

Agnieszka Podolecka

University of Warsaw

University of South Africa

Spiritual healers in the Basotho society: An overview of “traditional” beliefs in Christianised Lesotho*

Abstract

This article investigates the place of *lehuelas* or *sangomas* in Basotho society, their vocation, work, and relationship with Christian churches. *Lethuelas*, also called *sangomas* or shamans, are healers, diviners, and/or mediums. Thanks to the country's mountainous isolation, their vocation and work can be observed in its most primal and unspoilt version, passed down for generations without much influence of outside shamanic traditions or New Age forms of shamanism encountered in other Southern African countries. The article includes the data gathered during the field studies conducted in March 2013 and January 2019 in four regions of Lesotho: the capital city of Maseru (250 000 inhabitants), the Nazareth/Roma region, the villages and tiny settlements in the western part of the Maloti Mountains, and the Butha-Buthe district in the north of the country.

Keywords: African spirituality, *sangoma*, *lethuela*, *lingaka*, shamanism, healing, divination, ancestral spirits, Lesotho

* The field studies that allowed gathering first-hand for this paper were sponsored by the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), Poland, project no. 2017/25/N/HS1/02500.

1. Introduction

Lethuelas or *sangomas* and *lingakas* are spiritual healers who provide services to Basotho people¹. Their job is also preserving the culture, passing down tribal history, and preparing young people to the adult and married life. *Lethuela* is a local term, but in relations with non-Sotho people, the Zulu term *izangoma* (usually called *sangoma*) tends to be used instead, simply because it is more familiar. *Lethuelas/sangomas* are believed to be called to their profession by ancestral spirits². Their wisdom is transmitted from generation to generation orally. The first accounts of Basotho religious beliefs come from the 19th century. We owe them to Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset, French Protestant missionaries, who arrived in Lesotho in 1833. They translated the Bible into Sesotho, which accelerated conversion. They also founded the Lesotho Evangelical Church (Beckner & Casalis 2015: 74) In *The Basutos: Or twenty-three years in South Africa* (1861) Casalis described Basotho religious beliefs, such as in spirits and their life after death and reincarnation, Basotho religious practices and practitioners, *ngakas* ("traditional"³ doctors), sacrifices offered to the ancestors, and finally Christianisation (Casalis 1861: 239-250, 286). These subjects were also described by Dieterlen and Kohler in *Les Bassoutos d'autrefois* (1912), subsequently by Ashton in *Medicine, magic and sorcery among the Southern Sotho* (1943) and *The Basuto: A social study of traditional and modern Lesotho* (1952), and more recently by authors like Van Wyk (1996) and Rakotsoane (2001).

Lesotho was established as a country in 1829 by Moshoeshe I (1786-1870) who in 1868 made his lands a British protectorate (Scott 2013: 269-270). Lesotho became independent in 1966. Most people living there are Basotho, which means "Sotho speakers". Sesotho is also spoken in the Republic of South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia. About 90% of the Basotho say they are Christians (divided almost in equal number into Protestants and Roman Catholics), the remaining 10% are Muslims, Hindus, Baha'i, or practise indigenous religions⁴.

¹ In seSotho sg. *lethuela*, pl. *mathuela*. I use English version for pl.: *lethuelas* and *sangomas*.

² When I describe *sangomas*' calling or their esoteric duties, I write from their perspective, hence I do not use the phrase "are believed to" each time. *Sangomas* and people who believe in their powers have no doubt that *sangomas*, like shamans from other cultures, can contact spiritual realm and gain knowledge from spirits that inhabit it. The matter of placing *sangomas* within shamanic discourse will be discussed later in this article.

³ I put the word in quotation marks because the expression "traditional" is a term invented by the colonists who called the African native beliefs "traditional religions" in contrast to Christianity (Shaw 1990: 339).

⁴ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/lesotho-population/>

However, the Christians have not necessarily stopped believing in the protection and mediumship of the ancestral spirits⁵. Like other Bantu people in all the countries of Southern Africa, the Basotho revere their deceased ancestors and whenever the need arises they consult different healers, diviners, and clairvoyants. *Lethuelas/sangomas* can be found literally everywhere – in the capital Maseru, in the small towns, and in settlements that can hardly be called villages.

The aim of this article is to analyse the place of *lethuelas/sangomas* in the Basotho society, explain what *lethuelas* are, who and how can become a *lethuela*, and how their beliefs and practices fit the Christianised society. I consider *lethuelas* and *sangomas* within the context of shamanism because they have the same abilities, duties, and prerogatives as shamans in other parts of the world and because it is strongly believed that they are called to their vocation by spirits. In the Republic of South Africa and neighbouring Botswana and Namibia one can observe that sangomahood (*ubungoma*) has been influenced by shamanic traditions from other parts of the world and that it is also influenced by New Age thinking⁶. However, this does not hold for Lesotho, which has not yet become part of the global Internet village. Many rural areas have not been electrified, hence Internet is hardly accessible, though some people use it on their cell phones. Where it is used, for example in Maseru, my informants told me that they had no interest in pursuing other traditions – they trust their ancestors. Many people do not speak English or any other foreign language, which is another limit on their potential for international communication. In this article I present “traditional” healers, who are depositaries of ancient spiritual traditions, and their work within a Christian society. I also explain who the “traditional” or spiritual healers are, the scope of their work, their patients and clients, and how they fit into the global phenomenon of shamanism. My information comes from other researchers and from my field studies.

2. Methodology

If one decides to carry out research on a culture which is very different from their own, they should remember that their life experience, pre-cognitive assumptions, and the way they have been educated (especially in the modern Western system) will influence the way they understand subjects’ actions and thought

⁵ Van Wyk states that most Sotho *sangomas* belong to the Apostolic Church but I met many who are Catholic or Protestant (Van Wyk 1996: 39-40).

⁶ More information in Podolecka (2016).

patterns. Geertz explains that culture is a framework for people's behaviour, and every situation should be placed within the context – both of the culture of the studied subjects and of the researcher's culture – which will show the true meaning of the situation (Geertz 1993: 14-15). In this article I will try to examine *lethuelas/sangomas* and other "traditional" spiritual healers within their frame of reference, as far as it is possible for a Polish researcher trained in the Western system of education to do. During my field studies I always show respect for my informants and try to present the results of my studies as objectively as possible. Where I have not been allowed to reveal the identity of my informants, I call him or her "Informant".

I conducted my research in Lesotho during two field visits in March 2013 and January 2019. I worked in four parts of Lesotho: the capital city of Maseru (250 000 inhabitants), the Nazaretha/Roma region, the villages and tiny settlements in the western part of the Maloti Mountains, and the Butha-Buthe district in the north of the country. I met *lethuelas/sangomas* in places so remote that they were inaccessible by car, and I had to horse ride or climb for several hours to reach them. In many cases I was the very first white person to whom they had spoken, and the first academic who asked them about their work. Many live in mud huts without running water, electricity or a heating system even though in their climate three months a year there are snow and sub-zero temperatures. They do not travel and they have never been abroad. They live the lives of their forefathers, not influenced much by Western civilisation, apart from Christianity, which was brought to them by English and French missionaries long since departed and replaced by local exponents of the Sesotho culture. Their sangomahood takes the most primal form imaginable, and they found it difficult and challenging to pass on information about it to me, as they had never been asked about their vocation and work before – people just come for their help but never ask questions, so many *lethuelas/sangomas* had to strain their memories to remember their calling or training three or more decades ago.

