Mwali. Through extensive research by Richard Werbner, Terence Ranger and others¹ we are now beginning to understand the cult's history and organizational structure, its significance for the region's rural communities, and its political significance in the struggle for Zimbabwe's independence. It is remarkable that the cult is hardly mentioned in the public discourse on medico-religious complexes in Francistown. Only towards the end of a first year of full-time fieldwork did I once see a group of Children of Mwali, *Bawosana*, in uniform (staff, black cloak, white or black-and-white skirt, white or red sash, and strings of black beads or a combination of black, black-and-white, white and red) out on a public road in town; but by that time I had already made contact with a few Francistown *sangoma* lodges where Mwali-related sessions of dancing, treatment and initiation would be held, on private yards which due to the nature of urban space in African towns would still be fairly open to the public eye and ear. Well-known Mwali cultic personnel does have an urban residence: Mr. Vumbu, who is the high priest of the cult's south-western encompassing the Northeast District, and has an oracle inside Botswana's border (cf. Werbner 1989: 278 and *passim*), has a house in Francistown's area L and runs – an interesting detail in the context of the present book – a bar and a transport company; but a standard (and deliberately evasive, mendacious) response of my urban informants was that Mr Vumbu has dropped his cultic activities, is absorbed in his enterprises, and is no longer considered a true representative of the cult. A similar image of past activities supplanted by present-day inertia was detectable when I confronted Francistown lay (and even a few specialist) informants with my increasing information on what went on in the lodges: in these informants' responses, the ritual dancers there were interpreted not as actual Servants of Mwali at present incorporated in a regional network of cultic prestations and obligations, but as mere descendants of such adepts, emulating their ancestors' dress and paraphernalia in a fragmented and localized cult which, allegedly, no longer binds its present-day members to a viable regional network. Nonetheless, the extensive cultic network as described by Werbner (1989: ch. 7),

¹ Cf. Werbner 1989; Ranger 1979, 1985a, 1985b, 1987; Daneel 1970; and extensive references there.

spanning the entire Northeast district, has far from ceased operation; the extent of urban-rural ties between Francistown and the rural communities of north-eastern Botswana ensures that a considerable number of urbanites continue to participate in rural forms of the Mwali cult.

The urban invisibility of the Mwali cult appears to be partly due to the obvious seasonal element in the rain cult: from July to September, towards the end of the dry season, *Wosana* dancing sessions are staged in several townships of Francistown. These sessions, which draw a lay audience of several scores some of whom join in the dancing, are rallying points for senior adepts and cult leaders from other lodges in town, but also for a dozen or more of the *dingaka* who are not *sangomas* and do not have lodges. Participants of the latter category include some of the most senior *dingaka* – chairmen of their local professional associations; in attire and ritual practice they identify as *Wosana* during these sessions, but contrary to the lodge leaders they are not Ndebele but Kalanga from the Northeast District.

A cultic lodge

At the few Francistown *sangoma* lodges (figures 15.1, 15.2) the day-to-day life of the members, under the leadership of a major *sangoma* who is an adept of the Mwali cult, revolves on the diagnosis and treatment of mental and psychosomatic disorders attributed to ancestral and demonic¹ affliction, and, in the process, on the training to *sangomahood* of those patients who – according to the widespread model of the cult of affliction – can only be cured by becoming therapists themselves. I have studied in detail three such lodges; two or three more exist in Francistown. The discussion below concentrates on the lodge in the Maipaahela residential area.

A former squatter area (before Independence in 1966 hardly any African inhabitants of Francistown were allowed to settle on regular plots), Maipaahela had recently been upgraded as a residential district. This offered the opportunity to secure a relatively spacious plot and to fill it (in a way which would be impossible in a more controlled site-and-service plot, such as owned these days by an increasing proportion of Francistown inhabitants) with all sorts of inexpensive structures as dwellings for adepts and as treatment rooms, store rooms for paraphernalia and medicines, and a relatively large area occupied by a shrine: a platform made of tree branches. The medico-religious emphasis is combined with secular economic pursuit: in addition to the lodge members (about half of whom are close relatives of the lodge leader) two rooms at the plot have been let to tenants, young working women who are not related to the lodge leader and who have nothing whatsoever to do with the ritual organization of the lodge. A similar situation, but involving rather more tenants, obtains at the lodge in the Monarch residential area, run by MmaShakayile, a (classificatory) sister (in analytical terms, a first cousin) of the Maipaahela leader MmaNdlovu.

¹ Demonic affliction is interpreted in terms of the possession by an ancestor who during her or his life was an adept of the much-feared *Shumba* i.e. 'Lion' cult; cf. Werbner 1989.

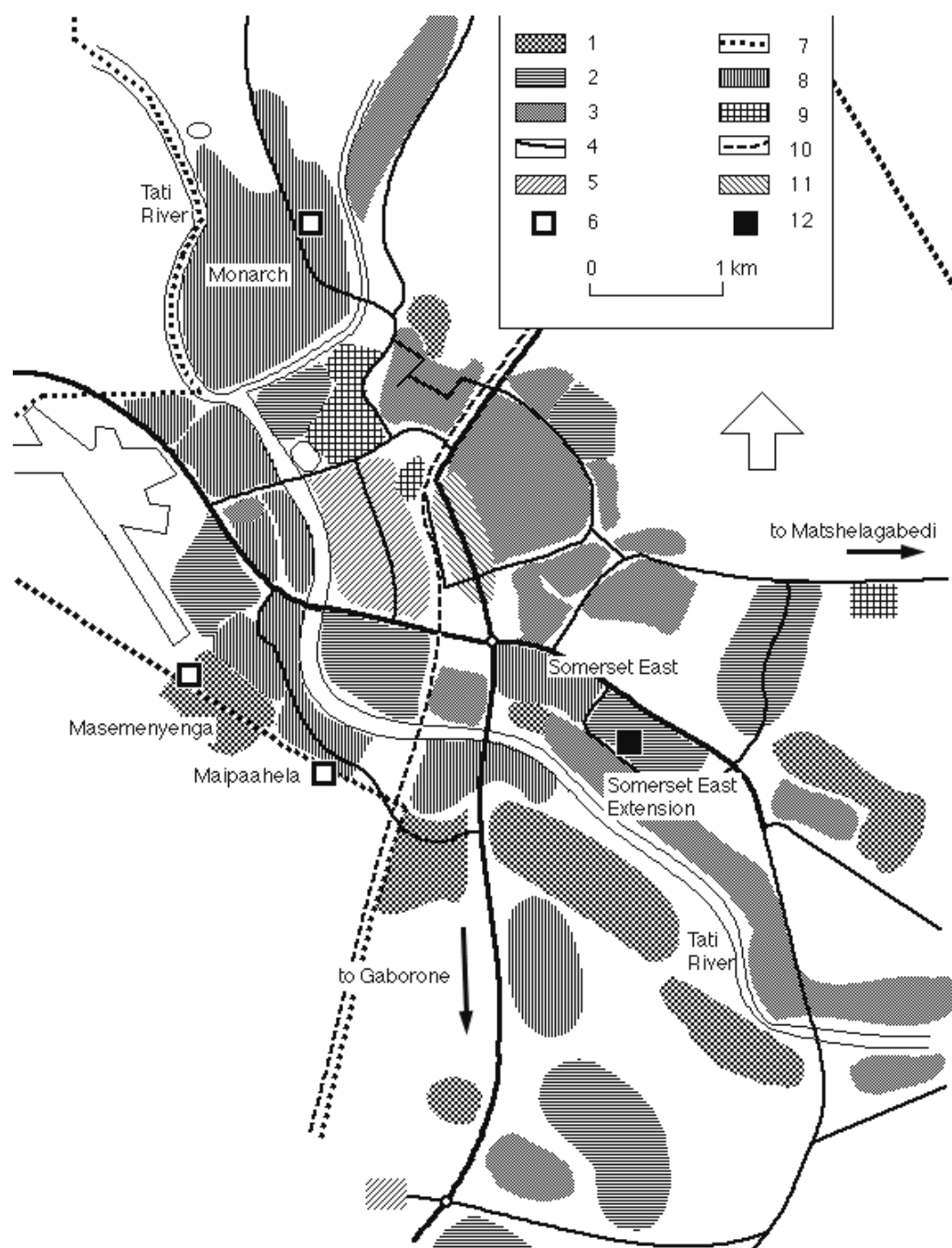


Diagram 15.1. *Sangoma* lodges in Francistown, 1989

Legend

- 1. squatter areas
- 2. site-&-service areas
- 3. serviced housing (high, medium and low cost)
- 4. road
- 5. industrial sites
- 6. *sangoma* lodge
- 7. municipal boundary

- 8. upgraded former squatter areas
- 9. institutional housing
- 10. railway
- 11. central business and shopping district
- 12. researcher's family's house, 1988-1989

