MESSAGES FROM THE DEEP
Water Divinities, Dreams and Diviners in Southern Africa

VOLUME I

Thesis
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by

PENELOPE SUSAN BERNARD

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comparative regional study of a complex of beliefs and practices regarding the water divinities in southern Africa. These snake and mermaid-like divinities, which are said to work in conjunction with one’s ancestors, are believed to be responsible for the calling and training of certain diviner-healers by taking them underwater for periods of time. In addition to granting healing knowledge, these divinities are associated with fertility, water and rain, and the origins of humanity.

The research combines comparative ethnography with the anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE), and focuses particularly on the Zulu, Cape Nguni, Shona and Khoisan groups. The use of the ‘radical participation’ method, as recommended by AEE, was facilitated by the author being identified as having a ‘calling’ from these water divinities, which subsequently resulted in her initiation under the guidance of a Zulu isangoma (diviner-healer) who had reputedly been taken underwater. The research details the rituals that were performed and how dreams are used to guide the training process of izangoma. This resulted in the research process being largely dream-directed, in that the author traces how the izangoma responded to various dreams she had and how these responses opened new avenues for understanding the phenomenon of the water divinities. The comparative study thus combines literature sources, field research and dream-directed experiences, and reveals a complex of recurring themes, symbols and norms pertaining to the water divinities across the selected groups. In seeking to explain both the commonalities and differences between these groups, the author argues for a four-level explanatory model that combines both conventional anthropological theory and extraordinary experience.

Responses to the author’s dream-led experiences are used to throw light on the conflicting...
discourses of morality regarding traditional healers and the water divinities in the context of political-economic transformations relating to capitalism and the moral economy; to illuminate the blending of ideas and practices between Zulu Zionists and diviner-healer traditions; and to link up with certain issues relating to San rock art, rain-making and healing rituals, which contribute to the debates regarding trance-induced rock art in southern Africa.
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted before, for degree or examination purposes, to any other university.

Signed by Penelope Susan Bernard on this ..............day of

..........................2010 at ..............................................
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The great Snake lies ever half awake, at the bottom of the
pit of the world, curled
In folds of himself until he awakens in hunger and moving
his head to right and to left prepares for his hour to devour.
But the Mystery of Iniquity is a pit too deep for mortal
eyes to plumb. Come
Ye out from among those who prize the Serpent’s golden
eyes,
The worshippers, self-given sacrifice of the Snake. Take
Your way and be yet separate.
Be not too curious of Good and Evil;
Seek not to count the future waves of Time;
But be ye satisfied that you have light
Enough to take your step and find your foothold.

T.S. Eliot: Choruses from the ‘Rock’,
GLOSSARY

abantu basemlanjeni - the people from the river - isiXhosa
abantu bomlambo - the people from the river - isiXhosa
buchu - an aromatic plant
emakhosini - the diviner’s ancestral hut
fukama - Xhosa ritual where the initiate stays in a small hut
ichanti or ixhanti - the Snake from the river - isiXhosa
iddlozi/amadlozi - the ancestor/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu
igqirhalamaqgha - diviner-healers (pl/sing) - isiXhosa
impande - root - isiZulu
imphepho - plant incense - isiZulu & isiXhosa
inhlwathi - the python - isiZulu
inkosi/amakhosi - chief/s, king/s, great ancestor/s, lord (sing/pl) - isiZulu
intlezi - plant-based protective medicines
intlwayalelo - Xhosa river rituals where offerings are made
iphupho/amaphupho - dream/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu
isangona/zangoma - diviner-healer/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu
isibaya - cattle byre, or diviner training school - isiZulu
isilo - ancestral clan animal - isiZulu & isiXhosa
isilwane - animal - isiZulu
isithunywa/izithunywa - messenger/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu
ithwasa/amathwasa - novice diviner/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu and isiXhosa
ityala - spirit animal - isiXhosa
izibongo - clan name - isiZulu & isiXhosa
mamlambo - snake familiar - isiXhosa & isiZulu
-mnyama(ubu-) - blackness, darkness
nganga/n'anga - diviner-healer - Shona
njuzu or nzuzu - mermaid - Shona
ubulawu - plant-based medicine for dreaming - isiZulu & isiXhosa
ubukhonyisa - Zulu and Xhosa ritual to bring back spirit of dead
ukucupha - to dream
ukuphupha - to set a trap/to return badness back to sender - isiZulu
umeqo - a form of witchcraft attack - isiZulu
umgidi - a celebratory party - isiZulu
umkwepha/abakwetha - novice initiate/s (sing/pl) - isiXhosa
umlozi/imilozi - whistling spirit/s (sing/pl) - isiXhosa & isiZulu
umshoba/amashe - ancestral shrine - isiZulu
umshoba/amashoba - cow tail/s (sing/pl) - isiZulu
umshozi/metho or muti - plant-based medicine/s - isiXhosa & isiZulu
umyeko - beaded headdress - isiZulu
uthwala - lit. ‘to carry’ – a negative form of self-enrichment - isiZulu
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CHAPTER 1
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

To think with perfect clarity in a poetic sense one must first rid oneself of a great deal of intellectual encumbrance, including all dogmatic doctrinal prepossessions: membership of any political party or religious sect or literary school deforms the poetic sense, as it were, introduces something irrelevant and destructive into the magic circle, drawn with a rowan, hazel or willow rod, within which the poet insulates himself for the poetic act. He must achieve social and spiritual independence at whatever cost, learn to think mythically as well as rationally, and never be surprised at the weirdly azoological beasts which walk into the circle; they come to be questioned not to alarm (Robert Graves, 1999: 407).

1.1 Introduction - Setting the scene

This thesis combines comparative ethnography with autoethnography to explore the widespread beliefs held across southern Africa concerning the existence of snake and fish-tailed deities that are believed to reside in various water sources and to be responsible for the calling of certain chosen individuals to their underwater realm. These deities or divinities, towards which many rituals are performed, are also regarded as a source of fertility, rain and knowledge, and are frequently regarded as guardians of human morality. It is claimed that the return of an individual taken underwater by these deities sees him/her granted great skills of healing and prophecy (i.e. divination). While many reports across the region document beliefs that insist that those called undergo actual physical submersion underwater for long periods of time, it appears that the claimed experience also occurs whilst the individual is in an altered state of consciousness1. Dreams are key features of diviner training and it is believed that dreams may serve to warn individuals of a potential underwater calling. As such, I argue that the inclusion of dreams as data provides a useful means for understanding the phenomenon.

In terms of comparative ethnography I will draw from both existing ethnographic sources as

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1 I use the term ‘altered states of consciousness’ as they are referred to by Bourguignon (1973) and Price-Williams (1994). These include various states of consciousness beyond the normal everyday state. They include dreams, trance, possession, as well as various forms of meditative or ecstatic states.
well as my own research data to examine first and foremost beliefs and practices as they exist among the Zulu, Cape Nguni, Shona and Khoisan groups in southern Africa (see Chapter Three, Four and Five for the main themes and theoretical approaches to them). Using autoethnography, I interweave throughout the thesis accounts of my own experience of being ‘called’ by these divinities (covered particularly in this chapter and in Chapter Six), my subsequent incorporation into a Zulu izangoma (diviner-healers; isangoma - sing) training school, and how my dreams helped guide the research process. It was these dreams that prompted the performance of a number of rituals on my behalf, under the instructions of my izangoma guides, which enabled me to observe and experience how their beliefs were translated into action. These opportunities to “cross over to the other side” have been central to my understanding of the water divinity phenomenon as well as related aspects of African cosmology.

Utilising these two principle methods, comparative ethnography and autoethnography, the main anthropological research questions this thesis seeks to address are as follows:

a) Is there a continuity of ideas relating to the water divinities across the southern African region? b) How can we explain the similarities and differences in these ideas across the region? c) Can the radical participation method, as advocated by the anthropology of extraordinary experience (especially with regard to dreams), give us insights into the phenomenon of the water divinities?

In this initial chapter I will first briefly examine the more conventional theoretical paradigms in anthropology that have sought to explain religious belief and ritual, and how recent shifts in paradigm, both in method and theory, have informed and enabled me to undertake this research. This will be followed by the formulation of an analytical model which attempts to combine both conventional approaches and more recent paradigms, which may best accommodate these varying perspectives especially in regard to how they may be applied to the water divinity phenomenon. As advocated by postmodernist scholars, I also include my

2 This term encompasses both the San (Bushman) hunter-gatherer groups and the Khoekhoe (Hottentot) pastoralist groups (Schapera, 1930/1965; Barnard, 1992). Barnard discusses the problematic negative connotations of the name ‘San’ (that suggests vagabonds, rascals etc.), and its alternative ‘Bushman’, but for the sake of consistency these terms are retained (Barnard, 1992: 8-9). The term ‘Hottentot’ is no longer in use.
own personal history and explain what led me to choose such a topic for research. I will explore the existing theory and literature regarding the water ‘spirit’ phenomenon in southern Africa in more detail in Chapters Three and Four. At the end of Chapter Four I will re-assess the usefulness of these theories and apply them to the analytical model I have proposed in Chapter One. I will bring in further relevant theoretical approaches as I progress in the thesis, where I examine how the water divinity phenomenon relates to and articulates with other issues such as ritual (Chapter Five), morality (Chapter Seven), Christianity (Chapter Eight), and San rock art (Chapter Nine).

1.2 Underlying theoretical paradigms

As my brief introduction to the subject matter of this thesis indicates, I am dealing with a set of claims that would not be regarded as physically possible to a rational empirically based science; they would probably be regarded as mere misinformed beliefs with no substantial basis in the real world, although the social and psychological manifestations that the beliefs elicit could still be subject to analysis and explanation. I will, therefore, first present the way conventional (or pre-postmodern) anthropological approaches may deal, or have dealt with, such claims before proceeding to examine how recent paradigms have paved the way for my own approach to the material.

1.2.1 Conventional anthropological approaches to culture and society

Anthropological theory, as it relates to religious belief, symbolism and ritual, is a vast and complex field and, for reasons of space and clarity, I cannot possibly draw on all its facets in this introductory discussion. Rather, I will identify the broad theoretical perspectives or paradigms that are of relevance to this study. Before exploring the various paradigms that have dominated anthropology over the last century, it should be mentioned that psychological theories have also played a part in trying to explain the nature of the beliefs in the water divinities, in particular those of Carl Jung (1968, 1969), which include his notions of the ‘collective unconscious’ and its archetypal symbols.

Within anthropology there are a number of ways in which the broad theoretical approaches have been categorised. Barnard (2000) classifies these according to whether they approach their material from a diachronic perspective (e.g. evolutionist, diffusionist, Marxist etc.), a
synchronic perspective (e.g. functionalist, structural-functionalist, structuralist, relativist etc.) or an interactive perspective (e.g. transactionalist, processualist, poststructuralist, interpretivist, feminist, postmodernist etc.), which combines both diachronic and synchronic elements. Another, perhaps more useful classification for the present purposes, is the broad division between those theories that prioritise, or focus on, ‘society’ (what people do – i.e. as a set of inter-relationships, or a social unit), as against ‘culture’ (how people think – i.e. share ideas, beliefs, ways of doing things). To some extent these two broad categories of ‘society’ and ‘culture’ have become polarised between two opposing camps, although some scholars have tried to integrate them. Broadly speaking the ‘society’ camp has been found more in British anthropology under the form of social anthropology, while the ‘culture’ camp has been associated more with American anthropology under the form of cultural anthropology (Barnard, 2000). There are of course divisions within each of these camps as well, and in the case of social anthropology there has been much attention paid to the disagreements between those who are more concerned with structure and symbol, or repetitive patterns and forms, be it in society (structural-functionalism, Marxism) or mind (structuralism, symbolism, interpretivism), and agency, or what Firth (1951) called social organization (e.g. transactionalism, processual anthropology, or political-economic anthropology). Firth has succinctly referred to these two differing levels of analysis as being concerned with either “modes of thought” or “modes of action”, while Holy and Stuchlik (1983) refer to these as two “domains of social reality” concerned with norms and actions (see also Jacobson, 1991). The work of the French post-structuralist anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1972/1977; 1990/1992), particularly in his ‘practice theory’, has attempted to integrate these two domains into a more coherent whole through the use of the concept of habitus.

In order to make this complexity of ideas comprehensible, especially with regard to the material I present in this thesis, I will briefly outline how some of these theoretical approaches have been applied to religious ritual and its symbolism. This analysis will also be pertinent to Chapter Five where I analyse the various forms in which ritual is used in southern Africa with regard to the beliefs in the water divinities. At the outset, however, I must emphasise that as this thesis is essentially a historical-regional comparison (i.e. a comparison of the beliefs and practices regarding the water divinities across southern Africa over a period of time) I have to consider the fact that many of the ideas regarding the water divinities that inform ritual across
the region may have been shared and transmitted between the various groups. I examine this issue of comparison in more detail in Chapter Two, Section 2.3. However, I also argue that while the transmission of ideas between contiguous groups is a valid consideration, it is not sufficient as an explanation for why these beliefs and practices persist and the driving force behind them. Nor does the historical-cultural approach address why these beliefs vary on some issues; such as, the varying emphases on ritual (see Chapter Five), and the material gifts individuals receive from these divinities whilst underwater (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.6), and how the water divinities relate to other aspects of social activity within the various groups. It should also be pointed out that both the regional comparativist approach and the cross-cultural experiential approach that I adopt in this thesis rule out any extreme form of epistemological relativism, which argues that groups occupy their own culturally constructed realities and that this idea, in effect, denies any form of pan-psychic unity (Barnard, 2000: 100). However, through the very act of suspending my disbelief of my informants' worldviews and allowing myself to become integrated into the diviner-healer 'profession', I have adopted a more moderate form of methodological relativism (see Shanefelt, 2002).

