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8. Indigenous Healing in Southwestern Zimbabwe

Doing the Work of the Ancestors

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Introduction

[1] During my research on indigenous knowledge in African healing, healers often brought up the importance of dedication to “doing the work of the *amadlozi*”¹ (ancestral spirits), doing that which is in the best interests of the community, and “having a good heart.” This implies that, for example, if the community needs rain for its crops, the healers doing the work of the *amadlozi* must put their energy into activities they believe will bring rain rather

¹ The singular form of this term in the Ndebele language is *idlozi*, referring to a single ancestral spirit. Although strictly speaking *amadlozi* refers to ancestral spirits, the people with whom I worked also used *amadlozi* to refer to the spirits in general.

than activities the individual healers may prefer instead. Doing that work may also mean that the healer stay in the community to be of help there rather than moving to another country or region to make more money. “Having a good heart” means being humble and not putting oneself above or before others. It also means doing that which is constructive, not destructive. For example, if one believes that someone else is engaged in an activity that hurts the family, one should not act to get revenge. “Having a good heart” also refers to the ability to control one’s anger. I was surprised by the healers’ emphasis on these actions and traits as the literature on African indigenous healing had few explicit references to this moral discourse with the exception of Pamela Reynolds’ *Traditional Healers and Childhood in Zimbabwe* (1996). This paper is an attempt to better understand this indigenous element of the healing discourse in this setting.

Methodology

[2] This paper is based on ethnographic research of indigenous African healing in 1995-1996 in Matabeleland, which consists of two provinces, Matabeleland South Province and Matabeleland North Province, in southern and western Zimbabwe. My primary method was participant observation, living for a year with a healer who had a widespread reputation for her healing abilities and who attracted followers and students. Living in the household of Gogo Ma Siziba (Figure 1), which consisted of approximately twenty-three to thirty people living in a two bedroom house with added granary and treatment rooms, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week for a year – a year that included the major crisis of the head of household’s death – led to intense and emotional interactions. My confusion, both intellectually and emotionally, when their responses to my behavior did not match what I had thought their responses would be, indicates that my underlying presuppositions were being challenged (Emerson et al.: 27), which I needed to investigate further. Living in the household twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I came to insights that I otherwise would not have had.



Figure 1. Gogo Ma Siziba.

[3] I was fortunate to gain access to the indigenous healing community since healers generally did not like to have outsiders present. A one-sentence letter opened the door for me. The process began with a series of fortuitous contacts. When I decided I wanted to do research in Zimbabwe, I contacted Professor Terence Ranger, a well-known historian of Zimbabwe from Oxford University. He directed me to contact Professor Richard Werbner of Manchester University, who was temporarily at the Smithsonian. I immediately drove from the University of Kansas to the Smithsonian and called Dr. Werbner, who then agreed to talk with me. He mentioned me to one of his former students, Dr. Gordon Chavunduka, who was president of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) and vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe. Dr. Chavunduka wrote me a short letter saying he would be interested in the results of my research. I presented this letter to the Bulawayo Branch of ZINATHA where I was introduced to the healer, who somewhat

reluctantly said I could live with her. Gogo Ma Siziba later told me that I would never have been allowed access without that letter. The healers as well as others in Zimbabwe hold Dr. Chavunduka in extremely high esteem.

[4] A condition of being allowed to do this research was that I not have access to any recipes for indigenous pharmaceuticals. ZINATHA is teaching healers to be wary of the possibilities of large pharmaceutical companies exploiting them and emphasizing intellectual property rights.

[5] The next step in the process of gaining access occurred on my first full day in the healer's house. She told me she would show me a little about the ceremonies that I wanted to study. When other healers and their students arrived, they went into the treatment room and began drumming and dancing (Figure 2). Someone led me to the room and introduced me. The atmosphere in the room was tense. A woman dressed in ritual clothing began asking me who I was and why was I there. Then a large man, also in ritual clothing, began grilling me about why I wanted to do this research and what I would do with it. I began to realize that this ceremony was to introduce me, test me, and ask permission from the ancestors to let me stay. Finally, they pronounced me *umuntu*, the Ndebele term denoting a person, but in this context it meant that I was accepted as an equal, recognized as belonging to the cultural group, and permitted to stay and proceed with the research.



Figure 2. Men drumming during ceremony.

[6] While doing participant observation and conducting numerous unstructured and semi-structured interviews, I filled fifteen field notebooks, fifteen audiotapes, forty hours of videotape and many photographs and slides. On each occasion when someone I had not met previously was present, a healer introduced me to a spirit who had possessed a medium, telling the spirit about my research. This told everyone present who I was and what I was doing. In this manner informed consent was obtained, not only from the living but also from the spirit world, something not considered by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) but nevertheless important for this particular type of research setting. If anyone present – in the flesh or in spirit – objected to my recording of information, I immediately shut off all equipment. Photographs after the spirit possessed its medium are relatively rare as I was only allowed to take a photograph of a spirit possessing a medium with explicit permission from that spirit on that specific occasion.

[7] One medium usually had multiple spirits who would take over the medium's body at separate times during the ceremony. I could have permission to take a picture when a specific spirit possessed the medium, but had to get permission again when a different spirit possessed the same medium. When a spirit takes over a medium's body, the body looks very different from the medium's usual appearance (Figures 3 and 4). The body appeared to me to be larger; and the eyes often had a fierce look. The medium also takes on a different

personality and mannerisms that ostensibly were the personality and mannerisms of that spirit while a living person. Experientially, those present, including me, felt that they were interacting with the spirit rather than the medium.