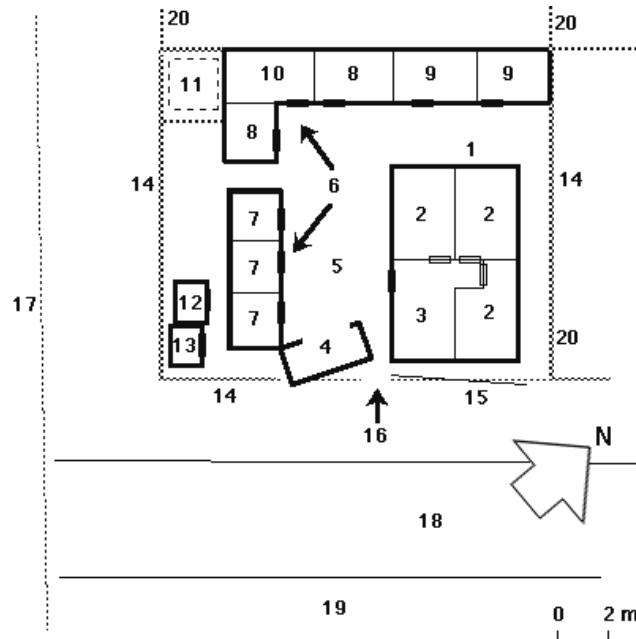


Diagram 15.2. The *sangoma* lodge at Maipaahela, 1989

legend

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. main building constructed to municipal regulations | 12. bathroom |
| 2. bedroom | 13. toilet |
| 3. main consultation room and sitting room | 14. wire fence |
| 4. kitchen | 15. clothes lines |
| 5. central yard | 16. gate |
| 6. temporary structures | 17. to football field, edge of township and municipal boundary; at 150 meter: stream bordered by bush |
| 7. treatment and storage | 18. dirt road (dead end) |
| 8. married couple, both senior adepts | 19. other houses |
| 9. tenants not associated with the cult | 20. plot boundary |
| 10. junior adept | |
| 11. shrine | |

The lodge is situated at the edge of the township, where complaints about ritual noise etc. will be minimal, relative privacy from neighbours maximum (further enhanced by the fact that the plot's separate buildings are narrowly closed upon one another to form a secluded yard, which is very atypical for Francistown), and finally as near as possible to a small stream, the abode of water spirits and ancestors, and a site of ritual purification.

'We are in this for the money': Characteristics suggestive of commodification in the sangoma cult

A mix of the old and the new, of the home and the market

In Maipaahela, the dominant structure on the plot is a fully-fledged modern four-roomed house, which would satisfy all the regulations and requirements of state-controlled urban building. In appearance, capital investment, and elaborate furnishing this house testifies to modern tastes and life-style, in no way exceptional in Francistown outside the circles of

the very poor. *What is exceptional, though, about the lodge is its perceptible balance between the old and the new – in the midst of a Francistown where historic forms of rural life and symbolism have been virtually banned from public life and are surviving only implicitly, keeping a very low profile, having virtually gone underground.* At the lodge, by contrast, the constant attention for ritual activities and paraphernalia such as drums, cloths, beads and medicine (items which the leader constantly carries around in, significantly again, disposable plastic shopping bags) does not imply a rejection of whatever the modern world has to offer in the way of furniture, clothing, utensils, child-care requisites etc. Most of the food consumed at the lodge is bought in Francistown's large supermarkets – the lodge emulates the symbolic but not the productive aspects of the historic rural socio-economic order. The beer consumed and libated in considerable quantities at the lodge, particularly during rituals, is not a ritual home-brew but the simple manufactured *Chibuku*, packed in cartons. The leader herself consumes endless series of canned beer of an unpopular brand called *Black Label* – the package in red and white against a basic black (cf. the *Wosana* costume) lends it a sanctity which its modern manufacture and purchase for money does not seem to affect negatively. By contrast to the sense of diabolical contamination with attaches to modern consumption and permissiveness in the idiom of the Francistown healing churches, at the lodge a carefree sense of immunity appears to reign – not in the least since *money*, that major contaminating agent from a Christian point of view, is involved in all therapeutic services at the lodge, and comes in in considerable quantities. *It can be sanctified* on the spot: by the leader's handling it, storing it with the paraphernalia in the shopping bags, and forwarding 5 to 10 % of the lodge revenue to the Manyangwa oracle in south-western Zimbabwe – a branch of the Mwali cult to which the leader is tributary. Fees for divinatory and therapeutic services range from P5 for a simple first consultation, via c. P100 for extensive treatment, to c. P1,000 (not counting sacrificial animals, a truly massive collective meal, firewood, cloth and beads) for graduation to full *sangomahood*; by comparison, the average monthly wages in the formal sector in Francistown are in the range of P150 to P200.

Of the other two lodges, the Monarch one is very similar to the one in Maipaahela – since their leaders are (classificatory) sisters, the Monarch lodge absorbed most of the Maipaahela adepts and patients when the Maipaahela leader died in 1989. The Monarch lodge however is situated not at the edge but more towards the centre of a township; a stream and bush therefore are not very near (although still not more than a few hundred meters away), and the plot is secluded from neighbouring plots and particularly from the main road by a dense growth of giant cactuses, which are exceptional in Francistown. Situated in the town's most dilapidated and disreputable surviving squatter area, the Masemenyenga lodge, although subservient to the same Manyangwa oracle, is different from the other two in that it has far fewer adepts (only three Kalanga women in addition to the Ndebele leader), who in ceremonies wear not the *Wosana* costume but instead emulate nineteenth-century Zulu warrior dress. The main difference lies in the way in which space is sacralized: not primarily by an outdoor shrine made of branches but by a fine white-washed one-roomed permanent building which is exclusively used for divination and treatment, carefully kept clean, the floor covered with elegant reed mats, the walls

crammed with sacred cloths and other paraphernalia, and with two small decorated ancestral gourds as the mobile centre of the shrine. In the midst of the – in Francistown proverbial – filth and devastation of Masemenyenga, this chapel-like structure (occupied by the lodge leader more than twenty years ago) stands out as a beacon of purity and vital strength.

However, we must appreciate that here, as in other manifestations of Francistown *sangomahood*, purity aspired in one line of activities or products (such as a white-washed modern structure, or a trainee *sangoma* who keeps all his nutritional and sexual taboos) does not preclude mixing with other lines. Thus *sangomahood* (as celebrating meaningful village life with still viable production and reproduction) may be mixed with modern commodified consumption celebrating the capitalist mode of production; *sangomahood* may be mixed with aspirations of Christian leadership even though most churches frown upon traditional religion; ancestral calling and healing, as a *sangoma*, may be mixed with the mercenary purveyance of sinister – sometimes criminal, homicide-derived – magical medicine for the benefit of local political and economic entrepreneurs. Absolutely secure in the awareness of an ancestral election that has been publicly ascertained when ancestors speak through the mouth of the *sangoma* in trance, this ritual specialist can afford to tolerate fuzzy boundaries, boundary transgression, and dirty hands. Not by accident *Vuba*, ‘Mixture’, is one of the most positive and propitious combinations which the *sangoma* four-tablet oracle may yield (see below). By contrast, African Christian churches in the region tend to radically oppose transgression, and to insist on much firmer boundaries precluding such mixing of lines. Therefore these churches confront both historic local forms of belief and ritual, and the inroads of capitalism and consumerism, with far greater intolerance than is found among the *sangomas*.¹

A fictive family, the lodge has a firm style of leadership which makes it far from a democracy. Commodities clearly articulate the internal relationships at the lodge. The leader’s plastic bags contain everything that the adepts may ever need for treatment and initiation, and as such represent the constant generous flow of healing care – which is also the transformation of externally bought commodities, via the leader’s shopping bags,² into internally meaningful paraphernalia, uniforms etc. – from the leader to her followers. But these bags also represent the almost total control which she exercises over the material and symbolic resources available at the lodge. Keys to the treatment rooms and store rooms ensure her authority over the lodge’s drums, pilgrim staffs, consecrated divination tablets, animals waiting to be sacrificed, butcher’s knives etc. – and this authority is reinforced whenever she personally hands out these necessary items in the context of specific rituals and treatments. Only fly switches and leg rattles made of spider’s nests (both indispensable for dancing), uniforms (for which the material has been bought by the adept personally, after which it is cut and sewn by the leader) and dummy tablets for divinatory exer-

¹ Yet at least one Francistown church, the Guta ra Mwari (‘Assembly of Mwali’) caters for entrepreneurial success medicine to be acquired through sinister means, just like some *sangomas*. Cf. van Binsbergen 1993a.

² Shredded and entangled in tumbleweeds, the multicoloured debris of such bags are conspicuous waste all around Botswana’s urban communities today.

cises, are kept by the adepts themselves. Similarly, individual adepts may *administer* the treatments prescribed by the leader, but she alone can *prescribe* a therapy, while she oversees all divination going on at the lodge except for the adepts' daily exercises with non-consecrated, dummy divination tablets. This insistence on control is on the one hand in line with the immense responsibilities the leader takes upon herself, braving ancestors and demons in her efforts to restore the patients to health and to preserve the well-being of the adepts despite the supernatural and psychological risks they constantly run. On the other hand the pattern of leadership is in line with the managerial problems of the position of leader, the cleavages and rivalry within the family that controls both the Maipaahela and the Monarch lodge, potential tensions (between senior and junior adepts, and between those adepts who are the leader's kin and those who are not), and the sharp competition with other Francistown healers, in which resort to such drastic means (sorcery, poisoning, occult killings) as they have professionally access to, is taken for granted by all involved.

'We are in this for the money'

The lodge's ritual services are being offered in exchange for substantial amounts of cash.

