

An Interview with Niall Richard Campbell

White iSangoma

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Q. Would you tell our readers a little about yourself?

I was born in Botswana in 1970, when Botswana was still a tiny unknown outpost. My father is originally from the UK and came to Zimbabwe in the 1950s as a member of the British South Africa Police force. My mother is 4th generation Zimbabwean of British decent. My parents met and married in Zimbabwe then moved to the western part of Botswana when my father was given a job by the government. By the time I was born my parents and older brother (also a Mungoma) had moved to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. I grew up on a farm outside Gaborone where I still live. I attended both primary and secondary school in Gaborone.

Q. When and how did you receive your calling to become an iSangoma?

I was always a little different to other kids, I used to see and hear people who were not perceivable to other people, and sometimes I had dreams which were so strange that I was fearful to sleep, often the scenes in the dreams were beyond the capability of my mind at the time, but later in life I would find the content of my dreams reoccurring in real life in places I had seen during sleep but never physically visited. At around the age of twelve I started being harassed by voices that only I could hear, these did not convey any important information, but at times were so loud that I had difficulty concentrating or even sleeping. I had already learned from hard experience not to share such matters with anyone. Living on the farm next door to ours was an old man who came from Sibasa in Venda, this old man was well known as a bone diviner and traditional doctor. I went to see him one day to consult on a matter completely (I thought) unrelated to the problem at hand. Hosea Chaoke, The old Diviner threw his bones and told me that I was troubled by spirits and that the problems, including the one I was asking about would be solved if I learned the art of throwing bones. From there began a long apprenticeship to Hosea that lasted about 4 years. I would come home from school and spend the afternoon with Hosea, collecting or grinding medicines and observing as he threw the bones or treated his clients. In 1986 Hosea moved away and my apprenticeship to him came to an end, by this time I was an adequate diviner and had some knowledge of Venda and Tsonga medicine. Hosea Chaoke passed away two years later and as the voices and dreams had settled down to bearable I did not pursue any more training for a while.

At the time I was training with Hosea, My father was working for the national museum that meant he was often on trips to remote parts of Botswana. During school holidays my brother and I often accompanied him to a very remote part of northwestern Botswana where the Hambukushu people live. This particular place is called Tsodilo and is located around some very sacred hills. The headman of the community is also a traditional healer. He took my brother and myself under his wing and taught us a huge amount about the traditional spiritual practices relating to hills, caves and other landscape features. I left school in 1989 and was employed in a mechanical workshop, I used to come home in the evening and see clients (many of whom were originally Hoseas) until late at night. I worked at that factory for seven years with my evening practice going at the same time. In 1997 I left the factory as I had got a job with an

international NGO based in Canada. I moved to Canada and started working there. It was then that the voices returned. The dreams came with a vengeance and I started to suffer the most terrible financial luck even though it was a well-paid job. I remember waking up one morning and being sure that in the night my parents had phoned to say that my grandmother (who had passed away years ago) needed me to come home. At this time I was experiencing dreams of the most terrifying nature which included deep pools inhabited by giant snakes and dragons, often I would wake up from these dreams wet with fever. When my financial situation became chronic I returned to Botswana, I was aware of what was causing the problem and was determined to solve it. At this time my brother who lives in Cape town was experiencing similar problems, I remember speaking to him one day and he said "time to thwasa" and at the same moment I said "I am going to thwasa".

Q. What is an iSangoma?

These days the word Sangoma has become a broad spectrum term for traditional healers in general. My understanding of the word is that it comes from the root "Ngoma", which is a drum or a song. A Sangoma is therefore someone connected with the song. Traditionally in Zulu culture Sangomas are diviners possessed by ancestral spirits, and in that culture it is a calling to which women are more susceptible. We were trained in the Tsonga-Shangan tradition, and we call ourselves Bangoma or Mungoma in singular. The Tsonga Mungoma I think is best defined as a medium of ancestral spirits rather than a Shaman. (I came across an interesting definition but can't remember where. A Shaman travels outside the body in spirit while a medium is possessed by spirits who work through them.) We have two kinds of spirits, the first are called Ngoni spirits and are usually related to the host (sangoma) as direct family ancestors. The second type are called Ndaus spirits and are the spirits of foreigners who choose to work through the host. These spirits are particular to Tsonga-Shangan Bangoma.

Q. Tell us about your initiation ceremony.

Initiation to Bangoma (Sangoma-hood) is hell (that is the nicest way I can put it). Our initiation lasted 3 months (traditionally it is two years), as we were already diviners and herbalists. The initiation is called 'thwasa' which can be interpreted as 'awakening' or 'rising'. We went to live at the home of our initiator where we worked for him. During thwasa the student's day begins at three in the morning with prayers and dancing, the day is spent cleaning the initiators home and doing household chores, collecting and preparing medicines, treating clients and running errands. At four in the afternoon dancing again. During dancing the students learn to allow their spirits to possess them and work in partnership with them. During the day things are hidden, especially students personal belongings if they are left carelessly, at dancing time the spirits have to find these things and bring them to the teachers (mostly former students). Sometimes they would bury a tiny red bead in the sand of a dry riverbed, we had to find and fetch it with the help of our spirits.

