

Thesis report on:

Jo Thobeka Wreford

Ukusebenza nge 'thongo – Working with Spirit: Healing Connections in Contemporary South Africa

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assessed by **Wim van Binsbergen**

Professor of Intercultural Philosophy, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and Senior Researcher, African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands
binsbergen@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

INTRODUCTION

Based on fieldwork conducted in the Western Cape, South Africa, from 1999 to 2002, and against the background of a considerable theoretical, methodological and comparative ethnographic literature, this thesis claims to make two main points:

1. the feasibility of an experiential variant of ethnographic fieldwork in anthropology; and
2. the complementarity of historic forms of healing (notably in the *sangoma* format) and biomedicine, in general, and particularly in South Africa today.

Meanwhile, in ways which the candidate's extensive introductory and concluding arguments scarcely stress, the thesis' lengthy argument (1.2 million chars) largely goes beyond these two explicitly claimed points, and particularly stands out as

3. a detailed ethnographic study of contemporary *sangomahood* in South Africa, specifically the Western Cape. The fieldwork, experiential or otherwise, has provided the data and the insights towards such an ethnography. Here particularly glimpses of White *sangomas*, a detailed and illuminating description of the spiritual techniques of *ukuvumisa* ('finding') and *umhlahlo* ('intuition') (pp. 255ff), of the intimate life of one *sangoma* lady Nosibeli and her colleague Dr Kubukeli, are valuable additions to the already considerable ethnographic literature on *sangomahood* in Southern Africa. Moreover, it is from this ethnography, that the empirical pointers are derived that help the candidate argue the complementarity as under (2)

The ethnographic style is crisp and shows the candidate as a mature, keen, sensible, witty, and loving observer. Well written, and most of the time full of warmth and respect towards the handful of protagonists, well organised, with an up-to-date bibliography, and addressing worthy objectives in a courageous and strikingly honest way, the thesis in its present form is an obvious and considerable achievement, for which the candidate, the supervisor (who remains anonymous in the present version), the institutions facilitating and presumably

funding this research endeavour (equally anonymous), and the University of Cape Town, deserve to be congratulated.

However, such an assessment is, in my view, *not* the same as advocating that, on the basis of the present manuscript, the doctoral degree should be awarded immediately and without further revision of the thesis. In this report I will present the reservations I have, and in my conclusion I will suggest how the Examinations Committee might choose to act on these reservations, in the interest of the candidate, the anthropological profession, and the University of Cape Town.

These reservations inevitably reflect on my personal involvement in the thesis' argument. The candidate is doing me the great honour of basing her topic and her methodology largely, though not uncritically, on an article I published in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* in 1991. My name must appear well over a hundred times in the thesis. Gratification of one's vanity is not the least reward of scholarship, but undeniably it stands in tension with the role of academic assessor as External Examiner. At a risk of being unnecessarily critical so as to avoid the accusation of partiality, I will try to assess the thesis both by its own avowed objectives, and by what I take to be the wider considerations and imperatives of scholarship. Here, I cannot just dwell on what I take to be 'good anthropology': as the candidate well realises, my 1991 argument – however inspiring to her as a budding anthropologist – meant in fact a critical assessment, and my own swan's song, vis-à-vis anthropology as I then understood it; I traded my chair in anthropology for one in philosophy in order to do justice precisely to the implications of my 1991 argument. Nearly one and a half decades later, my own thinking on the matter has developed considerably, crystallising in an extensive publication output of which remarkably little is reflected in the candidate's argument. In this later published work, I do revisit, repeatedly and extensively (for details cf. van Binsbergen 1999, 2003: chs. 0, 5-8, 15), the 1991 argument, proposing thorough revisions which, if explicitly reflected in the present thesis, would have avoided some misunderstanding and unnecessary polemic.

The challenge of the present report is to steer clear both of vain approval and of the temptation to engage here in the detailed scholarly debate which the candidate's interpretation and criticism of my work necessitates; such debate should ultimately take place in the appropriate scholarly venue of a professional journal, after the publication of the thesis in its final form. In what follows, therefore, I will try to refrain from detailed criticism, and stick to more general issues. These far from exhaust the methodological and theoretical criticism I could level against the candidate's position, but of course, once the thesis is found to be worthy of detailed criticism and debate, that already in itself means that it is a defensible contribution to scholarship at PhD level. Such perfectly admissible moot points must be distinguished from the, in my view, academically unacceptable flaws that I will highlight and critique in the following paragraphs.

I must pick my way very carefully, lest I fail to do justice to the candidate's honourable reliance on my own work, to the expectations of approval which such cannot fail to kindle, and to the sense of brotherhood which she inspires in me, a fellow *sangoma* of European extraction. Even so, I fear that my assessment will greatly surprise and grieve the candidate, and I have gone to excessive lengths to make myself clear and to indicate possibilities of improvement. When I agreed to act as External Examiner to this thesis, not knowing that it claimed to be largely inspired by my own work, I did not expect such complications, and that is why this assessment has taken much longer than foreseen. I apologise for all inconvenience caused by this delay.

I have no objection against this report being shown to the candidate. To her I would like to add that it is not academic malice or ambition, but an obligation – both academic and spiritual – to get things straight and to let her reap the best possible result of her own

achievements, which have brought me to the present, incisive and no doubt at times hurtful and excessive criticism. If also here she could detect the hand of the ancestors, I would be greatly relieved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The candidate's extremely eclectic treatment of my own work turns out to converge with her use of many other authors: these are usually (with some exceptions, notably Gellner – although she misses the obvious opportunity of testing Gellner's theoretical pronouncements against his own, utterly etic, formal and model-centred, ethnography; Gellner 1969) cited in approval, presented as a source of inspiration, but often very eclectically so (ignoring all details of more specific content), in a blanket format (e.g. 'NN1 1998; NN2 1995; NN3 1989') that very rarely extends to page references, as if the whole of a book or article deals with the issue at hand in that particular passage in the candidate's text, and only with that issue. Most frequently, such references are invoked to support a particularly apt phrase or useful concept, which the candidate appropriates and uses in isolation. Rarely (but in the progression of chapters, more or more) does the specific content of an cited author's argument receive more than one or two lines, so that a sustained critical argument becomes possible. Notable exceptions include the treatment of Taussig on mimesis, Reis on *umhlahlo*, Geschiere and van Binsbergen on witchcraft (the candidate nicely reconciles the disagreement between these two authors, pp. 470f), van Binsbergen on *sangomahood*. One would have preferred, often, a lesser scope and a greater specific depth of reading and of explicit discussion. For instance, the great Beninese philosopher Hountondji is very frequently invoked to provide one-liners on the essential pluralism and world-wide origin of knowledge – excellent ideas that I fully support, but also ideas that run so much against the current hegemony of North Atlantic knowledge that one needs to render, in detail, the specific argument that brings Hountondji to such knowledge claims. Moreover, some references in the thesis are simply wrong or non-existent.¹