'We are in this for the money',

is what two Francistown *sangomas* told me at the end of a long and deeply moving ritual which they had supervised in my Francistown backyard – the first bloody sacrifice I was ever to make for my own ancestors. And though I could scarcely believe that they were being so tactless (or, such it appeared to be to my Dutch ears) at such a sacred moment, they mentioned once again how much I owed them for their services.

Is it true what these men claim, that they have become, and have remained, *sangomas* primarily for the financial benefits attaching to that ritual specialism? Or does their pronouncement merely indicate the profound contradictions whose elucidation will preoccupy us throughout the present paper? Below we shall encounter one of these two men as Moses, a failing ritual entrepreneur; and the other as Leopold Siavuma, a highly successful ritual entrepreneur, head of a lodge patronized by the trading elite of Francistown, and owner of a first-rate motor vehicle. We shall see that Moses was propelled into *sangomahood* by the dynamics of Southern African aetiological categories – becoming a *sangoma* was the only way for him to restore his health after a mental breakdown had destroyed his splendid intellectual career; *sangomahood* was scarcely his chosen profession, let alone a profession he had chosen because of its lucrative nature. In the few years he sought to practice as a *sangoma* in Francistown, his monthly income has always remained below that of an unskilled general worker. On the other hand, Leopold, an androgynous presence when in trance, yet proud lover of his three female adepts, successor to his father who was also a famous *sangoma*, and enthusiast for early nineteenth-century Nguni military attire which he and his adepts don during their trance performances – Leopold gets many other highly valued things out of his *sangomahood*, besides money.

I suspect that the blunt insistence on the payment of substantial sums at the moment when the client is still in the clutches of spiritual transformation, has, among others, one

purpose which North Atlantic psychiatrists may be ready to recognise (for they themselves tend to bill their patient heavily): the money severs possible ties of life-long dependence and transference which would otherwise develop; it is the one reminder that beyond the dream of a self-contained personal microcosm which the therapy pretends to restore, lies a world of impersonal, universalized value, calibrated and rendered infinitely exchangeable through the external, alien medium of money.

The commodity angle in the Francistown *sangoma* cult is conspicuous. Not only are the services heavily paid for. Also the majority of paraphernalia derive from the market, as commodities. Rather than by ritual barriers to consumption and money, life at the lodge can be said to involve a celebration of consumption and a sanctification of money. Among the *sangomas*' clients are the most wealthy entrepreneurs of Francistown, and they do not come for personal bodily complaints, but for medicine ensuring entrepreneurial success. The latter type of medicine is extremely expensive, and it is sometimes procured by criminal, specifically homicidal, means. When a patient cannot be cured by simple therapy and has to go all the way, entering *twazahood* (the status of apprentice *sangoma*) in order to eventually graduate as a *sangoma* herself or himself, then for a year or more the *twaza*'s labour power is appropriated by the lodge leader. Emphatically subservient to all lodge members more senior than the *twaza*, the latter engages in menial tasks such as cleaning, laundry, cooking, digging up and pounding herbal medicines. *Twazahood* thus borders on exploitation, and the final fee which the lodge leader cashes upon the *twaza*'s graduation represents the equivalent of several months' income in unskilled formal-sector employment. In order to justify these expenses, as well as those of the repeated animal sacrifices, and the massively collective sacrificial meal at initiation into *twazahood* and at graduation (at which literally hundreds of guests have to be fed at the expense of the candidate), the *twaza* is constantly told: 'You will all find it back with the people', *i.e.* with your future clients, in the form of their fees.

Sometimes the celebration of commodities may border on the criminal. One of the most prominent lodge members of the Monarch lodge spent the Christmas period of 1991 in jail, because she was found trafficking in soft drugs. In the same year, I was presented, upon my own graduation as a *sangoma*, with what looked like a gold nugget the size of a chicken egg; I was exhorted to sell the item abroad and share the proceeds with the lodge leadership, but it turned out to be a mere pebble daubed in gold paint. That lodge was in decline, had a large number of non-productive dependants and few clients for major, expensive treatments, which in combination with the high level of alcohol consumption produced a pressing lack of cash.

Two historical models

Two, rather contradictory, historical arguments might be made at this point:

- (a) *sangomahood* in Francistown is the commodified transformation of an originally non-commodified rural tradition; alternatively, according to the second model,
- (b) Francistown *sangomahood* is to be read as a celebration of commodification, as

the cultic encoding of a regional history of extensive trade networks.

(a) The Francistown sangoma cult as an urban commodified transformation of initially non-commodified rural religious forms

The *sangoma* complex is relatively new to Francistown. Of the various lodges the date of establishment can be traced to no earlier than the middle of the twentieth century. Francistownians, especially those of Tswana rather than Kalanga ethnic affiliation, look upon *sangomahood* as an alien and terrifying thing. Older ethnographic accounts of the Tswana, for instance the works of Isaac Schapera, go into considerable details concerning traditional medicine, but scarcely mention *sangomahood*. On the other hand, the *sangoma* tradition has been amply described for the cluster of Nguni-speaking peoples of the central and eastern parts of Southern Africa (Zulu, Ndebele, Swazi and Xhosa), in a rural context where recruitment to this ritual specialism is largely on a kinship basis and the communal services rendered by the *sangoma*, while highly prestigious, are not supposed to be highly remunerated. Although in Botswana today *sangomahood* is more at home among the Kalanga (a branch of the Shona) than among the Tswana, until the late nineteenth century CE the Kalanga ecstatic cults would appear to have been limited to the Mwali cult (with its black uniforms and its veneration of ancestors who were Mwali adepts), and the *Lion* cult (with its veneration of spirits of the wild articulating the identity of the Kalanga domestic sphere). Descriptions of *sangomahood* from rural parts of Southern Africa¹ offer us a picture of a far less elaborate, more rustic, less lucrative and more cosmologically underpinned, local idiom, of which the activities in Francistown might appear to be somewhat virtualized and bricolaged transformations. One is tempted to suggest that the Francistown *sangoma* cult represents an eroded, commodified, cosmopolitan form of a ritual tradition which elsewhere, in remote rural areas of Southern Africa, has existed for at least several centuries in a more intact form, in the intimate village domain, relatively untouched by the money nexus. The fact that the lodge members tend to come from many different countries, language groups and ethnic groups, already suggests that the cult does not reproduce some historic localized identity.

In twentieth-century Southern Africa (ranging from Southern Zambia, through Zimbabwe and Botswana, to the Republic of South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho, with ramifications into Angola and Mozambique), the term *sangoma* has stood for any ritual-therapeutic specialist engaging in a combination of drum-aided mediumistic trance, four-tablet divination, and herbalism. This cultic complex is found in various contexts which may vary from extreme, culturally specific localization (homesteads in rural environments ethnically and linguistically marked as 'Nguni') to regional (by implication global), culturally fairly heterogeneous or unspecific, urban contexts such as Francistown. Important variations within this cultic complex can be mapped by a number of oppositions along the axis of the local/global distinction:

¹ Cf. Berglund 1989; Ngubane [Sibisi] 1977, 1981, 1986; Reis 1996; van Nieuwenhuijsen 1974; Booyens 1986; Kohler 1941; Hammond-Tooke 1955; Griffiths 1989; Mkhwanazi 1989; du Toit 1971.

- the nature and multiplicity of social and economic relationships between specialist and client;
- their being embedded in a shared mother-tongue-supported *discourse of causation* and meaning – or their having to make shift with a *lingua franca* and vastly divergent initial cosmological positions; in the latter case, the progressive construction and elaboration of a shared fantasy space between healer and client in the course of diagnosis and treatment amounts to the client's (re-)conversion;
- the extent, therefore, to which that discourse (especially as concerns supernatural agents as structures of causation and legitimacy) is localized, integrated and unitarian – or globalising, eclectic, fragmented and diverse.

Structured by these oppositions the *sangoma* complex, ramifying and kaleidoscopic, could be argued to constitute a fantasy space within which both clients and therapeutic entrepreneurs can pursue widely diverging options of imagery, a choice of repertoires of traditionalism or modernity, defining several explanations of evil and misfortune (notably: explanations in terms of sorcery; ancestral wrath; ancestral election; a Western aetiology of disease; or the theology of the Holy Spirit) with varying detail, consistency and idiosyncrasy. In urban multiethnic settings such as Francistown, these options would then be only distantly informed by the time-honoured, local cultural models which they do, however, emulate in dress style and imagery: nineteenth-century Zulu warriors; nineteenth-century Mwali adepts with Kalanga ethnic connotations). This creative variability is to be set against the background of contemporary urban Botswana society. Here it acquires the following characteristics:

- the snow-ball or chain-reaction organizational format of the cult of affliction (*i.e.* the patient is cured by becoming a cult adept and finally a doctor, and then attracting patients/adepts in her turn), and the great premium it lays on cultic and therapeutic competition for the public opinion *i.e.* for potential clients' patronage
- the cultic identity as patient, *twaza* and accomplished *sangoma*, is distinctly articulated by material objects that invariably constitute commodities derived from local and regional markets against cash
- relatively recent problems and concerns (such as: general urban insecurity and competition for jobs, housing and lovers; protection of large entrepreneurial and political capital for regional and national politicians and traders in an expanding market; the articulation of manageable tradition within a modernist nationalistic framework of politically controlled cultural production), which are largely to be identified as 'modern', are addressed in the *sangoma's* cultic idiom which in many ways upholds a time-honoured, historic world-view hinging on a belief in actively intervening ancestors, and a viable world of rural production and reproduction.
- despite an antiquarian nostalgic imagery and world-view prevailing in the *sangoma* cult, the entire cultic complex as found in Francistown is pervaded by the image of the market and of the commodity, to an amazing extent.

