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Chapter 3

Go with the ancestors' flow. Healing

After the introductory chapters, we will now dive into the actual world of indigenous healing and zoom in on what happens during a healing process. I will describe what structures can be distinguished in a healing session, what techniques are used; in short, the internal dynamics of the healing practice. I will also go into a few aspects of medicine, *muthi*.

The main question in this chapter is: How do processes of diagnosis and healing characterise the indigenous healing practice?

To provide an answer to this question and to give an impression of the sangomas' healing practice, I will examine the case of Mr Mbele's healing, one of the patients we met at the Gasa compound. I will describe four of the sessions in his healing procedure and compare them with other sessions we witnessed on Mks Gasa's compound in 2014,¹ where, on an average Saturday, about ten to twelve healing sessions are performed. I will distinguish and explain the various elements and the structure of a healing session in detail, as well as several parts of a sangoma's healing practice. When applicable, I will compare what we have seen on these days with academic literature on the subjects as well as with what the three sangomas in the 2012 interviews told us about their life and healing practice.

However, to understand what happens in healing sessions, it is essential to first describe the body of thought that is the foundation of Zulu indigenous healing: Zulu cosmology and the connected subjects of divination and aetiology.

Mr Mbele's healing process comprised at least five healing sessions. A healing process is indeed a process, it is not a one-off affair. For the greater part this is due to Zulu cosmology (Callaway, 1884 (1870); Bryant, 1949; Krige, 1965 (1936); Berglund, 1976), the indigenous Zulu belief system, in which the ancestors² play an important role and which encompasses a holistic view on mankind (physically and spiritually) and the environment he lives in (family, friends, neighbourhood, and physical surroundings). All of these parts are believed to influence each other. If someone is not feeling well, it is considered to be a manifestation of an imbalance in one (or more) of the three fields; body, mind, and (social) environment. To understand why someone is not feeling well,

¹ on 26 April and 3 May.

² The 'spirits of the ancestors' (Z: *amadlozi*) are believed to watch closely over the living and interfere in their daily life when necessary. These 'spirits' are referred to concisely as 'the ancestors'.

i.e. what the cause of this imbalance is, a specialist is needed, someone who is able to communicate with the ancestors. The ancestors are believed to protect the living and, in return, they allegedly demand certain offerings, such as respect or a specific ritual. If these offerings are not made, the ancestors supposedly get annoyed and may inflict bad luck or illnesses upon the living, thus disturbing the holistic tripartite balance.³ Most of a sangoma's clients require healing in all three domains, in order to ensure that the balance will be restored, thus several healing sessions are needed to achieve this goal.

In (early) descriptions of Zulu society and Zulu cosmology, sangomas are referred to as 'diviners', because they are the indigenous health practitioners who are allegedly capable of connecting and communicating with the 'unseen world', specifically with the spirits of the ancestors. A sangoma uses this communication with the ancestors, i.e. divination to diagnose the patient.

Much has been written about 'divination' in academic literature. It is described e.g. as a globally practiced phenomenon used "to solve a problem of a client, by a technique to gain additional knowledge about the client's history and present situation in life" (Peek & Van Beek, 2013, p. 1). A consulted diviner uses divination techniques to retrieve the cause of the client's bad luck or affliction, an explanation for why things are not going well. When this cause is uncovered, the diviner prescribes a remedy in the form of some kind of herbal medicine, a specific ritual, or a special offering in order to restore relations with the ancestors, elicit their goodwill, and solve the patient's problem.

In addition to being a connection with the unseen world, divination is also about knowledge and about 'how things should be', reflecting the culture's core values that are often essential in rapidly changing societies to maintain some kind (or just a sense) of stability. Divination is practised globally and there is a wide variety of divination systems, each and every one of which reveals what is presumed to be important in that specific culture, what is valued, and what people worry about. Peek (1991) emphasises the importance of divination on the African continent; he refers to the key role divination has in African cultures as well as the crucial position diviners occupy in societies in transition because of their role as mediators between the visible and the invisible world. Stroeken argues that the meaning of divination "in the participants' frame of experience – a frame that [...] is related to all other frames of experience" (2010, p. 182). That is what makes each divination process unique for everyone involved.

Within the scope of this research, the sangomas use divination techniques, they communicate with the ancestors, to find out what is causing the ancestors' anger and thereby the reason for the patient's problems. Basically, this is the reason why patients visit a sangoma: to discover why things are going wrong in his or her life. Divination is a technique for answering this question, it serves as an explanatory system.

³ More about Zulu cosmology, indigenous religion, and the aetiology of evil in Chapter 5.

It appears that the patient and the sangoma expect the world to be reasonable, consistent, and explainable and therefore they assume there must be a reason, a cause for any mishaps in life. Because 'everyone gets what he deserves in life,' the ancestors most likely have a reason for sending these afflictions, they assume. And this hypothesis makes them come to terms with these experiences, i.e. 'now it makes sense'.

Moreover, this assumption enables the patient to restore the ancestors' mood by performing a special ritual or by donating specific offerings. In doing so, the patient feels he is able to take control over his own life and health; as he makes an effort to please the ancestors, he again deserves the ancestors' protection from further mishap. In indigenous healing, the patient is an actor in the process of recovering health and well-being.

Let us now look at the indigenous healing practice and focus on the first healing session that was performed for Mr Mbele, a wealthy businessman in his early thirties. Although he lives in Pietermaritzburg and his business is in Mpumalanga, he came to Mks Gasa's practice in Durban for healing. The main characters in the following pages are Mr Mbele and the sangomas, Mks Gasa and her daughter Mks Zinhle. In the comparison of the observations with the interviews, Mks Bhengu (the oldest interviewee), Mks Mbuyisa (the middle one), and Mks Ngidi (the youngest) will be mentioned frequently.

3.1 Mr Mbele's healing, part one

3.1.1 In the rondavel

For⁴ anyone entering the candle-lit rondavel on Mks Gasa's compound, it seems as if the man and three women inside are just chatting about daily routines; there is laughter, cell phones are ringing and being answered, and people are walking in and out. The setting might seem strange, however; the man sits on a mat in the centre of the hut, he faces a leopard print cloth that hangs from the ceiling opposite the door, and against the cloth is a big necklace in the form of a rosary. He sits, his legs in a V-shape, and between his feet is a silver dish from which smoke spirals up. A somewhat closer look reveals that his eyes are closed and that he is holding a burning candle in his left hand and in his right hand a staff, with the sign of a cross on top. Next to him, on his left side, is the youngest of the three women, Zinhle. On his right, with her back against the wall of the rondavel, is Dudu and on his left side, also with her back against the wall, is Mks Gasa.



Figure 3.1 Mks Gasa's consulting room, interior

On this Saturday evening at the end of April,⁵ Mr Mbele has come for a healing session. He has been here before, so he is acquainted with the routine and knows that whatever procedure will be done, he will be guided gently by the youngest of the three women, Mks Zinhle. She is a sangoma, as are her older sister Mks Dudu and her mother, Mks Gasa. The daughters were trained by their mother, and now the three of them together train over twenty apprentices, including Mks Gasa's youngest daughter. All of them live jointly on Mks Gasa's compound, situated in KwaMakhutha, a Durban township approximately 15 kilometres south of the city centre. Even though she is the youngest

⁴ The description of Mr Mbele's healing sessions is in a smaller font and indented.

⁵ 26 April 2014.

in age, the ancestors' spirits have made clear that Mks Zinhle is the most important sangoma of this house and this is the reason why she is the one sitting next to Mr Mbele during this healing session.

When he arrived for this healing session, Mks Zinhle met Mr Mbele inside the gate of Mks Gasa's compound and together they walked the twenty metres to a rondavel; the consulting room (Z: *indluhlola*). There, Mr Mbele greeted Mks Gasa and gave her a paper bag filled with food, a bottle of Sprite, and a bottle of Coca Cola, offerings for the ancestors that Mks Gasa gratefully accepted and put beside her on the mat. Then, Mks Zinhle invited him to sit on the reed mat in the centre of the hut, which was covered with a leopard print cloth. Mks Zinhle talked to him softly while she took a printed cloth and draped it around his shoulders; next she fetched a fur crown (Z: *umnqwazi*), which she put on his head, and finally she put a lit candle and staff in his hands. After this, she sat down on her knees beside him and took a handful of twigs, which she put in the silver dish, she then lit these essence twigs (Z: *imphepo*⁶) and extinguished the flames, leaving the essence to smoulder in the dish. As soon as the smoke spiralled up towards the ceiling of the rondavel she started to invoke Mr Mbele's ancestors by reciting their praises. Next, she introduced all the people present in the consulting room and then asked the ancestors to be present, to unveil the cause of Mr Mbele's problem and for their assistance in healing him. After some moments of silence, Mks Zinhle yawned a few times (a sign of the presence of an ancestor) and asked Mr Mbele, who in the meantime had closed his eyes, to describe what he saw and heard. He said that he saw an old granny sitting on a chair with a white dress on her lap. The granny laughed at him and told him she wanted to make everything clear to him.

This is the moment when her mother and sister join Mks Zinhle in asking questions to the patient. Intermittently, they pose questions to get additional information in order to form a complete image of what Mr Mbele is experiencing. In answering the sangoma's questions, in a soft trailing voice that sounds as if it is coming from afar, Mr Mbele describes in detail the things he sees and hears. Gradually, the picture unfolds.

Mr Mbele speaks of the old woman he sees, she tells him his great grandfather was a king of a Xhosa⁷ clan, but he has never been told about him. And he sees a soft chair in blue, red, and gold, with armrests. There are flowers on the chair's fabric. The granny gives Mr Mbele instructions to go and buy such a chair and bring it into his house. She also tells him she is unhappy with him driving the car he has at this moment. Next, he describes a specific kind of dress, a Xhosa dress with beads. The type of beads and the pattern are meticulously specified as is the colour, white and blue. A kind of leopard print apron completes the outfit.