1.2.1.1 Past approaches to the study of religious ritual

Apart from its performative and expressive aspects, ritual serves multiple functions, and this no doubt explains why so many different theories have been advanced to explain why they are such an important part of human praxis and belief. Although I do not intend to do an exhaustive analysis of the various approaches to the study of ritual it is worthwhile to briefly examine some of the more pertinent ones relevant to the rituals dedicated towards the water divinities that are performed among many groups in South Africa. As I see it, ritual theory falls under three broad areas: the socio-centric (sociological), psycho-centric (intellectualist), and the eco-centric (or materialist). The socio-centric and intellectualist approaches have been the most dominant in anthropology, while the eco-centric approach would apply to the ecological (or ecosystem) approach of Roy Rappaport (1968), the cultural ecology approach of Julian Steward (1955), and the cultural materialist approach of Marvin Harris (1979). To some degree, the various structural Marxist approaches could also be applied to the eco-centric category.

The central focus of the socio-centric approach has been on what ritual says about, and does
for the social group performing it, and debates have largely been around the question of continuity and change. Does ritual serve to maintain the ‘idealized’ structure of a particular social group, and the *status quo*, as argued by the structural-functionalists (inspired by Durkheim), or does it actually allow for innovation and change within that structure – or even foster conflict, as argued by some processualists? Reactions to structural-functionalism, which represented the continuity hypothesis, argued that ritual functions to restore the *status quo* when *internal* conflicts challenge it, thus enabling enduring social structures. Victor Turner, in his book *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957) argued from this particular standpoint and to a certain extent was successful in demonstrating that this did occur in the cases of ritual he examined amongst the Ndembu in northern Zambia. An underlying structural tension of Ndembu life that came through most of his ritual analyses was the conflicting demands between matrilineal descent and virilocal residence after marriage. It was in this book that Turner developed his influential concept of the ‘social drama’. The social drama was comprised of four phases, beginning with an initial breach in relations between individuals or groups. This then led to the second phase which resulted in “a breaking off of relations up to the limit that the group can permit”, followed by the third phase where “various adjustments or redressive mechanisms are then deployed to heal the breach” (Turner, 1968: 89). These redressive mechanisms were largely the concern of ritual “whose dominant symbols represent values which all Ndembu share and which therefore have a unifying character” and could “reanimate the sentiment of loyalty to the group” (ibid: 90). The rift could thus be healed and this could lead “either to a re-establishment of relations or the social recognition of an irreparable breach between the contesting parties” (ibid: 89). The continuity hypothesis thus argued that even when conflict, rebellion and challenges against the incumbent authority, power structures, and normative rules governing social structure were present in the ritual, the ritual ultimately transformed the latent and manifest conflict into re-affirmation of the structural *status quo*. This argument was central to Gluckman’s ‘rituals of rebellion’ hypothesis (1954) discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1, in relation to the Nomkhubulwana nomdede rituals.

Later critics of the structural-functional approach have criticized, among other things, the fact it was static, ahistorical, and could not account for change. On emphasizing idealized structures and their maintenance, structural-functional and even functional approaches had
largely failed to take account of how ritual may serve to empower groups to initiate change or accommodate foreign intrusions, and to remodel or reformulate their realities. It was also little concerned with individual action and agency. Victor Turner himself demonstrated his concern for the weakness of the structural-functional approach in his later book *Drums of Affliction* (1968). His analysis of the *Ihamba* ritual, which involved the removal of a ‘spirit tooth’ of a dead hunter from an afflicted person, details the complexity of the relationships that generated the social drama that generated the ritual responses he observed. He also showed sensitive awareness of the role that the colonial administration’s interference had on matters regarding traditional chieftaincy, and the effect this had on the affliction of the victim Kamahasanyi and the ritual expression of the *Ihamba* ritual that was subsequently performed on him. It was Turner who emphasized the importance of social process (i.e. the actual day to day activities and interaction of individuals and groups which generate social forms) rather than social structure (i.e. the idealized notions of how society is or should be organized). Unlike the structural-functionalists he regarded process as the primary generative force behind structure, and he regarded structure as a secondary outcome (Edith Turner *et al*, 1992: 6).

Turner, as did scholars such as John and Jean Comaroff (1993), Clifford Geertz (1973), Bruce Lincoln (1987) and Richard Werbner (1989), reminded us that ritual attends to not only issues of internal contradictions or paradoxes, that are largely built into the structures of the social group involved (e.g. matriline and virilocality among the Ndembu), but also external threats and emergent forces (whether they be welcomed or otherwise) that threaten to destabilize existing social values and rupture social cohesion. The need to ‘historicise’ ritual in Africa in the context of colonialism, emergent independent states and globalization, soon became a dominant trope. The Comaroffs argued for a ‘Historical Anthropology’ that saw ritual as “a vital element in the processes that make and remake social facts and collective identities” (1993: xvi). Although critical of the structural-functional approach which they accused of ‘fetishising’ ritual (*ibid; xv*), inherent in much of their own arguments was, in effect, the

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3 It should be noted that the use of terminology regarding ‘social structure’ and ‘process’ in anthropology has been highly confusing and sometimes conflicting. For instance, Jacobson notes that “some anthropologists use the term structure to refer to an idealational system (i.e. notions of how society should be structured) and others use it to refer to a system of actions” (i.e. process or social organization) (Jacobson, 1991: 9, my emphasis).

4 Victor Turner and Edmund Leach are regarded as the main proponents of the processualist paradigm (Barnard, 2000).
argument that ritual still functions to consolidate the group against these external threats, by making commentary about them, and by transforming, re-constituting and domesticating them. As Lincoln states "ritual - like other related modes of symbolic discourse - may be used as a powerful instrument with which actors construct, deconstruct and reconstruct society itself" (Lincoln, 1987: 132). Both Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, however, pointed out that not all ritual leads ultimately towards social cohesion. Religious practices, in some instances, can have "disruptive, disintegrative and psychologically disturbing aspects" (Geertz, 1973: 143). Turner noted that ritual could break structural rules and his notion of liminality, which was inherent in the ritual process, was the ultimate expression of anti-structure. The sacredness of ritual emerged during the stage of liminality that was characterised by reversals of normative structure and the erasure of difference (Turner, 1969).

This notion that ritual could also have disruptive effects, counters another major strand of ritual studies that held dominance from an early stage. This was primarily concerned with the psychological functions of ritual for individuals or the group, and in its symbolic and cognitive representations. The so-called social-psychological or intellectualist (psychocentric) approaches were influenced by the earlier works of Frazer and Tylor, and later by Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard (Geertz, 1973:142; Guenther, 1997). According to Geertz this approach argued that for man (and presumably woman) religion and ritual "satisfies both his cognitive and affective demands for a stable, comprehensible, and coercible world, and how it enables him to maintain an inner security in the face of natural contingency" (Geertz, 1973: 143).

Levi-Strauss's structuralism, which "gave primacy to pattern over substance" (Barnard, 2000: 120) was another aspect of a psycho-centric approach, although it was not as concerned with function, but rather with decoding the universal structures of the mind and the relationship these have with other features of social structure (see also Needham, 1979). An inherent assumption of structuralism was that humans shared a pan-psychic unity, in that common

5 Both the sociological and social-psychological functionalist approaches maintained that "belief and particularly ritual reinforce the traditional social ties between individuals; it stresses the way in which the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through the underlying social values upon which it rests" (Geertz 1973: 142 ).
principles are used to construct meaning through classificatory symbolic structures. This is most evident in the way meaning is constructed based on the distinction between binary opposites and through syntagmatic and metaphorical/paradigmatic associations, all of which are revealed in multiple ways in ritual symbolism. However, structuralism experienced the same critique as that leveled at structural-functionalism; it was ahistorical, could not accommodate individual agency or account for either internal or external change (Guenther, 1997).

Victor Turner, who has been arguably one of the most accomplished ethnographers in African ritual analysis, applied in-depth analysis of the symbolic aspects of ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia. His emphasis and insights into the role of symbols in the ritual process, offer some of the best examples of the interpretive, symbolic or meaning-centred approaches to ritual (1967, 1968, 1969). For the Ndembu, symbols that were very commonly natural in origin (the mudyi tree etc), were deliberately selected and used to represent something else – usually of bodily and social significance (matriliny, breast milk, nourishment, fertility). Natural objects are frequently selected and used in African ritual because of their metaphorical and metonymical associations, and they are, as Tambiah (1969) and Douglas (1970) emphasise, ‘good to think with’. The sheer symbolic load that characterized Ndembu ritual was testament to the importance of symbols in the ritual process, but according to his wife and co-researcher, Edith Turner, Victor Turner saw these largely as psychological mechanisms through which social tensions and conflicts, and their resolution, could be mediated at a social and psychological level; he did not consider that they could have actual spiritual referents. Edith Turner notes “Vic regarded the symbolism of Ihamba as a mixture of moving poetry and undoubted hocus-pocus” (Edith Turner et al, 1992: 8).

Also relevant to the symbolic approach are the spatio-temporal perspectives on ritual, such as those of Parkin (1991, 1992) and Werbner (1989). Parkin was primarily concerned with the formulaic spatiality7 and the directionality of ritual that embraces the notions of movement,

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6 Symbols for Victor Turner may be objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures and spatial units employed in a ritual situation, and each symbol “is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (Turner 1967:19).

7 Parkin’s minimalist definition of ritual is that “Ritual is formulaic spatiality carried out by groups of people.
journey and passage etc. Werbner (1989) drew our attention to the idea that ritual could be seen as a sacred journey that is focused on a sacred centre, that is usually geographically defined, to and from which supplicants embark upon a process of sacred exchanges. Werbner applied these ideas to the movement of supplicants and pilgrims to and from the Matopos Mwari shrines in Zimbabwe (see Chapter Five, Section 5.5.1); however, they could be equally applied to the propitiatory river rituals (*intlwayalelo*) encountered among the Cape Nguni (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4).

The eco-centric approaches such as the ecosystem approach of Rappaport (1969, 1999) were principally concerned with the position that humans and their cultural practices, especially ritual, occupied in relation to the wider ‘biotic community’. As the terminology suggests, Rappaport saw human groups as an integral part of an ecosystem. In his study of the Tsembaga Maring of Papua New Guinea (1968) he sought to scientifically quantify and measure their impact on the dynamics of the wider system and was particularly interested in the ritual consumption of pigs and its relationship to both ecological and social processes. Rappaport's focus is relevant for the present concerns of the rapidly diminishing resources in the world and the increasing realization that fundamental to the ecological crisis that we face is the question of worldview, and peoples' perceptions of human-nature relatedness. However, one of the problems associated with the application of his earlier 'functional-ecological' approach was that such discrete and clearly bounded social groups, that have had an enduring and relatively undisturbed link to the land, no longer exist, if they ever did so. Furthermore where one draws the boundaries of a distinct ecosystem is notoriously difficult to do, if not impossible. Hence the idea of a self-regulating, homeostatic enclosed system is clearly problematic, especially in the contemporary world. However, as Rappaport clearly shows, it is evident that ritual and belief modifies people's behaviour towards their environment and this can have positive environmental effects. This is also evident in much of the material I present in Chapter Five.

Associated with the eco-centric approach were the more environmentally determinist

who are conscious of its imperative or compulsory nature and who may or may not further inform this spatiality with spoken words" (1992: 18).
approaches such as those of Julian Steward and Marvin Harris. Steward (1955) was particularly concerned with how certain environments determine certain aspects of society and culture, especially as it related to his concept of the ‘cultural core’ (i.e. those features of culture directly influenced by environmental factors). However, he assigned religion and ritual to the ‘secondary features’, elements of the superstructure (the ideological aspects, e.g. norms and beliefs), which he was never able to satisfactorily deal with, and his theories ultimately failed to be supported with evidence (Milton, 1997). Harris’s approach was also environmental determinist, although he emphasized the adaptive functions of culture, particularly in relation to the environment. He was particularly interested in the techno-material determinants of this adaptation especially with reference to protein intake and various demographic factors. His aim was to show that “within the material conditions imposed by the environment, all cultural features make ecological sense” (ibid: 480). Friedman, a structural Marxist, critiqued both Roy Rappaport’s ecological anthropology and Marvin Harris’s cultural materialism hypotheses as being too simplistic and mechanical, and described them as ‘vulgar materialism’ (Friedman, 1974).

The structural Marxists, such as Maurice Godelier (1975) and Jonathan Friedman (1974, 1975), regarded infrastructure as fundamental, but were able to integrate its relationship with superstructure in a more dialectically sensitive way. They were particularly concerned with the dynamic between the environment, modes and relations of production, technology and social formation (which is comprised of both superstructure and infrastructure). Friedman put forward a model that might have some relevance to my analysis of the differing ritual expressions towards the water divinities in southern Africa. He argued that the ecosystem or environment constrains the mode and social relations of production which affect the superstructure (including religion and ritual). Both the infrastructure and the superstructure also have a feed-back effect on the ecosystem (Friedman, 1975). Although not directly concerned with the environment, Maurice Godelier (1999) also developed the ideas of Marcel

8 A social formation was regarded as being the product of two broad interconnecting aspects: the infrastructure, which includes the forces and relations of production, and the superstructure, which was comprised of the ideological and jurido-political dimensions (Friedman, 1974).

9 Friedman emphasized that relations of production “are those social relations which dominate (i.e. determine the economic rationality of) the material process of production in given techno-ecological conditions – at a given stage of development of the forces of production” (Friedman, 1974: 446, his emphasis).
Mauss and Claude Levi-Strauss regarding the significance of ‘the gift’ particularly as it related to sacred exchange between humans and their gods. These ideas regarding the centrality of exchange, and its link with the moral economy, are relevant to much of the material I present in this thesis, particularly in Chapter Seven.

Ultimately all these approaches have something of value to contribute to our understanding of ritual and religion, their differences being mainly determined by their areas of focus and emphasis. Both Catherine Bell (1997) and Alan Barnard (2000) are of the opinion that an eclectic and judicious application of these various approaches is an intellectually acceptable approach. As Barnard notes, there are three strands of thinking that distinguish these broad theoretical paradigms, the structural, interactive and interpretive and that, “These strands are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in the hands of diverse theorists and ethnographers, they are intertwined, overlapping and intersecting” (Barnard, 2000: 174). In Chapter Five, where I deal specifically with ritual, and in some of the subsequent chapters, it will become evident that aspects of these approaches are relevant to the material I have gathered.