[8] Once, early in my fieldwork I inadvertently overlooked that I had not received permission from a specific spirit to take his photograph while he possessed a medium. When the flash of my camera went off, the medium possessed by this specific spirit, a fierce warrior spirit, turned and charged me with raised spear; the people in attendance at this ceremony made a protective circle around me, while telling the spirit not to hurt me.

Setting

[9] Bulawayo is an especially fascinating place to do this type of research because two healing traditions encountered each other. One was the Mwali² High God religion and the other was *Ngoma* that John Janzen identified throughout Central and Southern Africa (1992). For several centuries, possibly longer, people practiced the Mwali² High God regional religion centered in the Matopos Hills, south of what is now Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe. This religion now extends in the west from Botswana through the southern half of Zimbabwe, northern part of South Africa, and as far east as Mozambique (Werbner 1989: 245). The Ndebele speaking people, led by Mzilikazi of the Khumalo clan, brought elements of *Ngoma* when they fled war-torn northeastern South Africa in the early 1800s and arrived in what is today Bulawayo around 1838.

[10] *Ngoma* as an institution includes ritual drumming, singing, and dancing; ancestral spirits who act as intermediaries between the living and God; and transformation of sufferer to healer. The patient goes to a diviner-healer. In this southwestern Zimbabwean variant, the healer gives the patient treatments such as steaming for a sinus problem or cleansing evil and/or medicines with specific properties to treat symptoms or to cleanse evil or toxic traces. If the illness does not result from an obvious cause, for example, getting diarrhea after eating six whole mangos at once, or, if the patient does not get better after the illness has run that which would be expected to be its normal course, or, despite curing efforts, the healer contacts the spirits to find out more about the illness and how it should be treated. To communicate with the spirits, the healer-diviner may “throw the bones” or go into



Figure 3. Healer in normal state of consciousness.



Figure 4. Healer in demonstrative possession trance.

²Ndebele language speakers call the High God Mwali; Shona language speakers call the High God Mwari.

demonstrative possession trance. Throwing the bones consists of the healer, in a seated position, throwing small items on the ground and then pulling them back, while chanting in a soft voice. Through this process the spirits communicate about the illness. The literature indicates that the ways the bones fall have certain meanings, “the constellation of bones, their relationships and profiles, are ‘read’” (Janzen 1992: 42); in the actual instances that I observed, the diviner appeared to achieve an altered state of consciousness that was receptive to information from the spirits. I did not observe many instances of throwing the bones, because the healers I knew said that their clients preferred demonstrative possession trance. In demonstrative possession trance, healers call spirits to take over their bodies by performing that type of spirit’s song and dance. “Demonstrative possession trance” state can be differentiated from other trance states because it is apparent to everyone present that the spirit has taken over the medium’s body. People address the spirit, not the medium.

[11] Occasionally³ the healer diagnoses a patient as having an illness that signifies that the ancestors are calling for that person to become a healer. The treatment is *ukuthwasa*,⁴ i.e. training to become a healer. After a lengthy training usually lasting more than a year or two, when the *ithwasa* (the patient-novice-student) demonstrates sufficient knowledge, leadership, and ability, the *ithwasa* graduates and acquires certification as a fully qualified healer (Figure 5). The graduation ceremony is held at the *ithwasa*’s natal home. The *ithwasa* must pass tests that demonstrate competency. The supervising healer brings other fully qualified healers who are witnesses to the candidate’s competency. When her *ithwasa* was about to take the tests, I asked Gogo Ma Siziba how she felt. She responded, “Probably like the chair of your doctoral committee felt when you were about to take your Ph.D. oral exam.” When the *ithwasa* passed the tests, Gogo Ma Siziba performed rituals at the end of the ceremony that symbolized passing on the prerogatives to practice. The supervising healer in good standing with Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association signs a paper testifying to the candidate’s competency as a fully qualified healer. This paper enables the new graduate to get a certificate to practice. The healer’s training and career are punctuated by full weekend



Figure 5. *Ithwasa* Ma Ndlovu practicing dancing to call her *amadlozi*.

³ Every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, when I woke up about 6:00 to 6:30 a.m. patients were already lined up to be seen. With a break from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m., patients would continue to come until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. This was the schedule from when I arrived September 2nd until December 15th and again for about a month after January 15th. Only two of all these patients were diagnosed with the *thwasa* illness, the “apprentice” illness, referring to an interpretation of symptoms that require the patient to become an apprentice to a healer and ultimately a healer. The word “occasionally” probably overstates the actual percentage of those diagnosed.

⁴ In the language of the Ndebele, *ukuthwasa* – to be trained – is the verb, while *ithwasa* generally refers to a single trainee or apprentice. *Amathwasa* is the plural form of *ithwasa*.

ceremonies that include long periods of dance, song, and drumming. In this setting, the spirits associated with *Ngoma* include *sangoma*⁵ spirits, i.e. spirits of the *ithwasa*'s lineage ancestors. The *sangoma* are known for their divination abilities.