⁶ Often a *Helichrysum* variety, *Helichrysum odoratissimum* (Everlasting), or *Helichrysum sutherlandia*, herbs with aromatic leaves.

⁷ One of the neighbouring Nguni people, originally living to the south-west of the Zulu area.

The old lady also tells him that there has to be a function, and this function must be performed in his house, but not in the first house because there is a family quarrel about that house. His mother wants him to give her that house, but he is not supposed to give it to anybody. He must tell the family that he sold the house and, in the meantime, find people to rent it. If he does this, the conflict will dissipate. The function should not be held in his second house either, but at the prayer place of a new house. In this prayer place must be a bottle with two colours, the upper part must be light blue and the lower part dark blue. Furthermore, an old 5 cent coin should be at the bottom of the bottle as well as in the *muthi* bucket that is going to be used for the ancestors. The bucket must be white, placed on a white cloth, and whenever he is going to use it, he must put white coins into it. Preparation for the function must begin next Tuesday, with the brewing of the Zulu beer that is needed for this function.

Mr Mbele answers the questions – at times only after a short silence, at times it seems with some reluctance, his expression set. The sangomas occasionally smile about the answers given⁸ and a few times they even shake their heads,⁹ but invariably they treat Mr Mbele with great respect. The last statement, about starting to brew Zulu beer, causes real amusement in the consulting room. Mks Gasa, not sure things are reflected correctly, verifies this remark once again, but to everyone's surprise it is repeated: the preparations should start next Tuesday.

Throughout this procedure, Mr Mbele is in an altered state of consciousness, he seems to be unaware of the things that are happening around him. What he tells the sangomas about are the images he sees with his eyes closed. While the session is in progress, amathwasa enter the consulting room, engage in a brief conversation with one of the women, or fetch something and leave again to resume their tasks elsewhere in the compound. One of the apprentices brings food and drinks for us, and while we eat and drink, the proceedings are explained to us. All this time, Mr Mbele sits there, his eyes closed, and reports what he sees and hears. The only visible changes in him are in his body; sometimes, he is bending a little to the front, as if he wants to get a closer look; at other moments, he leans slightly backwards, his body tightening, his eyebrows frowning, as if he doesn't like what he is experiencing.

After about an hour, Mks Zinhle closed the session by lighting the imphepo again and thanking the ancestors for their presence and their help. As this session comes to an end, the sangomas yawn and belch and Mr Mbele opens his eyes. For a moment, he remained in the centre of the hut, then he moved to sit beside Mks Gasa, he obviously had to recover from this experience for he brushed his hands over his face several times.

Sitting beside Mks Gasa, he is allowed to take time to recover. In the meantime, the sangomas will tell him what has happened in the past hour, because Mr Mbele himself

⁸ About the instructions Mr Mbele gets regarding the quarrel with his mother concerning the first house.

⁹ When it becomes clear where the process has to be continued, i.e. not in Mr Mbele's first house, nor in his second.

doesn't remember anything; neither what he saw and heard, nor what he said. In doing so, they will also tell him the interpretation of what his ancestors have revealed during this part of the healing procedure and the implications for the rest of the process. Usually, recovery from such a session takes at least an hour, but it is only after a couple of days that a patient who has had such an experience will really begin to feel and understand what has happened to him. I learned about the interpretation and implications of this healing session exactly one week later when we attended Mr Mbele's next sessions. A description of those events is below in 'Healing Mr Mbele, part two'.

3.2 Healing process

Generally, healing sessions have a similar structure. The first step for the sangoma is to invoke the ancestors by praising them, and to ask for their help in the present situation. When a connection with the ancestors is established, it is of the utmost importance that the sangoma listens carefully to the message they give, i.e. the diagnosis. The sangoma then gives her interpretation of this message to the patient and, subsequently, she asks the patient if he recognises the ancestors' message; if necessary, she answers the patient's questions. Often, *muthis* are prescribed and the sangoma advises the patient, based on her experience, what to do in the situation at hand. In some cases, the patient is summoned to bring offerings for the ancestors to the next session. Both the sangoma and the patient are highly concentrated during all elements of the healing session, every element is executed with great intensity and dedication. Invariably, the session is closed by thanking the ancestors for their presence and help.

3.2.1 Communication with the ancestors¹⁰

When a person comes to a sangoma for healing for the first time, the sangoma is usually already aware of the reason for the visit and the problem(s) the patient has. Mks Bhengu¹¹ (the oldest interviewee) and other sangomas¹² told us that they often experience exactly the same pains that the patient feels, even before the patient has arrived at their premises. The moment the patient enters the consulting room the sangoma's pain vanishes, that way she knows this is the patient with those specific pains. The pains are one of the ancestors' ways of communicating with a sangoma (Callaway, 1884 (1870); Bryant, 1949; Berglund, 1976; Ngubane, 1992; Reis, 2000; Thornton, 2009) whose intention is to detect trace down the cause of the patient's problems in a healing session. In order to diagnose (*Z: uhlola*), the sangoma connects with the ancestors, usually by using some essence, *imphepo*, at the start and throughout the healing process. A handful of the small twigs are put in a dish or in a calabash and lit with a match; after a few moments, the flames are blown out, leaving the smouldering twigs to produce an aromatic smoke. The aroma is considered to please the ancestors and to encourage them to be present in the consulting room. By inhaling the smoke, the sangoma opens the pathways of communication with the ancestors; some sangomas

¹⁰ I will use the terms 'divination', 'communicating with the ancestors', and 'connecting with the ancestors' interchangeably.

¹¹ Interview with Mks Bhengu, 1 August 2012.

¹² Mks Mbuyisa and Mks Ngidi interviewed 9 August 2012, Bongani Ntshangase referred to this phenomenon several times in 2012 and in 2014. More about this in the remainder of this chapter.

additionally use snuff¹³ or a herb¹⁴ to quickly connect with the ancestors or to intensify the communication.



Figure 3.2 Mks Mbuyisa burning essence

There are many other divination techniques for establishing a connection with the ancestors. A frequent method used by sangomas is 'stirring' a mixture of water and *muthi* in a bucket or a large calabash with a specially formed twig (Z: *iphahla*).¹⁵ While stirring, she invokes the ancestors, praising them, and asking them to come and help. When foam starts to form on top of the mixture, it is seen as a sign of connection with the ancestors; the stirring will go on until the foam is spilling over the rim of the calabash. This foam may be used in various ways: the sangoma can eat the foam, spooning it with her hands from the calabash and bringing it to her mouth, or 'slurping' it directly from the calabash to open up for communication; or, she can smear it in her ears and nose to open specifically those channels, or put it on her head and the rest of her body as a sign of total dedication to the messages of the ancestors. In some cases, a patient is also instructed to eat the foam and to put it onto his body. We will encounter this application in the next section, on Mr Mbele's healing.

At Mks Gasá's compound, we also saw *muthi* stirred for another purpose: a sangoma carefully put the foam that was spilling over the rim on the lid of the bucket and went outside. While walking around in the compound, she strew foam on the ground all around her and asked the ancestors to guide people for healing to this compound.

¹³ In the form of powder inhaled through the nose, or in the liquid form sprinkled on the floor of the consulting room.

¹⁴ E.g. 'Manono': the bark and wood from a branch of a special tree: *Strychnos henningsii* (Red Bitterberry). The sangoma bites a small piece of the bark/wood and chews it. After a few minutes he or she spits it out. In the case of Mks Mkhize, he spat it at the bones which he used for the diagnosis.

¹⁵ A twig ending in a V form.

Eating the foam of stirred *muthis* is also known to be a frequent (if not daily) early morning practice for students as a part of their training to become sangomas. In that case it is used as an emetic, to purify the body, and, consequently, making the student more open to the ancestors' messages during the day to come. Mks Ngidi told us that there are at least three different sorts of *muthis* for different kinds of ancestors: *indiki*; *indawe*; and *thumwe*.



Figure 3.3 Stirring the *muthi*

Whereas sangomas seeking to communicate must invoke the ancestors by praising them and asking them for their presence, the ancestors themselves are believed to be able to interfere in a sangoma's life at any given moment. They use many forms to communicate with a sangoma: dreams; pains; voices or other sounds the sangoma hears; images the sangoma sees; and even every element of the physical surrounding of the sangoma. All these methods of communication manifest all day, every day so that the ancestors can get across their messages, wishes, and demands. In fact, the ancestors are believed to manifest themselves this way to every living person, the sangoma however, as an intermediary, is supposed to be able to recognise these signs and to read them. A sangoma must therefore be open to everything that is happening to herself as well as to other persons; a sudden thought, an image flashing through her mind, a dream in the night, anything happening around her can be a sign from the ancestors and hence must be interpreted as such.

An important element of the sangomas' training is to learn to interpret these signs, starting with dreams. Early every morning, before sunrise, *amathwasa* gather with their trainer to listen to the *amathwasa's* dreams, and to unveil the message that the ancestors want to deliver through those dreams. Be it about a person that is going to come for healing, about a specific way to harvest a special *muthi*, or about the clothes the

ancestors want the sangoma to wear, the *gobela* and her trainees take every message equally serious and they take them all into account.

As described above, a sangoma often feels the same pains, also with the same intensity, as the person that comes for a healing. However, the moment this patient gets near, the sangoma's pain vanishes. During the interview, Mks Ngidi told us a remarkable story about such an experience that happened in the time before she became a sangoma, when she was still a teacher in Eastern Cape. One day, while she was doing her administration her eye became red and painful. She asked an attendant sangoma to explain this pain and the sangoma told her it was not her pain but it was someone else's. So, Mks Ngidi went to her fellow teachers and asked: Who is the person with this eye ache? Then, one older lady said; "I am the one who has got this" and at that same moment Mks Ngidi felt her pain slip away.