In my work with informants, I applied research methods taken from comparative religious studies, ethnography, and anthropology. I collected the best primary sources by means of participant observation and open and semi-structured interviews. I also used constant comparative method categorizing and comparing qualitative data derived from everyday experience. I constructed interview questions in a manner which helped obtain spontaneous and detailed information from the interviewees. In contrast to many *sangomas* in the Republic of South Africa who are tired of academics, my Sotho informants were very open and

co-operative. They did their best to explain to me the way sangomahood works, and what they feel when they are immersed in the spiritual realm. I interviewed altogether over 30 *lethueas/sangomas* in Lesotho. I asked each of them if they chose their vocation themselves, if not – who and how called them to it, how their *sangomas* sickness looked like, how long was their training, how they co-operated with spirits, who are their clients/patients, and what kind of advice do they give. Their answers were used to write this article.

In 2019 in the Malealea district and in Maseru I used local guides. It turned to be a very useful experience because my guides asked questions that I did not think about. I focused on verifying if *lethueas/sangomas* were not fake, if they really went through the calling sickness and how they learnt during their apprenticeship. My guides focused on contacts with spirits, they wished to know if they could “successfully” speak to them, which meant getting answers from spirits. All 20 *lethueas* in both regions answered that the best way to reach spirits without *lethuela's* help is to be in constant touch with the ancestors: offer them food, talk to them every day, pray for their peace and deeply believe in these activities. Then the ancestors may send the answers in dreams. My guides also asked about the accuracy of the ancestors' advice, if their words really helped people. All informants were adamant that the spirits' help was needed and accurate, even if sometimes the spirits spoke in metaphors. In such case, it is a *lethueas'* duty to understand the metaphor and explain it to their patients/clients. This inter-cultural co-operation helped me better understand the phenomenon of spiritual healing and guidance and its importance for the Basotho people.

3. “Traditional” healing

According to Sechaba consultants, about 40% of the Basotho say they visit “traditional” (non-allopathic) healers for health care, and 10% see spiritual healers (Makoa 2000: 2, Moetsana-Poka 2016: 6). Theoretically, the health care provided by the state is free, but many people do not qualify, and Western medicines are mostly imported and too expensive. As many cannot afford doctors' fees, they go to healers who accept crops as payment. Additionally, “traditional” healers take a holistic attitude towards patients and may diagnose the cause of a disease as mistreating the ancestors or some other spiritual reason. Healers may register with the Lesotho Universal Medicine Men and Herbalist Council (LUMMHC), but most healers do not, because it would mean costly travelling without bringing

any real benefit. Hence there are no reliable statistics indicating the number of healers working in Lesotho⁷.

"Traditional" healing is based on a holistic approach to health, which assumes that the soul, body and mind should be in harmony with each other. After death, souls become spirits and may stay to help or harm their families. This belief is widely spread in sub-Saharan Africa. Hammond-Took explains that the term "spirit" is "a way to refer to the belief in intelligent agencies that are typically invisible and intangible but who have the power to affect the lives of the living" (Hammond-Took 1986: 158). He also states that there are several kinds of spirits. He calls the first group "communicating ancestors". They come from the family (fathers, grandfathers, clan founders etc.), they are benevolent and act as mentors and protectors, particularly against the machinations of witches, but they are liable to complain of neglect, especially neglect of ritual performance and then they can cause misfortune of their descendants (Hammond-Took 1986: 159). Other spirits can be witches, both dead and alive, and witches' familiars, i.e. animal forms of witches' spirits. However, Hammond-Took points to the fact that many academics do not consider witches and their familiars "real spirits" (Hammond-Took 1986: 161). This is an information that I also received from all my informants: witches can curse people but when *lethuelas/sangomas* speak about spirits, they mean either ancestral ones of clan-founders, who may not be related to their clients but are connected to the clan and hence they can be asked for advice and help. If a witchcraft is a cause of someone's misfortune, ancestral spirits can be asked how to deal with the problem. There are also "spirits of affliction [who] are associated with possession cults that have appeared over the last eighty years or so, mainly in the Transvaal, Natal and Mozambique. They have been explicitly recorded for Tsonga, Ndaou, Venda, Pedi, Lobedu, Kgaga and Zulu" (Hammond-Took 1986: 162). My Basotho informants never mentioned them, also no researcher describes a possession cult sects.

Although belief in spiritual guidance and help is common among the Bantu peoples, it may not be native to the Basotho. Rakotsoane claims that belief in the ability of the spirits to help or harm people is not native to the Basotho, as

⁷ We cannot establish if *lingakas* and *lethuelas* are mostly men and *sangomas* women. It is believed in SA that about 90% of *sangomas* are females but there are no statistics. There are also no statistics for *lethuelas* and my informants were not able to tell me if there are more men or women among them. An informant from Maseru, who runs a traditional school for boys where they learn history and culture of Basotho and get circumcised, told me that he knew as many men as women and there are schools like his one for girls which are run by female *lethuelas/sangomas* (he used both terms).

there are no mentions of such a belief in the old *likoma* songs (Rakotsoane 1996: 3). However, he agrees that prayers to ancestors are still being said, and ancestors are being asked to convey the prayers to older ancestors, the god Molimo or God (Rakotsoane 1996: 9). Van Wyk states that in the past diviners were called *linohe* and – unlike *sangomas* – they used to deal only with spiritual problems but were not herbalists or healers. The combination of the two, which is characteristic of contemporary *lethueles/sangomas* in Lesotho and other countries, is a result of outside influence, especially Zulu (Van Wyk 1996: 39, Rakotsoane 1996: 3). Regardless of whether the belief is native or imported, it is now an important aspect of the lives of the Basotho, and thanks to this belief *sangomas* have clients.

Sefotho names two types of healers: herbalists (*ngaka-chitja*) and diviners (*ngaka, selaoli*). He argues: “Basotho traditional healers fall into two main categories under the generic name *lingaka* – meaning doctors”. The presence of the first group of healers’ in communities is quiet and exemplified by their command of respect and sometimes fear (Sefotho 2016: 254). These are “diviners”, “medicine men” who throw bones and concoct herbs for healing (Sanders 1989: 523). The second group is loud, and their origin can be traced back to the Tugela River, where the first healers (called *mathuela*) were trained (Rakotsoane 2001: 186). Traditional healers are “called” to belong to a network that is linked to and constantly consults the world of the ancestors. Basotho traditional healers can be men or women who enter the healing profession at different ages. Traditionally, most healers were men, but this has changed significantly in recent times (Moteetee & Van Wyk 2011). Traditional healers in Basotho society diagnose and treat various diseases as well as prevent casting of evil spells on those who consult them (Sefotho 2016: 253-268, 264).

Sefotho also observes that to become a *lingaka*, a person must be called by his or her ancestral spirits, suffer a sickness (a dysfunction of body and mind) that can be healed only by apprenticeship, and then undergo an initiation. Then the whole process of healing patients is helped by the spirits (Sefotho 2016: 254-255, 260). This is the same system as in case of *lethueals/sangomas*.