[12] The High God Mwali regional religion (Werbner 1977: 179-218; 1989: 245-98; Ranger; Daneel) has its headquarters not far from Bulawayo, where the highest official, the High Priestess lives. She presides over the High God Mwali's most sacred shrine, Njelele, located nearby, hidden in the Matopos Hills. Mwali has responsibility for the well being of the region, is the source for rain, and is responsible for fertility of crops, livestock, and people. According to Ranger (24), "Mwali's Voice from the rock issued commands and prohibitions which determined the whole pattern of land use in the Matopos:

Njelele used to lay down everything – when to plant, when to eat certain plants, when to reap. In those days you didn't harvest until early August when the corn was really dry and mature. The land was protected for longer, the cattle did not stray on the land" (Ranger citing from an interview with Mark Ncube).

In addition to the well-being of the land, Werbner (1989: 246-49) draws attention to Mwali's emphasis on a moral order, stressing "avoidance of dangerous excess" (1989: 248), and the obligation for sharing resources: Werbner concludes that "provisions must be made for strangers and outsiders. Grain must be set aside for them" (1989: 248). Many local communities, usually with their own local shrines, send a messenger to the sacred shrine in the Matopos Hills to report on the state of the land and moral order of the community to Mwali. Mwali gives instructions and guidelines to the messenger through the High Priest. Types of spirits associated with this religion include *mbondoro*⁶ and *wosana*⁷ spirits. The medium of a *mbondoro* spirit is a spiritual leader in the local community and is tied to a particular territory. "Most *mbondoro* are believed to be spirits of important ancestors – typically political rulers – and are closely associated with the welfare of whole communities... *Mbondoro* are attributed with powers of rainmaking, prophecy, divination, and healing, and they also function as intermediaries with the High God, Mwali" (Rasmussen and Rubert: 204). Werbner identifies the *wosana* spirit medium as child of Mwali and more universalistic. *Wosana* spirit mediums can mediate between people and Mwali anywhere in the region (Werbner 1989: 255-58).

⁵ In the Ndebele language *isangoma* refers to a single diviner. *Izangoma* is the plural form of this noun. The manner in which this term is used varies. The people with whom I worked used this term to denote the type of spirit rather than the medium. The literature often refers to *sangoma*, whether diviner or spirit, which I use in this paper.

⁶ *Mbondoro* spirits are territorial spirits associated with the Shona, generally associated with royal ancestral spirits. *Mbondoro* are associated with the High God Mwali religion and they also exist in northern Zimbabwe where this religion does not exist, and therefore, their function would vary somewhat from this discussion.

⁷ *Wosana* spirits are associated with the High God Mwali and may be anywhere in the region for which Mwali has responsibility. The mediums of these spirits are religious officials of this religion. In the literature, the terms *mbondoro* and *wosana* vary in whether they denote spirits or mediums. The people with whom I worked used these terms to refer to spirits.

[13] People believe Mwali withholds needed rain and protection from illness if the people are not following instructions from the Matopos Hills or if they are behaving in ways that are destructive to the integrity of the community, such as starting quarrels or aggressively accumulating wealth at the expense of others. Since Mwali has responsibility for fertility of crops and people, healers with Mwali's spirits not only hold ceremonies for bringing the rains for the crops, but also help with childbirth, and treat infertility and other women's illnesses.

[14] According to indigenous theory, the spirits call people to become healers. The chosen person suffers a serious chronic illness; eventually a healer diagnoses the illness as a call to become a healer. The patient is reluctant and resists the call; but eventually the seriousness of the illness leads to the decision to *ukuthwasa*. Also according to indigenous theory, in rare instances, usually with someone who will be a great healer, a more prestigious path exists. A *njuzu*⁸ spirit takes the chosen person from a riverbank to an underwater location and teaches that person how to heal. Ranger cites a woman who was trained by a *njuzu*: "The Njuzu takes you under water and it stays with you...The Njuzu trains and teaches you. You are taught good manners, how to live well with other people and to be kindhearted. This is my job, to teach people to be humble with each other..." (285). According to the narrative, after a period of time learning the healing arts, that individual comes out of the water – sometimes with a python coiled around that individual. Though having learned the healing arts, she must still undergo *ukuthwasa* to learn all the specifics, such as what medicine to mix with what other medicine and in what amounts and proportions.

Description of Research Context

[15] My research focused on Gogo Ma Siziba, her students (the *amathwasa*), and her network of healers with their *amathwasa*. *N'anga*⁹ refers to healer while *gogo* is the honorific term for female healer. *Khulu* is the honorific term for a male healer. In *isiNdebele*, *gogo* literally means grandmother, and *babamkhulu*, from which *khulu* is derived, grandfather. People revere the elderly. Grandparents are closer to becoming honored ancestral spirits. Thus grandparent titles are used in addressing healers and other people to whom one owes great respect such as a chief. The etiquette used in approaching them, such as kneeling and clapping, also shows respect.

[16] Gogo Ma Siziba has a wide reputation for her healing abilities; in fact, when I arrived to live with her, a patient who had come from Botswana specifically to be treated by her spent the night at her house. Gogo Ma Siziba is an official with the Bulawayo Branch of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) and is also an officiant in the Mwali religion. She organizes ceremonies in her rural home area to bring the rain by following instructions from Mwali; she is the rainmaker in her home area. She has thirteen separate spirits, enabling her to heal a wide range of different illnesses, while many healers

⁸ *Njuzu* spirits are associated with water. Comparable understandings of such spirits are evidenced across sub-Saharan Africa.