Under historical model (a), there is a juxtaposition between the *sangoma* cult and commodification: the cult may have absorbed some commodified characteristics as is to be expected considering the highly commodified urban consumerist environment of Botswana as one of the very few viable economies of post-colonial Africa, but this commodified aspect has to be seen as accidental – the cult draws on a pool of symbols, images and ritual practices which have a long history in the Southern African domestic, as distinct from market, domain.

(b) The Francistown cult as a historic celebration of commodity trade

An alternative frame of interpretation which presents itself is to look upon the Francistown *sangoma* cult, not in contradiction to commodification, but as *a historic form celebrating commodities* – to the extent that most paraphernalia and most sacrificial animals and other sacrificial matter (snuff, beads), cloths) emphatically have to be bought, and cannot come from one's own supplies. In this virtual prohibition of the use of domestic production for ritual purposes the cult propels its adepts onto the market, and helps construct and maintain the boundary between the domestic and the market domain.

Networks of long-distance trade have traversed East and South Central Africa for millennia, connecting the royal or aristocratic courts of the interior with commodity flows extending all across the Indian Ocean, to Arabia, Persia, India, China, and Indonesia (Caton-Thompson 1931; Mathew 1956; von Sicard 1963; Neville et al. 1975; Beach 1980). As I have argued in detail elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2003a: ch. 8), the *sangoma* cult owes a great deal to these intercontinental influences: the black cloaks, staff, short dancing-skirt in cloth, crossed bead scapulars, prostration as ritual gesture, the insistence on bare feet in the presence of the sacred – all this suggests specific cultural forms which far from rooting in African soil have a considerable resonance in the Semitic world, in West and especially in South Asia. Despite the rendering as *wosanna*, there is probably a link with the Biblical exclamation 'hosanna'.¹ Such a connection may be ancient and need not derive from the twentieth-century influence of missionary Christianity. The theologian von Sicard has made remarkable, and highly contested, claims concerning comprehensive borrowings from ancient Judaism in South Central Africa (cf. von Sicard 1952). Particularly the Lemba ethnic group in that region is often claimed to have retained fragmented and eroded elements of ancient Semitic religion, language, food taboos etc. (cf. van Warmelo 1966; von Sicard 1952: 140-170; Parfitt 1992). These accounts cite specific historical migrations from the Persian Gulf such as took place to the Comoro Islands, Madagascar, and the East African coast, but scholars hesitate to acknowledge such influences for the Southern African interior.² Given the Persian influence on much of coastal East and

¹ Matthew 21: 9, 15; Mark 11: 9-10; John 12: 13. The exclamation is a superficial graecization of the Hebrew 'Do help us [Lord]', Psalms 118: 25-26. Therefore the link, if any, would be Christian and Common-Era, rather than Hebrew/Israelite and first-millennium BCE.

² However, E.N. Wilmsen, specialist on Kalahari archaeology, history and ethnography, assures me that, although there is no evidence of an Arabic *presence* in the Kalahari desert in, e.g., the late 9th century CE,

Southern Africa, the name Mwali might be associated with that of ʿAli, the central Shiʿite saint. Alternatively, perhaps South Central Africa's link with the Semitic cultural domain was via Ethiopia (Wainwright 1949), which appears to have served as a focal point for the spread of divine kingship over East, Central and Southern Africa; in Ethiopia, languages and cultural orientations very similar to the Semitic cluster are found, and in recent reconstructions Ethiopia appears as situated near or at the homeland of Semitic, or perhaps even of all Afro-Asiatic languages. There is no doubt whatsoever that medieval Islamic magic came to be enshrined, transformed and disguised almost beyond recognition, in the *sangoma* divination system (van Binsbergen 1994a, 1995, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1997a, 1997b, 2003a: ch. 15). Finally, South Asian religion greatly influenced the Mwali cult and *sangomahood* (van Binsbergen 2003a: ch. 8). The name of the cult's High God, the latter's implied female connotations, the colour black as the cult's main symbolic colour, and the association with a leopard skin, are all somehow reminiscent of the Hindu goddess Kali; some *sangoma* songs have textual parallels with Buddhist ritual songs.

After the middle of the second millennium, once splendid state systems of the interior declined greatly,¹ and it is likely that then regional cults (such as have survived into the twentieth century, especially the Mwali cult) came to play an large role in the maintenance of interregional trade networks, with major shrines acting as nodal points. Gold, cattle and oriental prestige goods travelled along these regional networks for centuries; perhaps even the amazing episode of the false clump of gold presented by the lodge leader to a newly graduated *sangoma* (in addition to other presents from the leader's part, including a costly sacrificial oxen) suggest an institutional ritual obligation from the time that the cult was still a viable network of circulation. Such affirmation of commodification, in the *sangoma* cult, as stressed under historical model (b), also ties in with the marked commodity-mindedness of Botswana, with an elaborate value system geared to the accumulation and successful upkeep of wealth under conditions of stability and social approval – a system rather exceptional in Africa, where such levelling mechanisms as sorcery, cursing, and bridewealth, tend to dissipate and discourage entrepreneurship and the accumulation of wealth, while on the other hand many actors cannot resist the temptation of primitive accumulation based on uncontrolled access to state resources.

Beyond the juxtaposition of contradictory historical models of commodification in the sangoma cult: Confronting the existential problems caused by extreme commodification

It is difficult to choose between the historical models (a) and (b). Each model appears to capture an essential dimension of the Francistown *sangoma* cult. Saturated with commodification (model b), the cult yet draws on symbols and a world-view that evokes the rural family with viable production and reproduction and un-eroded by commodification. We

there is certainly evidence of Arabic *trade contacts* for that region and period; personal communication, January 1993.

¹ Van Waarden 1986, 1988; Beach 1980; Tlou & Campbell 1984.

could leave the argument at this, satisfied to have pointed out the contradictory presence of commodification in the context of the *sangoma* cult. However, more of the vitality and the considerable appeal of the *sangoma* cult in the wider context of Francistown urban society (which is excessively commodified) may be understood if we explore this contradiction a good deal further. In the remainder of this paper I will present the case for the following view: *having inevitably absorbed as much of commodification as has become part and parcel of Botswana life today, the sangoma cult yet thrives in the Francistown context because it is one of the few symbolic and ritual complexes (African Independent churches are another, and rival, such complex) to actively confront the existential problems of meaning, identity and insecurity as generated by commodification.*

In order to develop this point, let me discuss at some length the *sangoma* cult's dynamics of signification, sacralization, and therapy.

An unaccommodating market

Ironically, the idea of the *sangoma* cult as a celebration of commodification is scarcely in line with the actual experience of adepts who are faced with the task of fulfilling their sacrificial obligations through the market. They find that the local market is extremely reluctant, difficult to operate, defective. Because of the history of White monopoly capital in the Northeast district, where Francistown is situated, the town is surrounded by a circle of commercial farms. Within a range of thirty kilometres, it is therefore virtually impossible to buy a goat for sacrifice, and beyond that, still difficult; hence the logistic costs of exploration and transport in monetary value easily equal those of the goat itself. The ancestral demands in terms of uniforms, beads, other paraphernalia, are often very specific, and difficult to meet from the day-to-day supply in Francistown's shops, where plastic hairpins are far easier to get by than white glass beads.

But there are other, more profound arguments against the view that Francistown *sangomahood* essentially revolves on commodification. Unmistakable, the lodge seeks to function as the centre of a viable, or restored, whole cosmology with rural referents, involving the sacralization of space and of the person, and hence the construction of a therapeutic community outside the market – in other words, the construction of a genuine home, surrounded and protected by conceptual and interactional boundaries which money, that great boundary-crosser and boundary-effacer, cannot make undone.

Sacralization of space

The Maipaahela lodge is situated near a stream. The stream's banks covered with shrubs offer a place for ritual ablutions. Most important however about the stream is that it is (as streams in the surrounding rural areas) a place where ancestral spirits are supposed to be eminently present, and approachable; here novice adepts are chased across the river where they deposit offerings of bank notes (or coins of the highest nomination) immediately to be retrieved by the adepts and forwarded to the lodge leader. The plot's closed lay-out around a central yard, with only one very narrow entrance, is suggestive of a womb nur-

turing and protecting the humans contained in it. It also evokes the symbolism (more than the actual physical form) of the Kalanga homestead and local kin group, the *nzi*. Also the *Lion* ecstatic cult in which the cult leader specialises beside her Mwali connections has a decidedly Kalanga signature. There is a double play on displacement here: Kalanga is the language of much of the surrounding countryside but not really of Francistown; and even at the lodge the language of communication is Ndebele rather than Kalanga (the two languages are not mutually intelligible). With its elaborate shrine and the adjacent river the lodge reproduces, in a Botswana urban setting where such is very exceptional indeed, a ritually underpinned microcosm, where many of the traditional symbolic elements of village and family life are represented. This *sacralization of space* is an important aspect of the healing potential of this urban community.