What characterized all these approaches was their failure to adequately accommodate or explain the ontological reality of the phenomenon for the informants. This was the essence of Edith Turner’s critique of ritual theory, which she argued failed to accommodate the reality of spirit for the Ndembu participants of the Ihamba rituals she participated in with her husband Victor Turner in the 1950s and later, after his death, in 1985. In her book Experiencing Ritual (1992) which describes her participation in the 1985 Ihamba ritual, Edith Turner displays refreshing honesty and sensitivity to the fact that sometimes the informant or subject may know better than the scholar and that their interpretations should be regarded as a valid component of analysis. After she actively participated in a long and exhausting ritual in which, in the participants’ understanding of the event, they coaxed and cajoled the afflicting hunter’s spirit ‘tooth’ to exit its victim’s body, she claims she witnessed a manifestation of a ‘bluish blob’ from the victim’s back that forced her to reconsider what her informants had always been telling her; that of “the existence of spirit” (1992: 5). A crucial element of this realization was her own involvement in the ritual, where she crossed over from being a mere observer to being an active participant. Ironically it was her husband Victor Turner who had commented as early as 1968 in his book Drums of Affliction that the role of the researcher in
influencing the outcomes of the data had not been sufficiently recognized. This observation leads me to consider the increasing awareness of the need to consider the role of the researcher in influencing the ethnographic process and the nature of the data they obtain. I will return to the revisionist analysis of Edith Turner in relation to her husband's earlier analytical material of *Ihamba* in Section 1.2.4 of this chapter.

1.2.2 The post-modernist turn: autoethnography and reflexivity

To a large extent my ability and courage to research and write this thesis was facilitated by the shift in paradigms regarding the accepted styles of anthropological research method and writing after the mid-1980s. This transformation was articulated most forcefully by James Clifford and George Marcus in their edited book "Writing Culture" (1986), which was regarded as "a watershed in anthropological thought" (James *et al.*, 1997: 1). Their critique, which is regarded as being a part of the 'postmodern' genre, challenged the existing authoritative, objectivist (author removed), and realist styles of writing characteristic of the more orthodox anthropological monographs, which tended to adhere to the principle of "value-free scientism" and towards social or psychological reductionism (Aull Davies 1999: 178). Instead, anthropologists were now encouraged to be more innovative, poetic, honest and reflexive in their approach to both methodology and in their textual styles of writing. This new paradigm encouraged not only the production of alternative descriptive ethnographic texts but also an exploration of new ways of generating anthropological knowledge. It also set in place the recognition that ethnography is no more only the study of the 'other' as it is also the study of the 'self'. For instance, Denzin, in the introduction to his book *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (1997), states "Ethnography is that form of enquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about" (Denzin 1997: xi). Implicit in this statement is the foregrounding of the writer in the ethnographic enterprise. It was a response to the central concern that post-modernism raised regarding the ‘Crisis of Representation’10 in

10 The Crisis of Representation is what Denzin has classified as anthropology's "4th Moment" (Denzin 1997: 18). He associates this "moment" with the writings of Marcus & Fischer (1986), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Turner & Bruner (1986), Geertz (1988) and Clifford (1988). Denzin uses the concept of 'moment' to categorize the broad genres of anthropological research in America since the beginning of the twentieth century. These are the 'traditional period' (1st moment) that embraced the positivist position; the 'modernist phase' (2nd moment) which sought to formalize a more precise and rigorous qualitative methodology while still largely endorsing a positivist position; the 'blurred genre phase' which included a wide range of cognitive, interpretive, symbolist,
anthropology: that we cannot represent ‘Others’ without representing or implicating ourselves in the process (Clifford, 1986a; Crapanzano, 1986; Rabinow, 1986 etc.) - and so we should be as honest as possible about our involvement in the process of research and how we write about it.

The crisis of representation emerged from the questioning of the textual styles of writing, characteristic of many existing anthropological monographs that sought to claim authority of representation of the social groups described, which were often (misleadingly) treated as enduring, bounded and complete. These so-called ‘meta-narratives’ were severely criticized and this constituted the basis of the ‘crisis of representation’. Henrietta Moore identifies three key areas in anthropology that were targeted in the critique. In summary these were: (a) the questioning of the authority of the anthropologist as author, (b) an insistence on the partiality and partialness of all interpretations, and (c) a profound questioning of the assumptions and techniques used to develop and convey cultural representations and interpretations (Moore, 1999: 5). Central to critique (c) was the iconic symbol of anthropology itself, that of participant observation. It has long been recognized that participant observation demands two incommensurable activities (Clifford, 1988: 109; Geertz, 1988: 10). It demands that one fuse both subjective and objective practices, we should participate (close the distance between observer and observed) and observe (retain a distance between observer and observed), i.e. one has to embrace and experience the life of one’s subjects, and in some instances ‘go native’, and yet at the same time retain a dispassionate, objective scientific distance from them. Regarding this rather schizoid demand in mental effort, Clifford notes that “until recently, this impossibility was realized by marginalizing the intersubjective foundations of fieldwork, by excluding them from serious ethnographic texts, relegating them to prefaces, memoirs, anecdotes, confessions, and so forth” (1988: 109). According to Tedlock (1991b) the profound introspection caused by the crisis of representation has now led anthropologists from participant observation (now regarded in some quarters as an oxymoron) to the feminist and constructivist approaches among others. The 5th to 7th moments represent the post post-modern period which is characterized by what he terms the “triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis” (Denzin, 1997: 17).

11 There has been much debate as to what we mean by the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ (Davidson, 2001; Evans-Pritchard, 1937), and Tedlock (1991b) has pointed out that the distinction between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ reality is intrinsically a cultural construct of western rationality.
observation of participation. That is, the ethnographer is now expected to seriously consider his/her own background, intellectual and emotive premises, and personal involvement in the research process. I would argue that it is possible to participate and observe; however, the issue is more related to the degree to which one is prepared to participate in the social processes of one's research subjects, and whether adequate cognizance is made of the researcher's own involvement in the generation of data.

It is necessary to explain what I mean by the use of the term 'autoethnography', as it is used by different scholars to denote different things (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis & Bochner (ibid) trace the origin of the term to David Hayano (1979) who used it to describe the ethnographic study of one's own group. However, the term has been extended to cover a wide range of auto/self-focused writing styles (for an extensive list of these see Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). For both Reed-Danahay (1997:2) and Ellis & Bochner (2000) autoethnography is a form of autobiographical writing that informs the ethnographic process:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739).

As the above quote suggests, the reflexive element is an inherent part of autoethnography. For Ellis & Bochner 'reflexive ethnography' occurs when “the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study” (ibid: 741). The use of the concept of 'reflexive ethnography' in this way is thus more focused and contained than the broader sociological concepts of reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Woolgar 1988). Marcus distinguishes between 'essential reflexivity', which is an inherent part of any representational or symbolic act i.e. writing, speech, acting etc., and 'ideological

12 As a prelude to these methodological shifts in focus, Ladislav Holy also addressed the need for 'observing participation' (Holy, 1984). Subsequent to this 'observation of participation', Pierre Bourdieu has extended the argument to consider what he refers to as 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu, 2003), which is also the title of his paper.
reflexivity' which is "how to strategize about it for certain theoretical and intellectual interests" (Marcus 1995a: 10). The use of the concept 'reflexivity' with respect to anthropological method and text production is thus more in the ideological sense. Within the ideological frame of reference Marcus identifies four broad categories or styles of meaning to the term 'reflexivity' (1995a: 12-20). For the purposes of this thesis I will be using the concept of reflexivity in its null (Marcus) form, that is, "where the ethnographer reflects on his/her personal/subjective and experiential involvement in the field" (Marcus, 1995: 12). Kirsten Hastrup argues that reflexivity is a natural outcome of the "shared social experience of fieldwork" and that,

... this is where reflexivity starts – not as particular style of writing but as an inherent element in any ethnography. Reflexivity in this sense refers to the way in which the accounts and the settings they describe elaborate and modify each other in a back and forth process (Hastrup, 1995: 126 citing Watson 1991:79).

Taken to its logical conclusion "If reflexivity is part of ethnography, this means that the anthropologist becomes her own informant" (Hastrup, 1995: 128). This means that the opening scenes, often used in traditional monographs to justify the ethnographer's claim to being 'there' in the field (see Geertz 1988: 11-12), where the self was presented for a short but often very revealing moment, have to now be extended to include the self throughout the text (Bruner, 1993: 2; Hastrup, 1992:126).

13 These are a) the null form of reflexivity (see above text), b) the use of the term in Bourdieu's sociology which "is tied to a commitment to sustain objectivity, the distance and abstraction of theoretical discourse, and empiricism" (Marcus, 1995a: 14), c) the reflexivity of the "politics of location" which emphasizes critical self-awareness and the intertextuality and diversity of representation, d) the feminist version of the null form of reflexivity. Beyond labeling the null form of reflexivity Marcus did not give identifiable labels to the other styles of reflexivity. Denzin has subsequently done this and has elaborated further on Marcus's four styles. He labels them respectively: a) Subjectivist Reflexivity (or the null form) b) Methodological Reflexivity c) Intertextual Reflexivity d) Standpoint Reflexivity. He adds a further one which derives from Marcus's fourth style which he terms Queer Reflexivity (Denzin, 1997: 218-223).

14 These insights that ethnovraphic knowledge is the product of a shared intersubjective experience and the understanding that emerges between the observer and observed have been supported by scholars such as Aull-Davies (1999), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Denzin, (1997), Okely and Callaway (1992) and Tedlock (2000). As I understand it the intersubjective encounter denotes the complex process of interaction between two or more individuals and how they adjust and readjust according to context, motivations, intentions, power differentials, interpretations, semantics of language, interests, emotions etc. It suggests that in the process of communication the outcomes are dynamic and constantly shifting.

15 For instance, Evans Pritchard's (1940) arrival among the Nuer and Raymond Firth's (1936) dramatic arrival in Polynesia. See also Pratt (1986).
Some post-modern critics have spent time analyzing the subtexts of the arrival scenes experienced by early anthropologists into the field (Geertz, 1988; Pratt, 1986). Pratt has pointed out that these arrival scenes are “symbolically and ideologically rich, they often turn out to be the most memorable segments of an ethnographic work” (1986: 32). They can also be the determining moment of how subsequent engagements take place. In Section 1.3.4 of this chapter I explore my own arrival scene in the field, which was a critical point that determined how the research process was to unfold and my understanding of events that eventually took place, where I found myself, as Hastrup (ibid) has observed, a central part of the plot.

1.2.3 Radical participation and the anthropology of extraordinary experience

Coinciding with, and in some respects in response to, the shift in paradigm to greater self-awareness in the research process, was the emergence of the anthropology of experience (or experiential anthropology), and an increasing recognition of the need to acknowledge the ontological reality of spirit and of metaphysical causation, if not for the anthropologist, then at least for those of our field subjects who are adamant these exist.

Many of the anthropologists concerned with the anthropology of experience (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Friedson, 1996; Hastrup, 1993; Jackson, 1989; Throop, 2003; Turner, V., 1985; Turner, V. & Bruner, 1986; Willis, 1999) drew on the earlier insights of philosophers such as Dilthey, Dewey, Husserl, Heidegger, W. James, Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault. While experience is an essential part of being human and is an extremely complex phenomenon (Brereton, 2009; Throop, 2003) that has occupied the minds of philosophers for centuries, the way in which the term has come to be applied in more recent anthropological method and analysis is with regard to the degree to which the anthropologist seeks to reduce the gap between his/her experiences and those of his/her informants i.e. some anthropologists now seek an ‘experience near’ form of understanding (Miller, 2007; Wikan, 1991). Michael Jackson suggested that the experimental object in anthropological research should be the researcher him/herself, as the the primary data emerges from the inter-subjective encounter (Jackson, 1989: 4). Jackson drew his insights from W. James (1976), a philosopher who coined the term ‘radical empiricism’. Radical empiricism was first and foremost “a philosophy of the experience of objects and actions in which the subject itself is a participant” (Jackson, 1989: 3; citing from
Edie, 1965: 119). The selection of the term ‘radical’ empiricism was employed to directly counter the existing concept of ‘traditional’ empiricism. The latter “assumes that the knower and the known inhabit disconnected worlds and regards experience as something passively received rather than actively made, something that impresses itself upon our blank minds or overcomes us like sleep” (Jackson, 1989: 5). Thus, radical empiricism breaks down the boundary between the observer and the observed. Jackson notes how this same principle has been applied by modern quantum physics, which is primarily concerned with the interplay between the observer and the observed (ibid: 3). Radical participation, as a methodological concept (Goulet & Miller, 2007) which I discuss in more detail below, could be seen as an element of this notion of radical empiricism.