As an undesirable and (considering the very real qualities of this work) undeserved result of this somewhat unusual style of referencing, the situating of the author's own argument within the wider recent literature often appears more a form of embellishment of an already

¹ E.g. van Dijk & Pels 1996 is nearly consistently referred to as van Dijk 1996; van Dijk, Reis & Spierenburg 2000 as van Dijk 2000 instead of van Dijk et al. 2000; mannikins or mannequins, alleged to work the catwalk in van Binsbergen 2001 (with 'website 2000' as the only reference to a published article; there are billions of websites) turn out to feature in Geschiere 1997, and so does 'African traditional medicine as being darkly twinned with witchcraft' (p. 407, cf. pp. 464, 467) although erroneously attributed to me; Sichone, in progress (p. 96) does not feature in the bibliography as a source on the Lenshina rising, but neither does what is generally considered to be the *locus classicus* on this topic, van Binsbergen 1981. Archbishop Milingo from Zambia is repeatedly referred to, but again the *locus classicus* (Ter Haar 1992) is ignored. The phrase 'searingly personal' is first, in ch. 1, attributed to van Dijk [and Pels] 1996, but later (p. 353) to Ranger in the same 1996 book. On p. 404 I am misquoted as considering African healing to be 'destined to be "singled out as the proverbial abode of witchcraft"', but it is Africa *tout court*, not African healing, to which I attribute this dubious qualification. Augé is consistently misspelled as Auge. Sometimes references are invoked in a highly inappropriate or nonsensical way, e.g.:

'This divination method is often linked by my teacher to her success at diagnosing witchcraft, a claim which is verified by Ria Reis' research in contemporary Swaziland (Reis, 2000)' (p. 239f, one of the very few positively defective sentences in the entire thesis, though.)

On p. 313 the title of a paper of mine (1999) is cited between quotation marks but no reference or bibliographic entry is given.

I concentrate here on publications by myself and my close colleagues because those I know well enough to spot inconsistencies readily. I suspect there are many more.

preset personal argument, than the development of an intersubjective argument largely based on senior other authors in the professional fields of anthropology, African Studies, and philosophy. The thesis would make a better impression, and its undeniable value would be more manifest, if this major defect could still be mended, as, I suppose, could be done within a few weeks of further editing.

RELIGIOUS FIELDWORK, AND CONTRASTING BACKGROUNDS

Turning now to matters of substance, we must assess whether the candidate's treatment of the three points outlined above (experiential fieldwork; complementarity between *sangoma* treatment and biomedicine; and the ethnography of *sangomahood*), invite any serious criticism and is capable of specific improvement. Here the matter of experiential fieldwork is the most controversial. In order to appreciate the various issues involved let me briefly sketch the approach in religious anthropological fieldwork, and contrast the backgrounds of the candidate, and the anthropologist whom she cites as the main inspiration for her ethnographic method.

Approaching ethnographically the religio-therapeutic complex of other people outside the ethnographer's own habitual cultural horizon, has been common practice in anthropology for almost a century. Such an approach has usually been framed in objectivity, methodological rigour, a careful insistence on the distinction between the outside investigator and those owning and living the complex as insiders. Often this distinction combined with the investigator's dismissal of the insiders' beliefs and practices as primitive, inferior etc. under conditions of racialism, colonialism, and postcolonial hegemony. But even apart from such political concerns based on subordination, exclusion and exploitation on a macro scale, there was the methodological concern to produce ethnographical knowledge that is both reliable and valid, hence replicable, and hence capable of being used for comparative cross-cultural analyses detached from the person of the original ethnographer. At the back there is the distinction between *etic* and *emic*. Even if ethnographers proclaim that all ethnography should be emphatically *emic* (i.e.: seeking to understand local concepts, practices and relationships in terms the participants themselves understand and employ), but (considering that all ethnography essentially involves representation, and translation, into a medium – professional and specialised academic international language – that is unavoidably different from that of the original ethnographic situation) all ethnography is ultimately *etic*, appropriative, alienating, a meta-discourse over the top of the participants' heads, and hence unavoidably guilty of the violence of representation.

Involving shrines, rituals, specialists, beliefs, divination, healing, sacrifice, etc. the study of *sangomahood* unmistakably belongs to the field of religious anthropology, *pace* the candidate's protests (see below) to the effect that *sangomahood* is uniquely a therapeutic and not a religious idiom; like in most African contexts, it is impossible to separate the religious from the therapeutic here. In the sub-discipline of religious anthropology, the dominant paradigm has been to engage in ostentatiously *emic* representation of belief systems and ritual practices, while at the same time reducing the beliefs to an ulterior reality (the subconscious, the social, the political economy, conflicts between classes, genders, age groups, ethnic groups etc. etc.) to which the ethnographer/analyst claims to have access while that ulterior reality is not directly perceived by, not even knowable to, the participants. Hence established religious anthropology tends to be based on epistemological inequality and condescension.

After establishing myself in religious anthropology since the late 1960s, and having studied ecstatic religion and therapy in various African settings, I decided in the late 1980s that, for reasons of charitable sociability, and of political solidarity, I was no longer prepared to project such an analytical methodology to *sangomahood* in Southern Africa; instead I allowed myself to be sucked in by the local idiom, became a *sangoma*, wrote my piece to that

effect, and gradually shifted fields from anthropology to philosophy – while continuing to develop my identity as a literary writer which was older than my identity as an anthropologist anyway. Later I realised there had been a third, epistemological reason for my rejection of the dominant, reductionist paradigm in religious anthropology: the validity of (some of the) knowledge produced under *sangomahood*.

This positioning, already idiosyncratic enough for a professional anthropologist, can only be appreciated (and also needs to be considered in a relative light) as reflecting the dilemmas of someone who has invested decades of his professional life in pursuing the dominant paradigm of religious (and medical) anthropology; who, as a specialist on Southern Africa throughout more than three decades but not only in that capacity, has intensely grappled with the political contradictions of the subcontinent; and who, as a leading Africanist on the national and international scene, has had to come to terms with the politics of knowledge production in Africa in a context of postcolonial hegemony.