⁹ *N'anga* is the Shona term for a traditional healer, which is more common in the literature than the Ndebele term *inyanga*. Thus, I refer here to *n'anga*.

can treat only a few illnesses. Given that Gogo Ma Siziba has a widespread and impressive reputation; it is not surprising that she has a *sangoma* spirit called Khumalo. The clan name, Khumalo, goes back to Mzilikazi, who led the *isiNdebele* speaking people to what is now Bulawayo. I met the healer who trained Gogo Ma Siziba and she claims that Gogo Ma Siziba did emerge from the water with a python coiled around her, having been trained by a *njuzu* spirit, which is a retrospective claim that reflects Gogo Ma Siziba's prestige.

[17] Her treatment center is located in Nkulumane, a high-density township near Bulawayo. Many people in Bulawayo kept strong ties with their lineages in the rural areas, as did Gogo Ma Siziba and her students. We attended full weekend ceremonies, Friday night through late Sunday afternoon, about three weekends a month. She organized ceremonies for her *amathwasa* when they had reached certain levels of competency and other healers invited us to ceremonies they organized for their *amathwasa*. These ceremonies took place both in Nkulumane and in rural areas throughout Matabeleland. Also, we made several trips to the most sacred shrine, Njelele, to ask Mwali for help or advice for her *amathwasa* or other patients. We made the last trip because Gogo Ma Siziba thought it would be courteous for me to say goodbye to the High Priestess before I left the country. She thought the courtesy especially important since the High Priestess had so generously allowed me to go to Njelele Shrine, a privilege that had been granted to very few people of European descent. Probably the fact that I was allowed to go to Njelele is testimony to the influence of Gogo Ma Siziba. We were in Gogo Ma Siziba's husband's rural home for a month over the Christmas vacation and another full month after he died, as was the custom related to levirate marriage. According to local customs, which include levirate marriage, Gogo Ma Siziba was supposed to continue the marriage with one of her husband's brothers by replacing her deceased husband after the thirty days in her husband's compound following his death. However, she was not willing to continue the marriage with one of the deceased's brothers. The healer, having ancestral spirits, is considered to be a keeper of the traditions. Gogo Ma Siziba skillfully used the traditions to break this tradition of the levirate. Breaking the levirate is good in light of the HIV/AIDS crisis and indicates that the healers can be effective in changing behavior and are an important resource in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

[18] Gogo Ma Siziba had twenty three to thirty people in the household. I can not say exactly how many because the situation was fluid; for example, her sister's son was living in the rural areas but in the middle of the year came to live with us to get better schooling. Her husband, Baba¹⁰ sa Zenzile, was head of household. Once one has a child, most people close to that person call him, father of . . . so and so. Her husband was Baba (father) sa (of) Zenzile, his oldest child; frequently, the name was shortened to "Sa Ze." Similarly, when not in a formal situation we called Gogo Ma Siziba



Figure 6. Author at healer's rural home together with members of the healer's family.

¹⁰ *Baba* literally means "father" and is the honorific term for respectable male adults.

“Naka Ze” or “Na Ze.” People living with them included their children, Zenzile and Vusa; Gogo Ma Siziba’s young brother with his wife and children; other siblings’ children; Ma Gumbo, another fully qualified healer who functioned as Gogo Ma Siziba’s assistant; two to three *amathwasa*, me, Ma Sibanda, the house girl, and sometimes, the patients (if too sick to go home). A house girl is a woman who does much of the cooking, cleaning, child care, and whatever the household needs to have done in return for living in the household, thereby gaining food and shelter. In this case, her baby also lived with us. When we had to be in the rural areas, Zenzile, Vusa, the *amathwasa*, the house girl and a few patients came with us (Figure 6). Most of the people in the household were bilingual, speaking *isiNdebele* and *chiShona*.¹¹ Gogo Ma Siziba’s nephew, Alexander, was also fluent in English, as was she. Ma Gumbo spoke English fairly well. Others could speak only a few words, if any, of English.

[19] The network of healers in my research is involved with healing institutions in both the *Ngoma* and the *Mwali* religion. Although *amadlozi* are literally ancestral spirits, the people I lived with refer to the spirits in general as *amadlozi*. There are two major categories of spirits, *obabamkhulu* and *ogogo*,¹² which translate into English as grandfathers and grandmothers, respectively (Figures 7 and 8). Each of the two major categories has several types of spirits within the category. The *obabamkhulu* category spirits are especially known for their divination abilities. The category includes *sangoma* and *tshomani*¹³ types of spirits associated with the *Ngoma* institution. The *sangoma* spirit is an ancestral spirit in a direct line of ascent from the healer or the *ithwasa*. Many of the *ogogo* spirits are associated with *Mwali*, such as the spirit types – *mbondoro*, *wosana*, and *njuzu*. Each type of spirit includes many individual spirits who are specific to that particular healer and can be either a male or female. Gogo Ma Siziba can have a female *sangoma* spirit who is a grandfather spirit, a male warrior *tshomani* spirit who is a grandfather spirit, or a male *wosana* spirit who is a grandmother spirit (Figure 8).

[20] Once we came across a healer and her *amathwasa* who only worked with *obabamkhulu* spirits. Gogo Ma Siziba questioned how they could work like that. She used the metaphor of



Figure 7. Spirit medium possessed by one of the *obabamkhulu* (*okhulu*) spirits.



Figure 8. Spirit medium possessed by one of the *ogogo* spirits.

¹¹ The prefix *chi* in the Shona language refer to language, thus *chiShona* is the language of the Shona.

¹² *Obabamkhulu* is the plural form of *ubabamkhulu*. *Ogogo* is the plural form of *ugogo*.