Regarding the experimental object, the self, Jackson draws from a vivid insight made by Victor Turner that, “experience is a journey, a test (of self, of suppositions about others), a ritual passage, an exposure to peril, and an exposure to fear” (Turner, 1985: 226). In a book that was co-edited by Victor Turner and Edward Bruner and published [posthumously] after Victor Turner’s death, The Anthropology of Experience (1986), the importance of experience was spelt out more clearly. In the introduction to the book Bruner attributes the formulation of an anthropology of experience to Victor Turner, who drew his inspiration from a German thinker of the late eighteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Dilthey (in Bruner, 1986: 3) used the term Erlebnis to represent his concept of experience, or that which has been “lived through” and reflected upon according to multiple attributes. This was distinct from the pure flow or sequence of events that is not reflected upon or made meaningful; what the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz refers to as duree (Schutz, 1970). Dilthey argued that “reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience” (Dilthey cited in Bruner, 1986: 161), and the active self engages with and shapes that experience. For Bruner this means that “the anthropology of experience sees people as active agents in the historical process who construct their own world” and, as a result, “culture is alive, context sensitive, and emergent” (Bruner, 1986: 12., my emphasis). This statement by Bruner suggests a cultural constructionist perspective which, as in the more relativist cultural anthropological

16 Brereton (2009), drawing from the philosopher Dewey (1925/1971), identifies these attributes as being temporalization, location, matter, energy, personhood, sensation, affect, events, rhythmicity, prolepsis, absence and culture.
tradition of Boas, suggests that “culture preempts reality” (Brereton, 2009: 6). Brereton, who argues from a cultural realist perspective (as inspired by Roy Bhaskar), argues that such an assumption is flawed, in that “it fails to theorize how culturalized views are structured by real properties and powers of the world, which world, and which powers, exist independently of those views” (ibid: 6). Brereton argues that Dewey’s model of experience (1925/1971) is able to accommodate the reality of the external world in that he “described experience as both an emergent feature of nature and a window into it” (ibid). Hence, this model of experience, which I support, accepts the reality of an external, tangible world that exists independently of the observer.

Although anthropology “is created in a process of shared social experience” (Hastrup, 1993: 63) we can never really know exactly how other people experience life. However, it is within that zone of experience-near and shared interpersonal experience, what Mason refers to as the ‘interstitial’ zone (Mason, 2002: 3), that we can come to a closer understanding of what other people experience. Thus, just being present in the field is not enough; one has to become a part of the drama; “The concept of becoming implies that one gives in to an alien reality and allows oneself to change in the process” (Hastrup, 1990: 50). Van Binsbergen argues along much the same line with regard to the process of intercultural knowledge production (van Binsbergen, 2003: 20).

There is, of course, more to experience than just interpersonal engagement and the spoken word. There has been much critique over the last two decades regarding anthropology’s reification of visualism, at the expense of other senses (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Claasen, 1990; Csordas, 1994; Feld & Brennais, 2004; Hastrup, 1993; Howes, 1991; Katz & Csordas 2003; Stoller, 1984, 1989, 1996, 1997). Experience necessitates an engagement of all our senses that inform us about the outside world, and the range and importance of each of these senses are culturally defined (Geurts, 2002: 4-16). As researchers we should not neglect those senses that our culture may have suppressed or dismissed, and yet may be recognized as perfectly relevant and reliable sources of information in other cultures. This especially relates to the senses involved in intuitive processes, often dubbed the sixth sense (ibid: 4), or those senses invoked during altered states of consciousness (such as in dreams or trance states). In many instances, these are regarded within various societies as providing profound and valid
sources of knowledge (Dilley, 1999, Goulet, 1994; Lumpkin, 2001; Ridington, 1988; Rushforth, 1992). It is this area where the anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE) has contributed significantly.

Extraordinary (perhaps with more emphasis on extra-ordinary) experiences are those that fall outside of what (in a broadly western perspective) would be termed ‘normal’ everyday experiences (of our life-world\(^{17}\)). These experiences are largely based on dreams, visions and trance states, but are not limited only to them. The AEE approach, which advocated the inclusion of such extra-ordinary experiences as valid data, was first articulated in a publication edited by David Young and Jeanne-Guy Goulet entitled *Being Changed by Cross-cultural Encounters: the Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience* (1994), and this was followed by a sequel publication in 2007 edited by Jean-Guy Goulet and Bruce Granville Miller entitled *Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field*. Drawing from their own experiences\(^{18}\) they note that when ethnographers have extraordinary experiences in the field, these “challenge one’s conception of reality in the sense that normal ways of classifying perceptual data are no longer adequate and the boundary between the real and imaginary are blurred” (Young & Goulet, 1994: 8). Emphasising the value in gaining an insider perspective of extraordinary experiences, Young and Goulet (1994) argue that, “anthropologists should, at a minimum, temporarily suspend disbelief, and attempt to take as seriously as possible informants’ reports of extraordinary experiences, as well as their explanations for them” (*ibid*, 1994: 11). This was primarily a methodological, rather than a theoretical approach; the proponents advocated that in order to gain better ethnographic insights into various realms of spiritual knowledge the ethnographer should become actively involved, through ‘radical participation’, or more specifically, ‘radical embodied participation’, in the ritual life of his/her host society. Rituals can be the best means of ‘radical embodied participation’ through which altered states of consciousness, including

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17 The term ‘life-world’ has been defined by the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz to denote the world of everyday life; “By the everyday life-world is to be understood that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense” (Schutz, 1973/1974: 3). A person’s life-world is also referred to as the ‘natural attitude’ in which one is born and socialized into. This is regarded as self-evidently ‘real’.

18 This particularly relates to Goulet’s extraordinary experiences among the Guajiro and the Dene Tha (see also Goulet, 1994)
powerful dreams and visions are induced. For instance, in my case (to be discussed in Section 1.3.4), my entrance into the Zulu *izangoma* world was initiated by ritual introduction to the ancestors (both my teacher’s and mine) followed by the ingestion of ritually empowered natural substances (such as ‘holy water’ and ground roots). The dreams that followed were regarded by the *izangoma* as confirmation that I had been accepted by the ancestors (see Section 1.3.5). It was evident that if I had failed to have any dreams of significance I would not have been able to proceed in my training. Dream experiences, including those of the anthropologist, constitute an important dimension of the anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE), and the ‘anthropology of dreaming’ (Tedlock, 1987, 1991a) has become a recognized field of its own. As my own dreams have proven a useful method of directing my research and determining a more nuanced understanding of the world of diviners and the role played by the water divinities in their training, I will return to examine this subject in more detail in Chapter Two.

The concept of ‘radical participation’ that was used by Goulet and Miller (2007), was adapted from Fabian’s concept of ecstatic anthropology (2001: 31), which advocates that anthropologists set aside their “single minded pursuit of data within a clearly defined research agenda” (Goulet & Miller, 2007: 1) and allow themselves to become co-actors in their informants’ worlds. It thus goes beyond our mere observing, questioning and listening, to our actively participating and ‘joining in’ with their lives. The proponents of this approach also insist that as anthropologists we cannot set aside those experiences “that challenge our own epistemological, ontological, and ethical assumptions” (ibid: 2). They clarify this statement by referring to Fabian’s concept of ecstatic fieldwork, which offers the potential for anthropologists to “step outside one’s taken-for-granted body of knowledge” (ibid: 5). Allowing ones worldview (or cognitive style) to become transformed in the process is a distinct aspect of such an approach and to “include such moments (of transformation) in one’s ethnographic account is to present not only knowledge obtained but also the processes through which such knowledge was gained and the circumstances in which such processes became operative” (ibid: 6).

Although the phrase ‘the anthropology of extraordinary experience’ (AEE) was only coined in
the 1990s, it could be regarded as a catch all phrase to denote a range of experiences that fall under the rubric of an 'altered state of consciousness' or of the experience of non-ordinary or extraordinary reality. There were many people who effectively practiced the radical participation method into the extraordinary before the AEE officially existed, and these include those anthropologists who were identified by their informants or host society as having a spiritual calling to become shamans, healers, ‘dreamers’, ‘sorcerers’, or members of a priestly order. Perhaps the best known and most controversial of these was Carlos Castenada (1968/1977, 1981, 1987), although his authenticity has been critically challenged and consequently undermined (de Mille, 1980/1981; Marton, 1994). Other well-known and respected anthropologists who became initiated into their host society’s spiritual traditions include Robert Desjarlais (1992), Michael Harner (1980/1990), Timothy Knab (1995, 2004), Michael Attwood Mason (2002, 2004), Karen McCarthy Brown (1991/2001), Larry Peters (1981, 1982), Paul Stoller (1984, 1987), Barbara and Dennis Tedlock (1982, 2005), and Wim Van Binsbergen (1991, 2003). A more recent example of an anthropologist who has been initiated into southern African healing traditions is Jo Thobeka Wreford (2005, 2008).

Not all those scholars who have had (recognized) extraordinary experiences, or have undergone initiation, or who align themselves with the benefits that extraordinary experience is understood to offer, necessarily agree that spirits exist (see Young & Goulet, 1994: 318-326), and some try to rationalize these experiences in terms of various psychological or existential states. Larry Peters is one such example of this (Peters, 1981). However, there are some anthropologists who have been more forthright in their recognition that we need to seriously consider that spirits do exist (Goodman, 1990; Shweder, 1991; Edith Turner 1992, 1993, 2003, 2006; Wreford, 2005, 2008). Some scholars confess that their original skepticism of the reality of spirits was challenged as a result of their experiences in the field (e.g. Ashforth, 2000; Salamone, 1995). There are also a number of anthropologists who confess to having experienced what they understand as supernatural afflictions, and/or the counteractive strategies used against them, which challenged their initially skeptical concepts of affliction and its causation (Badone, 1995; Favret-Sada, 1988; Grindal, 1983; McIntosh, 2004b; Owen, 1981; Stoller & Olkes 1987; Willis, 1999). There are also many anthropologists who have reported having so-called ‘anomalous’ or ‘religious’ experiences in the field (McClenon & Nooney, 2002; Mentore, 2007). Some scholars, such as Harner (1980/1990), Myerhoff (1974), and
Narby (1995) had their notions of reality challenged after participating in the ritual consumption of psychoactive plants, while others claim to have experienced possession or other such forms of altered states of consciousness induced from intense participation in ritual activities (Friedson, 1996; Lederman, 1991; Peters, 1981; Willis, 1999).

As noted above, radical participation in the field, may involve radical embodied participation, where bodily movements, restrictions, or consumption of substances etc. may precipitate what the anthropologist experiences as encounters with the extraordinary. These embodied effects are often induced through ritual activities. These experiences may not only offer unique insights into understanding the worldview of one's informants, but can also lead to a significant transformation in the researcher's own worldview, including his/her sense of reality and sense of self (Young & Goulet, 1994). While this process of transformation may be exhilarating and enriching in some respects, it can also be difficult, confusing and alienating in others (Wreford, 2008). Radical participation also implies some degree of 'going native' where one seeks to gain acceptance in the new culture and experience it from the 'inside'. Not only may one meet with some resistance and suspicion from members of the host culture, but one can suffer a sense of alienation, rejection and ridicule from one's own culture. It is also possible to over-romanticise the experience, and/or put oneself in danger. There are many hazards that may emerge when one naively enters a vastly different conceptual world, which has to be based on a relationship of trust with those who allow one to enter into it. Wim van Binsbergen has dealt with this issue extensively in relation to his own experience in becoming a sangoma (diviner) in Francistown, Botswana (van Binsbergen, 2003). In Chapter Seven I will detail my own experience of how this trust was undermined by certain individuals and how this put me in a position of potential danger. It seems, however, that this exposure to danger is part and parcel of the radical participation method. Reminiscent of Victor Turner's assertion that “experience is a journey, a test (of self, of suppositions about others), a ritual passage, an exposure to peril, and an exposure to fear” (Turner, 1985: 226), Goulet and Miller remind the anthropologist that it is in making oneself vulnerable through such radical participation methods that “reliable ethnographic knowledge” can be produced (Goulet & Miller, 2007: 11).

19 See Wreford (2008: 177-197) on this problem.
An important aspect of extraordinary experience is its spatio-temporal dimension. The order and timing in which events occur (be they of dreams, encounters with people and/or animals, rituals, messages etc.), and the convergence of otherwise disparate events, can transform an ordinary 'random' event into one of great significance and can have an effect of heightening the intensity of the experience. Goulet & Miller (2007: 4) observed this spatio-temporal aspect of extraordinary experience in their review of contributors’ papers in their edited volume. This tendency towards “a sort of non-linear, non-Newtonian, quantum physical world in which related, connected events unfolded [or appeared to unfold] simultaneously in various locations” (ibid) is sometimes referred to as ‘synchronicity’ (Jung et al, 1964; Mansfield, 1995). Mansfield defines synchronistic experiences as “numinous events where the outside world meaningfully relates to our inner psychological states” (1995: 6). Similarly Jung’s understanding of synchronicity refers to “a ‘meaningful coincidence’ of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected” (Jung et al, 1964: 211). Mansfield (1995), a physicist, has sought to explain the phenomenon of synchronicity with a combination of Jungian psychology and the insights of quantum physics. Beyond synchronicity and coincidence of events, many scholars have emphasized the importance of being aware of the temporal continuity of the anthropologist’s experience. Jackson points out that “Experience is not reducible to timeless laws or essences; it is a boundless process” (Jackson, 1989: 13).

Drawing from Dilthey, Bruner also observes that there are no boundaries to experience. Every experience has a history and a future, as well as a constantly moving present, and,

......present experience always takes account of the past and anticipates the future. What holds the present and the past together is a unitary meaning, yet that “meaning does not lie in some focal point outside our experience but is contained in them [in experience] and constitutes the connections between them” (Bruner, 1986: 8; citing from Dilthey, 1976: 239).