In Francistown, architectural structures which dominate the townscape are those associated with the state and capitalism. Only an inconspicuous role is reserved for one category of structures which in European and American towns is so visually dominant: churches. *Sangomas* and leaders of African Independent churches are the African Franciscan community's principal specialists in the articulation and manipulation of meaning. They are the only ones to actually sacralize the urban space in its own right through the creation of shrines and the staging of ritual and sacrifice in the urban context. The *sangoma* shrines to a considerable extent evoke a viable rural social and cosmological order revolving on ancestors; but as we have seen items charged with cosmopolitan and consumptive meaning (the lodge leader's relatively luxurious town house, modern furniture, emphasis on cash and on cash-bought paraphernalia and sacrifices, reliance on manufactured food and drink, even the ubiquitous plastic shopping bags) are far from shunned, and they are sacralized in the ritual process continuously going on at the *sangoma* lodges. The *baprofiti*'s position is related but somewhat different: their reference is to the cosmopolitan repertoires of meaning much more than to the historic local rural repertoire, and they impose severe limitations upon the selection from the modern society that their adherents are allowed to indulge in, yet they, too, offer ritual and symbolic ways in which the suffering and temptation engendered in that modern world can be alleviated and a person can return to it without being overwhelmed by it – ways which make that world once again an inhabitable place. In this way the *baprofiti*, too, sacralize and to some extent rehabilitate the urban space itself. Both types of ritual specialists offer a way out from the alienation which for most Africans in Francistown is both an accepted fact and a major factor in their strictly utilitarian approach to the town as intrinsically devoid of (historic, rural) meaning, as anything but home. Here there is the spatial and bodily *dynamics* of group interaction to be appreciated. In many Independent churches this takes the form of a dancing chorus, a circular dancing movement, or even a 'planetary' movement with the dancers (as detached, impersonal 'atoms'?) turning both around their own axis and, jointly, around a common centre, where often the congregation's newborn children, novices, baptismal candidates, sufferers or sick are placed as if to have maximum benefit from the energy (the *Holy Spirit*) unleashed by the frantic yet carefully orchestrated movement of the congregation. Although the *sangomas* dancing movements are less ordered and convey elements of spasmodic ancestral rapture, they too amount to a sacralization of urban space

by bringing about, in that estranged space, the presence of ancestors who take possession of the *sangoma* mediums during the latter's ecstatic dance. Both among the Independent churches, and in the *sangoma* dancing ritual, we can see the (attempt of a) *group-wise appropriation and hence transformation of a small ritual space inside town, as an active way of confronting and exorcising the alienation which is paramount in the everyday living experience of the African workers in the urban space outside the ritual situation.*

Sacralization of the person

The lodge's shrine is a focus for sacrifice and libation, which as elsewhere should be approached respectfully – without shoes and wristwatches, and with a ankle-length cloth wrapped around a woman's legs *even if she is in ritual Mwali-cult attire* (with only knee-length plied dancing skirt) – but this does not preclude joking and laughter in the presence of this eminently homely epiphany of the sacred.

At the Maipaahela lodge, the sacralization of space goes hand in hand with *sacralization of the person*. The lodge leader is seen as the incarnation of a major ancestral spirit, whose presence and sacred status is constantly to be acknowledged by a ritual greeting: whenever an adept or patient wants to enter the yard he or she kneels at the narrow entrance and loudly and slowly claps hands a few times; the leader then calls back

‘*Yebó, yebó*, you may approach, the spirit welcomes you.’

With graduation, every *sangoma* gains the right to have her or his ancestral spirit honoured in the same fashion by fellow-*sangomas*. The constant awareness (reinforced by frequent divination in which more senior adepts attend to the junior ones under the guidance of the leader) that all adepts host ‘incarnations’ similarly as the leader albeit on a less exalted scale, lends an extra dimension of ancestral dignity to the adepts’ personalities.

Whether from a sense of generational continuity reinforced by the constant emphasis on the ancestral dimension; or as a reversal of the rejection of children which is attributed to demonic spirits featuring in the *Lion* cult (Werbner 1989); or simply as another enacting of the quality of rural family life, – whatever the underlying factors, it is remarkable that the few young children at the lodge are at the centre of everyone's attention, admiration and care. Such a state of affairs is rather conspicuous in Francistown, where mothers often find themselves unable to balance the demands of maternal care with those of wage labour as a more highly valued activity, and where young adult women (at least, in their overheard public conversation) typically view pregnancy as tiresome inhabitation by an alien body.

The lodge as a therapeutic community

More even than a dwelling place and a shrine, the lodge is a therapeutic community: for the ‘outpatients’ who come and go regularly, but particularly for the adepts. Kinsmen and non-kin alike identify as children of the leader, despite their considerable variation in age, mother tongue and ethnic affiliation: the adepts (in so far as they are not recruited from the

leader's close kindred) may derive from any ethnic group in and around Botswana. There is great emphasis on mutual warmth, understanding, assistance both in day-to-day domestic matters and in ritual and healing, so that an awareness of belonging and protection is generated (along with the awareness of engaging in something dangerous, exclusive, often despised and repulsive: the pursuit of *sangomahood*). The members are very much aware of constituting a solidary group, which is further emphasized by their donning the lodge uniform for ritual occasions which, however, occur almost every day. The lodge does not house all adepts permanently. Some adepts live nearby; they may even have been recruited from among the lodge's neighbours' households. Some of them have, after their graduation from the esoteric training at the lodge, moved to places like Tonota and Tshesebe, 30 to 40 km from Francistown; they visit the lodge several times a month.¹ A few years after graduation these ties loosen up, and most alumni return to the lodge only very infrequently, on the occasion of the graduation of a new fellow-*sangoma*. Although the lodge members may engage in secular activities, including wage labour (some adepts work as shop assistants, cleaners, domestic servants, watchmen, and bricklayers), even when not resident at the lodge they are supposed to spend almost all their free time at the lodge, for both ritual and social action.

Throughout the day, but particularly in the afternoon, early evening and weekends, new clients may present themselves. Treatment sessions, during which the patient may be required to be clothed in nothing but a blanket, take place in the small treatment rooms, with only one adept in attendance; there is a strong sense of bodily integrity and privacy. Divination sessions however are a collective undertaking, when all the adepts gather around the leader in order to see an application to real-life situations, of the highly involved and technical divinatory principles which they have been discussing and practising on dummy exercise divination tablets during the day. While the lodge leader oversees all divination sessions and pronounces the main diagnosis and paths to redress, she often leaves it to a senior adept to cast the tablets, to name and offer a first interpretation of the combinations, and to question the patient in the initial stages. A large proportion of the sessions, meanwhile, concern not outside patients but the adepts themselves, and particularly the decisions that have to be taken at various stages of their progress to healing, graduation and senior status. In these cases, when all adepts intently bend over the tablets and try to read them as signs of misfortune and hope of their fellow-adepts, the nature of the lodge as a therapeutic community becomes particularly manifest. At the same time the training component of such sessions is unmistakable: while present the lodge leader may allow one of the more experienced adepts to go almost all the way in the diagnostic dialogue, showing her increasing mastery and gaining credit for it in the small circle of the lodge.

Each day at the lodge begins with a ritual: in a small treatment room all adepts present

¹ An amazing aspect of the lodge's location is that two of the adepts are neighbours. MmaBigi, a woman in her late twenties, lives with her husband and his children at a distance of c. 75 meters; and the plot of Ellen's mother is adjacent to that of the lodge. This is truly indicative of a ritual *market*, in view of the virtual absence of institutionalized quasi-kinship identification between neighbours, among Francistown urbanites (unless they hail from the same rural community).

as well as an occasional outpatient under special treatment (but never the leader) stage a ritual which in all details is identical to the one described by Werbner (1989: 311f) as the *cooling* (in Werbner's words: 'anti-cooking') *ritual* through which a Child of Mwali is initiated and which has also been adopted by the regional branches of the Zion Christian Church. All present repeat the following chorus (in Ndebele):

'We black cows drink muddy water,
We black cows of the ancestors'.

Meanwhile a pot containing a solution of water and powdered *mpetlelwe* root is placed on the head of an adept, and the solution is stirred until a greyish foam appears. In turn, the adepts scoop up this foam with their cupped hands, and apply it to their temples, forehead, elbows and knees. Their conscious interpretation is not – at least not explicitly – in terms of the Mwali cult, but in terms of fortification through the handling of bitter and repulsive matter, helping the ancestral spirit in them to emerge. After the morning ritual, a few adepts may attend to out-patients, administering fumigation, steam baths, massages etc. Meals are consumed collectively. In the afternoons, adepts often occupy themselves with the practising of divination, learning the basic combinations and improving their skills at spinning meaningful stories out of the chance sequences in which these combinations occur when thrown.





Every urban lodge heavily relies on nearby (up to than 50 km.) rural homesteads as sources of kin support, vegetable medicine, sacrificial animals, and as locations where such secret ceremonies for the *Lion* cult can be staged as are considered to be incompatible with the urban environment. This implies that the sacralization of space at the lodge has its limits, not so much because the lodge is within the municipal boundaries but because its reproduction of the rural order is balanced by the pursuit of a modern life-style and consumption patterns.

Within the general setting of life at the lodge as described above, the restoration of meaning and well-being is brought about by the movement back and forth between collective consumptive and didactic routine activities, and the heightened therapeutic situations of divination, performative ritual and sacrifice. Such topics cannot be dealt with in passing. Yet a few remarks especially on divination are in order here, since they help to pinpoint the nature of the therapy the lodge has to offer, highlight the role which commodities play in the process, and form a stepping-stone to the cases to be discussed below.