¹³ *Tshomani* spirits have healing talents that they bring to help their mediums to whom they are not related. Not being related to their mediums differentiates *tshomani* from *sangoma* spirits.

marriage and asserted that *obabamkhulu* and *ogogo* needed each other. At another time, Gogo Ma Siziba told me that her *njuzu* spirit (a *gogo* spirit) was very important in helping her to train her *amathwasa*, while a *tshomani* spirit (an *ubabamkhulu* spirit) oversaw her *n'anga* efforts as a whole. She needed both categories of spirits (*obabamkhulu* and *ogogo*) to do her work properly.

Strengthening Self

[21] Janzen highlighted the importance of strengthening one's experience of self in the process of "doing ngoma" (Janzen 1992: 142). An effective healer has confidence and projects authority. This requires a strong, positive self-image. To understand how this process of "doing ngoma" in a particular setting works to strengthen the self, we must take into consideration local concepts of self and strengthening the self.

[22] "Self" is lived experience, the experiencing human agent. On the continuum between an individualistic self and a communal self, (probably neither of these extremes actually exists) though variation occurs, Matabeleland tends towards a relational self. This relational self is located past the mid-point on the continuum in the direction of the communal self. In Matabeleland, as in many African groups, individuals are a part of a lineage, a corporate group including the ancestors, people living now, and those yet to come. The people in this research experienced themselves as part of the larger whole – the lineage or the household. I could only have reached a full understanding of the relational self as well as its implication through the "total immersion" (Agar) field method.

[23] Many instances in which Gogo Ma Siziba and others were angry with me resulted from the fact that they were experiencing a more relational self in contrast to my more individualistic self. I first experienced this confusion when I had been living there for a few weeks. I hired Gogo Ma Siziba's nephew, Alexander, who was 21 years of age, to transcribe and translate the songs I was recording. I thought Gogo would be pleased because she was anxious for him to get a job. So I was surprised when she and her husband called me aside to reprimand me. I should not have talked to Alexander directly; first, I should have asked the couple as head of the household; and if they approved, they would bring it up with him. Shortly afterwards, I bought Alexander a boom box for listening to the songs. That night after dinner Sa Ze thanked me for the boom box, and then others filed in and thanked me. Why were they thanking me? Did Sa Ze and the others not realize I bought it for Alexander? Did Sa Ze think that I bought it for him? But then, why would the others in the household thank me? I eventually realized that a gift to one individual, one part of the whole unit, is a gift to whole – the household – even if Alexander would be the one using it. As they experienced the situation, if something benefits one of them, it benefits the whole unit. If Alexander is happier, the whole household is happier. Another time, I wanted to buy a new cloth, a colorful cloth that women wrap over their skirts, for the house girl because she had done so many thoughtful things for me. When Gogo found out, she angrily reprimanded me, saying the household needs a new cooking pot more than Ma Sibanda needs a new wrapper. These are only a few instances of many. In these and other instances, I was interacting with people as individuals rather than as part of the household. This is not to say that people have no consciousness of themselves individually. Rather, it is more a matter of focus. An analogy might be a photographer who may focus on the foreground and the

background is somewhat blurred, or vice versa. Most illnesses in which one is diagnosed as *thwasa* have been chronic illnesses in which stress is a factor and strengthening the self is important. In *ukuthwasa*, in which strengthening the self is relevant, focus on the connections between parts of the household or lineage is more effective than focus on the individual alone.

Strengthening the Relational Self

[24] Strengthening the relational self entails strengthening relations with the larger unit (usually the lineage, but also the household) and healing disrupted lineages, lineages in which parts of the lineage are quarreling with each other. Quarrels or serious disagreements between parts of the lineage can cause stress on individuals in the lineage and exacerbate chronic illness. *Ngoma* helps to strengthen ties and resolve disagreements through lineage therapy. Ancestors have a strong interest in the well being of their lineage as a corporate entity. Since individuals experience self as a part of the unit, they feel stronger if they belong to a healthy lineage. The ancestors bear some responsibility for the health and strength of the unit.

[25] In training, the healer pushes the *ithwasa* to do the ancestors' work by strengthening the lineage through bringing living members together and through bringing them back in contact with those who have died, and by learning to mediate lineage quarrels through lineage therapy. To understand lineage therapy, we might compare it to western family therapy, in that it includes the larger unit rather than the individual. The ancestor's work also includes treating the many patients who come to the treatment center.

[26] Training begins with initiation into the healer's group of *amathwasa*. The *ithwasa's* household and lineage members must be at the initiation and the *ithwasa* is explicitly separated from them. In order to strengthen the lineage, the *ithwasa* must first be separated from the living family so that he or she can learn to turn to the ancestors, develop a strong relationship with them, and dedicate himself or herself to doing their work. This separation exemplifies Turner's ritual stage of separation in rites of passage. After the separation, the *amathwasa* go through a very rigorous and harsh liminal period with many restrictions that function to help the *amathwasa* focus on their ancestors. For example, Gogo made it very clear that the *ithwasa* cannot go home during the training period of more than a year and usually more than two years. Gogo Ma Siziba will decide if and when a spouse or child may visit. The *ithwasa* must be sexually abstinent during training. If Gogo allows a visit with a family member, she or her assistant must chaperone and no touching is allowed, not even with a child. At the initiation, the healer makes sure the people who have come with the patient understand this rule. Nothing should distract the *ithwasa's* attention and focus on the ancestors and their work. When I first arrived at Gogo Ma Siziba's house, an *ithwasa* was there with her seven-day-old baby. Her young sister who had just graduated from high school was also there to care for the infant (Figure 9). The *ithwasa* was only allowed to be



Figure 9. Sister of *ithwasa* with *ithwasa's* baby after weaning.

with her baby when she was nursing. Gogo Ma Siziba forced her to wean her baby earlier than the *ithwasa* wanted to so that the young sister could take the baby home. Gogo said the *ithwasa* having the baby with her distracted her from the ancestors' work.