This is why it is so important that the anthropologist gives some detail of his/her own historical and personal background; they are vital parts of our experiences in the field, how we interpret them, and the course that they take. In Section 1.3 I trace some of the key aspects of my own history that helped determine not only the choice of my field of study but also established the context in which much of my subsequent experiences took place.
1.2.3.1 Analytical critique of the anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE)

Considering its nature, there has been surprisingly little critique on the AEE, apart from the vigorous critique by James Lett (1991) on interpretive anthropology and the paranormal, which preceded the publication by Young and Goulet (1994), when the concept of AEE was introduced. Apart from Amanda Coffey's endorsement of the AEE and the need for anthropologists to include accounts of the "unusual and unexpected" they have seen or experienced during fieldwork (Coffey, 1999: 33), the only other paper in the anthropological journals I have found that makes reference to AEE, apart from the book review by Lynne Hume (1995), is by Shanafelt (2002). Hume's review, which was overall positive, predicted that Young and Goulet's (1994) book was "bound to be a controversial one, which will be met with some derision from die-hard social scientists who refuse to entertain the notion of other realities" (Hume, 1995: 53). Lett would probably be placed in that category, even though he presents himself to being open to the possibility that some paranormal claims may be true if confirmed by the rigorous rules of scientific enquiry. He then effectively precludes the possibility of such confirmation being possible when he states that one of his principle arguments is that "all claims of paranormal phenomena are false and illusory, and any other conclusion about paranormal phenomena is unsound and unwarranted" (Lett, 1991: 309, my emphasis). However, it should be borne in mind that in the case of extraordinary experience many of the claims to knowledge take place during altered states of consciousness, or in different orders of reality, thus proving their truth or falsity is a futile exercise. According to the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, these orders of reality (such as the everyday life-world, the world of dreams, the world of science or the world of religious experience) each have their own 'finite provinces of meaning', which contain their own meaning-compatible experiences, or cognitive styles (Schutz, 1973/74). Schutz argues that one cannot merge the cognitive styles of the different provinces of meaning but that one should rather 'leap' across them. However, there is a residue or gap (what Schutz refers to as an 'enclave') left behind from an experience gained in one order of reality (such as a dream) that bears relation to another (our

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20 Lett defines 'paranormal' as those "phenomena that are beyond the normal range of human experience and perception" (Lett, 1991: 305).

21 These being, "the rule that propositional claims must be falsifiable, the rule that logical arguments must be sound, the rule that beliefs must be based on available evidence, and the rule that experimental beliefs must be replicable" (Lett, 1991: 308).
In the case of a dream experience we can only measure its truth or falsity within the cognitive style of a particular order of reality from which we are examining it (Schutz, 1973/1974: 127); as scientific knowledge does not derive from the order of reality in which dreams emerge, it cannot be used as a valid measure of dream experience. If Schutz's position is correct, this makes any scientific verification of the claimed reality of dream-based experiences well nigh impossible, unless science is able to develop conceptual tools that are coherent with the order of reality that governs dreams. While not precluding the value of including such experiences as valid data in ethnographic accounts, or subjecting them to psychoanalysis, this phenomenological principle poses a problem if one is trying to make scientifically valid claims for experiences or beliefs that are derived from dreams or during other altered states of consciousness. Schutz's phenomenological conundrum also poses a problem for determining the truth or falsity of certain religious claims. Shanefelt (2002) has pointed out the difficulties in evaluating the truth or falsity of religious claims, especially when they are not testable. He argues that the mere fact that many beliefs conflict with or are contradictory to one another rules out the possibility that they may all be true. He also argues that the fact that multiple people may believe in something is not proof that it exists. This point is also made by Hume, who notes that,

> Seeing things does not necessarily lead to 'proof' of the existence of god or gods, and may have nothing at all to do with religion per se. The commonality of such experiences does suggest, however, that all humans have the capacity for experiences of a non-mundane nature, and as part of our human condition, is a subject worthy of study (Hume, 1995: 52).

On the basis of this epistemological conundrum posed by Schutz (1973/1974), while my own personal experiences may lead me to accept that the water divinities exist, at an academic level I cannot make any scientifically valid claims for this because of the lack of conceptual tools to do so; hence it is a futile exercise to pursue this. However, I can suggest we consider the possibility that the water divinities may exist, and accept that for methodological purposes, experiences relating to them are ontologically real for the people who experience them and have a direct bearing on how they respond and behave.

One could rightfully argue that an inherent weakness of the AEE approach is this issue of not being able to scientifically validate extraordinary experience. The question then is: What can
radical participation, and the inclusion of extraordinary experiences as data, contribute to our understanding of the water divinity phenomenon in southern Africa? I propose that it is not necessary to jettison the relevance of many of the more conventional approaches to religious belief and ritual in assisting our understanding of the forms in which aspects of the water divinity complex are expressed and acted upon across many groups in southern Africa. However, I argue that these conventional approaches are not adequate on their own. I believe that exposing myself to extraordinary experiences derived from radical participation in my informants’ lifeworlds has added an important dimension to my understanding of what motivates so many people in southern Africa, and as such offers superior explanatory power for the way in which the water divinity complex manifests across the region. If we resort to only the conventional forms of reductionist explanation, the question remains: why do so many people go to such elaborate and apparently far-fetched lengths to achieve social cohesion, assert power, make symbolic statements etc.? Why are such beliefs so widespread and consistent in many ways? Why do so many diverse people insist on the reality of the water divinity phenomenon? In trying to deal with the apparent reality of his Karanga informants’ experiences, Aschwanden was quite upfront in voicing his doubts about the explanatory power of using a purely psycho-structuralist approach to the Karanga material when he states,

There are no analyses – neither of a psychoanalytical nor structuralist nature – which could ever reach the depth of the African interpretation. Western interpretation(s) – frequently more interested in their own theories than in the discovery of real connections – all suffer from the same reality-deficiency, i.e. their dependence upon the idea of the unconscious, by which ultimately more is obscured than clarified (Aschwanden, 1989: 10).

The question that remains then, is how can we accommodate into our analysis of the water divinity phenomenon, not only the very real nature of the experiences claimed by our informants, but also the experiences we as anthropologists may have had as a result of the intercultural encounter, including those extraordinary experiences derived through radical participation? I propose a model that incorporates four broad levels of analysis.

1.2.4  Levels of analysis – experience, structure, praxis and transmission

When one is examining a particular form of experience and comparing it across cultural boundaries, as in this thesis, it is important to differentiate the various levels of analysis that
are associated with the experience (Jacobson, 1991). Firstly there is the experience itself; secondly there are the beliefs, notions or ‘modes of thought’ regarding the experience (what people say about it), and these may be drawn from both a personal or wider cultural ‘stock of knowledge’22 about the experience; thirdly there is the level of action, or ‘modes of action’ - what people do about the experience, how they use it or act upon it (i.e. through ritual, politics etc). At a fourth level, we can ask how, to what extent, and in which direction knowledge regarding these experiences is transmitted within and between groups, and the processes by which it may be transformed.

While the level of the actual experience, including those derived from radical participation, has only attracted the attention of anthropologists relatively recently, such as with those working in the fields of phenomenology, experiential anthropology and the anthropology of extraordinary experience, the second, third, and to some extent the fourth levels of analysis are the subjects that have been wrestled over by anthropologists for decades. In Section 1.2.1 of this chapter I introduced the two levels of analysis that were of main concern in conventional anthropology, but I will elaborate a bit more on their relevance to my arguments at this point. The ideational or ‘modes of thought’ aspect is concerned mainly with ‘meaning’ and may also be referred to superstructure or even culture (in one sense), and Jacobson (1991: 10) points out that these are further subdivided into a) “the way in which people classify or conceptualise their world” (i.e. conceptions, cultural categories, representations), and b) “the ways in which people should act, ought to act, or are expected to act” (normative rules or norms). Structural23, structuralist24, cultural, interpretive or symbolic ethnography attends mainly to this level of analysis. Anthropological approaches that were more concerned with the level or modes of action and ‘behaviour’ include Malinowski’s form of functionalism and processual anthropology (including transactionalism and conflict anthropology). The latter included the use of “situational analysis” and the “extended case method” (Gluckman, 1961; Van Velsen, 1967) where the lives of certain actors were followed over time in particular

22 This concept of ‘stock of knowledge’ comes from Alfred Schutz (1973/1974) who points out that all experience is made sense of by our own, or ‘my’, ‘stock of knowledge’. He explains that each individual’s, or ‘my’ “stock of knowledge within the life-world...is taken over from group experience and includes beyond that my own previous experiences” (ibid: 8).

23 As used by Radcliffe-Brown.

24 As used by Levi-Strauss.
settings (Jacobson, 1991). While it is useful to keep these two levels of analysis (‘modes of thought’ and ‘modes of action’) separate at a conceptual level it is important to remember that, in actuality, they are intricately associated, and there is a continual dialectic between both levels. Some scholars have sought to understand and integrate both levels of analysis into their ethnographies (e.g. Victor Turner 1968, 1969).

It is important to ask to what degree these ‘modes of thought’ and ‘modes of action’ are generated internally within social groups or cultures, or adopted from ideas and practices emanating from outside of them. This relates to the fourth level of analysis relating to the transmission of knowledge concerning experience. The extent to which ideas, practices and technologies are transmitted across groups have been the subject of much debate in anthropology, especially in the early part of the twentieth century (Eriksen & Nielson, 2001) when the theory of diffusionism was in vogue. Diffusionism emerged in response to the biased and prejudicial lineal evolutionist perspectives that dominated anthropology at the turn of the nineteenth century, and was largely inspired by anthropologists in Germany. It sought to explain the existence of certain culture traits (and their similarities and differences) on the basis of transmission of ideas across space and time from various centres of influence (referred to as Kulturkreis). It also argued “that the main process by which cultures change is through cultural borrowing” (Howard & Dunaif-Hattis, 1992: 363) and that this occurs from multiple different influences and directions; this “patchwork of traits with various origins and histories” meant that it was difficult to view society as a coherent and functional whole (Eriksen & Nielson, 2001: 27). The explanatory power of diffusionism was soon questioned mainly on the basis that it was difficult to scientifically prove and amounted to “little more than speculation” (Howard & Dunaif-Hattis, 1992: 364). Resistance to the idea of cultural diffusion emerged in conjunction with the rise of structural-functionalism which emphasised the importance of local context in the generation of coherent, discrete and self-adjusting societies that strive towards maintaining structural equilibrium, something which diffusionism could not accommodate. Its fall from grace was also partly due to its prejudicial overtones which implicitly denied that certain societies were capable of generating their own forms of knowledge and innovations, having rather absorbed these from more sophisticated societies such as those from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt (Lewis, 1976). However, despite this rejection of diffusionism it is undeniable that diffusion of knowledge, practices and
technologies are an essential part of the human condition (Eriksen, 2004; Lewis, 1976; Murphy, 1979) and have had a profound effect on shaping human history. The phenomenon of globalization is just one very stark example of this (Eriksen, 2004). I argue that in seeking to understand the distribution of ideas and practices regarding the water divinities across the southern African region we cannot neglect this factor of transmission.

The processes by which knowledge and practices are shared across cultures are complex and multiple, arising from such factors as migration, conquest and assimilation, intermarriage, trading partnerships, and communication technologies. Some modes of transmission are more obvious than others; in Chapter Four (Section 4.7.1), I explore how ideas and knowledge are shared between healers belonging to different cultural groups and how movements across cultural and geographical boundaries are often prompted by dreams. The manner in which foreign ideas and practices are imposed upon, or appropriated by, a particular cultural group will also influence the ways in which these new ideas and practices are made sense of; this may determine whether they are accepted and accommodated, or whether they are transformed and domesticated to blend with existing ideas and practices. This issue of whether externally imposed ideas and practices, be they political-economic or religious (i.e. Christianity), are accepted, accommodated or transformed, and the processes through which they occur, permeates much of the material I discuss in Chapters Seven and Eight. However, determining the direction in which knowledge and practices flow can be a challenging effort, especially when dealing with prehistory. This problem will be explored in more detail in Chapter Nine where I examine some of the arguments and evidence as to whether knowledge of the water divinities flowed from the San to the Nguni groups or vice versa.

This need to be aware of the different levels of analysis in order to help us understand religion in Africa has also been argued by van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers in their edited publication Theoretical Explorations in African Religion (1985). They point to the need for ‘confluence theories’ that “combine analyses in terms of power [both symbolic and non-symbolic] with analyses in terms of symbolic syntaxes” (van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers, 1985: 14). They propose a diagrammatic model or “co-ordinate system comprising two axes” (ibid: 15) to assist in our understanding of the relationship between structural analyses (i.e. ‘modes of thought’) and transactional or praexeological analyses (i.e. ‘modes of action’). However,
neither the level of experience nor the level of transmission is entertained in their model, although they both come to the forefront in van Binsbergen's later writings (e.g. van Binsbergen, 2003). I propose an alternative model that accommodates experience as well as transmission, which I depict as follows,

![Diagram of Levels of Analysis](image)

**Figure 1: Levels of analysis for exploring social and cultural phenomena**

Penetrating these fours levels of analysis is the issue of agency, or the capacity of individuals or groups to act and transform social reality, which may serve to benefit the agent/s involved. Agency is integrally linked to the power one has at his/her disposal, be this to attain something of material benefit or to gain some form of social control. While social norms may serve to limit the excesses of individual agency they can sometimes be used to validate it as well. This point was argued by Bourdieu in his practice theory, using the concept of *habitus* (1972/1977; 1990/1992). It is also agency that brings about social change.

As will be seen in Chapters Three, Four and Five the water divinities are intimately linked in thought with the provision of essential material elements for life, material comfort (wealth) and security, through the provision of water, rain, fertility and knowledge. It stands to reason that interpretation and control of such benefits may attract agency that is governed by self-interest and the desire to assert power. In Chapter Seven of this thesis I discuss the ambiguity of ideas regarding the water divinities, and how these are informed by issues of morality and
wealth, and who stands to benefit from the latter. As the norms and principles of material wealth and redistribution have become transformed from communal oriented benefits to individual accumulation as a result of capitalism and modernity, so have the moral discourses regarding the water divinities as a source of this wealth. The conversion of agency into symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979, 1990/1992), often enacted in ritual, is to be found in varying degrees across the different groups examined and as will be seen these are influenced in some way by the various political structures that operate under a variety of environmental and economic constraints. Much the same argument can be applied to the role of agency behind the conversion of symbolic power that has attended the religious transformations brought about by Christianity, which I examine in more detail in Chapter Eight.

In Chapter Three (Section 3.3), I examine the different levels at which the water divinity complex have been analysed by other scholars and how these have shaped their theoretical applications. After comparing the literature and presenting my own data regarding the similarities and differences found across the various southern African groups I return to this issue of levels of analysis in Chapter Four (Section 4.7.1) and examine its potential in assisting with cross-cultural comparison. I argue that we need to pay more attention to the level of experience in order to help us explain the widespread distribution of the water divinity beliefs, to understand the phenomenon and why it evokes such profound responses in these societies (see also Appendix Nineteen).