When the student is deemed ready, the Thwasa ceremony is prepared as a test, many high ranking Bangoma are invited as testers. The ceremony lasts two whole days and nights, non-stop. During the ceremony two goats are given to the spirits (this part is secret, unfortunately I can't elaborate) and the student is put through some terrible ordeals culminating in the hiding and finding of parts of the goats and the new dancing costume. On the second day of thwasa the students are taken to a deep pool in the river where they go through another ordeal - the initiation of Ndaus spirits.

During all this time visiting Bangoma dance and test the students. If a student fails for

any reason they forfeit the thwasa fee (R 5000.00) and their initiator has to pay a cow to visiting Bangoma. If the student passes well they are recognized by the community and all senior Bangoma as a true Mungoma. After the thwasa ceremony, the students start gathering their own medicines and establishing a client base. They are then taken home with another two-day ceremony involving a cow and a goat, more tests and a lot of feasting.

Q. Do you consider African spirituality to be Pagan?

I guess you would be asking this in terms of what the word Pagan has come to mean currently. I understand 'pagan' to mean the belief of the masses at a time when Christianity was still new. I think African spirituality is hugely adaptable (I have reason to believe Bangoma is only just over 100 years old) and that what we see now of it (I speak in terms of Southern Africa) may not be what it was even 50 years ago. Many African people are now involved with the Independent Apostolic Churches which are largely "African" in their methods and beliefs. I would not go as far as saying they are Pagans, though if I refer back to what I described as 'pagan', those involved with strictly indigenous spiritual beliefs may be considered so.

Q. What kind of spiritual or religious background did you have before you took initiation, and how does this affect your being a Mungoma?

I was a Catholic but my parents lapsed while I was still young and started exploring other belief systems. Personally I am very drawn to Buddhism and try to live my life by its principles, this is difficult in terms of being a Mungoma. African religion does not have the same views about killing animals. I guess I do my best to serve both belief systems, and there are definitely places where they clash but I have not ever tackled justifying one or the other.

Q. How did your family and friends react to your decision?

I must say I have only ever had support from family and friends. My family were hugely relieved that we managed to solve our problems without psychiatric treatment of a western kind. Most of my friends I have had since childhood. They all knew I had some very odd things going on that did not fit into any of the brackets of western logic. Most of my friends came to our homecoming ceremony and were feasting with the rest.

Q. Would you tell us more about ancestors and their relationship with the living?

African spirituality is, like (traditional) African society, based on hierarchy. Every person has a position based on age, status and family relationship. In traditional society everybody has an immediate senior to whom they would go if they had a problem they could not solve. In my case I have an older brother. If he is unable to solve a problem of mine, he approaches my father. If he can't solve it he may approach the chief, the traditional healer or his own dead father, the problem just goes up until it reaches an authority who can deal with it. We see the Ancestors as being actively involved and interested in our everyday affairs, so we have a commitment to keep them informed and happy just as we do with our living parents. As Bangoma we pray twice a day to the ancestors, in the evening at 6 we pray and announce all news and events, in the early morning at 3 we again pray and ask for the things we need.

The Ancestors are just people, they live among us but in another reality. They have the same personality they had in life and we treat them as such, I personally could not approach my grandfather in life, as he was very strict, so I don't approach him in death

either. My grandmother on the other hand was very approachable, especially if one poured her a whisky. Now that she is dead, I still pour a whisky and then ask her in the same roundabout way for the things I need.

Q. Tell us about the spiritual significance of animal sacrifices?

In traditional African society a person's most valuable possession was livestock. Mostly animals were not slaughtered unless for very special occasions so contrary to popular belief meat was a rare commodity and was shared with the community. The ancestors like people to be happy and to get on well so at times of celebration we invite the ancestors and the community to feast with us. It is considered a huge honor for anyone to slaughter an animal on one's behalf, in life it is at one's birth, wedding and funeral. So at times of thanking the ancestors we slaughter on their behalf and invite the community to share in the feast. We never slaughter without traditional beer so the celebration is huge. We say, to feed the community and make them happy, is to please the ancestors.

Q. How do iSangoma's generally feel about modern Witchcraft, Witches, Paganism and Pagans in general?

I'm afraid I can't really answer this question, as I simply don't know. Mostly in referring to witchcraft Bangoma would be referring to antisocial destructive forms of sorcery, which is what the term witchcraft has unhappily come to mean.