In most cases, sangomas are wounded healers (Reis, 2000); they were ill before they accepted their ancestral calling, their *gobela* cured them, and then trained them to become a sangoma themselves. In turn, they use the knowledge transmitted during the training to be able to cure other ailing people (Thornton, 2009). Each of the sangomas we interviewed in 2012 had her own story of an illness getting worse and worse, to a point that she could no longer resist and subsequently had to give in to the calling of her ancestors. Mks Bhengu, for example, had been ill for many years. The doctors she consulted at the clinic said there was nothing wrong with her, but the moment she returned home her illness reappeared. The illness only started to disappear after she started her *ukuthwasa*. Mks Ngidi told a similar story; in her case, she was bothered so much by toothache that she had to stop working. When she ultimately gave in and went to her *gobela* to start *ukuthwasa*, her toothaches vanished instantly. Mks Mbuyisa (representing the middle generation) had an 'illness' in another form; she was often not able to concentrate or to read or write at school. Her attention was constantly drawn by all kinds of things she saw outside or voices she heard in her head. These stories were told not only as a part of the sangomas' lives, but also as an explanation for the respect people in the social environment have for sangomas. I will return to this topic in Chapter 6.

The ancestors are believed to use voices and other sounds to convey messages or demands in dreams as well as in other aspects of daily life. We experienced this a few times in our meetings with sangomas. When she was talking about her training to be a sangoma, Mks Bhengu came to the subject of the many strict rules regarding behaviour and purity that a *thwasa* must adhere to and how, as a young married woman, she did not always live up to those instructions. At the point that she was about to tell of her disobedience we heard a loud rattling noise in the top of the rondavel. Mks Bhengu looked up, smiled, and asked us to move on to another topic. After the interview, when the voice recorder was switched off, and in the absence of her *thwasa*, she explained the rattling was caused by one of her ancestors, warning her not to talk about the issue in front of her own *thwasa*, because it would undermine her status as a *gobela*.

At Mks Gasas we heard another sound, believed to come from the ancestors, just a few minutes before Mr Mbele came into the consulting room for the healing session that I described at the beginning of this chapter. We were sitting in the rondavel and I inquired about all kinds of objects that were standing and hanging in the ancestors' place, behind the hanging leopard print cloth. Mks Gasas and Mks Dudu explained the symbolic meaning of the sculptures, buckets, knobkerries, and several musical instruments. All of a sudden, we heard a sound, like someone was strumming the guitar. Mks Gasas smiled and said to her daughters that one of the ancestors¹⁶ had arrived, the sound of the guitar was the sign he was in.

A whistling noise at the top of the consulting room or behind the leopard print cloth is a common sound for some sangomas but not noticeable for everybody. After invocation, the ancestors sometimes insist on communicating this way and then it is up to the sangoma to interpret these sounds. This 'whistling' is also one of the ways to diagnose in the healing process, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

As we experienced in Mr Mbele's healing session, sometimes ancestors choose to make their messages clear through voices and images that are only audible and visible for one person. Mr Mbele heard and saw things, while the other people present in the rondavel remained ignorant. Mks Zinhle and the other sangomas had to ask Mr Mbele to describe what he saw and heard, in order to receive and understand the wishes of the ancestors. When we visited Mks Mbuyisa in 2012 this happened at some point in the interview, when Mks Mbuyisa closed her eyes and seemed somewhat distracted. After a moment, she opened her eyes again and asked to move on to the next interview question. She told us that she frequently hears somebody talking to her, telling her what is going to happen. In this case, she was instructed to cut off the current subject, for there were more important elements coming up in our conversation.

Like the above-mentioned guitar, ancestors may use objects to get the sangoma's attention. Therefore, the sangoma must be aware of all things and events in her surroundings. A candle that has to be lit twice, the flame of a candle that is not burning steady, the top of a bottle falling out of your hands, the spot where the top falls, all such minor incidents are noticed and interpreted as signs from the ancestors. Mks Mbuyisa described the life of a sangoma as "a special life for special people. Sangomas have to be able to bend like reeds in the wind"¹⁷ Every day, the ancestors may, and indeed do, interfere with her plans for that day in whatever way they want to. A sangoma must go with the ancestors' flow.

¹⁶ One grandfather from the mother's side used to play the guitar. Now when he is coming to them, when they invoke the ancestors, he says "I want my guitar".

¹⁷ Interview with Mks Mbuyisa, 9 August 2012.

3.2.2 The diagnosis

After the invocation of the ancestors, there is often a sign of their presence, noticeable in the sangoma's yawning, belching, or producing of other loud noises. The next step in the healing session is the most important part, the diagnosis. Those ancestors who have been asked to help, indicate what the root cause of the patient's problem is and what is needed at this moment to heal the patient. It is only after the diagnosis is clear that the healing part of the process can begin. The indication of the problem's root cause can be given in at least three different ways. Which method of diagnosis a sangoma uses depends on the ancestors' preference, the training of the sangoma, and the relation between the sangoma and her ancestors. The three ways of diagnosing that we distinguished are: 'throwing bones'; 'using essence'; and interpreting 'whistles'. These procedures will be described below.

Throwing bones

The first diagnostic method to be described is 'throwing bones', which is also known as 'basket divination' in anthropological literature, referring to a basket in which the bones are kept, when they are not used for divination. Basket divination is a widespread technique for communicating with the unseen world. For the African continent alone there are countless descriptions of all kinds of varieties of this divination technique, e.g. Erdtsieck (2003) about Tanzania, Mlisa (2010) about the Xhosa in South Africa, and Granjo (2013) about Mozambique. In the Zulu context, I saw the bones stored in a small leather bag or in a bag woven from grass or reed. A collection of several small items is kept in this bag: all sorts of small animal bones, but also coins, stones, shells, erasers, dices, and pieces of wood, amounting to more than thirty items, each one of which has a special symbolic meaning. Together, these items are called 'the bones' and every sangoma composes her own individual collection.

At the beginning of the session, the sangoma lights *imphepo* in a calabash and invokes the ancestors. When the diagnosis part of the session starts, she fetches the bag with the bones and holds it in the smoke that swirls from the smouldering *imphepo*. The sangoma poses a question to the ancestors¹⁸ while she shakes the bag above the *imphepo*, making the bones rattle. She then throws the bones on a mat or a piece of animal skin on the floor, in front of the leopard print cloth behind which the ancestors are believed to dwell. From the position of every individual item thrown and the total composition the sangoma 'reads' the ancestors' message, for they are believed to have arranged the objects in this specific order. Thus, from this display of bones, the sangoma distils the ancestors' answer to the posed question. By pointing out the individual objects and explaining the meaning of their position, the sangoma recounts what the

¹⁸ E.g. what is the problem with this person?

ancestors are telling her through the bones. With every question she repeats this part of the ritual, although the bones are not necessarily replaced in the bag every time; the sangoma can also simply take the bones in her hands and shake them above the *imphepo* while asking the next question.¹⁹ The position of the bones after throwing will give the answer to this question, again the sangoma will point out how to interpret this message. The patient is allowed, even encouraged, to keep asking questions.

The problems patients have when they come to a sangoma are more often than not on several levels, thus the diagnosis must also be multi-layered. The ancestors must be consulted on the physical level, as well as in the spiritual and environmental spheres. Because physical problems are frequently believed to be the result of spiritual or environmental causes, the sangoma must look for possible imbalances in every single domain during her consultation with the ancestors.

At a certain moment during the healing session, the sangoma will ask the ancestors what is needed to heal this patient at this moment. Another throw of the bones will make clear to the sangoma what the next step in the healing process will be. Sometimes, the ancestors indicate that the patient must make offerings to satisfy them: food, drinks, meat, or even live animals may be requested – not just a random chicken or goat; when the ancestors want an offering, it must be a special animal of a symbolic colour (Ngubane, 1977). The patient will bring those offerings when he comes for the next consultation. The slaughtering of the animal will be done by the sangoma or one of her assistants on the compound.

In order to heal their patients physically, sangomas prescribe medicine, which is often ingested straightaway and more is given to take at home, with precise orders on how to prepare it and when to take it. The medication (*muthi*) may be a mixture of diverse natural elements, such as roots, herbs, barks, minerals, fats, snake skin or other dried animal parts, and many other, often symbolic significant elements.

Example of basket divination

To his patient who had swallowing problems, Mks Mkhize (the male sangoma) gave some crocodile fat mixed with pieces of a crocodile's uvula to open up his oesophagus. The patient had been having recurring dreams about a crocodile, therefore the *muthis* that were needed to heal him had to be linked to that animal. During the last part of the healing session, he ingested small bits of the *muthi*, trying hard to swallow it, producing growling noises.

This patient, a young man called Zanimvula,²⁰ was in great trouble when he came to Mks Mkhize's compound for the first time. He didn't have any luck at all, there was "[...]

¹⁹ E.g. what is the cause of this problem?

²⁰ Zanimvula (meaning: come with the rain) is not this man's real name. This name was given him when he came to Mks Mkhize's. He indeed arrived when it rained. Mks Mkhize renamed him to protect him from the forces of witchcraft that were after him. When he is outside the gate, he uses his own name, inside the gate he is called Zanimvula, so he cannot be reached by bad spirits. He is a frail, not very confident looking man, about 25 years old.

too much bad luck in him. The police was coming after him, people were opening a case on him, but he didn't know why.²¹ The day before he came to Mks Mkhize's he was hurt in a shooting incident. A bullet went right through his foot so he couldn't walk anymore. Mks Mkhize treated his foot with special *muthis*; after a week, the wound was healed and Zanimvula could walk again.

Diagnosing this patient's problem, Mks Mkhize learned that Zanimvula was estranged from his ancestors. Pointing at a specific shell, Mks Mkhize revealed that Zanimvula's problem was that his grandfather was very distant.

To find out what the cause of this problem is, Mks Mkhize threw the bones another time. Now, the bones revealed that Zanimvula's great-grandfather had had a problem in the community. As a priest in a Christian church, he had chased every indigenous healer out of the church, saying it was a demon thing. All the ancestors of those who were chased from the church now come after Zanimvula and give him this bad luck. However, his "great-grandfather is like chained and can't help"²² Zanimvula. First, the young man must help release his grandfather's spirit, so that, in return, he can help his grandson with his bad luck. This is the cause of the spiritual part of Zanimvula's problems.