Mokotso lists several types of healers, calling some of them witches: “In Sesotho culture there is a difference between a witch (*moloi*), diviner (*selaoli*), and doctor (*ngaka*), but all of them acquire inherent mystical powers and ability to use mystical medicinal substances. The difference is that a witch (*moloi*) uses his/her inherent mystical powers and knowledge of medicinal substances to harm others while a traditional doctor (*ngaka*) uses his/her knowledge of medicinal substances for the welfare of the people” (Mokotso 2015: 210).

Lingakas are Basotho healers who are mainly herbalists but can also communicate with ancestors to gain knowledge how to heal people. They provide medicines and charms to protect people from evil. They are believed to have the “ability to confront and reveal witchcraft as they are needed to restore physical and moral composure to the sick and conflicted”⁸. A *lilaoli* (pl. *selaoli*) is usually an ancestors’ messenger “who only reveals the unknown and gives explanations to the supernatural phenomena” (Mokotso 2015: 210). During my studies I did not manage to find any *lilaoli*, *moloi*, *lingaka* or anyone who knew such persons. Therefore, I shall focus on *lethuelas* and *sangomas*.

4. Who are the *lethuelas* and *sangomas*?

The term *sangoma* which *lethuelas* use in their relations with non-Sotho people comes from Zulu ethnic group. Moteetee and Van Wyk argue that the “concept of a *sangoma* is foreign to the Lesotho culture and it was introduced by the Thembus who originated from what was then known as the Cape Colony (Motlanelle 1938, after Ashton 1967), perhaps currently the Eastern Cape Province. The language in which *sangomas* practise their craft points to the foreign origins of this tradition” (Moteetee & Van Wyk 2011: 211). My informants told me that the word *sangoma* indeed came from isiZulu and confirmed that *lethuelas* used different means of divination and contacting spirits than Zulus, but on the other hand, both *lethuelas* and *sangomas* have the same process of being called, of training and working, and now their working methods are similar and often identical (i.e. using bones to contact spirits). Hence, they feel part of the same tradition of helping people by means of contact with the ancestors, and they believe that referring to themselves as *sangomas* can only help them attract non-Sotho clients, because this term is more widely known than *lethuela*. Also during their training they contact the same animal spirits, e.g. water snakes (Rakotsoane 1996: 88)⁹. Van Wyk uses the terms *lethuela* and *sangoma* interchangeably (Van Wyk 1996: 39) and so will I in this paper.

Sangomas are first and foremost healers but also diviners, clairvoyants, and soothsayers. They are depositaries of an esoteric wisdom that helps them make contact with the spiritual realm which is inaccessible to ordinary people. They are contacted by people in need, who suffer health problems, lack job or have other life problems. They are central figures in their communities and play vital roles in all the decision-making. They have always advised kings and chiefs in

⁸ Sg. *ngaka*, pl. *lingaka*, *bongaka* means ‘divination/healing’ (Coplan 1991: 4).

⁹ The same sentiment was presented by all my informants.

all Southern African cultures. Moshoeshoe I, the first king of Lesotho, availed himself of the advice of a *sangoma* who lived in the king's household¹⁰.

5. Religious background of Sotho *lethuelas/sangomas*

Even though Lesotho has been Christianised, *lethuelas/sangomas* continue to enjoy respect. Their belief in the powers of ancestral spirits and peoples' belief in the power of *sangomas* come from pre-Christian times. We can see in the attitude of the Christian churches in Lesotho how deeply these beliefs are rooted in contemporary Basotho society. I came across only one Church which disapproved of *sangomas*, and it was a tiny mission from the USA run by white Americans. But even they accepted the fact that the *sangomas* practise an effective herb lore and those who prefer herbal medications to Western medicine could be treated by *sangomas* without sin¹¹. There are pastors or priests who do not enjoy *sangomas* in their full ritual attire during Sunday masses but the official attitude towards *sangomas* is positive, which will be discussed in part 10 "Christian churches' attitude towards *lethuelas/sangomas*".

As in many Southern Bantu religions, Basotho native beliefs are based on a monistic belief in cause and effect (Rakotsane 1996: 1). This means that whatever happens in life – sickness, misfortune, happiness – is the result of former actions, either those of a living person or those of his/her deceased ancestors. "This is the kind of perspective that gives rise to a personal-impersonal [view of the] nature of the Supreme Being. The real is neither strongly personal nor strongly impersonal. As a vital force, it may be more manifest in ancestors than in kings, more manifest in animals than inanimate objects" (Rakotsane 1996: 1). The supreme being of Basotho was called Khanyapa. It was a huge water snake or snake-like animal which dwelled in rivers, streams and lakes, and is still a powerful symbol for most Southern Bantu peoples. It is believed to cause the much-wanted rain and bring the dead back to life¹². Today the water snake is still believed to visit *sangomas*, especially during their *ukutwasa* training – many Sotho *sangomas* told me this¹³.

¹⁰ Information acquired at Thaba Bosiu historical site, January 2019.

¹¹ Private conversation with the leader of Jesus 4 Africa Church, January 2019.

¹² Snake worship (*ophiolatreia*) is one of the most popular kinds of worship in Africa and other world cultures. In case of Southern Bantu people it is connected to water rituals, prayers for rain, and ancestors' presence (Rakotsoane 1996: 1, 51).

¹³ The calling and training is called *ukutwasa* or *ukuthwasa* and the apprentice is called *twasa* or *thwasa*. I use the first transcription.

The word for God in Sesotho is *Molimo*, exactly the same word as for the supreme ancestor. The plural form *balimo* is used for the ancestral spirits. The word is almost the same as in Setswana: *modimo* and plural *badimo*. Rakotsoane recalls a saying “one’s parent is one’s God” and interprets it to mean that people are called to revere their parents and elders but also indicates that God is like a parent to humans (Rakotsoane 1996: 25). This saying can be interpreted in the Christian way of seeing God, but as it is probably older than Christianity in Lesotho, it may also support the view of my *sangoma* informants: God is our father, therefore he is *Molimo*, the Great Ancestor. Interestingly, the Sesotho word for the sky is *lelimo*. Rakotsoane claims that when Christians introduced the idea of God in heaven to the Basotho, they associated *lelimo* (heaven) with *Molimo* (God, the supreme being) and *balimo* (ancestors) (Rakotsoane 1996: 41).

It would be impossible to separate the concept of God from the First or Supreme Ancestor. I asked every single informant about this, and the answer was always the same, though they had to think it over, as no one had ever put this question to them before, and they had never asked it themselves. In fact, the answer is very interesting from the point of view of Western Christianity, especially the Roman Catholic Church, which makes a point of calling Jesus not only the Son of God but also God Himself. When asked about God and Jesus, all my informants told me that Jesus was definitely the *Molimo*. Many explained to me: the proof that Jesus is the *Molimo*, our Great Ancestor, is the fact that he appeared to his followers after his death – only a powerful ancestor can make himself visible in a physical form. Also, Jesus called other people his brothers and sisters, and emphasised that we all had a Father in heaven. Therefore Jesus must be our *Molimo*¹⁴. When I asked about Jahweh, God the Father, they said that he had never come down to Earth to show his true appearance. He is so distant, so inconceivable and beyond human imagination, that there is no sense in wondering about him. However, when I insisted on a definition of Jahweh, my informants said that he could be called the *Molimo* as well because he is the Father, the one who created humankind and all living beings, hence he is our ancestor, too¹⁵. Regardless of when the belief in the presence of ancestors came to the Basotho religion, it occurs in the religious beliefs of all Bantu ethnic groups and is so strong that it determines the way Christianity and all the Christian denominations are understood in Lesotho.