Some critics may argue that experience cannot be separated from meaning and thus it cannot stand as a separate category or level of analysis from that of ‘modes of thought’. Steven Katz (1978) has commented on the dilemma posed by this unity of experience and meaning. He states, “all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty” (Katz, 1978: 26). However, despite the relevance of this observation, I suggest that we need to differentiate ‘form’ from the ‘content’ of experience, especially as it relates to dreams. While we may describe the content of a dream or an experience, with minimal levels of interpretation imposed upon it, within the idiom and structure of a particular discourse, we then embellish it with meaning based on our group or individual interpretations (under the influence of agency), and thus shape its form. Thus, in
the case of the water divinities, the statements of people who claim to have had the experience of being taken underwater and meeting various snake or fish-tailed creatures demonstrate remarkable similarities across the various groups in southern Africa. However, the content of these experiences are not all interpreted in the same way and the form they assume when explained and integrated into their respective cosmologies may differ in certain aspects from one another.

I propose that the model I have formulated concerning the different levels of analysis that are involved in any study of cultural and social phenomena helps support my claim that the insights provided by applying the methodological principles of AEE to my material are complementary to the conventional approaches. To conclude this section I refer back to the unique contribution that the scholarship of both Victor and Edith Turner made to our understanding of Ndembu ritual and society, as well as to anthropology in general. The fact that Edith Turner was able to participate in the 1985 Ihamba ritual in a far more radical way, and saw what she regarded as spirit substance being removed, which immediately led to the resolution of the patient’s physical symptoms, does not mean that all the valuable sociological insights offered by her husband Victor Turner were no longer relevant. The social crises at village level precipitated by tensions between normative structures and individuals’ agency were there; as were the broader political injustices and tensions brought about by colonial rule. The rituals did seek to resolve the interpersonal tensions that precipitated the crisis and achieved this with some success. The symbols used revealed fascinating insights into the way the Ndembu conceptualized and categorized their world and how they were employed effectively in the ritual, which displayed all the elements of a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960). What Edith Turner did was to highlight the fact that the driving force behind the rituals was the firm conviction that the spirit of the deceased hunter was angry for the omissions and actions of the living, and the removal of the spirit substance confirmed this in the minds of her informants. She herself experienced what she understood to be the driving power, the ‘fuel of spirit’ that generates and sustains the ritual process among the Ndembu.

1.3 An anthropologist’s choice of study
1.3.1 The relevance of an anthropologist’s life history:
As I have already explained, it is now widely accepted that the anthropologist’s own history is
relevant to the ethnographic enterprise. My own personal history had a direct bearing on not only why I chose the topic I did, but also in determining the course it took. For purposes of clarity I have divided my life history into three main phases.

First Phase: A childhood in a mystical landscape – glimpses of African spirituality

I was born in Zimbabwe (what was then known as Rhodesia) in 1955. My father was the 3rd generation descendent of an early pioneering family on his mother’s side, who had trekked to Rhodesia in 1892. They were an aristocratic (but cash strapped) family of Orkney Island origin who had now become farmers of the African soil. My father died in Zimbabwe in 1983 after a long and illustrious career as an airline pilot, and a somewhat less illustrious career as a part-time farmer. The demands of flying meant that he was out of the country for much of the time and this left the responsibility of raising a family of seven children to my very resilient mother, who had been born and bred in England. Apart from the long absences of my father, the biggest problems she faced seemed to be in dealing with snakes and other uninvited beasts that plagued the house and garden. My own survival of an encounter with a spitting cobra had been one example of these; when I was about 6 months of age a cobra had slithered into my playpen in the garden while I was under the ‘watchful’ eye of a childminder. On seeing the snake the childminder fled in terror leaving me to the mercy of my new playmate. Fortunately our cat had joined me in the playpen and had kept the cobra at bay until one of my brothers had encountered the scene and came to my rescue. The cat assumed a legendary place in the annals of our home. This is not just an idle story but I believe it is relevant to the ‘calling’ that I subsequently had.

When I was five years old we moved to a cattle ranch in a remote valley in Inyanga (now called Nyanga) in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. My mother was initially horrified at the idea as the farm was extremely remote and difficult to access. What is more, with my father absent most of the time, she would be responsible for its management. We were to discover later that it had poor soils and grazing, was plagued by cattle-killing hyenas and, as it was in the rain-shadow, was frequently drought stricken. Despite the apparent madness of it

25 Many izangoma report significant experiences with snakes in their childhood (see Baba’s account - Appendix One).
all, it was a transforming event in our lives, for the children especially, as we did not have to worry about the logistics and financial stresses of such an undertaking, although we all assisted with the farm work. Our first residence was a ramshackle old corrugated iron house vacated by the previous owner. It had no running water or electricity, and so for the first year of living there we all had to wash in the river some distance from the house. It was a delightful river for us children, with a magical waterfall, deep pools and lots of granite rock, and we would spend most of our days there, in between helping with farming operations. When we finally built our equally ramshackle house, it was close to this river, and I would spend as much time possible playing in the pools.

My favourite place was sitting right underneath the waterfall on a rocky ledge just before it gave way to a deep abyss of water. This river flowed from a very imposing, spiritually mystical mountain, which was colloquially named “The Rain God”. It had a majestic presence in the landscape and it was not only us who felt its power but also the local Manyika people who surrounded our farm. From the time of our arrival the local people had told us about the spiritual power of the mountain, the taboos and sanctions that were associated with it. It was associated with rain-making and no-one except the nyanga (traditional healer) or a chief could climb to its summit. If they did a terrible misfortune would befall them. Similarly one should never point at it with a finger, as this was a sign of great disrespect. I found the local people’s notions of the spiritual presence that pervades the mountains intriguing, mainly because I could feel their very tangible power. During this time we were completely unaware of the local beliefs regarding the spirits of the water, the sacred pools, the snake and the mermaids (njuzu). This was something I was to discover at a much later date, and these beliefs are what set my research in motion. We did, however, have one encounter with a python, usually a very shy and elusive creature. One night my father shot a twelve foot python that had got into the duck pen and was in the process of swallowing a duck. He declared that the Arabs with whom he had spent many years in the Sudan and Bahrein, regarded python meat as a great delicacy, and so proceeded to cook it. I always remember him eating that python with gusto, although the rest of us chose not to try it. Little did I know about the significance of the

26 The farm was surrounded by what was called Tribal Trust Land—that is, communally held land under the control of local chiefs.
python as a sacred ancestral animal in those days, but that would come later. At weekends during the night, the drums would start their resonant communications with the spirit world and I would lie awake listening to them, intrigued as to what was going on at the so-called ‘beer drinks’ in the villages and farm compounds. At that age I felt it was like a forbidden world, one that I had no right to enter if I had not been asked, and so I never did see what went on—until much later in another part of the continent. Mt Muozi (the Rain God) was one of many spiritually powerful mountains that flanked our farm or were in close proximity to it. What heightened the mysterious power of the landscape was the evidence left in the area of an extensive earlier civilization, one which the local people said they had no memory of, as it was from a distant past beyond genealogical reckoning. Extensive ancient stone-working, fortresses, mine workings, standing stones (menhirs), stone circles and hill terracing covered the land and we would spend many hours exploring the overgrown ruins, foraging among the fragmented pottery shards, letting our imaginations run wild as to the people who had once lived there. The sheer beauty of the landscape augmented the tangible essence of mystery that pervaded the land and it was this that etched itself so deeply into my soul and whole being and to a large extent has driven my research interests.

**Second Phase: Racial conflicts over land: the terror of violence and war**

However, in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s these idyllic experiences were shattered by the escalating guerrilla insurgency that saw the onset of the War of Liberation. My understanding of what was happening on the broader political scene was minimal, as we rarely had access to newspapers and my family did not pay much attention to what was happening since they were so immersed in the daily struggle to survive on the land. The war was, of course, a struggle for control of the land as well as for political power. I had little understanding of the racially based inequalities of both the land allocation and governance at that age and it was only when I attended university in South Africa in the mid 1970s that I began to understand what the conflicts were about and the gross human rights abuses (particularly in South Africa) and intolerable racism that had led to the current crisis. In 1975 we were moved off the farm for

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27 Our favourite being, in line with the earlier explorers and scholars (see Garlake, 1973: 51-75), that this was the lost land of Ophir—the Queen of Sheba’s kingdom, later to be the land of Prester John.

28 This includes not only my thesis topic, but also other interests concerning religion and ecology, and landscape anthropology.
our own safety as it had become a ‘hot spot’ because of its close proximity to the Mozambique border, the access route taken by the guerrilla insurgents into the country. Our farm was appropriated for resettlement several years later when the Transitional Government came into power (headed by Abel Muzerewa). With the small amount of compensation my parents received they were able to buy a small piece of land in the Kadoma region, and at the time of independence my brothers purchased land to continue farming in a fertile area to the north of the country. They were committed to staying in the land of their birth and to contribute to its rebuilding. President Mugabe had adopted a very conciliatory approach to the remaining Europeans in the country and there was great hope that a more tolerant era had begun. Little did we know at this stage what was in store for the ‘white’ farmers, with the land invasions by the so-called ‘war veterans’ and the subsequent theft of property and livelihoods that would ensue. It was to be these events that would inform many of my subsequent experiences with the Zulu izangoma.

Phase Three: Preparing for a healing and anthropological career in a time of racial turmoil

On the completion of my schooling in 1973 I took the well worn route of many youngsters to study at university in South Africa. After a fairly indecisive start I eventually chose to take a degree majoring in nursing and anthropology. It was during my first year of studies that I experienced a near drowning event that Baba was to later identify as being as an aborted attempt by the water divinities to take me ‘under water’. Having obtained my degree as well as a husband and two children along the way, we soon moved to Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape where my husband had secured employment. I continued nursing at the local hospital, although this was temporarily interrupted in 1986 when I did a post-graduate honours course in anthropology at Rhodes University.

29 Our neighbours, an old couple who had refused to leave, were both murdered within a month of our departure.

30 It was quite evident in many of the land invasions that took place after 2000 that some of these ‘war veterans’ were far too young to have taken part in the liberation war.

31 I was swept over a waterfall on the Umgeni River during a tube race and got trapped under the pounding water and lost consciousness. Fortunately someone was able to pull me out and I only regained consciousness once on the bank.
The late eighties was an extremely oppressive time in South Africa, with the increasingly frustrated masses of disenfranchised black people marshalling all their energies to overthrow the increasingly oppressive and desperate white apartheid government. It was the time of ‘Rolling Mass Action’ and the regime’s response was brutal and devious (along with the so-called ‘third force’ atrocities), as were the measures the revolutionaries were taking to punish government sympathizers. As nurses and health care providers we witnessed the most unbelievable horrors that people could wreak on each other, having to patch the tortured, broken, burnt fragmented bodies and souls as they flowed into our casualties and wards. Health care was frustrating and depressing, especially working in the segregated black wards and hospitals, where resources and staff were scarce. In 1996 I returned to the Anthropology Department to assist with a short spell of teaching and it was during this period that I decided to register for a Masters degree, as I had developed a clear idea of the topic I wished to pursue.

1.3.2 Extraordinary experiences and finding a research direction
In 1995 I had come across some interesting information while helping my brother who was engaged in research on the ancient ruins in Zimbabwe, in addition to which I had experienced a number of events that could be described as ‘paranormal’ (or extra-ordinary). With regard to the latter the best I can say was that I was becoming increasingly aware of a ‘presence’ that was guiding me. I had had a number of experiences of precognition where the power of prayer played a part. I do not have the space to describe these in detail; suffice to say that these included a premonition I had that my husband was in grave danger whilst travelling overseas, and another where I had a premonition of a student being at risk of a serious injury in a rugby match. In both instances I was unable to intervene physically or warn them, and so resorted to intense praying. In both cases there seemed to be mysterious last minute interventions which averted the danger. Around about the same time I experienced what could best be described as a mystical experience while at the coast soon after a close friend of mine

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32 This was the time of the dreaded ‘necklacing’. People who were suspected of collaborating with the government were attacked by mobs, had rubber car tyres put over their torsos, and had petrol thrown on them before setting them alight.

33 Extra sensory perception (ESP) is defined as “acquiring information by means other than the known sensory channels”, while precognition is defined as “acquiring knowledge about events before they happen” (Mansfield 1995: 28).
had died. It involved an intense experience of golden light, including the presence of an enormous rainbow, which had a transforming effect on my psyche and my sense of reality. The relevance of this was that rainbows were to become very significant in my later experiences with the izangoma.

On a family visit to Zimbabwe in 1995 while assisting my brother who was researching the ancient ruins in Zimbabwe, I came across a number of documents that caught my interest. The one was by Frobenius and the other by local researchers from the University of Zimbabwe, J. Matowanyika and A. Madondo. Leo Frobenius was a German ethnologist who had spent many years traversing Africa collecting myths and beliefs, as well as museum relics, from the various tribal groups that he had encountered. The document I had in front of me was entitled *Leo Frobenius 1873-1973 - An Anthology* (Haberland, 1973). It appeared that amongst the tribes from which he had sought information were those located fairly near to our farm in Nyanga. Discussing the ‘myths’ of origin regarding the Wahungwe people, he notes that they referred to a ruler by the name of ‘Madzivoa’. Frobenius noted that this name translated as a lake, pond or ford (*i.e.* a body of water). He noted:

> According to a large number of myths and legends, many of the dzivoa are populated by ‘beings’ which live at the bottom of lakes. Whether a dzivoa is inhabited can easily be seen from the rising of bubbles encircled by widening ripples... The generally accepted name of the spirits that inhabit the lakes is “Wadzivoa” among the Manyika and Wahungwe. This is what is stated about the origin of the Wahungwe. The preferred name of the underwater spirits among the Wahungwe, Barwe, Wateve, Manyika and Wazezuru is not Wadzivoa but Ndusu or Njivi. Of these Ndusu the Wahungwe tell that they live at the lake at the bottom like men, that they have fire in their huts, that smoke rises from their huts and that they love music (Haberland, 1973: 198).