Born in the same year as her External Examiner and fellow *sangoma* (1947), the candidate brings very different things to her own research on *sangomahood*. She was born and lived in the United Kingdom, trained and worked there as an architect specialising on community projects; on the side she trained and worked as a complementary (‘alternative’) healer, in which capacity she adopted, in typical New Age fashion (no pejorative implications intended), a globalised (but largely Asia-derived) mixture of therapeutic and cultural traditions with typical (*and far from unreasonable*) assumptions of unboundedness, universal applicability, and an underlying unity informed by the fundamental global sameness of the human body and of the human mind. She went through Jungian therapy in the 1980s, and having given up her native Anglicanism very early in life she now identifies as a Buddhist, having gone through a Buddhist initiation shortly before embarking on her South African PhD fieldwork (pp. 50f, 113, 215, 495, etc.). She first set foot in Southern Africa (Zimbabwe) in 1992, and only six years later began to pursue the study of *sangomahood* in earnest, largely with a view on extending and reinforcing her healing skills, and only secondarily with a view on writing a doctoral thesis in anthropology. The thesis contains extensive autobiographical sections but they do not mention any specific training in anthropology except in the context of PhD thesis supervision. There is no evidence of formal training in, or attachment to, the classic texts of anthropology, nor standard anthropological research techniques in the domains of kinship, religion, symbolism, beliefs, myths, etc. In fact, with a frankness that pervades the thesis (and that contrasts very favourably with the professional impression management habitual among anthropologists – often suggestive of far greater linguistic and cultural competence and greater knowledge of the details of people’s lives than tends to be the case among the members of that discipline today), the candidate admits to substantial shortcomings in this respect (p. 126). Of the many languages spoken in South Africa, the candidate only knows her native English, but given the language proficiency of the other protagonists in her research, she managed to conduct her research fully in that *lingua franca*.

Anthropology was made, and sustained, by outsiders, including marginalised and/or single women. Moreover, everyday social life equips any member of society with a practical understanding of social, cultural and political processes at the micro-level – enough to engage in alien fieldwork situations. Life experience is a better teacher than books and lectures. The thesis shows that the intellectual and practical baggage which the candidate brought to her fieldwork has enabled her to do interesting and valuable fieldwork. However, it is the intellectual processing of the fieldwork data into a sustained, theoretically informed professional framework that makes a doctoral thesis in anthropology.

Here, the candidate’s efforts, however worthy of our sympathy and support, as yet fail to convince on a number of counts.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE, AND COMPARISON

A relatively simple point concerns the considerable disregard for the structure and dynamics of social relations, especially the wider social-structural and political framework in which *sangomahood* and some of its exponents operates in South Africa today. The candidate has a perceptive eye for the immediate network relations in which her handful of protagonists operate, among close kin, teachers and adepts, colleagues and rivals. But beyond that, the world of Cape Town remains shady, its class structure, open and hidden conflicts, contestations for state power under the new dispensation of the post-apartheid state unarticulated. Why should it be that the central protagonist, the elderly *sangoma* Mrs Nosibeli – whose Zulu ethnic background is only very gradually disclosed to the reader – should live in a predominantly White suburb and hide her *sangoma* identity from her neighbours (pp. 76, 337)? Could it be that there is something in the politics of the public space, dominated by White and Christian, literate interests for several centuries in South Africa, that has systematically precluded the negotiation of African identities including traditional religion and healing from that space, and forced such expressions to go, more or less, underground (cf. van Binsbergen 2002b, 2004) Why is it that at the same time a Member of Parliament manages to mobilise one of the country's central intellectual institutions, the University of Cape Town, for *sangoma* conferences (p. 323ff) where the exclusive African nature of this medical specialism is vigorously proclaimed? What is the numerical extent of *sangoma* consultation as a first-line medical facility in various parts of Cape Town? In short, what is the place of *sangomahood* in the cultural politics of post-apartheid South Africa, and how does it relate to experiences under apartheid and to major ideological and political processes (for instance those crystallising around *ubuntu* and the *African Renaissance*) after the attainment of majority rule? Is *sangomahood* the kind of 'therapy of the people' one might expect to gain ascendance once apartheid oppression by a White minority has been lifted? Or is *sangomahood* rather to be identified as one among a series of neo-traditional fossilisations of cultural identity and specificity as were created, or at least furthered, precisely under the apartheid state, and therefore somewhat suspect under modern conditions?

The thesis contains some of the material on the basis of which one might begin to answer these questions, and these questions would certainly deserve a place among the points for further research, but as it is the candidate turns out to have little attention for what is yet one of the most fundamental processes in which the society she studies is involved, and therefore the unavoidable backdrop to whatever micro-phenomena she investigates: *the rearrangement of local and global cultural power positions under majority rule, after apartheid*. More in general, she lacks a sociological (as distinct from a perceptive social) eye, for instance, she asserts that *sangomas* tend to have conflictive relationships including marriages, and that they tend to travel and move a lot, but fails to provide comparative data on non-*sangomas* so that a controlled comparison could be made.

Similarly, the comparison between biomedicine and *sangoma* therapy, proclaimed to be one of the two main points of this thesis, must – at least in its present form – be faulted on methodological grounds. Where is the detached empirical analysis of biomedicine? Where is the fieldwork in hospitals, surgeries, training institutions, professional meetings of exponents of biomedicine, interviews with patients and doctors, to bring out fundamental orientations (and contradictions) of biomedicine beyond the obvious stereotypes with which every user of biomedicine is equipped as a member of her society and culture? In what socio-political macro setting of post-apartheid South Africa are the debates situated, and how are they empowered or disempowered? What is their interface with current politics of culture, in

which *sangomahood* presumably plays a part? Or must we simply trust the candidate's superficial stereotypes, e.g.

‘As the content of Chapter Eight explores, [Doctor Kubukeli – one of the thesis' *sangoma* protagonists], like other medicine men in the biomedical fraternity, is almost instinctively publicity-conscious. He utilises the press as an engine to drive his practice in ways which echo those of western biomedical specialists.’ (p. 312)?

The comparison between the two therapeutic spheres appears to be one-sided, since the biomedical sphere is empirically underrepresented. Moreover, contrary to the expectations kindled in the introduction (p. 8), the thesis offers very little evidence of successful *sangoma* cures, certainly not in the case of the candidate herself, whose period of admitted great distress was over a decade before her initiation as a *sangoma*, and for whom therefore the apprenticeship (*ukuthwasa*) and the subsequent initiation, contrary to *sangoma* orthodoxy, was not in response to an protracted and unbearable suffering.

Speaking of comparison, the candidate does not explore the theoretical and methodological conditions for the comparisons she frequently makes, usually in passing: between South Africa and Zimbabwe (adjacent cultural area but, as the thesis implicitly shows, with rather distinct healing traditions); but also all over Africa as if total globalisation (or a firm and widespread pan-African culture) were already an established and accepted fact; and even with extensions into China. I am an outspoken champion of long-range comparison in space and time, and – admittedly – the extensive use of African parallels in localising ethnographies is established scholarly practice which this thesis merely emulates. Yet the rigour associated with a PhD project demands that the conditions for comparison are explicitly stated.

GLOBAL CONTINUITY: AN UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION OF THE CANDIDATE'S ROLE AS A COMPLEMENTARY HEALER IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC REGION?