Divination at the lodge

Divination at the lodge takes place with a combination of divination tablets and clairvoyant trance. The divining tablets (*hakata*, 'bones'), their names and associations are derived from the basic pattern of four as is widespread in the subcontinent. Most divining tablets are crudely made of freshly hewn wood by the lodge members themselves; but it is also possible to buy sets, especially at the large section of the municipal market devoted to

traditional medicine, in the major town of Bulawayo, just across the Zimbabwean border.¹ Individual variations include exchanging or altering the shape and names of certain tablets and combinations, the use of more than one set of four at the same time, the addition of 'joker' tablets reflecting the diviner's personal idiosyncrasies and biography, or the substitution of this system by the more abstract but essentially similar system of unmarked nutshells. Trance divination is supported by such physical requisites as drums, fly-switch, ceremonial dress comprising beads, ostrich feathers and rare skins (typically dappled, speckled, or bi-coloured), ceremonial spears or axes, manufactured cloths with mass-produced representations of sacred animals in prescribed colours, substances to be rubbed onto exposed parts of the body, and ancestral gourds. Most of these items are commodities, purchased from ritual specialists, from the formal-sector game-skin tanneries in Francistown's industrial area, or preferably from the Bulawayo market. Both in tablet divination and in trance divination, the diviner tends to enter into a ceremonially restricted dialogue with the client, picking up minute clues volunteered or inadvertently offered by the client. If a divination apparatus is used, the diviner dextrously juggles with the many vectors and complexes of meaning and association with which the physical apparatus is endowed according to a body of professional knowledge in essence shared by all diviners using this apparatus, combining this with the process of verbal exchange during the session.


The most common local form of divination involves four basic wooden or bone tablets, named Kwame () , Silume () , Ntakwale () and Lingwane () , each identified by different, although often rudimentary, markings, which also identify front and backside of each tablet. As a result the tablets, when cast all four together, may fall in sixteen different combinations, which have all been named and to all of which specific praises attached. All sixteen combinations can be interpreted as addressing the following basic dimensions: abstract, ancestral, bodily, generational, social, property and animal aspect. In addition, several combinations trigger standard interpretative exclamations from the diviner, while all have their specific praises full of symbolism. Finally, each combination of one, two, three or four tablets facing up implies a converse combination involving the remaining tablets which are facing down; the interpretation of manifest combinations are specified, qualified or reversed by reference to their implied hidden combinations.




As a result the divination yields a coherent and often very detailed account, naming specific supernatural causes (often to the extent that the exact genealogical position of the ancestor involved may be identified, or the living evil-doer is characterized in terms of sex, age, complexion, and significant anecdotal details of the attack), their effects in the form of illness and other misfortune, and remedies in the form of sacrifice, retaliation, protective medicine, or ritual training as the case may be. The specificity of the message,

¹ In a Bulawayo curio shop in 1989 I picked up a set of *hakata* divining tablets which had undergone the most astonishing commodifying transformation: they came in decorously printed carton box with a cellophane window, complete with a booklet explaining (on the basis of unmistakable insider knowledge) the oracle's various combinations and their meanings. As an instance of the appropriation and commodification of Southern African divination systems in a global New Age context this example is not unique, cf. Kevlin 1992; Crowley 1989 – the latter accompanies another commodified set turned into a parlour game.

its symbolic and verbal virtuosity, the generous attention for the patient's predicament, and its being inadvertently guided by the client's input, produces the effect of opening up an entire world hitherto hidden, and stipulating forms of redress which restore the patient's grasp of his or her symbolic order: history, ancestry, obligations and future potential. The restoration of sense leads on (via performative ritual and sacrifice) to a restoration of self.


The divinatory apparatus is essentially a machine for producing stories that are convincing, moving, redemptive, and that invite identification on the part of the patient. The four tablets, the many different aspects under which each combination may be read at the same time, the joker elements, – all this provides the amazingly complex yet fairly systematic repertoire of possible interpretations. An essential stochastic element is introduced by the throwing of the bones. To the patient and onlookers, every new throw (and sessions consist of at least a dozen throws, sometimes up to thirty and forty) carries the suggestion that some blind hand of fate and truth dictates the bones to fall in a specific manner and compels the diviner to interpret them in one way and no other – as if the net is tightening more and more around the evasive truth that is searched for. Yet in fact each new throw offers the diviner a new opportunity to page through the entire interpretative repertoire available and make his selection, taking a new bend or shortcut through the maze, developing a promising point, abandoning a dead alley, and triggering new reactions on the part of the patient. *The deception of deliberate (although intuitive) selection posing as blind necessity* could not be achieved without the appearance of objective materiality achieved by the uncontrolled throwing of the tablets as if they were dice. From a commodity perspective there is an important lesson to be learned here: the divinatory dice, and most other paraphernalia used at the lodge, may be commodities, but they are used to enchant or re-enchant, instead of disenchant, the modernized world of commodities that surrounds, and afflicts, the clients and adepts.

The story-producing aspect was never clearer to me than when, at the Maipaahela lodge, I witnessed a small group of three adepts, young women, in their afternoon exercises of throwing the tablets and improvising interpretations. Fondly applying themselves to the task, as children absorbed in a board game, the women bend over the sacrificial goat skin spread out between them and tossed the dummy tablets in their hands. One of the women (MmaBigi) threw and the others (Kwani and Ellen) watched and checked whether they agreed with her interpretation. The combination to come up in the throw was *Zwibili* (; shaded tablets are upside down), and MmaBigi interpreted:

‘The two children [= *Zwibili*]... are at home,’ using the complementary combination underlying *Zwibili*: *Mbango* (), in its most innocent aspect of the home (specifically the fence post). The next throw brought out *Mpululu* (), with its complementary down-facing combination *Take* (), and while the other women amusedly agreed MmaBigi continued:

‘They are playing happily,... running about,... and the yard is peaceful.’

And so the story went on, making the children tie two strings (*Mithengwe*, ),

deciding to go and rest on a mat (*Mashangula*, , etc. – all very serene and of a charming simplicity, the adepts enchanted that their efforts to bring the tablets to life began to succeed.

From then on I understood that the purpose of the hours of relaxed joint exercise with the tablets was not so much to memorise the correct meaning of every tablet and combination (although that proved difficult enough when, later, I went through the training myself), but to develop the ability to spin stories, of increasing depth, relevance and drama, on the basis the evolving sequence of throws. And in the professional sessions with real tablets, sacralized in the blood of sacrificial animals at the occasion of a *sangoma*'s graduation, such as would take place a few times a week in the consulting room cum sitting room of the main house, one could see the leader and the most senior adepts display these skills to great heights of performative virtuosity.

This divinatory process, only loosely indicated here, offers the main turning points in the following two cases, which involve first an 'outpatient' and then a resident junior adept of the Maipaahela lodge. Their discussion will throw some further light on the career dynamics of *sangomahood*.

It looks as if we have to read the message of commodities and commodification in the lodge situation at a number of distinct levels, at one level as the seeping through of commodities from a thoroughly commodified wider social environment, at another level as a strategy of coping with the modern world through the positioning of re-enchanted commodities in a process of revitalization. Such coping is a therapeutic response, to a process of dissociation and affliction which ultimately may be a result of commodification in the wider community. Let us consider, out of a wealth of case material at my disposal both as a detached researcher and as a practising *sangoma* on the Francistown scene, the cases of Moses and Simon, and extract such clues as they may have to offer.

Sangomahood as a lucrative career option? The cases of Moses and Simon

Moses Inungu was born in south-western Zimbabwe in 1937. A brilliant student, he finished secondary school and took a B.A. degree in English. Looking back he can detect in his adolescence one or two signs of an inclination to become a traditional healer, but these were eclipsed by his success in a modern career. In the wake of the massive migration from his region of origin to Botswana in the 1960s and 1970s, he settled in the southern Botswana town of Lobatse. There he married, had children, built a house, drove a motorcar, and was a successful secondary-school teacher for over fifteen years. In the early 1980s he had the opportunity to go to the USA, where he studied for a diploma in French.

After a few months abroad he was struck by a mental disturbance (described in terms suggestive of agoraphobia) which made him discontinue his studies, and after months of profound distress and confusion he returned to Lobatse. His wife's adultery and lack of understanding for his predicament aggravated his condition. He proved unfit to continue his teaching job, and resigned. A short course of cosmopolitan psychiatric treatment was soon discontinued when the patient realized, and with his verbal virtuosity brought home to the medical staff, that such therapy was irrelevant to his condition. Leaving his wife in charge of the house and the children, he returned to Zimbabwe in search of treatment, still in a state of severe

mental disturbance.

In Bulawayo he came in contact with a spiritual group comprising both Africans and Europeans, who combined Christian inspiration with a respect for African religion and medicine; these contacts he found inspiring but they did not in themselves restore his mental health. He was received as a trainee in a thriving *sangoma* lodge in one of the outlying townships of Bulawayo, where his condition was divined to be due to affliction by his paternal grandmother seeking to emerge in him. He was duly initiated as a *sangoma*, learning a personal repertoire of dance and song, and receiving the beads, cloak, dancing-skirt and pilgrim's staff of a Mwali adept – although so far he never accompanied the lodge's leader and other adepts on their infrequent visits to the central Mwali oracle of Njelele.