Figure 3.4 Basket divination by Mks Mkhize for Zanimvula

The next throw of the bones was accompanied by a question about the cause of the physical part of Zanimvula's problems. Mks Mkhize read the position of the bones and deduced that the ancestors had deliberately made Zanimvula sick. They wanted him to go to an indigenous healer, and even to start the training to be a sangoma himself.

²¹ According to Mks Mkhize, explanation of the healing session on 28 April 2014.

²² Ibid.

Initially, Zanimvula didn't see the need to do that and he neglected the ancestors' wishes. To force him to go, they gave him HIV-positive symptoms, including trouble with eating. When he eats, the food doesn't go down, it is like his oesophagus is closed. Even after an operation in hospital, his situation didn't improve. It was clear from the way that Zanimvula was sitting during the healing session that he had started his *ukuthwasa* at Mks Mkhize's: on his knees and resting on his hands, a position typical for a *thwasa*.

Mks Mkhize discovers how to heal Zanimvula spiritually after the next throw of the bones. Two white goats must be slaughtered. That offering is the first step, it will set the grandfather's spirit free. Secondly, Zanimvula's home must be sealed so the bad spirits that are after him are unable to enter. In due course, additional offerings will be requested in order for Zanimvula to finish his training and become a sangoma himself.

The topic of the last throw of this session is how to heal the physical problem. From the way the 'bones' are displayed after this toss, Mks Mkhize reads that Zanimvula must ingest some crocodile fat mixed with dried and ground parts of a crocodile's uvula to open his oesophagus. Expecting a better result from these *muthis* than from the operation in the clinic, Zanimvula doesn't hesitate and takes it immediately.

Sangomas use symbolism as an integral part of the healing rituals. An illustration is in the use of colours, some with various meanings in a different setting. Although in general colour symbolism is arbitrary (because it shifts), the meaning of the most used colours has been settled. Red, white, and black are the most important colours in African symbolism. Usually, red refers to danger and heat, white to purity, fertility, and health and black stands for evil and affliction (Turner, 1970; Jacobson-Widding, 1979; Ngubane, 1977). In Zulu healing rituals, green and yellow refer to, respectively, female and male ancestors. The colour blue represents the sky as well as water, but it also refers to elements relating to Christianity. I introduced these features in the 'snapshots' at the start of the first chapter. The lighting of candles at the start and during indigenous healing sessions can also be seen as a symbolic element. I will return to this in Chapter 5.

Muthi is believed to be more powerful and effective when it is used in combination with colours, for example coloured candles, clothes, beads, or strings. Besides the colour symbolism, minerals and specific parts of special animals are also symbolically applied to heal a patient in indigenous healing. This way, certain characteristics of the animal are allegedly transferred to the patient in need. In love potions, pieces of a dried python's skin are mixed with other elements to enable the client to secretly wiggle his way into the heart of the object of his love. Or, whenever a client needs power or speed, the indigenous healer may use parts of a lion in his *muthi* mixture. Crocodiles in general do not have swallowing problems, so when Zanimvula takes some ground parts of a crocodile's uvula it is supposed to solve his complaints.

Once the healing of a patient has started, a continuous diagnosis process is triggered. The sangoma diagnoses to see if the healing is on track and what is needed at that

moment to take the next step in the healing process. The desired offerings are made, *muthis* are prescribed and often actually provided. The next consultation will start again with a diagnosis, to search for remaining imbalances in the three domains: physical, spiritual, and (social) environmental.

Mks Mkhize frequently executes healing sessions with Zanimvula, who had been living at Mks Mkhize's compound for about half a year when we attended his healing session. The sangoma told us that, in the meantime, several of his problems had been solved; that the case against him had been dropped, and that the police were no longer looking for him. His bad luck had diminished and his physical condition had improved immensely, he was feeling much better. Zanimvula is convinced that coming to Mks Mkhize's and starting the training to be sangoma is the step his ancestors wanted him to make. He is determined to stay at Mks Mkhize's and finish his *ukuthwasa* in order to get healed and, more importantly, to comply with the wishes of his ancestors to become a sangoma.

Using essence

The second way of diagnosing is the use of essence, i.e. herbs, to establish a connection with the ancestors and to open up the sangoma's senses for all sorts of signs from the ancestors.²³ A sangoma's consulting session always starts with the burning of essence, *imphepo*, and the lighting of candles.²⁴ Additional herbs are often used in the diagnosis part of healing sessions. The way these are used depends on the invoked ancestors' preference and on their wishes in this specific situation. The sangoma conforms to the desires of the ancestors.

Many sangomas use snuff in one form or another: some sniff it as a powder or in a liquid form; others take snuff in their mouth or sprinkle it on the burning *imphepo*. At the end of our interview with Mks Ngidi, she fetched some tissues to take something out of her mouth. Bongani Ntshangase explained it was the remains of snuff she had chewed on to open up the communication with her ancestors. Mks Bhengu and Mks Mbuyisa threw some powder snuff on the burning *imphepo*, causing an incense odour in the consulting room. In his own healing practice, Bongani prefers snuff in liquid form, which he sprinkles on the floor. He wants his body to stay clean – he doesn't smoke or drink alcohol – therefore he doesn't take snuff either, because he considers it more or less mind-expanding. He admitted that he had spent some time negotiating this stance with his ancestors, but in the end they agreed.

At the start of the healing session, candles and *imphepo* are lit. As the flames get smaller, smoke spirals up from the smouldering *imphepo*. The sangoma invokes the

²³ This way of diagnosing is referred to in different ways, e.g. ecstatic divination, intuitive divination, and inspirational divination.

²⁴ White candles are always used, but, depending on the sort of consultation, yellow, green, red, and blue candles will be lit too.

ancestors by praising them and mentioning the names of many previous generations, ultimately asking them for their help with the patient. In the meantime, the above-mentioned special herbs are added to the *imphepo* or used in another way by the sangoma. After a short while, the ancestors signal their presence²⁵ and then they start to communicate with the sangoma.

Sometimes, this communication is through the patient, as we witnessed in Mr Mbele's healing session described at the start of this chapter. Typically, the patient is sitting on the floor with his legs in a V-shape in front of him, to be in a steady position.²⁶ The patient, his eyes closed, tells the sangoma what he sees and hears, as the sangoma (not experiencing the same things) asks the patient to tell her what is happening. She must understand the ancestors' message from his answers, in order to be able to interpret it correctly and to continue the healing process in the desired way. When she has received enough information, or when the ancestors decide to stop the communication, the sangoma will end the session by thanking the ancestors for their help. While the patient recovers from his altered state, she tells him what has happened in the preceding process. There is ample opportunity for the patient to ask the sangoma questions about the things he experienced.

Generally, however, the ancestors communicate directly with the sangoma, who is beside her patient. Both the sangoma and the patient sit on their knees, facing the leopard print cloth, behind which the ancestors allegedly dwell. The ancestors make clear to the sangoma what the cause of the patient's problem is and what is needed to heal the patient. Sangomas refer to this part of the session as 'listening to the ancestors', but the telling is not only in words, the ancestors also use symbols and images to clarify their message to the sangoma. It is therefore of the utmost importance for the sangoma to have an open attitude, be perceptive, and be receptive to the (whole) message. Patient and sangoma are sitting side by side, quietly and concentrated. When the message of the ancestors is clear to the sangoma, she must interpret it and explain to the patient what the cause of his problems is. In these cases, the patient is allowed, even encouraged, to ask questions about the message the sangoma has received. The sangoma will answer these questions and give the patient advice, partly based on what she has just experienced and partly based on her expertise. In their message, the ancestors include the cause of the patient's problems and the prescription of medication. The interpretation that the sangoma passes on to the patient is followed by the explanation of the rituals that he has to perform and the *muthis* that he must take to be healed. Subsequently, the sangoma gives these *muthis* to the patient with a prescription for how to prepare and use them. A major part of the (many years of) sangomas' training

²⁵ For instance, in the sangoma's belching, yawning, or snoring.

²⁶ Mks Zinhle told Mr Mbele to sit like this when he approached the mat in front of the leopard print curtain. Bongani explained the ancestors had told Mks Zinhle in advance they were to communicate through Mr Mbele in this session.

is concentrated on exactly this part of (healing) sessions, i.e. having a receptive mind for any communication from the ancestors, interpreting this communication correctly, having the necessary skills to perform rituals and the knowledge of (herbal and mineral) medicines to cure patients physically and mentally. Mlisa describes the training to become a sangoma (in Xhosa: *amagqirha*) extensively in her doctoral thesis (2010) and in non-academic literature like Arden's (1996) and Hall's (2009) autobiographical writings this part of *ukuthwasa* is portrayed in glowing terms.

Example of using essence

At Mks Gasa's we were allowed to also be present at healing sessions in which the ancestors communicated directly with the sangoma. In one case, a young family with their three-year-old son, let's call them the Dladla²⁷ family, came for healing. A male, almost-graduated *thwasa*, called Mngadi,²⁸ acted as the sangoma. On the left side of the rondavel, her back leaning against the wall, Mks Gasa sat on a reed mat, supervising Mngadi's work, interjecting every now and then to remind him of something, or to ask him about his actions. After the family entered the rondavel and sat down on the reed mat facing the leopard print cloth, the woman draped a shawl around her hair. She looked indifferent, depressed even, her facial expression and her movements were despondent. The man looked serious and worried. Mngadi, while gently explaining to the man and the woman what was going to happen, put *amabhayi* (cloths) around their shoulders. A white candle was lit, the *imphepo* set alight, and Mrs Dladla sniffed a bit of snuff.