It is my impression that the candidate's avowed New Age orientation is partly responsible for her tendency towards sweeping comparison and generalisation. It is in this vein that she can identify (p. 341) ‘the West’ as a region whose specific ills are diagnosed (in terms of lack of attention for the spiritual), and can be offered a remedy (*sangomahood*) within one paragraph; an excellent idea (with close parallels in my own work), but PhD stuff? Occasionally, unpalatable chunks of New Age idiom enter into the text, e.g. when a person pointing to her breast is said to point ‘to heart chakra’ (only a few lines down this is censored into ‘to the heart’, p. 164); or when (by a generalisation of the idiosyncratic New Age idiom widespread among complementary healers in the North Atlantic region),

‘Both Z and myself by this time were suffering from a variety of *aural* disturbances’... (p. 269; my italics).

I submit that the text needs one more round of editing, either to take out (which would be somewhat regrettable) what from the standpoint of a universalising academic discipline like anthropology would appear the local idiosyncratic idiom of a North Atlantic – or global – community not coinciding with the professional community of anthropologists, or to explicitly frame this kind of expressions in such a meta-analytical, personal context that they may become acceptable – but may also be taken relatively – as ‘wisdom beyond anthropology’.

It is, I submit, as an exponent of a consciously globalised, translocal New Age healing repertoire, more than as a professional anthropologist (let alone professional architect) that the candidate has inserted herself into the healing scenes of Zimbabwe and Cape Town. Although she frequently characterises her fieldwork strategy with a phrase borrowed from me, ‘going all the way’, this means something totally different (but neither inferior, nor superior) in her case than in mine:

- in my 1991 case, braving the external and internalised pressures of a professional identity and stance cultivated throughout one’s adult life;
- in her case, making earnest with the unboundedness that was implied in her semi-professional identity as a complementary healer, in the first place.

The candidate’s sense of continuity between her own situation and that of her African healer friends and teachers seems primarily inspired by a sense of being transcultural colleagues, more than by any theoretical anthropological notion she may have brought to the fieldwork – including the notion of ‘experiential fieldwork’ or ‘mimesis’. It is important to establish this crucial point. It does not in the least disqualify the candidate’s fieldwork, on the contrary: being only partially professionalised as an anthropologist, she did not bring to the field the distortive juxtaposition of ‘analyst/observer’ versus ‘informants’. Instead she allowed herself to ride on a wave of transcultural affinity and recognition that, as a more recent product of globalisation, has rendered somewhat obsolete the fieldwork stance of classic anthropology, as a much earlier product of globalisation.

Having studied *sangomahood* as an anthropologist and having practiced it as a *sangoma* for one and a half decades, I am happy to confirm that as a fieldwork strategy the candidate’s approach was successful and yielded valid, reliable, replicable data that ring true to anyone who knows the topic.

However, in the discursive rendering of the fieldwork in academic, anthropologising prose the candidate seems to overplay her hand.

THE UNCERTAIN CONCRETE BENEFITS OF ‘EXPERIENTIAL’ FIELDWORK

The traineeship (*ukuthwasa*) as a *sangoma* certainly is a means of gaining access, of being allowed to share day-to-day and ritual events as a matter of course, of sharing in essential information and of getting the right feel for what matters in *sangoma* circles, and what not.

It does not seem to be the only way, considering the considerable openness surrounding *sangomahood* in Cape Town today, the frequent access even of Whites to apprenticeship and graduation, the interest from the part of biomedicine and politics etc. When the candidate says (p. 66),

‘I am certain, with van Binsbergen, that the method results in knowledge which would be inaccessible to the participant observer as “outsider”’,

I am not sure if we mean the same thing: esoteric therapeutic knowledge, such as implied in the practical use of *sangomahood* for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes, or the kind of descriptive knowledge that makes up accepted ethnography? For acquisition of the latter type of knowledge, I am not so sure (any more?) that ‘going all the way’ is a unique, or even better, ethnographic method.

We may also admit that a considerable part of the thesis’ ethnography is not particularly enriched by the fact that the data were obtained while its author trained to be a *sangoma*. As

the candidate repeatedly admits under the heading of ‘humble pie’ (e.g. p. 157), and as I have discussed at length myself (van Binsbergen 1998 and 2003: ch. 6), submitting to the training routine in many ways precludes posing the kind of systematic questions, and pressing on after unclear or otherwise unsatisfactory answers, that would be taken from granted in the ethnographic routine. In principle, the training routine also tends to fixate one’s network position in the field, discouraging entries at other points in the field and precluding the additional perspectives that these may offer – but in this case the contacts with a few other *sangomas* in addition to her teacher seem to have somewhat circumvented this danger.

However, much of the thesis’ argument, while based on data that became available by the candidate’s research strategy of ‘becoming a *sangoma*’, is in a format that, however respectful and sympathetic, is still highly objectifying. She admits to taking interviews, even with her own *sangoma* teacher (p. 106), even with her own father (p. 236). The lavish use of acronyms (and not ‘diminutives’, p. 15) to indicate the protagonists is one, unfortunate, example, which completely runs counter to the thesis’ intentions, and should be changed so as to enable the reader to meet, and get to know, real people with real names. Also the discussion of White *sangomas*, of cultural politics around *sangoma* (to the rudimentary extent to which there is such a discussion), of the complementarity between *sangomahood* and biomedicine, is grist-of-the-mill ethnography (with this proviso that it lacks socio-structural depth) which could do entirely without the plea for ‘experiential’ ethnography that takes up chapters 2 and 7.

Perhaps the most objectifying, and in general weakest, passage in the thesis is where conspicuous *sangoma* attributes (strings of beads worn across the shoulders and crosswise under the breasts; beaded headbands adorned with gall bladders; and white cloths) are interpreted by analogy with the biomedical doctor’s stethoscope, head-mirror, and white coat (pp. 374f, especially 379f). At this point in the text the reader is already familiar with the fact that the candidate, increasingly identifying as the *sangoma* she has become through initiation and graduation (although not through actual practice, p. 158), follows her inner voices not only as guidelines in personal life (p. 265) but also in thesis writing. The point is not that such intuitions are necessarily wrong (in the three cases cited here, however, the correspondences appear to be merely superficial and formal, without any generic or historic connections), but that, again, they are not validated in the light of an explicit methodology, and therefore do not constitute meaningful statements in the sense of an empirical discipline such as anthropology – they cannot be verified or falsified since the conditions for such an assessment remain utterly unspecified. I stress that here the candidate’s analysis is yet entirely *etic* in the sense that no grounds are found, not even sought, in the participants’ conscious perceptions to validate the candidate’s symbolic interpretation; her experiential method thus becomes *a license to substitute her own cognitions for those of the host society* – in the very anthropological tradition from which she claims to have broken away. Meanwhile, in ways the candidate appears to be unaware of, anthropology does offer the systematic methodologies to underpin *etic* symbolic analysis of this kind, e.g. in Lévi-Straussian structuralism, or in the Louvain School’s (of which she only cites one of the earliest works: Devisch 1985) stance of ‘speaking like a Yaka’ (or a member of any other host society). One gets the impression that, as a relatively untutored anthropologist (who however claims to be ‘a not so naive anthropologist’ – cf. Barley 1986), the candidate does not quite realise what it is she is doing.