As for pagans and paganism, I remember once being at a conference of traditional healers and someone said that western people had completely lost their traditional beliefs to science and Christianity. Someone else mentioned that Paganism was a growing movement in the west and an argument erupted as to how "pure" the beliefs would be after 1500 years of suppression. Unfortunately the discussion moved on and I was not able to hear other opinions. Personally what I know of Western Paganism is limited, but I do see some similarities with traditional African beliefs relating to the landscape and seasonal changes.

Q. How can Pagans who are not trained Bangoma approach their ancestors for guidance or assistance?

Good question! Communicating with one's ancestors is simply a form of prayer and I think there are as many forms of prayer as there are people. If I can give some basic guidelines, it is said that the best times to speak to the ancestors are 3am in the morning and 6pm in the evening. Traditionally these times are dawn in the morning and sunset in the evening. The best place is some place in nature, a hillside or forest and especially good if there is running water such as a stream, spring or river. If it is a particular ancestor one is addressing, it is usual to do it at their grave or the place where they lived. We Bangoma have shrines that represent the graves of the ancestors; these are in the courtyard of the home. When addressing ancestors we usually sprinkle snuff on the ground before beginning. We sometimes also sprinkle alcohol. We kneel down facing east and clap our hands gently. First we begin by announcing ourself, "I am so and so, my parents are such and such" then we begin by calling the names of those ancestors we know and ask them to take the message to those we don't know. As a Buddhist I also call on my Guru and personal Bodhisattva. One should speak in audible sound as the ancestors won't hear mumbled whispers and might become annoyed. When speaking to ancestors address them in terms of respect (but not necessarily flowery language... I once used the most eloquent terms and heard a voice ask if I was practicing for a Shakespeare audition!).

Outline the situation and your needs clearly. Always assume that the ancestors are people and can't possibly know what they have not been told. If you garble your message, you can expect a garbled reply and that can be chaos when the spirits reply in actions and not words as they most often do. It is polite to approach your ancestors regularly and not just when you want something. Build up a relationship with them, and try to tell news and give thanks for what you receive. Always ask for clear messages that you can understand.

Q. Tell us more about the healing aspects of your vocation?

Bangoma are a bit like Gap's though many specialize. Often the treatments we specialize in are those that our possessing spirits practiced. We throw divining bones as a diagnostic method and from these we get a map of the client and their environment and relationship with their family and community. We believe that all illness is traceable to something in the environment. After establishing all the factors that are causing problems we start to tackle them individually, reestablishing good family relationships, strengthening ties with ancestors, protection from negative and harmful people and energies. Our treatments range from ceremonies, steamings with herbs, herbal baths, drinking herbal remedies and prayers. Our view of herbs is similar to the Wiccan view. Herbs have powers that are not necessarily scientifically active on the body (for example Yarrow is good for fever, but it also attracts friends and keeps enemies away). We use herbs and animal parts, minerals and even bi-products of modern technology, all these things are seen as a route along which energy can be directed.

Q. How may interested persons become an iSangoma or Mungoma?

At the risk of sounding exclusive, it is not for everyone. The calling to become a Mungoma is very specific, and many people who are interested don't have the calling. I don't think that Bangoma is the only way to become involved in indigenous spirituality though; there is no specific calling to become an iNyanga (Traditional doctor) or to learn to be connected with the Ancestors. Usually when people are on the road to thwasa they end up having the bones thrown and the specific combinations will come up. In our tradition we look for three independent divining sessions in which the need to thwasa comes up before we consider training.

A difficulty is that Bangoma are often very secretive about their activities, especially to non-Black people. I recommend that people try to get friendly with a Mungoma and see if there is a possibility of attending a dance (Without endless questions and judgments as these turn the veils of secrecy into concrete curtains). Those who genuinely need to thwasa will have such an affinity to what is going on that Bangoma may even approach them and recommend thwasa. I don't advise thwasa with the first Mungoma one meets. Many people claim to be Bangoma and are not and would like nothing better than to lure a rich ignorant person into parting with vast amounts of money in the name of thwasa.


If you are looking to thwasa, do your homework. Avoid thwasa with someone who has less than 5 previous students, and make sure those students are still loyal to their initiator. It is better to thwasa in one of the bigger and better known schools such as Majoye or Vondo as these have a better structure. Before you join, have your prospective teacher make a detailed list of all the fees and requirements, and don't give the money till it is needed. For all the fees and requirements you will be paying in the region of 20 to 30 thousand Rand.

For those of you who are on the road to thwasa, may your ways be open and filled with

light. For those interested in African spirituality, don't try to apply western logic to it, but may those who guide pour luck on you like sunlight through rain clouds. Thokozane Bakokwano (Rejoice Elders).

Before deciding to contact me, try to find Bangoma in your own city or area, they are there, and if you need long treatment it is easier than coming to Gabarone, Botswana.

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