[27] Relatively early, the *ithwasa* strengthens lineage ties in several ways. Before initiation, the lineage members come together to raise the money for the initiation. At the ceremony for having mastered the earliest level of training, the family must recognize the ancestral spirit. At ceremonies for the *ithwasa*, the spirits work on the problems that the family or lineage is experiencing.

[28] Werbner gives an excellent description of the process of bringing the family members together to raise the money for the *ithwasa* in *Tears of the Dead* (1991). For each ceremony that marks the student's progress, at a minimum, the lineage must buy the grains for brewing ceremonial beer, the goat or cow for sacrifice and feast, the beads and materials for the ritual clothing, and pay a fee to the healer.

[29] After initiation, although the healer begins teaching about the plant and herbal medicines and other pragmatic treatments integral to doing the ancestors' work, she also teaches the *amathwasa* to work with their spirits, both lineage ancestors and those associated with Mwali. As part of the training, Gogo Ma Siziba requires the *amathwasa* to get up at 4 a.m., bathe in cold water with medicines and then sing the ancestors' songs for almost two hours. They sing quietly, almost chanting. With the constant repetition of these songs, they begin to feel familiar and comforting. The singing helps the *amathwasa* learn to call the spirits and increases their sense of connection to their spirits. During the weekend ceremonies, *amathwasa* practice singing and dancing the rhythms of their spirits until they learn to go into demonstrative possession trance (Figure 10). Each type of spirit has its own rhythms, songs, and dances. Even after achieving trance, the *amathwasa* have to learn how to work with the spirit so that the spirit can speak through them. I observed people who had had much exposure to traditional healing go into a trance without being explicitly trained.

[30] On the other hand, I never saw anyone who had not been trained have a spirit speak through him or her. Learning to have a spirit speak through one takes training, often months. When the healer determines that the *ithwasa* has achieved an appropriate level of proficiency the healer organizes the first ceremony for that *ithwasa*. During the ceremony, the *ithwasa* sings and dances the rhythm of a spirit until the spirit comes. Family members, required to be at the ceremony, try to recognize the ancestor. If they do recognize the ancestor, it means that the *ithwasa* is able to be a medium for this ancestor, and provides evidence that the *ithwasa* was called by a spirit. When the family does recognize the ancestor, they joyously greet the ancestor. Everyone sings about recognizing the ancestor. The following is an example:

Leader: That's father. That's father.
 I have seen him.
 That's father, he is wearing his hat.
 That's father, he is holding his knobkerrie.
 I have identified him by his hat and his walking stick.

Chorus: I have seen him. I have seen him.

I have seen him. I have seen him.

Leader: We have seen the spirit.
Come and play father's song.
Come and play father's song.
We have brewed beer
And slaughtered a cow and a goat.
So come and play.
Ambuya¹⁴ Nehanda,¹⁵ we have seen the spirit.
Sekuru¹⁶ Chaminuka,¹⁷ we have seen the spirit.

Chorus: Come and play; we have proved.
Come and play, we have proved.

This song was interpreted by

Gogo Ma Siziba and I quote from the interview with her:

All the relatives have gathered to see if spirits are really there. The spirit comes, the relatives recognize the spirit and sing, "come and play with father's spirit." We are happy and giving everything to our spirit. We are happy to give a goat and a cow to the spirits.

Sometimes a spirit can come and the relatives do not recognize it. They may be confused and not so happy. But when the spirit is recognized, they are very happy and sing this song.

Through embodying the spirit, the *itwasa* reunites family members with an ancestral member of the family. Affectively, this helps increase their sense of connection to the lineage and in this sense strengthens the lineage. Through this process, the *itwasa* has forged a strong connection to these spirits. After having achieved competency in working with *ogogo* spirits, they must work at competency with *obabamkhulu* spirits.

The Spirits Enforce Doing Their Work

[31] Fairly early during my fieldwork, Gogo Ma Siziba appeared to feel sick. She said she felt weak; a spirit was "bothering her." When I asked about it, she went on to explain that if she did something that the spirits did not like, they would "bother her," that is, make her feel sick. To show their displeasure, sometimes they would not come when she needed them to help her with a patient. In this case, a spirit was causing her to feel sick because she had

¹⁴ *Ambuya*, in the Shona language, refers to grandmother and is an honorific term used in the same manner as *gogo* in the Ndebele language.

¹⁵ Nehanda is a *mbondoro* spirit of a woman who when alive was a major leader of the 1896 rebellion against the new colonial state.

¹⁶ *Sekuru*, in the Shona language, refers to grandfather and is an honorific term used in the same manner as *ubabamkhulu* or *khulu* in the Ndebele language.