At that moment, another *thwasa* came in with two white chickens. Both the man and the woman took one in their hands. Because this was a couple, both the man's and the woman's ancestors had to be communicated with, hence there were two chickens, one for each ancestral side. It was decided Mrs Dladla would 'talk first' and that in today's healing session her ancestors were to be consulted. Mngadi started to invoke the ancestors, the woman joined him in praising the ancestors and asking them to connect with her family. Then Mngadi took the chickens, held them over the smoking *imphepo* one by one; in the meantime, he talked to the ancestors, dedicating the animals as offerings to them. He plucked a small feather from each chicken and placed it in the dish with the smouldering *imphepo*. The assisting *thwasa* entered again and took the chickens outside, where they would be slaughtered a few minutes later. Mngadi bent over the smoking *imphepo* and briefly communicated with the ancestors again.

²⁷ Not their real names.

²⁸ Not his real name.



Figure 3.5 Healing session Dladla family, notice the white chicken

Next, the family and Mngadi moved to a reed mat facing the right side of the rondavel, taking the burning candle and the *imphepo* dish with them. On the wall they now faced was a blue dress with a white cross and in front of the mat they sat on was another reed mat, covered with a white tablecloth with blue crosses stitched on it. On top of this tablecloth Mngadi had, before the start of the session, displayed all kinds of food and drinks in a systematic and attractive way: cakes; potato chips; sweets; fruit; raw meat; sweet potatoes; a bottle of Sprite; a bottle of Coca Cola; and a jar of Zulu beer. To complete the display on the table, Mngadi lit candles in different colours.²⁹

Mngadi, the woman and the man alternated in saying prayers, in which the name of Jesus was often mentioned, and Mrs Dladla took another sniff. After a few minutes of silence, the *thwasa* started to explain what the message from the ancestors was; what was causing the family's present problems. Mrs Dladla and Mngadi got into a conversation that ended in a joint prayer. During the whole procedure, the small Dladla boy was walking in and out of the rondavel. The father took care of his son, his mother did not pay any attention to him at all.

The other *thwasa* brought a glass of water; Mngadi took it and sprinkled some water on the couple, their son, the offerings, and threw some drops over his shoulder. Then, he left the consulting room and the assisting *thwasa* entered with three plates; she seated herself next to the couple, in front of the offerings on display. On each plate she put a bit of the cakes, sweets, fruits etc., and she invited the woman, the man, and

²⁹ A yellow one for the male ancestors, a green one for the female ancestors, a blue one for the (Christian) spiritual ancestors. The last candle to light is a red one for danger, for fighting the evil spirits.

the child to eat of their offerings. This female *thwasa* took the sweet potatoes and the raw meat with her out of the rondavel. Mngadi then came back to the family and gave some *muthis* wrapped in paper, telling them the prescription, how to prepare and when to use it. While they ate of the offerings on their dishes, both the woman and the man sat in silence, contemplating, reflecting on the ancestors' message that Mngadi had conveyed. The father fed his son and the parents remained seated until all three plates were empty. In this period of silence, the family finalised the healing session and the connection with the ancestors.

This healing session was very interesting in more than one way. The Dladla couple came for healing to Mks Gasa's because they wanted to lift their level of happiness. Mr and Mrs Dladla were clearly not a happy couple and both of them were suffering in this regard.

In a previous healing session, the ancestors had made clear that the root cause of the problems was to be found in Mrs Dladla's history. Before her marriage, she had been called to become a sangoma and she had completed her *ukuthwasa*; she had graduated and had even started to practise as a sangoma. For whatever reason, she had decided to stop practising and ceased to live according to the strict rules³⁰ that are associated with being a sangoma. This meant that she had turned away from her ancestors; the ancestors were displeased and subsequently had stopped watching over her. The connection between her and her ancestors was broken. Mrs Dladla was aware of their disappointment and hence she felt unhappy and depressed. This depression is reflected on her husband, their son, and their family life. This was the diagnosis for the family.

To break through this miserable situation, the connection between Mrs Dladla and her ancestors had to be repaired. The ancestors asked for offerings, so to please and appease them the Dladla family brought things with them to their session that all ancestors like, including Zulu beer, sweets, and animals for slaughter.

³⁰ E.g. regarding purity and food requirements.



Figure 3.6 Offerings for the ancestors

At the end of the healing session, after finishing the food on her plate, Mrs Dladla looked somewhat uplifted; she paid attention to her husband and her son and when they left the consulting room she smiled and greeted all the people present.

The fact that Mrs Dladla has been a sangoma herself may explain her active role in the healing session. Though initially she seemed absent, when *thwasa* Mngadi started the healing session she quickly joined him in invoking and praising the ancestors, an action that we had not seen from any other patient during their healing process. The fact that she was a former sangoma may also explain Mrs Dladla's habit of taking snuff during the healing session, we also did not witness any other patient doing this.

For patients who are Christians, or whose ancestors were Christians, the healing session holds another chapter, as witnessed during this healing session and a few others that same afternoon at Mks Gasa's. These sessions all followed the same pattern; after the usual start (which includes invoking the ancestral spirits), while facing the leopard print cloth, the patients and the *thwasa* turned to another side of the rondavel, now facing a blue dress with a white cross stitched on it. On that spot, the Christian spirits were invoked much in the same way as the ancestral spirits were, although obviously the words were different. Whereas one of the keywords in the ancestral praises is '*makhosi makhulu*';³¹ in the prayers to the Christian spirits the word 'Jesus' was frequently used and these prayers were invariably closed with the word 'Amen'. More about the syncretism between indigenous healing and religion in Chapter 5.

The couple's offerings (the chickens, cakes, drinks, etc.) were dedicated to the ancestors, both Christian and non-Christian. The patients themselves have to eat and drink from the food and the drinks, to show "this is what we offer and we can also eat it,

³¹ A respectful form of addressing the ancestors.

it is not poisoned, it is safe."³² As we saw with the Dladla family, the consumption of the offerings at the end of the healing session is a time for reflection and contemplation. They 'chew' on the ancestors' message, letting it sink in, digesting it together with the food. When patients have finished their plates, half of the offerings are put in bags and given to the patients to take home. The other half of the offerings are for the ancestors, personified by the sangomas, their *amathwasa*, and their staff. The offered animal is also cut into two halves, one for the patient to take home, the other half for the ancestors. The patients also take the candles that are used during the healing session, in order to burn them again at home, thus continuing the process. Only one white candle is left to burn in the consulting room, to secure the continuation of the healing process in this place as well.

The whistling sounds

The third method used by sangomas to diagnose is referred to as 'interpreting the whistles'. After the start of the session, when the ancestors are invoked and praised, sometimes the ancestors make clear to the sangoma that they want to "do the talking themselves," as Mks Mbuyisa described it in the interview. She explained that, in those cases, she can hear whistling and speaking behind the curtain in her consulting room. It is up to her to interpret these words to the patient. In Mks Bhengu's consulting room (*Z: indluhlola*), the whistling can be heard in the top of the hut on such occasions, but it is not always that the ancestors talk in whistles, sometimes they communicate through crackling noises in the roof. In those cases, Mks Bhengu knows how to interpret these sounds, because of her connection with the ancestors and because of what she learned from her *gobela*. At Mks Gasa's, the ancestors are believed to use various sounds to make their message clear, including whistling sounds in the top of the consulting room, the sound of someone strumming a guitar, and the sound of someone blowing a trumpet.³³ Mks Gasa and her daughters, Mks Zinhle and Mks Dudu, interpreted those sounds and explained their meaning to the patient involved. Similar to other methods of diagnosis, the patients were encouraged to ask questions and, at times, the sangoma gave her patients some advice and she usually gave them *muthis* to take home.

The kind of method for diagnosis that a sangoma uses in a consultation depends first and foremost on the preference of the sangoma's ancestors. As described above, the ancestors make clear to the sangoma the way in which they want to communicate. This is not just a matter of what mood the ancestors are in, there are other elements involved, e.g. which ancestors you have invoked. Mks Ngidi told us she is able to use two methods for diagnosis, 'throwing bones' and 'using essence'. She generally uses

³² As Bongani explained to us. In Zulu culture, it is common use to take something yourself of the offerings (food and drinks) you give to others, e.g. visitors, as a sign of your good intentions, that it is safe to eat and drink.

³³ Some of these sounds were even audible for the innocent visitor.

the essence because the ancestors from her mother's side are Zulu and they prefer her to use this method. These ancestors are more important, more powerful to her. The ancestors from her father's side, however, are Swazi, they prefer her to use the bones for diagnosis.³⁴ So, although these ancestors are less powerful for her, she sometimes throws the bones to include them in her healing practice.

The different methods of diagnosis reflect successive stages in the competence of the sangoma. Mks Dudu (Mks Gasa's older daughter) explained that throwing bones is the first step in learning to diagnose during *ukuthwasa*. She is the one who teaches this part of the training to the *amathwasa* at Mks Gasa's compound. The second step in diagnosing is using the essence. This is sometimes part of the training but could also be an upgrade for a sangoma after her graduation. In the interviews in 2012, Mks Bhengu and Mks Mbuyisa suggested there are three stages in diagnosing for a sangoma. First, you learn to throw bones; secondly, you learn to use the essence and it may happen that the ancestors want you to develop to yet another level; thirdly, you will learn to interpret the whistles. In the transition from one level to the next, the very same illness the sangoma experienced at her calling, is involved. At the start of every consultation, the ancestors specify their preference within the limits of the sangoma's capability.

3.2.3 The closing

When everything is clear to the patient, the healing session comes to an end. The sangoma thanks the ancestors for their presence and their help on behalf of all people present, citing their names just like she did at the start of the healing session. One may notice the withdrawal of the ancestors in the sangoma's yawning or belching again. Generally, patients stay in the consulting room for a while after the healing session is closed, they take their time to recover from the deep concentration during the whole procedure. Often, the patient seats himself against the wall of the room, leaning against it, relaxing, talking with the sangoma about the things that he experienced. After a while he leaves, knowing what the next step in his healing process will be.