Frobenius continued his exposition on how these mythic beings were seen as the origin of all knowledge (especially that of the high priests), healing, science and engineering (metal working), as well as certain ritual practices. In this paper I found hints of something familiar that I had encountered elsewhere. However it was when I started reading the draft paper by

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34 He had already spent a number of years mapping and documenting the extensive ruins and terracing that cover over 25000 square kilometres of Zimbabwe. He had developed an extensive library and was chasing leads relating to the ancient trade networks that were reputed to have operated for the last thousand years between Zimbabwe and North Africa, the Middle East and India. He was also interested in certain medieval European interests in these trade networks.
Matowanyika and Madondo, entitled *In the Shadow of Mt Muozi*, that my excitement rose. They were writing about Mt Muozi, the ‘Rain God’ under whose ‘shadow’ I had been brought up. The paper was concerned with the spiritual ecology of the area, and was particularly interested in how this might relate to resource management. Having confirmed the central importance of Mt Muozi as a sacred site, as well as other related mountains in the area, they then discussed beliefs surrounding other resources in the area. With respect to certain riverine areas being regarded as sacred spaces they noted the following:

Other sacred spaces where no resource extraction is allowed are certain areas with riverine ecosystems that have sedge *Cyperus digitatus* (linked with the habitat of the python (s) which play host to the spirits and therefore are not killed and are also the totem animals for the local rulers). (88).............

Certain pools along local rivers are considered to be sacred and inaccessible to carnal beings. One such pool is Birira pool described by a local headman as “Birira pool and a number of other pools are sacred and inaccessible to the living. Birira pool is inhabited by a mermaid (*njuzu*) and strange things happen there. When the mermaid is cooking its meal one can see smoke spiralling from the pool or hear the hissing of the mermaid’s great pot as it boils. At other times one hears cocks crowing and cattle lowing. People who have gone much closer have reported seeing a reed-mat (*bonde*) on the surface of the water and on top of it a bar of gold35. Those who have had the opportunity to see the mermaid basking on the mat say that it is a feminine looking creature which is half-fish and half-human. No-one dares enter such pools except those who want to disappear into them to emerge in latter (sic) generations as diviners and medicine men” (Matowanyika & Madondo, 1994: 89).

I was later to discover the Birira pool was in the Nyataure district that bordered the northern boundary of our farm.

In reading these papers I was struck by the similarity of such stories to those I had encountered mainly through the research of Manton Hirst, a psychologist who had done his PhD in our anthropology department in the early 1990s. His work had focussed on the process of becoming a diviner amongst the Xhosa speaking people in Grahamstown (1990). Of key interest was his identification of the central importance of water in Xhosa diviner training practices and the mythology surrounding it: the role of the mermaids, the so-called River People (*abantu bomlambo*), in the calling and training of healers by taking them under water.

35 This account of a mermaid holding a bar of gold recurs frequently in Zimbabwe. It proved to be of significance for me when I had a dream that I had to go to the Nyamakati Pool in NE Zimbabwe (see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1).
I had been intrigued by Hirst’s findings that were in-depth and extensive (more will be discussed on his findings in Chapters Three, Four and Five). However, what excited me was the possibility of conducting a comparative study of the phenomenon between the Xhosa and Shona/Manyika beliefs. I had a hunch that this was an interconnected corpus of esoteric knowledge between two otherwise disparate groups. I saw this as my chance to return to my beloved Nyanga and spend time back in the mountains, soaking up the landscape while finding out more on these intriguing aspects of a belief system that I had been totally unaware of as a child. I was a bit concerned that my father had killed and eaten a local totemic animal – the python.

1.3.3 Zanele enters our lives and the ‘ancestors’ show their presence

With these ideas in mind and a part-time post awaiting me in anthropology, I started formulating my research plans. The idea at this stage was to just explore the similarities and differences between the beliefs of the Shona and Xhosa speakers of Zimbabwe and the Eastern Cape respectively. At this time I was in frequent telephonic contact with my sister, Sally, who lived near Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. I had phoned to tell her of my decision to do the research for my Masters degree. Some weeks earlier she had phoned to tell me about her lucky find regarding her search for a new domestic helper. She had discharged her former help several months earlier for theft and had made a resolution not to employ anyone else. For two months she had done her own housework but one morning she woke up and, exasperated with the housework, decided she would not let another day pass without finding someone reliable to help her. She had heard that one could interview jobseekers at a local convent and so she went there to ask the nuns if she could interview anybody they had there that day. The nuns brought in five different women, one after the other, but none of them seemed to have the qualities she was looking for. Frustrated, she asked the nuns if they did not have anyone else as she was determined to not go home empty-handed. They looked a little worried and then said they did have one person but that she was ‘sick’. My sister said she would still like to interview her. They brought in Zanele and after a brief interview Sally knew she would get on well with her. In the car driving back they had chatted animatedly and Zanele described to Sally how she had been told in a dream the night before to go to St Catherine’s Church
because she would find a job there. She spoke about how wonderful her ancestors were to help her find a job as she was struggling to feed herself and her three children, and it turned out the 'sickness' was related to the fact that she was a sangoma (the common term for a diviner, that is, a person who can communicate with the ancestors). Sally had phoned to tell me about the events and how well they had got on together. During this time Sally had been having a strange experience with a bird (a black-headed oriole) that would frequently come to her house and fly from window to window, pecking at it and calling in its melodious watery manner. It would only stop when Sally would go into the room and greet it. It would then fly off. Zanele had observed this bird's activity and told Sally that it was our ancestors; they were trying to give Sally a message (although Zanele was unsure what it was). I had mentioned to Sally my plans for my research and she had discussed them with Zanele. She later informed me that Zanele had got very excited about what I was planning to do. Zanele's message to me was "Tell Penny to come up here and talk to me, we Zulu know all about these things". She told Sally she could tell me a lot about 'the snake' and she often dreamed of the mermaid who she described as a fair skinned lady with a fish tail who had "pert breasts and often combs her hair". As I had not yet encountered such ideas among the Zulu, I realised that I may have stumbled onto something that was bigger than I had anticipated. At that stage, however, my plan was to identify as many healers as I could amongst the Xhosa and the Shona/Manyika groups, who claimed to have been taken under water, spend time with them, and interview them. I was thus unsure about extending the study to Zululand (KwaZulu-Natal). In retrospect, I was fairly naïve in my expectations of finding people who could claim to have experienced such submersions, as they are actually quite rare. In fact I still have not met a Xhosa healer who has admitted to being taken under water. Despite this the knowledge of the subject held by Xhosa diviners (amagqirha –pl.; igqirha – sing.) is extensive and apparently fundamental to their training (Hirst, 1990). I have met many people who claim to know, or have heard about, other individuals, including relatives, that were taken, but these people have since died, or for some reason or another cannot be located.

In October 1996 I received a very distressed call from Sally asking me to advise her on what to do. She said that Zanele had not come to work the previous two days. This was unlike her,

36 She later told me that she had been shown Sally's face in her dream.
as she would usually phone if there were a problem. That morning she had opened her back
door to find Zanele sitting on the doorstep looking at herself in a piece of broken mirror. Her
face was swollen and grazed and she appeared in a confused, dishevelled and anxious state.
Initially worrying that she had been assaulted, Sally managed to extract what had transpired.
It seemed that she had experienced a profound dream and entered into an altered state of
consciousness for over a day. Zanele recounted the events to Sally who kindly wrote them
down and sent them to me:

I had a dream in the night that I was being strangled by the ‘Big Snake’. It wrapped
itself around my body and was squeezing. I was fighting it and trying to get it off. I
could feel the cold wet skin against mine. There were also other snakes but lesser ones
- lots of them all over the place. I managed to get it off and hung it up on the wall with
my other sangoma ‘stuff’, but when I awoke I couldn’t find it, it had gone. During the
struggle I hit my head against the wall and was injured [on her face]. All of the next
day I had ‘no brains’ - if people came to talk to me I didn’t hear them. I talked and
talked with my ‘family’ [i.e. her ancestral spirits]. There was an old man standing
inside my doorway, skinny and ancient with wild long, white hair. He was gasping like
a fish gasping for air. All day I saw my ‘family’ - everyone except my mother [who
had recently died]. There were two little children, old people and young. The one man
was wearing a tribal outfit like a chief with the horns of an ox on his head. There were
snakes around me, a crab came past me and the ‘veil’ that covered my face at birth
[membranes] came up and sat down beside me. I spoke to it, thinking there may be a
baby in it, but there wasn’t. I was told by my family [her ancestors] to buy a white
cow to sacrifice and that the time had come for me to go higher in my learning about
the spirits. [She said at this point that she was going to visit another isangoma in
Clermont, Durban, to get his advice as to what to do next. This man had appeared in
her dream and helped take the snake off her and hung it up]. There was another snake
on the floor, a green one that was for my ‘family’. The one wrapped around my belly
and another two entwined about my body with their faces up near mine. They were
very thick [about 20cm in diameter]. They looked like the ones that you see in the
bush with V’s on their backs (python). My ‘family’ [her ancestors] appeared within a
‘frame’ on the wall like a TV and I could see the houses and chickens - lots of
chickens. The ‘family’ were well fed. A woman appeared and spoke to me wearing
beads around her head, a nurse’s uniform and a black cow skin skirt [isidwaba]
wrapped around her. I think this is the woman who originally informed me that I must
go through this whole process of becoming a sangoma.38

37 This is a frequently used English expression by Zulu speakers to describe the disoriented state during trance.

38 This dream account bears many of the key elements to be found in the ‘underwater’ experience that will be
discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four. The big ‘Snake’ represents the power of the great ancestors
or even God (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3), that is responsible for taking a person to the realm of the dead, or
the underwater world, where one’s ancestors, both recent and long forgotten, may be encountered. The ancestors
may appear in both their human bodily form or in their symbolic forms as the various snakes. The crab is a
regarded as a key messenger for the ancestors and its appearance may herald the ‘calling’ to be a diviner, as do
Sally had not quite known how to handle this fairly bizarre information as it was way beyond the scope of her experience and knowledge. Fortunately, having done a fair amount of reading around the subject, I was able to reassure her that this was all quite appropriate to the condition of becoming a healer. I advised her to firstly reassure Zanele that she would not lose her job. This had been a great source of anxiety for Zanele, as she did not think a white woman would tolerate such things. I also urged Zanele to confer with the man in her dreams to see how she should proceed. Reassured that she was not going to lose her job Zanele soon recovered and went to see the man that she had been shown in her dreams. She told him about her experiences and he agreed that this was indeed an extremely significant dream. However, it was beyond his skills, as he had never experienced being taken underwater. He advised Zanele that she should consult with a powerful isangoma (Baba), who resided near Pietermaritzburg, whom he knew had been taken under the sea. This she did and, as a result, she was identified as requiring further training by Baba. When she met him the first time she recounted how I had assisted her after her fairly terrifying dream experience and she also mentioned my research interests, as she knew I was keen to interview people like him. He had apparently laughed and said “Bring her to me. I will talk to her”. His claim to fame was that he was a very powerful diviner who had been taken under the sea by a ‘snake’, and he communicated directly with the whistling spirits, the powerful ancestral spirits known to the Zulu as the amakhosi (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.6.1). She was obviously overwhelmed with his ‘power’ and regaled Sally with all the stories about his abilities. He could, it seemed, virtually raise the dead.  

On her first consultation with him he had stressed that it was necessary that Zanele do an animal sacrifice as a result of the dream. Although the dream had indicated a cow sacrifice, this was out of the question since Zanele did not have anywhere near the R2000.00 required to purchase a beast. She was thus advised to sacrifice a goat. This in itself was beyond her means and, after Sally had phoned me to discuss her predicament, I told her to reassure Zanele as I

the membranes that may cover an infant’s face at birth, signaling the child is chosen to be a diviner. The fact that the ancestors had lots of chickens and appeared well fed fits with their idea that this underwater world is free of hardship.

39 I was in fact given a story of his accomplishment in this regard.
would cover the costs of the goat. To me this was the least I could do since she had been able to set up an interview with Baba for me. I could not believe my own luck. I caught the bus up to Durban, a long twelve hour journey, and the next day (February 7th 1997) Sally kindly drove Zanele and me to Baba’s homestead in order that I conduct my interview.

1.3.4 The ‘Arrival Scene’- Baba invites me into his world

We arrived at Baba’s homestead in the late afternoon when it was bathed in a luminous light from the setting sun. His homestead was a sprawling mass of round Zulu huts set on the slope of a hill in a well populated semi-rural area of the KwaZulu Natal midlands some thirty kilometres from Pietermaritzburg. Nothing could prepare my sister or me for that first vision that we had of Baba as he glided out of his pink walled house to greet us. He was a handsome, lithe and remarkably young looking man, but with an otherworldly countenance. His eyes twinkled, full of infectious laughter - he seemed delighted to see us. He was swathed in brightly coloured orange and purple fabric wraps that swirled around his head, waist and shoulders and made him glow against the luminescent light and the reflecting orange/red earth near the entrance to his sacred hut. On seeing him Zanele had instantly collapsed on her knees, her head lowered in humble obeisance, clapping her hands and greeting him with the standard respectful welcome of healers “Camagu! Baba” (“Be praised! Father”).