¹⁷ Chaminuka is a *mbondoro* spirit of a man who when alive was a major leader of the 1896 rebellion against the new colonial state.

refused to see a patient. Gogo Ma Siziba was busy, tired, and believed the patient to be a liar. Her spirits would make her feel sick until she agreed to see the patient. She also said that if she was angry her spirits would not work with her. During a discussion about a patient that a healer had diagnosed as an *ithwasa* the year before but who had never accepted that call, someone said that the patient had been evading even her everyday domestic duties. An *ithwasa* has more responsibilities to lineage and community. Since she was not even fulfilling her everyday responsibilities, she would not be likely to do the work of the *amadlozi*. Therefore she would not be a good candidate to *ithwasa*.

Mwali and a More Inclusive Sense of Serving Others

[32] During gatherings and ceremonies shortly after my arrival in Nkulumane, healers and their spirits in the network associated with Mwali discussed politics at the Njelele Shrine and explained that one must “have a good heart” to go to the Shrine. “Having a good heart” implies not being arrogant; it also indicates doing whatever is beneficial for the larger community and not being self-aggrandizing. “Having a good heart” also means that a person has his or her anger under control and does not lash out at people. “Having a good heart” is not a characteristic that they attributed to certain politicians. The healers declared that if a person does not “have a good heart” and attempts to go to the shrine then this person will fall off one of the boulders in which the shrine is hidden “never to be seen again,” i.e. to certain death. These healers further explained that certain government officials would not come to the shrine because they knew they would die in this manner. Those political officials were self-aggrandizing and their policies did not benefit the country. The healers stated that these politicians denigrate the shrine to cover up the fact that they were frightened to visit the shrine for fear they would fall off the boulders and die. Spirits associated with Mwali, speaking through their mediums, discussed these problems in relation to the long drought. Mwali, the High God, was not pleased with the politicians and their policies that were counterproductive to the well being of the region and therefore Mwali withheld the rains.

[33] Gogo Ma Siziba told me about the difficulty of getting the people to honor Mwali’s *chisi*¹⁸ rest days. Mwali has given instructions through the *mbondoro* spirits and their mediums that one day a week be reserved for rest; one should not work in the fields and the healers should not call their spirits. When Gogo Ma Siziba saw someone in the fields on a rest day, she would reprimand the person. Sometimes people from her rural home area came to Nkulumane to bring messages to Gogo about problems such as lost livestock or the mysterious death of an ox. A drought had caused serious problems with crops. These were problems for the well-being of her rural home area.

[34] When we went to Njelele, the High Priestess told Gogo Ma Siziba that Mwali was not happy that the people were not following the traditions. She gave Gogo Ma Siziba detailed instructions for carrying out the rain making ceremony. The High Priestess reminded her that though she presided over the local shrine in her home area, it belonged to everyone, reinforcing the strong emphasis on humility. Gogo Ma Siziba, busy and tired, might have

¹⁸ Mwali declares these *chisi* days as days of rest through mediums communicating with the *mbondoro* spirits. On these days no one is allowed to work in the fields and healers are not allowed to call their spirits.

preferred to stay in Nkulumane, but she went back to the rural area, organized and hosted the rain making ceremony. After a half day of ceremony under bright sunlight, the sky suddenly turned darker and rain came pouring down. My fieldwork notebook, which Alexander was using to take notes on what was being said at the time that the rain began to fall, has raindrops on those pages.

[35] Gogo Ma Siziba said that due to the bad economy, many people were emigrating to Botswana or Zambia where they could make more money but she had to stay where she was to serve the community. She did not present this option as a choice but regarded this as her vocation and calling: that she must stay to serve the community. Those who have spirits associated with Mwali are not just concerned with their lineages, but must serve the larger community. In doing the work of these spirits, they tend to the well being of the region. Sometimes, that responsibility involves them in politics.

Demonstrative Possession Trance and Expansion of Self

[36] The healers and *amathwasa* develop strong ties to lineage ancestors in a dramatic possession trance. In the act of embodying the ancestor, the *ithwasa* forges a strong connection to the ancestor. When that ancestor is very strong and powerful as is Gogo Ma Siziba's spirit Babamkhulu Ugasa, embodying the fierce warrior increases the medium's sense of power and confidence. When this spirit comes, everyone must drop to the floor; no one's head can be above this spirit's. He has a firm, loud, authoritative voice that commands attention. Once when this spirit came, Alexander was so scared that he dropped my video camera. The spirit interacts through the medium's body, making the experience more concrete, more convincing for both the medium and for others present. Though the medium may not consciously remember what happened during that time, the medium's body is experiencing the power and strength of the spirit and will have that lived experience (Figure 10). Since the healer's body has that lived experience, as well as the other ways described above that the healer has forged an intense connection with the spirit, the healer's sense of self expands to include characteristics of that spirit. Meanwhile lineage members see their powerful ancestor. They feel a stronger belonging to and being intimately a part of that strong corporate group. When Gogo Ma Siziba embodies her strong spirit, that personality also gives a sense of security to her *amathwasa*. Gogo is strong and her spirits are strong and can protect an *ithwasa* from evil spirits.¹⁹



Figure 10. Gogo Ma Siziba dancing to call her warrior spirit.

[37] Willis uses the term “expansion of selfhood” to denote the process that happens in the encounter of an individual with a spirit during a trance. According to Willis, becoming a

¹⁹ Talking with Khulu Benjamin Mthupa, I had the impression that he was telling me that when the senior healer is harsh and beats the *amathwasa*, the beaten *amathwasa* feel even more secure because they are then confident that she could stand up to any evil in order to protect them.

healer is a big deal for the people he studied. He asks how they feel different from their earlier selves and discusses a statement by one of the people with whom he worked:

Before his life crisis and emergence as a “spirit” healer in 1985, he had been just “an ordinary man” . . . The incursion of ‘spirits’ typically coincides . . . with the transition from “ordinary” personhood to an awareness of “non-ordinariness,” of being suddenly gifted with unusual powers (Willis: 171).