Having described these various parts of healing sessions, the picture is not yet complete. Up to this point, the description has focused on healing sessions executed in the consulting room in the sangoma's compound. But in order to heal a person, to establish a balance in the three domains,³⁵ it is sometimes necessary to perform healing sessions at other locations, in other settings. These are places connected with the ancestors of the patient or with the root cause of the patient's problems. We witnessed this in our second meeting with Mr Mbele.

³⁴ As is more common among the Swazi, according to Mks Ngidi.

³⁵ Physical, spiritual, and environmental.

3.3 Mr Mbele's healing, part two

A week after we attended Mr Mbele's healing session, described above, we met him again at Mks Gasas's compound³⁶ when he came for a follow-up session. The previous day, Mks Zinhle had called to invite us to the compound again, so that we could attend a special healing procedure at a special location – where the river meets the sea. On that long sunny Saturday, I gradually became aware of the interpretation of the ancestors' message and the implications of the things Mr Mbele had experienced the week before.

3.3.1 At the compound

We arrive shortly before noon and enter the consulting room after taking off our shoes and tying an *ibhayi* (cloth) around our waists. In the consulting room, Mks Gasas warmly welcomes us and invites us to sit down. We seat ourselves on the same spot where we sat last week, on the right side of the door, our backs against the wall. To the left of the door, Mks Gasas sits on her mat, also with her back against the wall. There is a lot of activity at the compound this afternoon; new patients arrive all the time, they take their seats in a waiting room, where a TV is tuned to one of South Africa's popular channels. Patients enter the consulting room, some for a healing session led by an advanced *thwasa*, some just to greet Mks Gasas and to give her their offerings. There are constant sounds of mobile phones and the answering of calls. *Amathwasa* wander in and out of the consulting room, fetching things from behind the leopard print cloth, rearranging reed mats on the floor, or bringing drinks to us, the visitors. A young sangoma, let's call her Ntombi,³⁷ enters the consulting room frequently to stir *muthi* in a bucket, to take it outside, and to reappear after a short while to stir the *muthi* bucket again. Everyone seems to have their own chores and responsibilities and they all act accordingly. It gives me the impression of a well-oiled operation.³⁸

When one of the healing sessions has come to an end, Mr Mbele enters the consulting room. He greets Mks Gasas, the ancestors (represented by the leopard print cloth), and the other people present. He takes his time to talk to a few of them until the moment Mks Zinhle calls him to come outside, then off he goes. In the meantime, a woman, who turned out to be Mrs Mbele, has seated herself next to Mks Gasas. The elder sangoma talks reassuringly to her, but Mrs Mbele shakes her head with tears in her eyes. After about half an hour, Mks Zinhle calls her to come outside as well. Some two hours later, we meet Mr Mbele at the back of the compound, when he comes out of another building, where he has been in a dressing room getting dressed for the coming

³⁶ 3 May 2014.

³⁷ Not her real name.

³⁸ For the way Mks Gasas runs the healing practice on her compound, see Chapters 4 and 6.

procedure, according to the desires of the ancestors he heard last week. His shirt and shorts have been exchanged for a 'traditional' Xhosa attire, a white robe with a few thin black stripes. On his head is a band of white and blue beads. He is holding a gold-coloured knobkerrie and one with white and blue beads.³⁹ Hanging around his neck is a long white and blue beaded necklace, across his shoulders is a real leopard skin, the claws still on the paws.



Figure 3.7 Mr Mbele greeting the ancestors



Figure 3.8 Mr Mbele dressed up for the session and Bongani

He walks proudly and barefoot to the *indluhlola*, followed by Mrs Mbele who has also changed her clothes. Her fashionable dress and high heels have been replaced by two brown-and-white chequered *amabhayi*, skilfully tied around her body, and flat sandals. Around her neck she wears a multi-coloured beaded necklace, a headband in the same print as the *amabhayi* completes her outfit.

Mr and Mrs Mbele are not the only ones that are dressed up for the occasion, Mks Gasa, Mks Dudu, Mks Zinhle, Mks Ntombi and several of the *amathwasa*, including the male *thwasa* Mngadi, have changed their clothes for freshly ironed *amabhayi* and colourful skirts. Mks Zinhle wears a white scarf around her hair; on top of it is a black hat, around the hat a fur crown with a 'tail' at the back reaching to her shoulders. Mks Dudu wears a single-layered beaded crown (Z: *umnqwazi*) on her head, Mks Gasa a red scarf. Judging by the way everybody has dressed up, we assume that the remaining sessions of today's healing procedure are a special occasion.

In preparation for the process on location, a short function must be conducted in the consulting room. Mrs Mbele, still looking sad and worried, sits close to Mks Dudu while Mks Zinhle, who sits next to Mr Mbele on the mat in front of the leopard print cloth, takes the lead and puts a handful of *imphepo* in the silver dish.

³⁹ White and light blue are the colours of the Xhosa.



Figure 3.9 Mrs Mbele (centre) between Mks Ntombi and Mks Dudu (l)

In front of Mr Mbele is a white bucket, wrapped in a white cloth; on top of this bucket's lid are about fifteen silver coins. Mks Zinhle sticks five candles (blue, red, yellow, white, and green) to the floor and then she puts an *ibhayi* around her shoulders; she is ready to start this part of the session. She does so by lighting the yellow candle and the *imphepo*, then she invites Mks Dudu to light the green candle, Mks Gasa to light the blue one, and Mr Mbele himself to light the red and, ultimately, the white one. For each candle they use a separate match, which, after the candle is lit, is extinguished and thrown in the silver dish with the smouldering *imphepo*.



Figure 3.10 Start of the healing session

Then, Mks Zinhle starts to invoke the ancestors by praising them. She introduces all people present and asks the ancestors for their guidance and help. In the meantime, many *amathwasa* have arrived in the *indluhlola* and everybody supports Mks Zinhle's praises by repeatedly saying "*Makhosi*". Mks Zinhle then takes the lid from the bucket and starts to stir the *muthi* inside until the foam spills over the rim, all the while continuing to praise the ancestors. The foam rises quickly, an indication of the connection with the ancestors. When Mks Zinhle stops stirring, Mr Mbele takes a few hands full of the foam and eats it, the last handful of foam he smears on his head. This part of the procedure is finalised after about twenty minutes with everyone in the consulting room praising and thanking the ancestors.

It is time to go to the cars. In a cheerful procession, everyone walks outside, singing, dancing, and ululating. Mks Zinhle walks ahead carrying the white bucket on a dish. Immediately behind her are Mr Mbele with the burning candles in his hands, Mrs Mbele, *thwasa* Mngadi, Mks Gasa, and Mks Dudu followed by the *amathwasa*.



Figure 3.11 In a procession to the car, Mks Zinhle leading

Mks Gasa, Mks Ntombi, Mngadi, and about eight *amathwasa* get into a minibus. Mr Mbele, his wife, Mks Zinhle, and Mks Dudu get into Mr Mbele's car. We also get into our car, eager to see where our destination is, where the next step in this healing process will take us. We become even more intrigued when our first stop is at the petrol station to fill up our fuel tanks, because, as Bongani explains, "we don't know where the ancestors take us."



Figure 3.12 Amathwasa dressed up for the occasion

3.3.2 At the beach

About three hours later, in complete darkness, we are walking on a beach, at a location where the river meets the sea. It is here, some 130 kilometres south of Durban at the Mtamvuna River estuary, under a star-strewn sky that the healing process will continue. Right here, because this river indicates the border between KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape Province, the border between the land of the Zulu and the land of the Xhosa.



Figure 3.13 Map KwaZulu Natal, map by Yde Bouma. Used with permission ©Gottmer Uitgevers Groep

This is an excellent place to invoke and connect with Zulu and Xhosa ancestors. Especially because the spirits of the ancestors are believed to dwell at the waterside at the end of the afternoon, around sunset. They supposedly bathe in the water every day, to be clean for when they visit (in dreams) the sangomas in the evening.

Water plays an important role in the sangomas' healing practice. Be it in the form of the sea, a lake, a river, or a waterfall, water is used to cleanse and to strengthen patients, *amathwasa*, and sangomas. Water is always connected with the spirits of the ancestors and therefore sangomas are often to be found near water. There is ample opportunity for the sangomas in the Durban Metro district, adjacent to the Indian Ocean. Occasionally, in this area NUPAATHPSA arranges trips to the beach for sangomas to empower them, to give them the opportunity to be close to the ancestral spirits and to be filled with spiritual power.

On many occasions during the 2012 interviews, we heard about recurring dreams of sangomas singing, drumming, and dancing near a river. Those dreams were the start of the calling to become a sangoma for Mks Bhengu, Mks Mbuyisa, and Mks Ngidi. Some sangomas, like Mks Mbuyisa and Mks Mgadi,⁴⁰ related an important event during their *ukuthwasa*. Both of them told of an old lady, calling them to come into the river. When they followed that lady and indeed went into the water they found there was "another world under the water, where they could breathe, eat, drink, sleep and learn."⁴¹ Mks Mbuyisa and Mks Mgadi claim to have been in this world for several months, until they were told to go back to their family (Mks Mgadi) or to the *gobela* (Mks Mbuyisa).⁴² They referred to this time as an important, valuable period in their training and talked about it with affection.

Having arrived at the Mtamvuna River estuary, south of the city of Port Edward, this location seems logical, but initially nobody knew exactly where this trip would take us. While driving from Durban to the south, the sangomas have constantly been communicating with the ancestors, asking for their guidance about where to go. Mks Dudu called it "the ancestral GPS." Especially in the last part of the trip we had to stop many times, turn around and get onto another bumpy (gravel) road. Now we have arrived, some 130 kilometres south of Durban, on the beach in the dark. In our left ear is the sound of the rolling waves of the Indian Ocean, in our right ear is the sound of the murmuring water of the river. It is a very special place. Even though this session that is about to start should be performed when the sun is setting, nobody minds the darkness. When light is needed, they use their mobile phones as torches.