¹⁴ Private conversations, January 2019.

¹⁵ Private conversations, January 2019.

6. The *lethuelas/sangomas*' calling and training

Becoming a *lethuella* or a *sangoma* is not a matter of choice – all the *sangomas* I have ever met in Southern Africa and all the researchers' informants state this quite clearly. The only exception is Natefe S., whose mother and grandmother were *sangomas*. He had dreamed of stepping into their shoes and ever since childhood had kept asking his ancestors for a calling. His desire was finally granted when he was 19, and he is the only *sangoma* on record not to have suffered from the *sangoma* sickness. He was trained mostly in dreams and visions by his ancestral spirits and the water snake¹⁶. The rest of his training was done by his mother and grandmother. Natefe's case is an exception, other informants report a horrible sickness which forced them to accept the *sangoma*'s profession and lifestyle.

There are numerous studies on *sangomas*, and they all state that the sickness is the beginning of a new way of life. It starts as a disorder of the body and mind and is a process in which a person is re-created. Through visions and conversations with the dead and the deities, the person leaves the world of the profane and enters the realm of the sacred. The ancestors possess the chosen person and do not leave him/her with a choice – rejecting the calling from the ancestors can lead to death. Mahubelo S. told me that two of her apprentices disregarded the calling for too long and came to her too late to be saved, both died soon after finding their teacher¹⁷.

Though, at the beginning many *sangomas* find contact with the spirits unwelcome, a time comes when the person accepts the calling and the possession, and the spirits become his or her teachers. They lead the person to his or her teacher and help him or her to acquire knowledge. The person becomes a *twasa*. The training process which is called *ukutwasa* becomes a process of healing. The spirits visit a *twasa* and give him or her their instructions, they teach, explain, and help. Usually there are several spirits who guide a *twasa*, and all my informants told me that during the process a *twasa* established a closer relationship with some of the spirits or deities than with others¹⁸.

In South Africa and Botswana, where I also conducted field studies, *ukutwasa* lasts at least two years. In Lesotho the situation is different – the average time is

¹⁶ Private conversation, March 2013. The cases of snake guidance and teachings were also reported to scholars (see Berglund 1976: 144, Farrer 1879: 137, Gatti 1962: 195).

¹⁷ Private conversation, January 2019.

¹⁸ March 2013, January 2019.

six months¹⁹. The exception is Mathobeli P., who studied for 6 years in South Africa under apartheid, and had to take breaks to earn money and move to new places. *Ukutwasa* is not cheap, teachers have to devote their time to their *twasas* and usually let them live in their abode. Usually families accept the calling of their relative and pay for his or her training with chickens and crops from their fields. In the remotest parts of Lesotho, where people have no income, the payment comes from their households.

The spirits are usually deceased members of the *twasa's* family. Pitso M. told me that at the beginning it was one of his uncles, which was not surprising because this uncle was a *sangoma* and before he died he said he would call Pitso. He appeared in Pitso's dreams, showed him where to go and find his old white beads and shells. He also sent Pitso a vision of his future teacher and the place where she lived. It was a vision of a woman with white beads in her hair walking in a river²⁰. After some time, other paternal ancestors joined in. At first, Pitso was not willing to accept his calling, so the ancestors sent the sickness upon him. He felt very weak, had pain in many parts of his body, and could not concentrate. He soon understood that accepting the calling was the only option, he found the lady from his vision and became a *twasa* and then a *sangoma*. During his apprenticeship Pitso learnt about the therapeutic properties of all the plants that grow in Lesotho, where to collect them, and how to use them for the benefit of his patients. He also established a good relationship with his ancestors, and they no longer possess him, but he can call upon them at any time and they will come to help²¹.

Rastaka T. was called at a time of need. He was 22 and he could not find a job, his parents were very poor and the harvest was very small that year, so they sent him to some relatives for several weeks. He was not a welcome guest and was refused food, to force him to return to his parents. He was hungry and could not see a solution to his problems. Then his ancestors appeared to him in a dream and told him to return home and find a *sangoma* to teach him. He refused to do so and the *sangoma* sickness started, his whole body was ill: he felt pain in every muscle, headaches became a daily problem and he could not take any food. He heard voices no one else could hear and started to lose his sight.

¹⁹ Sefotho says training lasts 6-12 months (Sefotho 2016: 260).

²⁰ White beads are *sangomas'* symbol in Lesotho; *twasas* get them as a graduation gift and wear them to show people that they are *sangomas* and are ready to help. The white colour symbolises light and divinity (private conversations, January 2019).

²¹ Private conversation, January 2019.

When he was almost blind, he accepted his fate, found a teacher and started his training. During *ukutwasa* he recovered his sight and learnt how to co-operate peacefully with the spirits. They were his paternal and maternal ancestors and they supported him on his progress to sangomahood. They no longer talk to him, unless he needs their assistance²².

Tselane M. was so sick that she kept fainting. It started in her teens and neither she nor her parents knew what could be the reason. Western doctors did not offer any help. There were times when she felt better and during one such time she married in the traditional way when she was 16²³. Thereafter her health deteriorated rapidly: she was weak during the day and she was sleep-walking at night. One night she came across an old lady who woke her up from her trance and told her that she was experiencing the *sangoma* calling. She became Tselane's teacher, she taught her herbs, Sotho history, how to communicate with spirits, and how to deal with patients. Tselane's training lasted 7 months, then she went to a *sangoma* school for a final month and graduation. Her husband understood the situation, accepted her calling and helped her pay for tuition. He also accepted that during *twasahood* *twasas* are not allowed sex, even with their husbands. They must also be on a special diet which excludes some kinds of meat, cheese, and vegetables. When Tselane came back home after initiation, she was healthy and strong. She is happy that ancestors chose her though she does not know why they did it. She never asked and she never will, she accepts their decision without any doubts.

The calling happens not only to young people. Matsepo is a very respected *sangoma* in her region, she trained many other *sangomas* and the lesser ones send patients to her when they cannot find a cure for them. She was fifty when she was called by the ancestral spirits, though she was just six when her first contact with ancestors occurred. Since childhood she could hear spirits and often she felt sick. Ancestors did not call her into sangomahood but they were present in her life and helped her during difficult times. She remembers being beaten by her mother who suspected her of thieving. At night she had a dream that revealed the location of the missing objects and she was able to lead her

²² Private conversation, January 2019.