‘GOING ALL THE WAY’ IN FIELDWORK

Of paramount importance for an assessment of this thesis, therefore, is the following: the claim of ‘going all the way’, and the attending plea for ‘experiential’ fieldwork, risks remaining a license for unlimited self-indulgent navel-gazing, as long as it is not accompanied

by an explicit theoretical and methodological exploration into the dangers and limitations of self-analysis through introspection.

Let us bring the case down to its true proportions. *All* field anthropologists use their own experiences in order to make professional ethnography – they insert themselves, with greater or lesser reservations, in an existing community and progressively formulate their insights on the spur of such inspiration, puzzles, doubts, fears, insecurities, as their personal life in the field produces in them. However, by an inveterate classic anthropological convention, most anthropologists (with an increasing trickle of postmodernising exceptions since the 1980s) have stuck to the disciplinary convention that such personal experiences are not permitted to enter into a professional anthropological text – they have to be dissimulated under a veil of objectivity. If they are shared by ‘the others’, i.e. the members of the host society, it is these others that will be reported on, not the fieldworker herself. Often the fieldworker’s role consists in translating, objectifying, her own local personal experience (puzzlement, insight, fear, etc.) into an informal but testable working hypothesis concerning the behaviour and the cognitions of the members of the community under study, – a working hypothesis subsequently to be tested empirically on the participants, and only if more or less confirmed to be committed to the pages of printed ethnography. Completing this cumbersome methodological trajectory means that one takes an objectifying distance from the intimate sociability that informs the very field relations out of which ethnography is born. However, refusing to complete this methodological trajectory has largely meant (at least in the six decades between Malinowski and the arrival of postmodern ethnography) that one gives up the claim of anthropology as scientific, and instead resigns oneself to pursuing a genre of fiction writing, or of philosophy.²

These are central questions of ethnography, touching on textual authority, validity, epistemological and social charity between fieldworker and host community, aesthetics, the violence of representation, and the exercise of power and initiative at self-representation (of the members of the host community) versus condescending and alienating vicarious representation of others (by the ethnographer). They relate to essential questions of hegemony and intercultural communication in the world today, and cannot be adequately treated merely in passing, in the present context. However, contrary to what the candidate suggests (p. 139), the fear of going native in anthropological fieldwork is not just hegemonic, as a jealous and arrogant avoidance of ‘the other’ at all costs. That fear is also purely methodological: lest the anthropologist destroys the critical distance on which the classic conception of ethnography depends.

If the fieldworker refuses (or overlooks) to make this objectifying translation, to complete this cumbersome trajectory, and instead insists on introducing her or his own acting and conscious self as a protagonist in analytical ethnography, the result is *belles lettres* or introspective philosophy, not empirical anthropology. Anthropology, classic or postmodern or whatever kind, simply does not offer accepted methodological procedures under which self-analysis may be engaged in professionally, as part of the ethnographic exercise. For me this was a reason to opt out of anthropology and become an intercultural philosopher, which – in combination with my literary work – offers me more room to reflect on intersubjectivity and

² Incidentally, my published literary writing on *sangomahood* has remained limited to the middle section of the 1991 piece, whose narrative forms may be literary, but which is certainly not *fictional* in the sense of containing aesthetic inventions deviating from (what I take to be) the literal truth. A greatly revised and expanded version of this piece is now included in van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 5. In order to lend rhetorical force to my claim that anthropology could not accommodate what I was doing with *sangomahood*, I threatened to write a novel instead, under the working title of *Servant of the Ancestors*, but this never materialised – I merely published a novel on my much earlier (1968) fieldwork into ecstatic religion in North Africa, shortly before my Botswana fieldwork in the late 1980s, which yielded the 1991 piece. The candidate’s extensive discussion of the limitations of the literary alternative, therefore, is something of a red herring (p. 159f).

personal transference in intercultural encounters, also on the basis of my own experiences (or of whatever I manage to represent as such). I ate my cake, and no longer have it.

However, the candidate, relatively unhindered by the canons of professional anthropology, does not see the point. Mistakenly reading my piece on ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ as a recipe for the production of *sangoma* ethnography instead of for what it was intended: a critique of established religious anthropology, she decides to have her cake and eat it at the same time. She parades a selection of postmodern ethnographers to argue, somewhat gleefully, that

‘anthropology has simply overtaken van Binsbergen’

(which, in a lively and populous academic discipline, is quite possible, after one and a half decades, although the authors she cites, and the way she does so, do not convince me), and that, under this new dispensation, anything goes as anthropology, especially experiential introspection, even though unframed by a theoretical argument that explicitly and in detail engages with the standard critique customarily levelled against introspection in the social sciences and in philosophy.

Thus in the hands of the candidate, the aim of fieldwork is defined, rather incredibly, in the following terms (p. 68):

‘I suggest that the task is to seek to experience what the others experience, that they see and feel’

– the aim of ethnography would then be to report on that *vicarious* experience of the self, and trace its inner movements in a bid to grasp the hidden realities of the other. Once again, this is how fieldwork sometimes works in practice, but usually with the saving grace of the professional act of translation that, after the inspiration that may or may not be derived from introspection, seeks to make the dawning insight intersubjective and external, by empirically exploring if the local others feel the same, and when, and how, and how we as anthropological outsiders or newcomers can be reasonably sure they do. If this cumbersome trajectory is not traversed, if this bridge to empirically grounded intersubjectivity fails to be constructed, then the result is not anthropology, and whatever awards it may invite, a doctoral degree in anthropology should not be among them. One wonders how a researcher like the candidate can be so naive about self-analysis and the dangers of distortion and transference, on the one hand, yet (and rightly!) so conscious of well-known post-hoc revision of personal memories that she opts to present her ethnographic accounts as literal quotations from, or as textual reconstructions based on, her various types of text written during the fieldwork itself.

At the risk over overstating the obvious, let me try to define what the rationale of ‘total immersion in fieldwork (van Binsbergen 2003: chs. 0, 1, 6, and 15) is: to test, through your own public behaviour in the host society and through the hosts’ responses to that behaviour in terms of approval or disapproval, flow of information or exclusion from information, acceptance or rejection, if you have understood local idioms, conventions and practices correctly. The rationale is the construction of grounded and intersubjective intercultural knowledge, not through the idiosyncratic generation of vicarious personal experiences that are subsequently to be analysed through introspection, but through the submission to intersubjective scrutiny on the part of the members of the host society.