Mks Zinhle carries the bucket on its dish and selects a spot near the riverside; the *amathwasa* lay several *amabhayi* on the sand for people to sit on. On the one with a

⁴⁰ I met with Mks Mgadi in March 2012 in the preliminary trip of the field study, see Chapter 2.

⁴¹ Mks Mbuyisa, 9 August 2012.

⁴² Bongani Ntshangase had a similar experience of going into the water, staying in that 'other world' for about a week before his *gobela* came to fetch him.

leopard print, Mks Zinhle, Mr Mbele, and his wife kneel down, like everybody else on the other *amabhayi*. Mks Zinhle digs a small pit in the sand and places *imphepo* in it, she puts the coloured candles in the sand and lights them. This lighting of the candles and, later, of the *imphepo* takes some ingenuity because of the wind. But with a little help from the other sangomas who try to block the wind with their bodies, Mks Zinhle succeeds and soon all is set to continue the procedure. Mks Gasa comes to Bongani and asks him to participate as a sangoma in this session and therefore to put an *ibhayi* around his shoulders as well. She expects there will be many ancestors, so the sangomas can use all the help they can get in carrying the weight of the ancestors in the next part of the process. Although Bongani initially joined this event as a bystander, Mks Gasa appeals to his professionalism and asks him to participate as a sangoma. He agrees and puts an *ibhayi* around his shoulders; from this moment on, to the end of the session on the beach, his plays an active role in the ritual, supporting Mks Zinhle.



Figure 3.14 Help to light the *imphepo* in spite of the fierce wind blowing

Mks Zinhle puts the bucket, with the silver coins on the top, and Mr Mbele's knobkerries in the sand, beside the burning candles. Mks Zinhle and Mks Gasa start the invocation by alternately praising the ancestors, introducing all the people present to them, and asking in a very persuasive way, urging them, to grant their presence and help. After closing the invocation, Mks Zinhle asks a few of us for a silver coin, to throw into the river as an offering for the ancestors. Then, she takes the lid off the bucket and starts to stir the *muthi*, praising the ancestors. Soon, the foam reaches the rim of the bucket and, moments later, it is tumbling over the rim. Mr Mbele again takes a few handfuls of foam to eat and one to smear on his head, just like he did back in Mks Gasa's consulting room.



Figure 3.15 Mr Mbele eats the foam

From the moment Mks Zinhle selected the spot at the riverside, the *amathwasa* have been continuously singing and dancing, calling and praising the ancestors. Quite soon, there are signs of ancestral presence; a *thwasa* yells loudly, another one shouts, and the sangomas yawn, snore, and belch. The male *thwasa*, Mngadi, repeatedly shouts in the direction of the sea and towards the other side of the river. In the silence of the evening, the echoes come rolling back on the dark waves of the water; it sounds just like someone on the other side is answering.

The singing, shouting, and dancing continue. They intensify and are supplemented with blowing whistles and flutes as the healing session reaches its climax. Everyone is in high spirits as Mks Zinhle, Mr Mbele, Mks Ntombi, Bongani, and Mngadi rise and walk towards the river. Mks Ntombi (the extra sangoma) and Bongani stay near the water's edge, the other three enter the water and walk a few steps, up to a point that the water is well over their ankles. To go any further into the water, as is usually done, is too cold and too dangerous in the dark. Before entering the water, Mks Zinhle has asked the ancestors' permission to just go in with their feet. While standing in the river, Mks Zinhle again starts to invoke the ancestors and Mr Mbele takes the bucket to pour some of the contents into the water. Mks Ntombi and Bongani support the group in the water by giving them light with the torches on their mobile telephones. The rest of the group, including Mks Gasa, Mks Dudu, and Mrs Mbele, remain on the sand, near the *amabhayi* and the burning candles. Mks Dudu stays close to the still tense and worried-looking Mrs Mbele, to explain what is going on and support her if needed. The *amathwasa* continue their singing and dancing in the background.

A few moments later, on Mks Zinhle's signal, Mr Mbele holds the bucket in the water, to let some water slip into the bucket. Then, walking slowly as if bearing something on their shoulders, the small group returns to the beach, where they take their positions on the *amabhayi* and Mks Zinhle again starts to communicate with the ancestors while stirring the *muthi* in the bucket. When the foam has reached the rim once more, they slowly rise to walk into the river again. Now, Mr Mbele, holding his knobkerries in his hands, is shown

by *thwasa* Mngadi how to swipe them one by one through the water. When this is done, they walk back towards the rest of the group and sit down on the beach near the burning candles and join in the songs.



Figure 3.16 Again stirring the *muthi*

Coming to the end of this part of the procedure, Mks Zinhle again stirs the *muthi*, thanking the ancestors for their presence on behalf of all the people present (whose names she mentions again) and asking them to protect and guide Mr Mbele. Mks Zinhle gives the knobkerries, the white bucket, and the burning candles to Mr Mbele and together they lead the singing and dancing procession back across the beach to where the cars are parked. From the moment they first came out of the water, until much later that evening in Mr Mbele's house, the sangomas and Mr Mbele move like they are heavily laden, carrying (the weight of) the ancestors on their shoulders.

3.3.3 Like the granny said

Up to this point, we have encountered many elements that Mr Mbele saw last week during his previous session, when an old lady told him about his unknown Xhosa ancestors. The white striped dress Mr Mbele is wearing today was shown to him, including the colour and the pattern of the beads in the necklace, knobkerrie, and headband. The leopard skin Mr Mbele has wrapped around his shoulders looks like the apron he was told about.

The implications and the interpretation of last week's event become clearer in today's follow-up to Mr Mbele's healing process. Mr Mbele has been neglecting his Xhosa ancestors; he was even ignorant of the fact that his Xhosa great grandfather had been a Xhosa king. Consequently, the ancestors are disappointed, angry, and not looking after him. By fully dressing up in indigenous Xhosa attire and coming to the Mtamvuna

estuary at sunset, he has come to the place where his ancestors were assumed to be, dressed in clothes the ancestors will recognise. In doing so, and by bringing his offerings (silver, white coins) Mr Mbele shows he wants to make amends with his ancestors. He thus hopes and expects to please his Xhosa ancestors, to persuade them to connect with him and look after him.

The ultimate aim of this part of the process is to pick up the spirits of Mr Mbele's ancestors and to take them to his house. Therefore, in the procedure at the waterfront, the sangomas invoke the ancestors by stirring the *muthi*, praising and singing, dancing and whistling. Sometimes, when the ancestors are not responding fast enough⁴³ to the invocation, sangomas and *amathwasa* try to please and activate them by singing, dancing, whistling, and drumming.

At Mks Gasa's compound, Mks Zinhle had stirred the *muthi* in the white bucket to connect with the ancestors for the first time, here at the riverside she stirred the *muthi* again to strengthen the connection. At a certain moment, Mr Mbele, while standing in the river, pours a part of the stirred *muthi* into the water as an offering to the ancestral spirits. A few moments later, some river water is drawn into the bucket, to take to the next part of the healing procedure. The spirits of the ancestors are believed to be transported in the river water and hence join the patient on his journey.

The second time Mr Mbele went into the river, he carried his knobkerries. On the instructions of *thwasa* Mngadi, he bowed a few times and swiped the knobkerries through the water, first the beaded one, next the golden one. At this stage, the knobkerries are a symbol of a weapon. While bowing he asked the ancestors to protect him and to cleanse his weapons, thus, according to Bongani, by washing the knobkerries, he is actually performing a cleansing process.

We have not yet dealt with a number of issues that were raised in Mr Mbele's previous session. The ancestor that appeared in the session, the old lady, told him about a function that needed to be done in his house, involving a special chair and a prayer place with a two-coloured bottle. There was some confusion about in which house this was meant to take place because the old granny said she did not approve of any of Mr Mbele's houses. Mr Mbele and his mother were quarrelling about his first house and the ritual was not to be carried out in the other house. Reading between the lines, the sangomas interpreted this as meaning that a third house had to be bought and Mr Mbele has done exactly that in the past week. It had to be done quickly because the old lady also demanded Zulu beer at the ritual and, according to her instructions, the brewing of the beer had to be started last Tuesday. Zulu beer needs to ferment for three days before it is ready for consumption, which explains the timeline – this part of the healing session exactly one week after the last one.

⁴³ Some ancestors are 'too lazy', Bongani said.

3.3.4 At Mr Mbele's house

After a trip along dark and foggy roads, it is almost midnight when we arrive at today's final destination, a farmhouse on a hill outside Pietermaritzburg. This is where the last part of today's healing procedure will take place, the house Mr Mbele purchased only a few days ago. We park the cars behind the house and everybody gets out and lines up in a procession near the door. There is a stiff, cold wind blowing, the *amathwasa* (most of whom are scantily dressed) huddle together. On Mks Zinhle's signal, the *amathwasa* start to sing and immediately a group of young women, who were waiting for us inside the house, joins them in the praise songs. Mks Zinhle takes the lead, carrying the white bucket, Mr Mbele is behind her with the burning candles and his knobkerries. Singing loudly, everybody walks inside, through a corridor towards the main bedroom. Next to the bed is a prayer place. There is a white cloth on the floor and on it is a plate with silver coins, a feather, a few bottles with alcoholic drinks, a calabash with Zulu beer, and a chair covered with a leopard skin. There is another leopard skin on the floor and Mr Mbele and Mks Zinhle kneel down on it, in front of the prayer place. Mks Zinhle puts the burning candles and the dish with the *muthi*-filled bucket on the floor in the centre of the prayer place, then she lights some *imphepo*. The other sangomas and *amathwasa* kneel down in the bedroom and while Mks Zinhle and Mr Mbele talk softly, their singing goes on for several minutes.