²³ There are 3 kinds of marriage in Lesotho, all recognised by law: magistrate marriage, Church marriage, and traditional marriage, which means that two families agree to the union of their children and the man's family pays for the wife, usually in cattle. A *sangoma* can be asked for blessing but it is not necessary. Young people, usually from rural areas, ask for the land to build a hut and work the field. The land is granted for free and they do not have to pay taxes. Land is usually so small that it barely allows to grow crops for the family.

mother to them. Such situations were happening all her life and her family suspected it could be the *sangoma* calling yet she did not feel the calling until she was fifty, already married and a mother. It started during a trip to RSA. She took a relative to a doctor in Bloemfontain. The doctor could not heal her relative and told her to find a *sangoma*. That night Matsepo had a dream that revealed her where to go. Thus she found the *sangoma* to heal her relative and learnt from another dream that this person should be her teacher. She saw herself as a *twasa* in a vision and told the *sangoma* about it. The *sangoma* was surprised but agreed to teach her²⁴. During *ukutwasa* Matsepo felt strong and healthy for the first time in her life. She embraced the calling, studied hard to learn medical plants and how to co-operate with spirits to help patients. She is very happy that she was chosen for this vocation, even though it happened so late in her life. “Ancestors always have their reasons, maybe only at 50 I was really ready”, she said²⁵.

There are rare situations in which *twasas* do not have teachers but are taught by spirits. This was the case with the mentioned above Natefe S. who learnt not only from *sangoma* ancestors but from the river snake deity. Thabiso M. was also taught by spirits for several weeks before he found his teacher. Thabiso had no intention of becoming a *sangoma*, he wanted to be a teacher. However, he started having disturbing dreams and then visions during the day and he became sick. He could not concentrate, he was losing sight and could not see the writing so he had to quit school. He had a vision about his teacher but he refused to go to him. He was Catholic and he was scared, and people around him thought he was crazy. The spirits showed him herbs and taught him how to use them to make *muti*²⁶. After several weeks of spirits’ training, he finally decided to find his teacher who was expecting him. He went through six months of training during which he learnt healing, communication with spirits, *sangoma* ethics, and history of Sotho people. Ancestors granted him his wish to become a teacher – he runs an initiation school for boys²⁷.

During *ukutwasa*, apprentices have to be absolutely obedient to their teachers and spirits and they must reject all their personal views and desires. This is

²⁴ There are no statistical data as to how many teachers expect their *twasas*, some tell me their teacher was waiting for them, some are surprised by the appearance of a potential *twasa* at their doorstep.

²⁵ Private conversation, January 2019.

²⁶ Muti is a variety of herbal medicines which – in certain cases – may include animal parts. Sesotho word for *muti* is *moriana* but the term *muti* is widely used (private conversations with *lethuelas/sangomas*, January 2019).

²⁷ Private conversation, January 2019.

a hardship that all *twasas* go through, no matter how old or rich they are when called or what their skin colour is – obedience is required to crash an ego, to leave one's pride and habits behind and become a new person. All my *sangomas* informants confirm the importance of casting away the ego. These are the basic requirements in all shamanic training: the sickness that leads to the teacher, rejecting ego, and changing from a profane person to the one who co-operates with spirits and spiritual realm. Accepting the calling and the vocation means humility towards spirits, teachers, nature, and patients. Mathobeli P. told me she had to walk on her knees for two kilometres from her hut to her teacher during her initiation to prove the humility and surrender to spirits' will. Other *sangomas* confirm the tradition of kneeling and showing humility²⁸.

Twesas learn different means to contact spirits. It is a very personal process in Lesotho. In comparison, Zulu *sangomas* use bones to communicate with spirits²⁹. Piso M. uses bones to get answers. In Lesotho bones are used relatively rarely, many *sangomas* just go into deep meditation and seek spirits in this way. Some of them, like Malefetsane M., feel ancestors with them all the time. When patients come to him and he cannot recognise a sickness, he just asks the ancestors for help and hears the answer. Tsohleho M. does not use any tools, he feels ancestors are with him all the time. Mathobeli P. uses a piece of reed to hear the answer. She prays and calls upon spirits, she asks questions and hears the answer through the reed. Such communication was also observed in RSA, though it is relatively rare. Thabiso M. uses a steel stick to poke his patients. He also uses the Bible, he prays to God and opens the book, and he finds answers in the verses. This is in addition to asking ancestors for help, thus he combines ancient methods with Christian beliefs in the holiness of the Bible³⁰. Many *sangomas* in the Southern parts of Africa do this: they pray to God and call upon ancestors to help them heal their patients³¹.

Sangomas have their specialisations like many professionals. Some specialise in herbs, others in trance healing (they get into a trance, put their hands on patients, "mould" their bodies into healthy ones), some specialise in divination. Divination is often used for healing but it can be used for predicting the future

²⁸ Private conversations, March 2013, January 2019; also conversation with *sangomas* in other countries, 2012-2019.

²⁹ Divination bones consist of actual bones of sacrificial animals and small objects like shells, stones, and coins. In Sesotho they are called *litaola* (Moliehi 2013: 84 and my *sangoma* informants).

³⁰ Private conversations, March 2013, January 2019.

³¹ My research in last 10 years and Van Wyk (1996: 39).

and showing clients actions they should take to achieve their goals. Mathabang K. told me that she had had a divining talent since childhood. When she was in a primary school she had prophetic dreams about people she knew. She received the calling when she was about 30 and during her *twasahood* she learnt divination. Her tools were coins as representations of people and situations. She would cast them before her and the client, and from the pattern of coins she would read the situation. She does not need to use them anymore as she can always ask ancestors for help.

7. Graduation or initiation of a *lethuela/sangoma*

Ukutwasa is finished with *hlope* – an initiation, also called graduation, that is witnessed by all *sangomas* from the region and many guests³². This is a kind of exam during which *twasas* must prove their ability to contact spirits, recognise sickness, and find proper remedy for it. Often some things are hidden and *twasas* must find them intuitively or thanks to spirits' guidance³³. Cattle (usually white goats) are slaughtered for the ancestors and *twasas* give gifts (usually blankets) to their tutors and receive *sangoma* insignia – in Lesotho these are white beads which are worn on the head, neck or wrist. White is the colour of *sangomas*, their beads and sacrificial goats are white. For the ceremonies and rituals and also for visiting sacred places *sangomas* wear long skirts or a cloth that covers their bodies from waist down. This is a matter of respect towards spirits and other *sangomas*.

Graduation is a big occasion. Van Wyk states that often a cow is sacrificed for the initiation feast (Van Wyk 1996: 42). Such an expensive animal is used by those who can afford it, in other cases the sacrificial animals are goats. It is a public event and its aim is not only to check if a *twasa* has learnt enough to handle patients and clients but also to introduce a new *sangoma* into society. All *sangomas* from the region come for the graduation and ask ancestors for blessing the initiate. Prayers and ritual dancing are public, for everyone to see. Animals are slaughtered and the new *sangoma* is given a bladder to put on his/her head. This tradition is widely used by Zulus, among Basotho it does not happen every time. The bladder's filling is believed to be bitter for humans but sweet for ancestors. The skin, the gall bladder and bones become the future *sangoma*'s

³² Private conversations, January 2019.

³³ "The use of this term 'graduation' by *sangomas* themselves, rather than the often heard 'initiation', points to their own sense of professionalism" (Thornton 2009: 18). Still, the term "initiation" is used by many other scholars and my *sangoma* informants.

tools of work, the means of communication with spirits. The meat of the slaughtered animals is cooked and *sangomas* share it with families and other guests (Berglund 1976: 127, 154, Kohler 1941: 17, Van Wyk 1996: 42).