At the back of this misorientation in the candidate lurks her lack of appreciation for what is perhaps anthropology’s single most important concept: *culture*. Not that that concept is unproblematic! Anthropology’s invention of the concept of culture in the second half of the 19th century, and its subsequent insistence on the equal values of ‘cultures’ for the sake of vindicating oppressed colonial subjects in the first half of the 20th century, left us by the middle of the 20th century with the images of reified culture, and of Africa especially as a patchwork quilt of discrete and bounded cultures, fragmented, eroded, and ready to surrender

to North Atlantic cultural, economic, social-organizational, constitutional, political and military hegemony; by a common dialectic, the force that was once liberating, had become oppressive, e.g. in the well-documented use of culture and ethnicity by the apartheid state. A fundamental critique of culture is therefore part of contemporary anthropology. Moreover, globalisation has often involved the situational and strategic denial of cultural specificity, difference, and boundaries – and their replacement by new ones. The postmodern subject, certainly in a relatively highly globalised society like South Africa today, finds herself (or rather, constitutes herself) at the interplay between boundedness and unboundedness, historic identity and manipulative strategy, self-realisation and self-destruction, continuity and innovation. (Incidentally, this is where the exploration of the conditions for cross-continental and intercontinental comparison, in healing and otherwise, should have begun.) One part of this postmodern identity construction is deceptively similar all over the globalised world, it appears to be continuous, displays common roots which go back to shared historic origins, or has converged recently under the impact of similar, or identical, pressures of the world economy, the media, world religions, science, formal education, literacy. This is where the European complementary therapist, who (or so, at least, I interpret her position) brings an implicitly unbounded New Age conceptualisation to her South African fieldwork, cannot fail to be aware of continuities between her own outlook in life and therapy, and that of the *sangomas* whom she befriends. However, another part of postmodern identity construction is culturally specific (and subject to conscious ethnic positioning and juxtaposing – in the specific case of South Africa all artificially reinforced by the apartheid state, and then again highly contested in the post-apartheid state), and experienced in specific historic frameworks (in South Africa: colonial conquest, apartheid, extreme class formation, residential segregation, etc.), *to such an extent that it is under the prevailing, and converging, ultimately Kantian and Cartesian theory of sensory perception, cognition, mind, personhood and communication that underlies modern global scholarship in the social sciences, it is simply unthinkable that our middle-class British middle-aged architect-cum-complementary-healer, simply through introspection, could have access to a full, or even merely representative, range of the experiences of her South African sangoma friends.* In the anthropological idiom of an older vintage we would simply have said: to the extent to which a person's experiences are culturally patterned, persons with different cultural backgrounds and upbringing will have different experiences even if going through the same institutional complex such as, e.g., *sangomahood*.

We touch here on a fundamental philosophical problem, which in principle contains the elements for vindication of the candidate's position, if she were to develop it explicitly and at length, rather than taking it for granted in passing, as in the current version of this thesis. The empirical social sciences, such as anthropology, in their methodologies and theories base themselves, largely implicitly and even unconsciously, on assumptions that in themselves do not constitute the subject matter of empirical social science, and that in the latter respect do not even constitute paradigms in the Kuhnian sense. Here the Cartesian heritage of mind-body dualism, and the more general North Atlantic philosophical tradition assuming the absolutely bounded and non-porous nature of the individual mind, form important presuppositions. These presuppositions are clearly obsolescent. In the first place, in the sense that they are increasingly exposed and rejected by professional North Atlantic philosophers working in the philosophy of mind, of the body, of man and culture, society, but also of nature and of natural science (quantum mechanism being very much a contested ground in this respect). But also in the sense that (as some sort of the revenge of the peoples that were colonised by the North Atlantic region in the 18th-20th century CE) from all over the world (South Asia, China, Native America, Africa, the Arctic) philosophical, cosmological and religious traditions taking a very different stance on precisely these issues have, from the late 19th century

onwards, come to penetrate common thinking, everyday life and complementary healing throughout the North Atlantic region – in recent decades particularly in the form of the New Age movement (which, therefore, while a convenient and clarifying label, is certainly not a pejorative qualification). The most recent forms of globalisation, particularly through the Internet, have greatly facilitated and accelerated this development. This means that, with the New Age orientation she brings to the research, the candidate again turns out to be equipped to avoid the anthropologists' usual professional myopia, and see new things, and see them in the correct light. However, in a PhD context seeing is not enough – textual persuasiveness is of the essence. Therefore, let the candidate be reminded that at present an interesting philosophical case could be made as to the possibility of empathically 'knowing what the other experiences' through less crude, less crude and less obvious means than merely on the basis of the knower's sensory perceptions of the experiencer, including the experiencer's own verbal accounts. Especially in the domain of *sangomahood* the evidence of extrasensory perception is overwhelming, and lends itself to detailed scientific scrutiny (van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 7). One of the main insights which such research has yielded, however, is that extrasensory perception, however undeniable as a phenomenon, cannot be *willed*, therefore cannot be summoned within a narrow framework of time and place set by an investigator, and therefore is unsuitable as a source of scientific knowledge – however much we admit that scientific knowledge is not the only, and probably not even the highest, form of knowledge. Anyway, such '*partial knowing* what the *other* experiences through some sort of psychic osmosis' – i.e. semi-permeability of the boundaries of self and other – is still radically different, on several counts, from a knowledge claim to the effect that one '*experiences* what the *others* experience'. In the context of the assessment of this thesis, the important thing is this: such an appeal to a new model of perception that is anathema in that it runs counter to accepted (even if obsolescent) social-sciences presuppositions, can only be made if it is firmly embedded in a sustained argument spelling out the philosophical basis for such a monstrous deviation from established (though obsolescent) disciplinary common wisdom. Either the candidate throws this line of approach entirely overboard, or she engages with it, in a new version of the thesis, far more explicitly, at length, and with sophistication.

The candidate insists (p. 54) on recognising the other in ourselves as the fieldworker's task, without realising that if the other is to be found out to be us, then our vicariously but crudely and naively (and uninvitedly!) representing that other in the shape of ourselves means not compassion and charity, let alone humility, but denial, arrogance and violence – the very things the candidate so very clearly, and rightly, seeks to avoid at all costs.

Without explicitly answering this challenge at the theoretical level, the claim for experiential fieldwork remains unconvincing. Perhaps chapter 7's long and interesting, Taussig-based argument on mimesis (but where is Girard in this connection? cf. van Beek 1988; and where Plato, for that matter?) could come some way towards providing such a theory, but surprisingly that possibility is not explicitly pursued or at least dissolves into the anecdotal. On the contrary, the mimesis argument leads the candidate to consider the problematic South African social category of the *coconut* ('black outside, white inside'), the Black South African who has presumably 'lost his culture', as if 'a culture' were something otherwise uniquely and intrinsically attached to a person, like some sort of organ. Here, incidentally, an implication becomes manifest of the candidate's one-sided concentration on *sangomas* in South Africa: with the active display of 'traditional culture' that is these specialists' stock in trade, the practically total concentration on *sangomas* as a research population (of very small size at that) means that the researcher is not forced to ask herself how much even that 'traditional culture' is a manipulated, nostalgic and re-invented product, reflecting (as I argue elsewhere; van Binsbergen 1999, 2003: ch 8) transregional and even intercontinental contacts through migration and trade as much as it does some presumably

perennial and immutable ‘ancestral heritage’ of, e.g., ‘the Zulu people’ (also a category of less than two centuries’ time depth).