Restored to full health, having undergone in his late forties a metamorphosis from a dropout westernized intellectual to a budding traditional healer, he returned to Botswana and settled in Francistown. Here he tried for a few years to establish himself as a trance diviner and healer. Business was generally very low but he managed to secure in Francistown's new Block VII a S.H.H.A. (Self-Help Housing Agency) plot on which he started to build a four-roomed house and, at the back of the yard, a surgery with such basic paraphernalia as a python skin, drums, ancestral calabashes with sacred honey, a limited selection of herbs, etc. He made every effort to identify as a professional, to improve and broaden his diagnostic and therapeutic skills, and to move in circles of other healers where he hoped to make contact with clients. He was not yet eligible to join one of Francistown's professional associations of traditional healers. With one of Francistown's most reputed *dingaka*, hailing from the same region in Zimbabwe but not a *sangoma*, he began to study the casting of divination tablets, although his preference remained with trance divination.

Although since the onset of his disease his sexual interest has been minimum (a condition said to be due to the fact that he is hosting a female ancestor, who had to be propitiated for any – heterosexual – activity on the host's part), after a few years he became involved with his neighbour Mary, a female head of household around thirty years of age, likewise from Zimbabwe. The love and fulfilment that Moses had missed for many years he found with her, and he looked upon this as an unexpected and undeserved gift. When she became pregnant it was as if a broken vital chain was restored.

Yet Moses was eaten by frustration. Mary's income from employment and rent had to support him when, through most of 1989, no patients turned up at all. Never very self-confident of his status as a *sangoma*, he began to consider another metamorphosis again, that towards the status of Christian church leader, which he thought to be a more sociable and less lonely profession, closer to the people and with more response from them. The Bible began to compete with Shakespeare as his favourite reading, for which he had more time than he cared for. The sacrifice of a goat to his possessing ancestor, to take place at Full Moon on his Block VII plot and to be followed a *sangoma* dancing session, was planned for August 1989, but it did not materialize, partly for financial reasons, partly for a feeling of ritual incompetence on Moses's part. In the same month, at a *Wosana* dancing session in Monarch, Moses bashfully dressed up in his ritual costume and volunteered a short performance, but without making any impression on the audience. However, at this session he met the leader of the Maipaahela lodge, and he was soon so impressed by her powers that he asked her to look into the stagnation of his practice. A long and dramatic divination session at the lodge revealed a combination of ancestral wrath and intrafamilial conflict as the causes of misfortune: earlier in 1989, Moses's sister's son Gideon had asked him to accompany him to a church leader in Francistown's Donga township, and on that occasion Moses had been persuaded to accept some medicine, through which the sinister church leader in collusion with Gideon had meant to transfer the latter's misfortune to Moses. In punishment for this stupidity the possessing ancestor had subsequently tied up Moses's practice. Deeply moved by this exceptionally long and dramatic divination session, Moses agreed that the leader and adepts of Maipaahela lodge would spend a weekend at Block VII and stage the necessary rituals of redress there.

Immediately after a week at the branch's Tshesebe rural outpost where in all secrecy (and to Moses's horror when he heard about it) two adepts of the lodge were initiated into the *Lion* cult, the lodge population came to Block VII on a Saturday evening in September. As could have been expected, the other senior Francistown healers whom Moses had invited did not

turn up. After beer drinking and chanting of the highly repetitive (and often equally obscure) *sangoma* songs, a replica of the Maipaahela lodge shrine was built at night in front of Moses's house under the directions of one of the adepts; a goat was slaughtered there and its meat displayed on top of the platform, while its blood and selected intestines were buried beneath it. After the sacrifice a dancing session was staged behind the house. In the course of this dancing session a relieved and triumphant Moses entered into trance, as well as (a rare event) MmaNdlovu, the lodge leader herself. In the late morning, dancing was resumed in the unroofed central room of the house; in a way supposed to be good for business, this attracted a considerable crowd of neighbours, who looked in through the openings where doors and windows were to be hung in a later stage of completion of the house and of financial success. Towards the evening the party returned to Maipaahela carrying some of the meat and, as an initial payment, three metal window frames which had been waiting to be fitted. The ritual, though expensive, was considered a great success until, at noon the next day, the lodge leader died suddenly and under suspect circumstances.

Moses's consultation with Leopold Siavuma, the leader of the Masemenyenga lodge (also his home-boy – both are of Ndebele, as distinct from Kalanga, identity) soon offered Moses a coherent interpretation of the intrigues, involving both the deceased's family and other Francistown healers, culminating in the leader's death. A surer sign that Moses's sacrifice had been rejected by his ancestors was hardly possible, and at Leopold's advice the shrine was demolished; the latter considered it, with its Kalanga features, alien to Ndebele forms of *sangomahood* anyway. Accompanying two other adepts of MmaNdlovu who found themselves stranded spiritually and ritually because of her death (my wife and myself), Moses soon travelled to Bulawayo to visit his lodge of initiation, and with the blessing of its leader and accompanied by a few of his fellow-adepts he made the journey to the Njelele oracle in the heart of the Matopos. The nocturnal experience at the oracle gave him a great sense of mystical fulfilment, and he was deeply moved to be one of the many supplicants united there before Mwali as the 'Mother of Spirits'. The oracle told him that despite recent setbacks he might yet have hope.

A few months later a healthy child was born and Moses resumed his relatively lucrative former job as a qualified teacher at a secondary school.

Having fled (or destroyed?) his modern world, Moses for some years found refuge in the protective alternative world of *sangomahood*, but he could scarcely summon the self-confidence, virtuosity, obsession with power, fascination with the borderline between life and death, necessary for a successful and remunerative pursuit of the career it offered him. The restorative effects of a new love and a new fatherhood (another inversion of the chain of filiation, back to normality, after ancestral possession had constituted the first inversion) made him less dependent on such a solution. A similar effect was brought about by his continued contact with alternative viable forms of symbolic production besides *sangomahood*: Christianity, Western literature, my own academic research which greatly interested him (thanks to his introductory reading of anthropology in the USA he could discuss my research with rare detachment and insight, and he made significant contributions towards it as a free-lance research assistant). The opportunity to resume a career as a well-paid employee within a modern formal organization, rather than as a hand-to-mouth ritual entrepreneur (daily – and with increasing sense of helplessness and incompetence – exposed to the terrifying powers of the occult and of rival specialists), tied in with his new responsibilities. Having been restored to health by the pursuit of *sangomahood*, it was not necessary to continue to make his living as a *sangoma*.

Although within the inner circle of the lodge and the professional organization *sangomas* may take pride in their speciality, there is very considerable shame and fear in-

volved: no one with an alternative course will become or remain a *sangoma*, and in many cases (perhaps with the exception of those belonging to *sangoma* families) adepts only yielded to the forces pulling them to this cultic complex after having exhausted all other possibilities. It is a choice one makes in utter desperation, when there really is no choice any more.

Moses described a tangential orbit with regard to the Maipaahela lodge, although his case informs us of the lodge's life in a particularly critical episode. If the space would have been available, more of a centripetal movement could be seen in the case of Simon, which for the rest displays striking parallels with Moses's in terms of career and conjugal development. However, as a further indication of the kind of people who end up in the Francistown *sangoma* cult, let me include a brief description of Simon:



Simon is a well-educated Mongwato,¹ born in Shoshong in 1952. When I first met him he had spent four months at the Maipaahela lodge. Although by no means the youngest adept he is obviously the least senior, and it is he who performs many of the menial tasks such as killing and butchering sacrificial animals and digging up vegetable medicine. In dancing sessions his attire cannot not be distinguished from that of the others, but his movements are far more awkward, he has not entered in trance yet, and he does not know most of the songs which are in Ndebele; his only languages are Tswana and English. His esoteric knowledge of divination, sacrifice and healing practices is still minimal. He is still rather an outsider to the lodge, and looks with wonder at many of its practices, lacks the background knowledge to interpret them, and occasionally feels bullied by the lodge's forceful style of leadership. He has a clear and coherent conception of what had brought him to the Maipaahela lodge. Until 1983 Simon worked for the government of Botswana as a highly successful co-operatives officer. He had been sent to Scandinavia twice for training. He owned a motorcar. (His former, high standard of living was still clear from the few personal belongings he brought with him to the lodge.) He was married, with a few young children. All this was wiped out when towards the end of 1983 illness forced him to give up his job. His complaints were very severe headache; impaired vision; and pain between the shoulders.²

Fully recovered, Simon left a lodge after nearly a year, not to return to his work in the co-operative department, but to set up a *sangoma* practice in the town of Selibi Phikwe, in eastern Botswana.

Speaking about commodification by ignoring it

If the aetiology offered by the *sangoma* diviners were to be assessed as if it were a scientific theory, we would immediately be struck by its myopic circularity: cults, ancestors and sorcery are the diviner's stock-in-trade, so *that* has to be what the patient's problem amounts to. The limitations of this position come out most clearly when expatriates from an (initially) largely alien cultural orientation – like my wife and myself – submit to the

¹ Bamangwato is the name of the dominant Tswana group under which the Kalanga region of Botswana falls; their capital is Serowe.