Even though it is believed that the calling must be accepted, many *sangomas* who put an effort and money into training and being initiated, quit the profession after some time. Thornton states that about 80% of *sangomas* stop practising their calling. He is an example himself. When he became a single father, he had to earn more and was unable to do so as a *sangoma* so he focused on his academic career³⁴. I asked my informants in Lesotho how many *sangomas* stopped practising. They did not know the number but confirmed that some *sangomas* quit. The reasons are various: ancestors may leave a person, *sangoma* may have too little talent or he/she can negotiate with ancestors to let him/her go back to a normal, mundane life. Modiehi is such a person. She received her calling at the age of 30 when she was in separation from her husband and already a mother. She served as a faithful *sangoma* for almost 30 years. In 2018 her beads' string broke and the beads fell on the floor. It was a sign from ancestors that they were happy with her work as a *sangoma* and that they released her from her duties. She was happy as a *sangoma* and she is happy now when she can live a life without patients and without worrying about people's problems. Clients still come to her, as they had done for previous decades, but she does not call upon ancestors and she does not want to use *muti* anymore. She uses water, she prays over it and changes it into holy water. She blesses people with it and believes that if people pray to God, God will help them achieve what they need. However, if sick people come and ask for *muti*, she mixes herbs because she still has the knowledge to do it. Even though Modiehi quit being a *sangoma* but she is still respected by her community.

8. *Lethuelas/sangomas* as healers

The biggest responsibility of *sangomas* is healing – these words I heard from all my informants in all countries I carried out field work during last decade. *Sangomas'* healing is holistic which means that only a combination of healthy spirit, body and mind can produce a healthy human being. In Sotho and other Southern African cultures sickness has always been treated in holistic terms: body, mind and soul are ill together, not separately. The physical sicknesses usually have non-physical reasons – like abusing ancestral spirits, a curse or unbalance in

³⁴ Private conversation, February 2018.

somebody's soul. *Sangomas* uncover the physical and the spiritual causes of illnesses and find solutions to cure. This holistic approach to life and health makes *sangomas* doctors, psychologists, and priests in one (Van Wyk 1996: 39, Maiello 2008: 248, Chidester 1992: 18, Podolecka 2016: 147). Because the reasons of sicknesses are often esoteric (e.g. workings of spirits), the process of healing is likewise – healing talent is considered a gift from ancestors. As ancestors are those who call *sangomas* to their vocation and work, they are also responsible for providing them with knowledge and tools, both via leading people to proper teachers and via direct dreams and visions in which ancestors teach³⁵.

"The definition of traditional [not Western] medicine implies a culturally appropriate ethnic health care system which makes use of plant and animal (and sometimes mineral) material in its healing and consulting pharmacopeia to treat physiological and psychological ailments. It also includes the use of these items for ceremonial, spiritual and religious purposes associated with the ethnic healing process" (Beilis, Esterhuizen, 2005: 15). The healing process is a combination of prayers, calling upon ancestors and Jesus Christ for help, getting into a trance, conducting healing ceremonies in sacred places such as caves or waterfalls, applying cleansing rituals, using *muti* herbal medicines), and by sacrifices. Places sacred for Basotho are often behind Lesotho's borders but in case of serious illness or other problematic life obstacles, Basotho travel to RSA. One of the most popular places is Motoulong, the Fertility Cave, near Clarens, Free State, where *sangomas* live alongside charismatic and Pentecostal Christian priests³⁶. The cave is huge and actual houses are built there. I visited the place and saw both the inhabitants and pilgrims. Many come from Lesotho for training and for various rituals.

Coplan carried out field studies among Basotho in many sacred places. He has observed a similar situation at Badimong cave where *sangomas* lived in little huts and shrines and protected sacred caves and grottoes. "Some enclosures are inhabited for weeks or even months by those whom the ancestors have

³⁵ All my *sangoma* informants and Rakotsoane (1996: 27).

³⁶ *Motoulong* means "a place of beating drums" which points to *sangomas'* drum music and rituals. San paintings adorn some rocks and San shamans use drums for ritual reasons as well (Mensele 2011: 15). The place is also called Fertility Cave because it is believed that barren women can be cleansed from bad energy there and can get pregnant. The cave consists of main high-ceilinged cavern and 7 little grottoes. There is over 2 metre high rock pillar in the main cavern. Women light candles and walk around it to purify their thoughts. Main rituals are done in this place. Then women meditate in grottoes for 7 days. After this time, they believe they will get pregnant (information gathered from *sangomas* and charismatic priests in the Fertility Cave, January 2019).

'arrested', and whom only the ancestors can declare cured of their afflictions and release. Others are used for services on special celebration and feast occasions, such as Easter, and by a range of healers, diviners, prophets and churches of every type known to southern Bantu people" (Coplan 2010: 982). This is a perfect example of the combination of Sotho ancient religious beliefs and Christianity which together make a unique form of deep esoteric belief in spirits' presence in the lives of the living.

Sangomas use various herbs, roots, shrubs, tree trunks, and local plants for healing purposes. The most popular one is *imphepho* which is considered the most sacred plant³⁷. It is collected on wild meadows and dried, and for ritual purposes it is lit by fire. Aromatic smoke is widely used to cleanse people and their surroundings, both in the physical meaning (i.e. their houses) and esoteric ones (i.e. the surrounding aura). The smoke is also inhaled by *sangomas* and is often given to patients to inhale. Other herbs and plants are usually mixed together to produce *muti*, a medicine that can be drunk or inhaled. *Imphepho* and *muti* are also used when a baby is born, for blessing during marriage rituals, at every initiation for *sangomas* and in initiation schools for boys and girls. It is also used to cleanse houses of bad energy, to call on spirits and for many other reasons.

In the 21st century sacred places are still believed to possess powers that can help – even educated people living in big towns like Maseru succumb to *lethuelas/sangomas'* help when in need, and pay in chickens or money for travels to places where their issues may be solved. This shows the power of belief in esoteric reasons of misfortunes and esoteric powers of *sangomas* who are trusted to help solving problems. Basotho are not separated from other ethnic groups, especially those who live close to the South African border. Monica Lukhele Mangengenene who takes permanent residence at Badimong and is the leading diviner, healer, and multi-lingual spokesperson says that her roots go so deep down the history that she had Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa, and even white ancestors (Coplan 2010: 982). This is very much in line with what I heard from my *sangoma* informants. The belief in mixing ethnicity and the travels of souls are also explanation for the calling of white *sangomas*, the phenomenon that took place even in colonial times but rapidly increased in numbers when apartheid was collapsing³⁸.

³⁷ *Imphepho's* Latin name is *helichrysum odoratissimum*. It is an aromatic, multi-branched herb with small yellow flowers.

³⁸ My *sangoma* informants told me that the calling of white people was nothing new, it just was not recognised during colonial or apartheid times (numerous private conversations in last 10 years).

Today white *sangomas* are trained by black ones and the latter are trained by whites – a phenomenon not popular in Lesotho because of barely existing number of white population but definitely not rare among Basotho living in RSA. White *sangomas* are – like their Sotho counterparts – first and foremost holistic healers, they undergo the same training and also treat their patients using esoteric methods of discovering sickness and finding cure.