Discussing how embodying a spirit changes the way the individual who embodies that spirit feels is very difficult to understand for those of us in the Western philosophical tradition.

[38] The healer distinguishes between self and spirit. When embodying the spirit, usually, the healer does not have consciousness of what is going on. Another designated person tells the healer what the spirit said and did during possession, indicating a sense of differentiation. When I asked Gogo Ma Siziba on what basis she would diagnose a patient as an “*ithwasa*,” she said that she did not make the diagnosis because her spirits made it. She corrected me in that manner many times. There is a sense in which she understands herself as separate from the spirits.

[39] On the other hand, there are times when the healer does identify with the spirits. In the rural areas with no electricity for miles, we were sitting outside after dark, and I saw strange lights moving quickly around the perimeter of the property. Soon others saw them, too. At first, they tried to explain them away, saying for example, that maybe they were insects like lightning bugs. The lights were too large to be lightening bugs. Soon, Sa Ze and one of his brothers went to investigate. They found nothing to explain the lights. A short time later, a woman whose sleeping blanket was near mine became possessed “in a bad way,” i.e. she had not called a spirit. An *ithwasa* yelled to me to get the possessed woman’s baby so no harm would come to it, which I did. The fact that the *amathwasa* were upset about this behavior alerted me that the behavior was considered negative. Other things that seemed strange to me happened. Gogo Ma Siziba warned me that if I had to get up during the night to stay close by to be on the safe side; I was a little unsettled if not scared. Gogo Ma Siziba comforted me with the words “Don’t be afraid, I’m here.” The “I” in her reassurances included her powerful spirits as part of her identity. Her reassurance indicates her own sense of strength due to the spirits; she is able to protect all her children, meaning all of the people for whom she felt responsible.²⁰ Taking care of all of her children also indicates the high level of her sense of responsibility.

[40] In his concluding paragraph, Willis says:

human selfhood and the otherness of spirit being are intimately related; but true understanding of this “equiprimordial” relationship, as realized in the ecstasy of the healing encounter, would seem to require a conceptual language that refuses any concession to dualism, particularly the notions of

²⁰ When Gogo sometimes talked to me about taking care of all her children, she was referring to everyone in the household except her husband and me, though sometimes as in this instance, it probably did include me. I think that it included her patients as well.

“selfhood” and “spirit” as these have evolved in our Western philosophical tradition (Willis: 196-197).

Through *ukuthwasa*, the sufferer has been transformed into a healer, one who has an expanded sense of self, which includes a sense of identity with one’s spirits and therefore a feeling of obligation to “doing the work of the amadlozi.”

Conclusion

[41] In this setting, *ukuthwasa*, the training to become a healer, strengthens one’s sense of self through strengthening connections within the family and lineage and through creating identification with ancestors. *Ukuthwasa* forges a deep connection between the *ithwasa* and his or her spirits. Singing the spirits’ songs and dancing the spirits’ rhythms builds a connection with the spirits. *Ukuthwasa* training strongly emphasizes that they must do the ancestors’ work and that requires giving up their own individual paths in order to pursue the good of the lineage and regional community. The supervising healer and assistant do not allow the *ithwasa* to sit and relax; they constantly remind them they must “do the ancestor’s work.” *Ukuthwasa* also imparts mastery of performance knowledge, such as vigorous dancing and singing (as well as ability to have a spirit speak through one) required to embody the spirit. The act of embodying the spirit is especially effective in expanding the self to include elements of that spirit.

[42] Having family members recognize the spirit that the *ithwasa* embodied increases the awareness of connection and identification. As the *ithwasa* develops this connection and identification with the spirit, the *ithwasa* also gains a feeling of responsibility to do the spirits’ work. The *ithwasa* graduates to healer, who feels obligated to work towards a healthy lineage. The healer also has spirits associated with Mwali. Mwali and associated spirits are responsible for the well-being, for the health, wholeness, and integrity of the community and region. Healers with these spirits feel responsibility for well-being of community, including treating patients who have illnesses that the healer’s spirits’ know how to heal. Healers feel obligation to serve and do what is best above and beyond the individual by serving the lineage, the community, the region, and Mwali. They learn to connect to “That Which Is Above And Beyond the Individual.” This expanded sense of self has strength to cope with adversities. Identification with the spirits also helps one cope by providing a sense of purpose and meaning; one is “doing the spirits’ work.”

[43] Expansion of selfhood through connection with inclusive spirits entails more extensive responsibility. Doing the “ancestors’ work” is difficult. I said earlier, that when I asked Gogo Ma Siziba on what basis she diagnosed someone as *thwasa*, she said that her spirits did the diagnosing. When we transcended the issue of who does the diagnosing, she told me that the one characteristic one must have to be diagnosed as *thwasa* is a good heart. Gogo Ma Siziba said her *njuzu* spirit was essential in teaching her *amathwasa*:. “The *Njuzu* trains and teaches you. You are taught good manners, how to live well with other people and to be kindhearted. This is my job, to teach people to be humble with each other . . .” (Ranger: 285).

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