But even apart from the question of whether the fieldworker can at all, if only in part, experience what ‘the others’ are experiencing, the thesis leaves us with a considerable disappointment: when finally we arrive at what should have been the *pièce the résistance* of experiential ethnography, notably, the candidate’s description of her own trance.³ What we get here is a few lines of bland prose of considerable predictability (p. 200). Is it the trance that (like the candidate’s ancestral brooding) was not so impressive, after all? Or is it merely, more charitably, that words – least of all, her own words – cannot describe what was in fact going on inside her, and between her and her fellow *sangomas* at that crucial moment?

Clearly, but contrary to the candidate’s contention (e.g. p. 162), having undergone the initiation does not put one in the best possible position to report on it in the form of ethnographic texts directed at one’s professional anthropological peers; claiming otherwise amounts to an overrating of the redeeming and aesthetic potential of anthropological texts as a genre, and, concomitantly, to an undeserved depreciation of the same qualities in literary prose, poetry, and philosophical argument. But even then, the most important and most fundamental things in life cannot be adequately expressed in words, and therefore should better be left unsaid.

SANGOMAHOOD: RELIGION AND/OR THERAPY?

Another major point of confusion appears to me the therapeutic versus (at least in the candidate’s mind) religious, nature of *sangomahood*. In her appreciation of *sangomahood*, the candidate seems to oscillate between two rather opposite positions:

1. *sangomahood* brings, in response to a profound predicament which cannot be resolved in any other way, total change to the initiated’s personality and life;⁴
2. *sangomahood* is just another spiritual therapeutic technique which can be picked up transculturally and applied at will.

³ Something that is, by the *sangoma* canon, impossible because during trance the possessing ancestor is supposed to completely overpower his host and totally eclipse the latter’s consciousness – all that a *sangoma* can know about his trances is in retrospect and by hearsay only, based on his peers’ oral reports made after the fact. My own experience with the matter, like the candidate’s, is that what the *sangomas* recognise as a true, convincing trance, does not really preclude a vague, disorientated awareness of one’s immediate surroundings at the moment, and memories of that awareness after the fact.

⁴ Op p. 527 the candidate sums up her own experience as:

‘I argue that a richer, more evolved self, emerged from this experience.’

Which, incidentally, is less than the total change claimed elsewhere in the thesis. Throughout the thesis the candidate chides me for remaining reticent about my own presumed experience of total change in regard of my own initiation and graduation to *sangomahood*. However, the truth is that, in my opinion, and considering the likelihood of transference and self-deception, the general limitations of self-analysis, on this point, it is not for a person himself or herself to claim total change, certainly not a change for the better. As it happened, after a decade it turned out that what I had initially considered to be total change in myself, was more a submission to infantile conflicts than a solution of them, and my *sangomahood* then failed me as a personal spiritual resource although it continued to work for others; cf. van Binsbergen 2003: chs 0, 5-8. Incidentally, in those chapters, and in my 1998 piece, and precisely in order to make the present point about transference (yielding to subconscious pressure in conscious life) I did give up the reticence the candidate so repeatedly reads into my 1991 article. Yet even in the latter piece there was already enough of soul searching, crying bouts, disorientation, ambition, in short self-indulgence, to make that piece less than reticent.

True to the well-known, and published, canon of *sangomahood*, the candidate (somewhat perfunctorily, it seems, given that elsewhere in the thesis she admits to positively having aspired to sangomahood as a new spiritual and healing dimension – a reason for her to come to Southern Africa as an architect in 1992) claims that she cannot have *chosen* to become a *sangoma* (one is thus elected by the ancestors; in my estimate only one in a thousand persons in Southern Africa are so elected), although of course, so she claims, she was free to choose to write a thesis about the process of becoming a *sangoma*.

Since she did not present herself as a client to me in my capacity as *sangoma*, and since I was asked to assess this thesis as an academician rather than as a *sangoma*, it is not for me to question the authenticity of her call. All the same, it is remarkable that in her discussion of ancestral election (which is invariably introduced by a prolonged period of mental and physical malaise known as ‘ancestral brooding’) the PhD candidate dwells on the predicament of others so elected, whereas all she can muster as her own matching condition (for an *ukuthwasa* apprenticeship starting in 1999) was ‘a difficult relationship with our mothers’ (plural, for it is a condition she shares with her Zimbabwean healer-friend, p. 28),⁵ and a period of disorientation and subsequent Jungian therapy undergone in England in the 1980s! Presumably it would be part of experiential fieldwork to require the local cultural system to be applied and followed to the letter.

More importantly, the candidate’s tendency to emphasize therapy (2) over conversion (1) leads her to deny the religious nature of *sangomahood* (p. 112f) – one of her few contentions with me. The matter might be resolved by remarking that in the 1991 piece she has used, I identified mainly as an anthropologist of religion, whereas the candidate mainly seeks to identify as a healer, and by extension as a medical anthropologist. Also an explicit definition of religion might do the trick, were it not that religious anthropologists have tended to give up on the definitional aspect of their sub-discipline back in the 1970s. However, the one explicit definition of religion which the candidate musters derives from a philosopher (Mudimbe 1988)⁶ and it would make *sangomahood* a perfect example of religion, in my eyes.

⁵ In my own meta-reflection on ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ (van Binsbergen 2003), I dwell at some length at the risk of transference in fieldwork, especially fieldwork of the ‘experiential’ kind. When the candidate does not hesitate to engage in extensive self-analysis *as part of her professional anthropological discourse*, this suggests that she dismisses or ignores the danger of transference. But here it is, from someone who admits to having a difficult relationship with her own mother:

‘This was an extraordinarily moving moment for me, as my adopted black African mother carefully spent time preparing her daughter. Everything fell silent. There was magic in the air’ (p. 172).

Yes, magic. Or, as the psychoanalysing anthropologist would have it, the mystifying, bewildering intrusion of the subconscious into the subject’s conscious everyday life – transference, in other words, the stuff trance and ecstasy, among other spiritual expressions, are made of.

In very interesting ways that would pay further elaboration, the thesis (not unlike my own further work on *sangomahood* in van Binsbergen 2003: chs 0, 6 and 7) implicitly offers glimpses (e.g. pp. 170f, 275f) of the way in which the *sangoma* apprentice is constantly spurred on by his seniors’ gratification of infantile drives at recognition and praise, thus constantly opening the door to the subconscious by constantly invoking the idiom of ancestral inspiration, manifestation, approval, for every little event that may occur in the apprentice’s already stressful and regression-prone training period. Our PhD candidate cannot break loose from the (in my eyes, regressive) enchantment this creates in her, and although she is alive to her teacher’s occasional cheating, she cannot allow herself to see these excessive verbal mystifications of current events for what they are: the common strategy of knowing elders manipulatively creating mystery for credulous children, who are thus coaxed into submission, into seeing the world the elders want them to see it. Yet such strategies do not rule out the possibility of genuine ‘synchronicity’ – in bizarre ways, they even seem to enhance such possibility, as if the forces designated as ‘ancestral’ are really at work, independently from yet welcomed by, the apprentice’s manipulated illusions.