Johan Classens who is a white *sangoma* trained in Zulu tradition had Basotho trainees, and with some of them he lived in the Fertility Cave. He built a hut in the cave and spent several months among other *sangomas* and charismatic and pentecostal priests there. When I visited the place with him, he was greeted by the Sotho *sangomas* and asked what had happened with Basotho he trained. Local *sangomas* were interested how his trainees were doing after becoming fully fledged *sangomas*³⁹.

9. *Lethuelas/sangomas* as part of global phenomenon of shamanism

There is no binding definition of shamanism. Taksami, a Siberian-born ethnographer, calls it a historical phenomenon present in Siberian religious beliefs, others perceive shamanism as a religion or a set of primitive beliefs and rituals, while still others as a way of life (Price 2001: 3). Eliade understands shamanism as a kind of religion because shamans have connection to deities, are mystics, and perform priestly duties. They are special kinds of priests because they are masters of ecstasy, they can be possessed by spirits and deities but they can also control the possession (Eliade 2011: 28-30). Before Christianisation *sangomas* and their counterparts in various Bantu cultures were the depositaries of sacred and religious wisdom. It was their task to pass religious beliefs down the generations and care for the spiritual growth of their people. Today, pre-Christian beliefs are hard to find but *sangomas* still preserve the knowledge about ancestral guidance and use this knowledge to contact spirits and help people. Also, like Siberian and other shamans, they are considered important figures in their societies. The first Basotho king, Moshoeshe I, kept a *sangoma* at his court and listened to his advice and so do Basotho till today.

Lethueals/sangomas calling is very similar to shamanic one. There is no psychiatric explanation of *sangoma* or shamanic sickness. It may take different forms in

³⁹ Private conversations, December 2018.

various cultures but the process always requires personal sacrifice, rejecting old ways of life, and submission to ancestors or deities. Eliade recalls how among Siberian, North and Southern American and Australian peoples a novice is guided by visions from “another realm”. It may seem impossible and absurd for Westerners but the sickness is a real experience, and a traumatic one, and a person who goes through it strongly believes in its reality. The ethnic group in which it happens also believes that visions and dreams are true – they justify the calling and validate the shaman’s role as a person who moved from profane to sacrum (Eliade 2011: 51, 53). This applies to *lethuelas/sangomas* as well, they have the same abilities and duties as Siberian shamans. Hence I argue that they are part of the shamanic phenomenon.

10. Christian churches’ attitude towards *lethuelas/sangomas*

Christianity arrived in Lesotho in 1833 with the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) who came to help the London Missionary Society (LMS). The converting process was based on the racist and prejudiced belief that Africans were heathens without any supreme god. Christian missionaries managed to convince Sotho people that their beliefs are dangerous for their souls, barbaric, Satanist, and primitive, while Christianity brings them enlightenment and a better life. Native religion was denied the status of religion and quickly Basotho started believing their oppressors (Mensele 2011: 16). The results were devastating for the Sotho culture. Their original religion survived in bits and pieces to be picked up by *sangomas*. Missionaries managed not only to introduce Christianity to Lesotho but also to divide the nation so far united in their belief in ancestral protection – Lesotho remains almost half Catholic half protestant since that time. “Missionaries didn’t bring Jesus, they brought their culture, and they uprooted people. Only now do churches in Lesotho understand that ancient belief in ancestors is not in contradiction with Christianity, and only now do they see that there is no sense in fighting for believers – what different is it if you go to a Catholic church one Sunday and Evangelical another week? Christianity should be about love and inclusiveness, about reading the Bible and following Jesus’ example, not about dividing people”⁴⁰.

During my research in Lesotho I spoke to priests of several Christian denominations and to the head of the Christian Council of Lesotho which comprises

⁴⁰ Khosi E. Makubakube, president of Christian Council of Lesotho, private conversation, January 2019.

7 churches: the Roman Catholic Church⁴¹, the Lesotho Evangelical Church for South Africa (LECSA), the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Assemblies of God in Lesotho, the Anglican Church of Lesotho, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and the Weslean Methodist Church (it broke away from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 2018 for financial reasons but kept the credo)⁴². The council's official attitude towards *sangomas* is positive. Its president Khosi E. Makubakube told me that all churches in the Council were inclusive and – in spite of intolerance in other countries – they welcomed *sangomas*, homosexuals, and people who decided to live in traditional kind of marriage without the church wedlock. When asked how the Council perceives *sangomas*, he said: "*Sangomas* have a gift from God, they see and hear things that ordinary people don't, they are like ancient prophets. God sends *sangomas* to people to heal holistically, to see what is wrong in their lives, what must be changed and repaired and then, when the mind and soul are healthy, the body also heals. Before Christianity, Basotho were united, they believed in ancestors' powers. Then, when white priests came, ancestors were almost forgotten, they went back to God. Now, that the priests are Basotho, ancestors are back. They help us communicate with God like saints. Many are the saints. Now two realities, two traditions reconcile and *sangomas* help us communicate with ancestors when we don't know how to do it. So why should any church reject them? Rejection comes from a lack of wisdom. And this is not my personal view, this is what our Council believes"⁴³.

The Council does not condemn rites and rituals that *sangomas* have managed to preserve. The most important one is introducing boys into manhood and the circumcision ritual. Though not present in Christianity, this centuries-old African tradition is cultivated till today and in recent years it gains enthusiasts. Thabiso M. allowed me to witness a part of training for the boys. Thabiso lives in Nazaretha region and runs a school for boys⁴⁴. They quit their government schools for six months when they are about 14-16 and come to his house to learn everything that a Sotho man should know: how to farm the land, how to manage cattle, how to speak to his wife and be understood (sic!), how to contact ancestors and care for them by special offerings so that they will care for him and his family. Boys

⁴¹ Lesotho is the only country in the world where Roman Catholic Church is not just a partner but a full member of the ecumenical body of the Christian Council (Makubakube, January 2019).

⁴² Makubakube, January 2019.

⁴³ Makubakube, January 2019.

⁴⁴ Initiation schools are called *mophatong/lebollong* (Moliehi 2013: 82).

learn through songs, poems, lectures and tales of the elders living nearby. The boys I met were mainly Christians but still their families decided to send them to the boys training and those teenagers were proud of being part of this tradition. Nearby there was a similar school for girls, when female *sangomas* taught but Thabiso was also invited to give occasional teaching⁴⁵. Thabiso told me that the tradition of initiation schools was becoming more and more popular and that sometimes he had students in their thirties, men who did not receive such education in their teen years but who want to complete their education. In 2013 he had a fifty year old student. He also said that *sangomas* would be present in these young people's lives: they would help women go through pregnancy, they would be asked to help an easy birth, to help in farming the land or finding a job. In the 21st century Basotho go back to their roots and combine tradition with Christianity and modernity.

The situation is not perfect though, some prejudice still happens. Hamubelo S. told me that her priest had serious problems with accepting her *sangoma* calling. She asked ancestors what to do and they said that God was one and no man could take his place to judge people. They suggested changing church from Roman Catholic to Apostolic one and said she would be closer to God there. However, the change did not help, the priests were not welcoming either. Finally she went to another Catholic and then to Anglican Church where she was finally accepted. Makubakube said I was against Church Council advice⁴⁶.