² Such pain is the surest sign of ancestral affliction: the patient's body takes literally the standard phrase (the combination  of the divining tablets, called *Kwaga*) 'you are carrying a heavy load'. Incidentally, in the combination *Vuba* ('mixture') referred to above, the tablets display the following pattern: .

cult's therapeutic apparatus and see their own problems, too, scaled to the dimensions of the familial domain and ancestral wrath. The cults have no idiom to discuss the wider, modern world and its political, economic and existential predicaments in terms derived from that world or meaningful in that world. *They have no discourse to explicitly articulate and confront commodification and its implications.* Yet we can safely assume that the patients' problems at least partly stem from that wider world.

We are now in a position to pinpoint more clearly what it is that the Southern African diviners do from a point of view of such major social and economic changes as we can capture under the heading of commodification. They artificially relegate all human predicaments to problems of the interpersonal microcosm, of the *home*, as the only admissible source of historic meaning relevant to their patients. These diviners ignore the input from the wider world, implicitly declaring it irrelevant and non-existent – from the same sense of carefree, secure immunity noted earlier on; instead, the diviners re-introduce (or, in the case of the alien patient, introduce) the patient to a much more comprehensible, particularistic world, which essentially revives the archaic world-view of a small-scale *home* society – and suggesting that the key to the patient's personal past lies in a return to the collective past of the home. Having thus led away the patient from his earlier, devastatingly painful confrontation with, and in, the wider world, the therapist then sets out to convince the patient that his misfortune makes sense in the terms of that new cultic world. Next the therapists use the full skills of their symbolic and dramaturgical manipulation to address, and resolve, the problems once these have thus been totally dislocated and redefined.

The ancestral interpretation is the lodge leaders' most cherished dimension. The sorcery dimension is often presented by them as secondary. Their reasoning on this point is as follows. Sorcery is everywhere, everyone is constantly under attack from sorcerers from all directions, but only when one's relationship with one's ancestors is disrupted, do the ancestors sufficiently withhold their protection for a living descent to be seriously vulnerable to sorcery attacks. The ancestral model suggests that the pathogenic moment springs from remnants of ancient symbolic vitality left unaccommodated (ineffectively encapsulated and not rendered harmless, a kind of ancestral time bomb), in a life of modernity whose detailed analysis is unnecessary for diagnosis and treatment. Translated in sociological terms the lodge leaders' viewpoint comes close to analytical approaches – obsolete, theoretically barren and politically paternalistic – in terms of cultural lag, of survival, of a fragmented and dislocated yet potent traditional culture which at all costs – including ethnicity, cults, and individual mental illness, and a combination of these – seeks to break through the modern 'varnish' of urbanism, capitalism, and the state. We can understand why the therapists must take this position: they themselves (as former patients turned into healers) have suffered from modernity and commodification, but they have only developed a discourse about the opposite of modernity and commodification: the illusion of an intact or restored ancestral home world; moreover, this illusion and the therapies it stipulates are themselves turned into a commodity, which is dispensed at the lodge against very substantial fees.

The fundamental paradox of the *sangoma* cult then appears to be: *its capacity to cure patients from the modern world by ignoring it.* The patients are effectively healed (or so I

have found, from the – admittedly – utterly subjective perspective of having become a *sangoma* myself), not because they are being restored to communion with some repressed but genuine and authentic pre-modern identity lurking at the depths of their souls, but because they are sucked away from modern commodification and the attending alienation, by the liberating force of a daring imagination, which selectively feeds on personal and collective historical themes.

As such, the cultic complex is far from out of place in a Southern African urban environment – on the contrary, it offers solutions for some essential problems posed by that environment. Not being considered, by the local actors, to be highly specific to one particular culture and ethnic group in the Southern African subcontinent, the *sangoma* cult can cater for the heterogeneity that is the reality of that situation. This cultic complex does not actively reject the modern matrix of capitalism, mass consumption and the state (but rather neutralises these factors in a more roundabout way). Neither does it reject the traditional world-view which links patients to their individual histories as members of a family and lends meaning and hope to misfortune. Nor does it succumb to the temptation of rendering this world superficially comprehensible in the cheap terms of an all-pervading and all-explaining sorcery idiom. Through this complex and contradictory combination of strategies, this cultic complex appears to be in at least as good a position as Christian churches and cosmopolitan medicine to address the existential problems of contemporary urbanites.¹

There can be no doubt that the lodge's cultic complex mediates elements which are meaningful because they are historical. After all, history is the only thing left if you want to 'cure your patient from the modern world by ignoring it'. The complex does so at two connected levels, and part of its therapeutic effectiveness may derive from this very connection. On the one hand the complex mediates historical forms: a once viable and meaningful world-view of collective representations concerning power, causation, continuity, filiation, identity, and the material and corporeal vehicles of these concepts, which in other ways (certainly not in town, and only decreasingly in the villages) are reproduced (albeit only inadequately and fragmentarily) in the lives of the people who are the potential clients of these cults. On the other hand, the complex addresses the suffering individual as rooted in these forms through his personal history, and attribute his or her suffering to a temporary disruption of this rootedness.

'Why have you left your traditional culture? Why did you deviate from the ways of your fathers? (...) There is a royal stave waiting for you, destined for you if you could only revive your link with your paternal grandfather!'

In these unexpected terms, spoken with force and full of reproach, the head of the Masemenyenga lodge began his trance divination for a client whose only manifest problem was the loss

¹ With this qualification, perhaps, that one is struck by the intellectual, symbolic and emotive powers taken for granted among the members of the lodge communities, and *sangomas* in general. These are unlikely to be at the disposal of the average member in any society. Both Moses and Simon strike us as exceptionally talented, exceptionally gifted, and exceptionally strongly afflicted. Only one in a thousand inhabitants of Francistown is a *sangoma*; parallel to the notion of ancestral election, there is the social fact that the *sangomas* do constitute some sort of an intellectual elite.

of valuable property.

Invariably, the *sangoma* world-view in its divination and possession stresses the central position of ancestors, not mechanically (as just another aetiological category next to the High God, the spirits of the wild, the humans who commit sorcery), but as the essential ingredients which went into the making of the individual: the lines of his or her personal history, with which one must first come to terms. By precisely identifying irate ancestors, and by stipulating ways of redress, the *sangoma* aetiology creates not only clarity and hope, but also a sense of finality and inevitability, which enables the patient to overcome both resentment and guilt, and inspires him to start off in a new direction and with a regained vitality which, he feels, derives not only from personal resources but shares in the entire stream of generations flowing through his body. The divinatory reconstruction of the underlying conflict takes on such sophistication and profundity that it manages to reduce sorcery, however formidable it may appear at close range, to an almost irrelevant contemporary accident: once the ancestral puzzle is solved, the ubiquitous sorcerers will be forced to keep their distance – and even if they do attack they will find that their evil is ineffective. The historical forms proffered by the complex are those of the times of the ancestors, it is the ancestors who allowed or caused the misfortune, and by acknowledging this sore spot and sacrificially acting on this knowledge, the patient gains a new freedom, not under ancestral oppression but with a restored sense of personal history. The sacrificial part is essential, because of the alchemy of identification and dissociation, violence and gift-giving which it entails: the sacrificial animal, although a commodity at the moment it was bought specifically for the sacrifice (and often with great difficulty, in far-away places), in the course of the sacrificial ritual crosses the boundary into the domestic domain – it is at once the patient, the complaint, and the ancestor; its violent death evokes both the patient's suffering, the termination of that suffering, the passage from living descendant to dead ancestor; and the patient's resentment at the ancestral affliction; and the incorporation of the remainders of the sacrifice (meat, prepared skin, beads) in the body and everyday life of the patient is not only a reminder and a reassurance, but also a sign of victory of the living over the dead.

On the personal level this amounts to a psycho-therapy of (or so I found) evident effectiveness and beauty; on a societal level what we have here is a model of cultural continuity and the reproduction of meaning. In a society like that of contemporary urban Botswana there is a struggle about the appropriation and transformation of historical forms which derive from the local region rather than from world-wide commodification and mass consumption. In everyday urban life these historical forms are scarcely tolerated in the urban setting, and they tend to exist vicariously: implied in the links urbanites continue to have with rural villages and cattle posts. In public life, a narrow selection of stereotyped items of 'our traditional culture' has entered the official discourse: the traditional village *kgotla* – council, moot – meeting as a model for information transfer, mobilization and decision making; the myth of the Urban Customary Court as constituting just another *kgotla* meeting, despite the former's high level of formalization including verbatim written minutes, and reliance on a printed *Penal Code*; the folklorization of historic regional

music and dance in the school curriculum; the official policy favouring interaction between traditional and cosmopolitan health care. These and a few others are the symbols, stripped of historical form and political power, which lend a harmless sprinkling of heritage, to bureaucratic and capitalist rationality which increasingly governs not only the state and the economy but also people's personal life-style, especially in town.

Christian healing churches in the Botswana context (van Binsbergen 1993a) have gone somewhat further in the selective adoption of historical forms, and on this basis they might to some extent be able to cater for forms of suffering which the public discourse interpret in terms of sorcery and spirit possession; but usually the churches' approach of these elements revolves on rejection and dissimulation, which drives the suffering individuals back in the arms of a modern society, their problem of meaning still unresolved.

In such a context the therapeutic potential of the cultic forms available at the Francistown lodges may be appreciated, not merely or primarily as commodified, but as, at the same time, offering the symbolic means, brilliantly contradictory and inconsistently, for making commodification bearable by confronting it through commodities, creating the illusion of a viable, historic *home* in the midst of the commodified modern urban wilderness.