⁶ It is not his only definition of religion, nor his most useful one; cf. Mudimbe 1997: ch. 1, and my philosophical critique of that book (van Binsbergen, in press).

The crux of the matter, however, is the following. It is the candidate's very denial of the religious nature of *sangomahood* (while yet puzzlingly calling it 'a *sacred* commitment to healing' at the same time, p. 114; cf. 159, 538; my emphasis), that enables her to have her cake and eat it: in other words, clamouring for an experiential fieldwork approach to *sangomahood without (as I did) through the act of conversion opting out of anthropology*. The underlying thrust of my 1991 article was epistemological (cf. van Binsbergen 2002a, 2003: chs. 0, 7, 15): if religious fieldwork, which usually involves the participation in the host's ritual practices, can only approach other people's religion by a process of condescending deconstruction on the ground that 'African gods do not exist', then such a form of anthropological knowledge production is to be rejected as hegemonic, anti-pluralist, and destructive of intercultural charity, while the opposite necessarily implies adoption not only of the diagnostic and healing practices inherent in *sangomahood*, but also of the underlying beliefs. By denying the religious nature of *sangomahood* (although I have the feeling that this denial is based more on the formal models of what 'a' religion is which the candidate derived from her Anglican childhood, and from her reading of Buddhism as 'beyond religion', than on a detached definitional exercise applied to *sangomahood* in South Africa today) the candidate can claim to engage in experiential fieldwork without any real threat to the mind set with which she arrived at the scene. She can remain a Buddhist and globalised New Age complementary therapist, now enriched with additional therapeutic inspiration from *sangomahood*, and even seek to obtain a PhD degree in the very discipline, anthropology, that is (or so at least was my argument in 1991) destroyed by her, and my own, fieldwork stance. Speaking of total change, and of the reticence attending such claims...

THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Finally, a note on history.

Although I wholly concur, in principle, with the candidate's claims as to the historical roots shared by *sangomahood* and biomedicine, and with her idea (derived from Gudeman and Rivera, and Hountondji) of now peripheral knowledges that were once the wellsprings also of North Atlantic biomedicine, such claims simply cannot be argued on the basis of synchronic fieldwork, however experiential. All fieldwork can do is inspire such ideas as interesting working hypotheses, as it did in the candidate's case just as in my own. After becoming a *sangoma*, I spent much of the subsequent one and a half decades to develop the methodological and theoretical requirements for such a historical analysis, and to painstakingly gather the actual documentary and archaeological data, in a 'history of ideas' project inspired by, but distinct from, my fieldwork. After a trickle of dispersed scholarly articles, this substained historical work is now coming to fruition, with a number of book drafts lined up for finalisation and publication. I am certainly not alone in this kind of interest, but it is not as if the results of such and similar research are widely available for secondary scholarly circulation. In other words, the candidate's assertions on this point (and the assertions of those she cites) reflect, at best, good intentions and hoped-for results of current and future research, but not yet facts. Surely, merely an appeal to the 'efficacy and longevity of *sangoma*' (p. 219; is the institution meant? or individual specialists, whom, even if plural, the candidate also tends to designate by '*sangoma*') is very thin as historical argument.

By the same token, Bernal (not just 1991 but also 1987) cannot be claimed (p. 413) to be a source on 'the influence of Africa on Europe' – his work is, at the most, a plea to consider the possible contribution of the Ancient Near East, including Ancient Egypt, to Ancient Greek civilisation, which is something much more specific, and not necessarily the same. His

cultural knowledge of sub-Saharan Africa is negligible, let alone that he could be an authority on crucial issues on cultural history involving that part of the world.

Also at the meso- and micro-level something is wanting in the candidate's sense of history. Only occasionally do we get glimpses, in this thesis, of what it means to be a *sangoma* in late apartheid or post-apartheid South Africa, even though the post-apartheid transformation of that country must be deemed one of the most significant historical processes to take place on the African continent in the last hundred years. And at the micro level, it is remarkable that the candidate treats *sangomahood* as if it were perennial and without specific, detectable history; at least, only such a static view would allow her to do, as it were, fieldwork by temporal proxy, and to treat the initiation experiences of senior *sangomas* among her protagonists (now in their seventies), decades ago under full apartheid, in exactly the same manner as she treats the rich observational and participatory data concerning the initiation experiences of herself and of her contemporary, the White middle-aged 'Zinzi', well after the year 2000.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined what I consider to be important shortcomings of this thesis, many of which I consider to amount to internal contradictions and inconsistencies, resulting largely from what the candidate brought to the project as a New Age complementary healer, a stranger to Southern African studies, and a relative newcomer to anthropology – in other words, resulting not from a lack of ability, maturity or talent (all of which are very obvious), but simply from the complexities of the task at hand (and from the laudable ambitions the candidate has set for herself).

Given the central place the thesis has accorded one of my *sangoma*-centred pieces (while all others, though available often for for years, either in published form or on the Internet, are ignored), I find it impossible (in a manner that should appeal to the candidate as a champion of 'experiential' anthropology) to assess this work in an objective and distancing manner, without reference to my own grappling with the study of *sangomahood* over the years. It is quite possible that the incisive criticism presented in the preceding pages, reflects not the inadequacy of the candidate's work in the light of professional anthropology today, but simply, and much less damningly, her mature professional disagreements with me. I am unable to make this distinction, and most probably I deserve to be ruled out of court for this reason.

If however the Examination Committee continues to uphold my suitability to act as the External Examiner of this work, *I recommend that, although the thesis does not meet the required standard, the candidate should be invited to do further work as necessary and to revise and resubmit for re-examination.*

Coming from the very person whom the candidate clearly considers her main role model, and for whose approach she has so many kind words in her work, this must come as a terrible disappointment. It could have been avoided had I been involved in the supervision of this work at an earlier stage. If the Committee adopts my recommendation, and the thesis is to be revised prior to re-examination, I am prepared to be actively involved in the recasting of what is, potentially, an highly valuable piece of work which, after profound revision, is extremely likely to earn the candidate the doctoral degree, and to find a respectable publisher. I am scheduled to visit Cape Town early June, 2004, and if the necessary arrangements can be made, I am prepared to extend my stay and make myself and my published work available towards the revision process. I doubt if by that time that process can already be considered completed. I can only hope that by that time the candidate will have sufficiently recovered

from the present disappointment to accept my assistance in the spirit of both academic and spiritual responsibility in which it is offered.

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