Many *sangomas* admit their peaceful co-operation with priests. Matsepo S. is Anglican and though at first the priest was not happy to see his faithful Christian become a *sangoma*, he gradually accepted it and even started coming to her for medicines. The new priest even sends sick people to her. Maliholo S. was part of the Dutch Reformed Church when her calling started in 1974. She spoke to her priest and he was not enthusiastic because he was afraid that she would renounce Jesus. When he saw that she stayed in the church and she was helping people, he accepted her calling. All his successors have had a good relationship with her and were her patients. Malefetsane has a more difficult situation as his priest in the Seventh Day Adventist Church does not accept his *sangoma*-hood. He was not rejected though and he is accepted in church and attends masses regularly. All my other *sangoma* informants are active members at their church community and have good relationships with their priests⁴⁷. Some

⁴⁵ Boys schools are also called "circumcision schools". There is no circumcision of girls (private conversation with Thabiso M., January 2019).

⁴⁶ Makubakube, January 2019.

⁴⁷ Private conversations, March 2013, January 2019.

sangomas leave their church if they are mistreated, e.g. Tsabiso S. is still Christian but does not follow the Roman Catholic Church anymore and does not seek a new church. Many *sangomas* start their healing or divination process with a prayer to Jesus who is considered the Great Ancestor and the messenger of God. It is believed that *sangomas*' gift for divination and helping people comes from God, therefore it is appropriate to pray to God or Jesus⁴⁸.

11. Conclusions

The analysis of the vocation, work, and reception of spiritual healers/diviners, especially *lethuelas/sangomas*, in Christianised Lesotho shows co-existence of ancient traditions with various forms of Christianity. These faiths permeate each other creating new forms of spirituality. Though the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches tried to eradicate native beliefs, they did not succeed, and after 200 years of their presence in Lesotho most churches have come to the conclusion that old spirituality does not defy Christianity. The faith in ancestors' presence and interference in the lives of the living is still strong and Basotho seek ancestors' help when in need; at the same time most of them belong to Christian churches. *Lethuelas/sangomas* and other "traditional" healers combine their medical knowledge based on plant medicines with spiritual healing involving ancestral spirits. This holistic approach earns them permanent respect and high position in the Sotho society. They also contribute to keeping old traditions alive and they are hardly influenced by non-Bantu traditions. However, even though I think that Sotho sangomahood is the purest in the entire region of Southern Africa, I still believe it is a part of the global phenomenon called shamanism. Shamans, like *lethuelas/sangomas*, are called to their profession, undergo the sickness which changes their bodies and minds, heal through apprenticeship learning and they have the same abilities (contacting the spiritual realm and seeking help there), duties and prerogatives⁴⁹. In the 21st century Lesotho we can observe the co-existence of ancient traditions with various forms of Christianity. These forms of faith permeate each other creating new forms of spirituality.

References

- Ashton, H. 1967. *The Basuto, a social study of traditional and modern Lesotho*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Moliehi 2013: 84 and my *sangoma* informants, January 2019.

⁴⁹ For more information why *sangomas* are part of shamanism see Podolecka (2016).

- Beckner, B.W. 2015. "Eugène Casalis and the French mission to Basutoland (1833-1856): A case study of Lamin Sanneh's mission-by-translation paradigm in nineteenth-century Southern Africa". *Missiology: An International Review* 43(1). 73-86.
- Beilis, N. & J. Esterhuizen. 2005. "The potential impact on Cape Griffon Gyps *coprotheres* populations due to the trade in traditional medicine in Maseru, Lesotho". *Vulture News* 53. 15-19.
- Berglund, A.-I. 1976. *Zulu thought-patterns and symbolism*. Uppsala: C. Hurst & Company.
- Casalis, E. 1861. *The Basutos: Or twenty-three years in South Africa*. London: C. Struik.
- Chidester, D. 1992. *Religions of South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Coplan, D. 1991. "Fictions that save: Migrants' performance and Basotho national culture". African Studies Seminar Paper. Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand. Online: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/39667486.pdf> [18.06.2021].
- Coplan, D. 2010. "Land from the ancestors: Popular religious pilgrimage along the South Africa – Lesotho Border". *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29(4). 977-993.
- Eliade, M. 2011. *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Polish translation: *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy*, trans. K. Kocjan. Warszawa: Aletheia.
- Farrer, J.A. 1879. *Zululand and the Zulus: Their history, beliefs, customs, military system, home life, legends, etc., etc., and missions to them*. London: Kerby & Endean.
- Gatti, A. 1962. *Sangoma*. London: Frederick Muller Limited.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hammond-Tooke, W. D. 1986. "The aetiology of spirit in Southern Africa". *African Studies* 45(2). 157-170.
- Kohler, M. 1941. *The izangoma diviners*. Pretoria: Department of Native Affairs of the Union of South Africa.
- Maiello, S. 2008. „Encounter with a traditional healer: Western and African therapeutic approaches in dialogue". *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53. 241-260.
- Makoa, E.T. 2000. *Collaboration between traditional healers and nurse practitioners in primary health care in Maseru health service area – Lesotho*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Mensele, M.S. 2011. *A study of rituals performed at two sacred sites in the Eastern Free State*. Unpublished MA Thesis. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.
- Mokotso, I.R. 2015. "A sustainable educational response to the recent increased witch killing and ritual murder 'liretlo' in Lesotho: Introducing Basotho traditional religion in Lesotho schools". *African Educational Research Journal* 3(4). 209-220.
- Moliehi, T.-R. 2013. *The practices of traditional healers in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the Roma Valley, Lesotho*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.

- Moteete, A. & B.-E. Van Wyk 2011. "The medical ethnobotany of Lesotho: A review". *Bothalia* 41(1). 209-228.
- Motlamelle, M.P. 1938. *Ngaka ea Mosotho* [Mosotho doctor]. Morija Printing Works, Lesotho.
- Moetsana-Poka, F.M. 2016. "Strengthening regulation of traditional midwifery practice in Lesotho". Unpublished MA Thesis. North-West University (Yunibesiti Ya Bokone-Bophirima), South Africa.
- Podolecka, A. 2016. "Sangomas, shamans and New Age: The hybridity of some modern healing and esoteric practices and beliefs in South Africa". *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* LXIX, Z. 1. 142-157.
- Price, N.S. (ed.). 2001. *The archaeology of shamanism*. London: Routledge.
- Rakotsoane, F.L.C. 1996. *Religion of the ancient Basotho with special reference to 'water snake'*. University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- Rakotsoane, F.L.C. 2001. *The Southern Sotho's ultimate object of worship: Sky-divinity or water-divinity?*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- Sefotho, M. 2016. "An exploration of 'calling' as a career among Basotho traditional healers". *Indlinga – African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 15(3). 253-268.
- Shaw, R. 1990. "The invention of 'African Traditional Religion'". *Religion* 20. 339-353.
- Thornton, R. 2009. "The transmission of knowledge in South African traditional healing". *Africa* 79(1). 17-34.
- Van Wyk, G.N. 1996. *Basotho*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group.