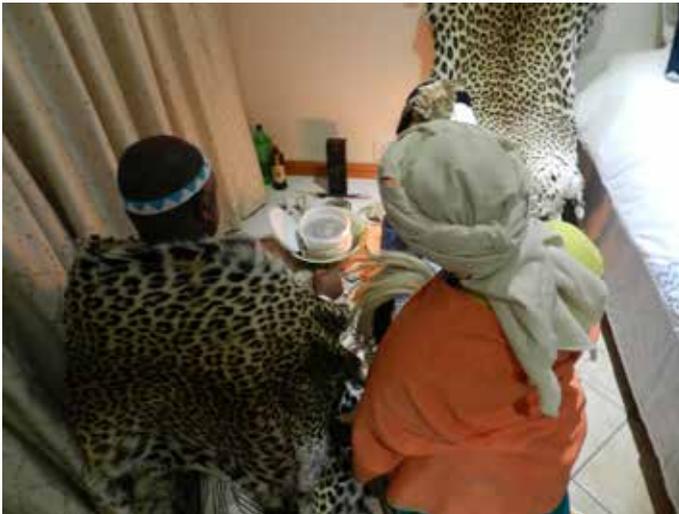


Figure 3.17 In Mr Mbele's bedroom

The *amathwasa's* singing is meant to do more than invoke the ancestors. Sometimes, singing is also used to prevent others from hearing what is said between patient and sangoma. It is a way of guaranteeing the privacy of the patient because the conversation between sangoma and patient is strictly confidential.

In a corner of the bedroom, Mr Mbele's mother is sitting on a pile of cushions. On our way to this farmhouse, our convoy stopped in one of Pietermaritzburg's well-off districts to pick her up. She is present because the aim of this part of the healing process is to resolve the family quarrels about Mr Mbele's houses. Initially, she looks on sternly, keeping herself aloof. In the course of the process at Mr Mbele's house her attitude changes, increasingly she seems to approve of the things occurring, so much so that, in the end, she looks like she is really enjoying the whole event.

Mr Mbele's mother is not the only person we picked up on our way here. At the start of our trip from the beach to Pietermaritzburg we stopped at a gas station, where a Xhosa sangoma, Mks Masingo,⁴⁴ was waiting for us. Mks Zinhle had arranged for her to join us on this last part of Mr Mbele's healing session, to emphasise his Xhosa roots and to please his Xhosa ancestors.

While she talks softly with Mr Mbele, Mks Zinhle removes the lid from the bucket and she starts to stir the *muthi*, invoking and connecting with the ancestors, again. Soon, the foam spills over the rim of the bucket. Mr Mbele eats a few handfuls of the foam and gently rubs one handful on his head. Several praises and songs follow and during the songs Mr Mbele and Mks Zinhle continue to talk quietly. Then, for the first time in this process, Mr Mbele, talks aloud, saying a prayer,⁴⁵ encouraged and supported by the sangomas and *amathwasa*, who repeatedly say '*Makhosi!*'. After mentioning all people present, he thanks the ancestors for coming to his house, asks for their long-lasting presence, protection, and guidance, and then he thanks the ancestors for having his mother here in this house at this moment. Mks Gasa continues the prayer, reiterating the gratitude for the ancestors' presence and the hope that they will stay with Mr Mbele and protect him and his house. To mark the end of this part of the healing session, a song is started again. Mr Mbele throws a bit of powdered snuff into the *muthi* bucket, on the burning candles, and around the prayer place as an offering for the ancestors. At the end of the song, Mr Mbele points at the ceiling, there is a green insect like a big grasshopper, a '*gogo*'.⁴⁶

As soon as the singing is done, Mr Mbele's mother starts to talk; she thanks Mks Gasa, Mks Zinhle, and the others for their presence and for taking care of her son. She says she is glad she has witnessed this procedure and hopes her son will be blessed and wishes him well. Next, Mr Mbele invites us to the dining room where food and drinks will be served. Before we leave the bedroom, Bongani explains to us that the appearance of the '*gogo*' signals that the invoked ancestors (from the female side) have arrived in the house. Meanwhile, Mr Mbele's brother and his wife have arrived, too. This healing is indeed a social process (Van Beek & Blakely, 1994).

⁴⁴ Not her real name.

⁴⁵ The process of sangomas talking to the (spirits of the) ancestors is also referred to as 'praying'.

⁴⁶ '*Gogo*' is the Zulu word for a maternal great-grandmother. To indicate the reference to the ancestors from the mother's side this grasshopper is thus called a '*gogo*'.



Figure 3.18 Mr Mbele and his mother in the bedroom

This is a big house; the curtains, the furniture, everything is big, new, and expensive. At first sight it seems to be a normal house occupied by a family, but a closer look reveals that this is not entirely the case: the cupboards are empty and price tags are still on decorations. In the kitchen, about five women are preparing food and drinks, they turn out to be *amathwasa* from Mks Gasa's compound. Because of the tight time schedule, Mr Mbele had not been able to arrange for pots, pans, and cooking utensils, so Mks Gasa offered her assistance and arranged for the catering.

When we arrive in the dining room, it becomes clear to us that there is yet another part in this healing procedure. The *amathwasa* have taken huge plastic bags from the car, out of which they get two drums and several anklets with tinkling metal pieces. Mks Zinhle and *thwasa* Mngadi beat the drums and the *amathwasa*, with the anklets on, start to dance in a line of four or five dancers, knobkerries in their hands. The other *amathwasa* sing, clap their hands, yell, and ululate in support and blow the whistle fiercely during all the dances. The sounds of the anklets, the singing, and the drums bounce off the tiles on the floor and the blank walls, it all adds up to an impressive, exuberant show. After a while, on Mks Gasa's signal, the sangomas get to dance; in turn, they step out of the line to the front to do a special part in the dance. Finally, Mks Masingo and a *thwasa* kneel on the floor and start to move as if they are walking like a lion, then they shake the upper half of their body like a snake, trembling.



Figure 3.19 Sangoma dance

Mr Mbele, his wife, and his mother watch the dancing intensely with approving smiles on their faces; eventually, the mother joins the *amathwasa* in singing and clapping her hands. From the moment the healing session in the bedroom is finished, Mr Mbele's wife looks more relaxed, she is obviously relieved this healing procedure has come to an end.

3.3.5 Back to the granny's words

In the last part of Mr Mbele's healing process today, in his recently purchased farmhouse, we recognise the ritual that the granny instructed him to do. The confusion about which house this ritual should take place in is solved. His mother still lives in his first house, the second house was not the right one, so Mr Mbele bought a third house last week. Now that the ritual has been carried out in this house, this has become his main house, his home, where the ancestors have been brought to and where they are watching over him. The Zulu beer Mks Gasa brewed last Tuesday was in a calabash in the prayer place as was a two-coloured bottle and, in the bottom of the white bucket with *muthi* was an old 5 cent coin. The chair beside the bed however was not yet the right one, because Mr Mbele had not been able to find a soft chair in red, blue, and gold. Therefore, today he used another chair instead and covered it with a leopard skin, he assured Mks Zinhle, however, that he would keep searching for the right chair.

Mr Mbele's healing procedure took at least five healing sessions, the last four of which are described in this part. He and his wife were gently guided through all the necessary procedures by Mks Zinhle, her mother, and sister. The sessions were performed at three different places: the consulting room at Mks Gasa's compound; the Mtamvuna estuary; and Mr Mbele's house. The three fields of healing are reflected in the sessions we witnessed. After the first described healing session, Mr Mbele was given *muthi's* to take home, to heal his physical troubles, the spiritual and (social) environmental part were treated in the procedures at the river and finally in his house, where his mother

was present. There are two key moments in this process: Mr Mbele's contact with his ancestors when he got the instructions for the ritual that had to be done and the procedure at the river where he connected with his ancestors in order to take them to his new home.

In the week between these sessions, the sangomas were preparing all kinds of elements based on the granny's instructions. They bought the Xhosa attire, the beaded headband, knobkerrie, and necklace. They have brewed the Zulu beer, arranged for extra sangomas to join them at the river and at Mr Mbele's home and, ultimately, they provided extra help to feed everybody at Mr Mbele's after the last session that night.

3.4 Concluding remarks

After returning to Holland, it occurred to me to take Mr Mbele and his healing as a special case in this part of the research. However, as a consequence of Bongani's untimely death, and my dependency on his mediation, I no longer had any possibility of obtaining further information on Mr Mbele as a person, his business, his family, or on any results from his healing process. At the moment of writing, these matters unfortunately remain unanswered.

In this chapter, I have chiefly written, especially the indented parts, from an emic point of view, in order to give a reflection of what the sangomas and the patients believe to be true and real. Obviously, I respect their opinions on these matters, but that does not imply that, as a Western researcher, I fully agree with them.

I have given an impression of an indigenous healing practice by describing and zooming in on the healing processes of Mr Mbele, one of the patients we met on two consecutive Saturdays at the Gasa compound in KwaMakhutha, Durban. On the basis of Mr Mbele's healing sessions, I described and explained the various elements that comprise such a session: the burning of *imphepo*; invoking the ancestors; diagnosing the cause of the patient's problems and the remedy, be it in the form of performing a ritual or the prescription of *muthis*. It became clear that both the diagnosis and the healing itself are key elements in a healing session. Although we saw these elements presented in many different forms, they proved to be the characteristics of indigenous healing.

To sketch a picture of how these internal processes of diagnosis and healing characterise indigenous healing, I compared Mr Mbele's sessions with other healing sessions we attended. The information from the 2012 interviews and findings in academic literature served as a background for the description of this healing process. This led to an extensive explanation and account of what happens in an indigenous healing procedure, often a number of sequential sessions. Of particular note were the amount of time and effort that sangomas devote to the healing of their patients and the attention they give to the patients and their relatives.

I also found significant the notion that the ancestors' communication and the interpretation of the diagnosis is strictly the prerogative of the attending sangoma. This is both a strength and a weakness in indigenous healing; the sangoma has a powerful position but there is no way to check her claims. This led me to investigate the internal dynamics of the indigenous healing system, viz. the training of sangomas and the transfer of knowledge in that training. That is the subject of the next chapter.