I noticed numerous other individuals going about their chores between the various huts that comprised his homestead, looking inquisitively in our direction. Men and women, old and young, they were mostly dressed in bright red skirts and had their chests, arms, ankles and heads adorned with red and white beads. Many had lengths of bright red, black and white ‘kanga’ material covering their torsos and tied with a knot at their shoulders, with pictures of large animals adorning the central panel of the print (usually lions, leopards, tigers, snakes or birds). Others had fabric shoulder wraps that were of a more subdued colour in a diamond chequered, oak leaf print design consisting of purple and black lines on a white background (known as mjida). Some had girdles of animal skin strapped around their chests and arms, and their skin and hair was variously smeared with red ochre or white clay. A number of them came down to meet us, and on bended knee greeted us in the same way that Zanele had

40 This word has a variety of translations. As a form of interjection it can used to appease, pacify, calm, soothe, pardon, bless, acknowledge etc (Kropf/Godfrey, 1899/1915: 55). Its utterance shows deference and respect, and immediately demarcates an encounter as being within a sacred zone of ancestral presence.
greeted Baba. It turned out that these people were either fully qualified diviner-healers (izangoma - pl), who regularly came to visit Baba for consultation or advice (apparently they came from all over the country), or his own novice healers (amathwasa – pl; ithwasa – sing.), who were residing at his homestead, either for the whole duration of their training period or for shorter periods in between returning home or to their work places.

Despite his infectious light-hearted and friendly manner, I had been struck by Baba’s sense of presence and the awe in which he was held. Anyone approaching him would similarly collapse on their knees in his presence, and greet him in humble respectful tones while clapping their hands and repeatedly exclaiming ‘Camagu Baba!’ Zanele had already explained to Baba the purpose of my visit, that I was a researcher who was interested to find out more about his experiences of going ‘underwater’. Not quite sure how the interview would proceed, we were then ushered into the living room of his main residence, a standard western type rectangular structure. Seated on the smart new lounge suite that was still encased in its plastic sheeting, refreshments were brought to us. This, I was to discover, was the hallmark of Zulu hospitality, a visitor should always be offered food and drink on their arrival, and one should always accept it graciously. We had noticed the interesting décor of the lounge, the blue painted walls stippled in red paint, the picture of Jesus hanging from a small frame high on the wall next to a calendar. Along one side of the lounge was a large cabinet holding a variety of prized acquisitions – both electrical and decorative goods, the latter mainly china tea-sets and china dogs and cats. Both the television and the radio had pride of place on the cabinet and were blaring out in competition with each other. The message they bore was obviously not in the sound that emanated from them, but rather the social and financial status of their possessor. Zanele whispered to us, “This is good, Baba likes you. You know, he can see into people’s hearts. If he sees they have a bad heart he chases them away” (and he will not consult with them).

Relieved that our hearts were adequately clean, we waited in the lounge for well over an hour. Every now and then a family member, healers or other individuals would come in and greet us. Suddenly Baba came sweeping into the lounge and said “Come! You like Zulu dancing?” He led us up to one of the large round huts higher up on the hill, while shouting instructions to various amathwasa and calling everyone to the hut. We were offered seats near the right of
the door and as we sat down we noticed the room was a sea of red, black and white fabrics clothing the clay-daubed bodies of excited healers and novices. They were a spectacular sight against the sea blue walls of the hut. One ithwasa (novice – sing.) was kneeling against a drum near the centre of the hut, and she set up a pounding three point rhythm on the stretched cow skin. Three amathwasa started putting on their ankle rattles that were made from the lids of flattened cool drink cans (a modern version of the seedpod), every movement making a sound of rustling turbulence. They stood up, amashoba (cow tails) in hand, singing with their clear penetrating voices, the lyric of the songs they were choosing to dance with, and the audience responded. They started their rhythmic dancing, a heel to toe foot pounding forward and back motion, their arms elevated in front of them, amashoba pointing upwards and their eyes fixed on the lower rafters of the hut, in a trance like state. All the others healers and novices clapped in encouragement with the drumming as they sat stretched on their reed mats. The tempo increased, as did the energy in the room and one of the girls dancing fell down in an apparent trance. She was helped away by her colleagues and another took her place. After fifteen minutes Baba took the stage, much to the excitement of all the onlookers. As he started putting on his ankle rattles his pure strong counter tenor voice sang out the tune and rhythm he required and the rest of the healers picked up his words and tune and responded in harmony. The drumming tempo increased significantly and I was treated to the first of many breathtaking examples of Baba’s dancing abilities that have continued to astound me over the years. He was a consummate performer. The room hummed with tangible power, and I noticed a bright eyed isangoma sitting watching us constantly on the other side of the room. He never took his eyes, which were sparkling with excitement, off us. Initially I was unsure if this isangoma was male or female. It turned out he was male but had the most extraordinary feminine appearance. I was to discover he was Bheki, a close friend of Baba; in fact Baba had trained him and he now was his chief assistant in all his rituals. There was also a lithesome young girl who started dancing with Baba. She could not have been more than 12 years old, but she was an incredibly strong dancer. This was Thandi⁴¹, who I was told had been called

⁴¹ According to her mother she had disappeared in a dam near Midmar when she was still a toddler and the mother had been informed by a diviner that she had been taken by the underwater divinities and thus she should avoid grieving, and await the child’s return. The child had allegedly reappeared unscathed three days later and was later taken at the age of five years to Baba to complete her training as an isangoma. This young girl assisted Baba during my first ritual sacrifice of a cow. Tragically she was murdered several years after this event – she was pregnant at the time of her murder.
under water when she was a toddler. Apparently Baba had taken her in for training at the age of five and at the age of eight she was a fully qualified isangoma.

*My first divination session with Baba*

After this amazing performance Baba, glistening with perspiration on his bare torso, called us to follow him down to the sacred hut, the *emakhosini*, where he donned his long white and yellow cloak, and placed his white beaded headdress (*umyeko*) on his head. I crouched on my knees on the reed mat to the right of the hut from the entrance, with Sally and Zanele, flanking me on both sides. Baba positioned himself in front of the elevated sacred shrine (*umsamo*) located opposite the doorway. Suspended from the rafters above the *umsamo* were numerous dry entrails, omenta and skins from sacrificed beasts; this was the resting place of his ancestors, the *amakhosi*. He lit some *imhepho* and soon its pungent smoke began to permeate the air. Baba swished his *umshoba*, held to be spiritually empowered, towards the smoke-encrusted beams and called on the ancestors in isiZulu and, with that, soft lilting whistles suddenly seemed to emanate from the rafters above the sacred shrine, coming from many different points.

He asked me for our family’s surname and then announced it to the source of whistles. After extending the ancestor’s greeting to us the whistles continued, and Baba suddenly broke into peels of laughter. Addressing me he said, “They (the *amakhosi*) say that you are like a Zulu doctor. Your talent comes from your grandfather from the farm (in Zimbabwe), from the river. He (my grandfather) comes from the snake in the water, not from the *muti* (medicine).” Baba continued to coax the whistles by swishing his *umshoba* towards the apparent source of the sounds. The whistles continued, with Baba translating them for me, “Your grandfather (maternal) - he has lots of things he wants to give you.... he gives you this talent (to be an

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42 The normal Zulu term for the ancestors is *amadlozi*. The term *amakhosi* refers to the spirits of those who were very powerful in life (*i.e.* the spirits of chiefs and kings). They are also linked in some way with the whistling spirits (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.6.1), and as Baba communicates with these he refers to them as the *amakhosi*.

43 A pleasant smelling plant (*Helichrysum odoratissimum*), that is burnt by the Zulu whenever invocations or important rituals are conducted to attract the presence of the ancestors.

44 This is usually the tail of a sacrificed cow, but if obtainable, healers may often use the highly prized wildebeest tail (*inkonkone*).
isangoma). But you must not go out to find this talent (i.e. I must not stay at my trainer’s home) you must stay at home (i.e. the ancestors will guide me at home).” Baba then informed me that they were telling him that I had a baby that ‘teased’ me (caused me problems). This was a plausible divination as my youngest daughter (my third child) had been born 13 weeks prematurely in 1991 and had collapsed and died temporarily with severe pneumonia, before being resuscitated. He then added, “Your family (i.e. my ancestors) is coming with (working together with) the ‘K’ family (Zanele’s ancestral clan). Your father is making the plan that Zanele finds the work with your sister”. This made sense to me considering the strange circumstances that had led to Zanele securing a job with Sally. He then asked Sally if she had any questions and although she was fairly taken aback as she had not wanted to be too involved, she asked if they could tell her why the bird kept coming to her window trying to attract her attention. He asked his amakhosi if they had heard her question and the whistles came back in their melodious way:

Your family [i.e. our ancestors] is coming to tell you they want a party. It is not actually a bird, it is your family [our ancestors]. Tonight you must set the table at midnight. You must put three yellow candles on the table and light them. You must have wine and fish, but you only eat tomorrow. The ancestors want to come to the party with you. You must also have a friend. After you are finished eating you must go and swim in the sea and then come back to your home.

We asked him what kind of fish they wanted and after the whistles he looked at us confused, not knowing quite what they meant: “They say Cray...I don’t know”. We interpreted this to be crayfish, our father’s favourite food. There were more whistles, “They say you were on holiday and you nearly had a car accident. The ancestors, they stopped it. That is why they want a party. They need [to replenish] their power.” This took Sally aback as she and her family had recently had a near accident while on holiday.

Our divination session was drawing to a close and I was concerned that I had not achieved the purpose of my visit, which was to obtain an account of his experiences, and I did not want to

45 According to Zanele it is well understood and recognized that certain ancestors prefer this method of teaching. There was thus nothing abnormal about it.
return home empty handed\textsuperscript{46}. I tried to refocus the attention on him and requested that he discuss his experiences of going ‘under the water’ with me. He was noticeably reticent and went back to consult with his amakhosi. He then responded saying that I must first ‘take the water’ as it would help me understand. After that my grandfather would ‘make a plan’. The special water I had to take turned out to be holy water that had to be collected from a stream in the early hours of the morning (3am), which was then prayed over by the numerous izangoma and novices at his homestead. This was followed by it being prayed over with much vigour by a Zionist\textsuperscript{47} choir (this was later administered to me with a powdered root, impande).

\textit{Accepting the ‘calling’}

Initially my rational and sceptical mind made me question his motives, especially when I was told the initiation fee would be R200.00 (approx. US$35.00 in 1997). I was concerned that he was seeing me, a white woman, as an entrepreneurial opportunity. My doubts were alleviated slightly when, upon noticing my hesitation, he immediately dismissed the money as of no importance and summoned all the izangoma and novices to the hut. They were wearing white cotton veils over their heads and they removed their shoes and shuffled on their knees into the emakhosini (it is taboo for anyone but Baba to wear shoes or to walk on one’s feet in the sacred hut). I had a white veil placed over my head, invocations were made and imphepho was wafted under my nose. We were then instructed to follow the rest of the healers as they shuffled out of the hut on their knees, veils still covering our heads, and continued around to the back of the sacred hut. Located there was a small fenced off area, on which a number of turkeys were perched gazing down on this strange procession of veiled humans shuffling into the enclosure on their knees. Inside were two compacted omphalos/cone shaped mounds of earth (referred to as amaphansi). Projecting out of the top of these mounds were small dried branches. I was later to discover these were from \textit{Erythrina} trees and this space is specifically the location of the female ancestors (from both the maternal and paternal sides). The potsherd containing the smoking incense (imphepho) was placed in between the two mounds near

\textsuperscript{46} I only managed to interview him on his underwater experiences two years after this initial divination session.

\textsuperscript{47} Baba has actively incorporated the Christianity of the African independent churches into his spiritual repertoire. In September 1997 he was ordained as a minister of the Apostolic Church of Zion. I deal with this subject in greater detail in Chapter Eight.
which I had to kneel. Baba called on his ancestors informing them of my admission to the sacred place. We returned to the hut where more prayers were said and then it was over. I was instructed to collect the holy water on the Monday (this now being a Friday). As we had to return to my sister’s house near Durban to do the ‘party’, as had been instructed, Zanele agreed that she would stay on and bring the water and medicine to me in Durban after it was prepared.

Although I had been offered a choice to accept the ‘calling’, the decision had in effect already been made and the ‘dice had been cast’. In retrospect it was the only way I could have gone if I had any hope in gaining any more knowledge from him, and intuitively I was not surprised. I had suspected that he was going to tell me something like this. In fact if he had not I would have been more suspicious of his abilities, as I sensed deep within myself that something profound was happening to me. Thus I became apprenticed to this enigmatic man who I would now address as Baba (Father), and I became incorporated into the family of izangoma who had trained, or were at present training, under his guidance.

Overwhelmed with the day’s events my sister and I returned to Durban. We only remembered later that it was her birthday the next day. It was a very appropriate day to have a party and we did everything we were instructed. The following week the oriole returned but this time it flew to each window calling. It did not persistently peck at the glass like it had been doing. This time it just flew off and that was the last time it came to Sally’s window. Zanele had told her, “You see they are happy [our ancestors]. They have just come to say thank you for the party”. Our ontological understanding of the distinct separation between ourselves and the natural world, and our former scepticism of the existence of the spiritual world, was beginning to be challenged.

1.3.5 The dreams commence

In the meantime I had been taking the holy water daily, which I had to swallow with some powdered reddish root, known as impande 48. Demonstrating how I must take a generous

48 The direct translation of the Zulu word ‘impande’ is ‘root’. Although many medicines are based on roots, the use of the word impande in this instance is specific. Interestingly, Zanele asserted that Zulu diviners did not normally use this particular root; it came from further north in Swaziland.
pinch of *impande*, place it in the palm of my hand and then chase it down with the water, Zanele had urged me to use the water sparingly in order to keep it for as long as possible. She held the water in more awe than the *impande* as this was where the main spiritual power was located. She had enthusiastically described to me how it had been prepared; the singing had been so strong and beautiful for over four hours. Each person (both isangoma and Zion choir member) had taken hold of the bottle and rapturously sang and prayed with it. I was overwhelmed that they had all gone to so much trouble for me. It seemed that all I had to do was to wait for my dreams to come. This was the main purpose of the water and *impande*, and the dreams did not take long to manifest. On the first night after I had taken the pleasant tasting, slightly spicy-woody flavoured *impande* with the holy water I had a vivid dream in the early morning hours just before sunrise:

> I was aware of a very powerful yet benevolent presence. A large hand came out and took mine, doing what seemed to be like a secret handshake, a word was spoken which I could not recall, I was then shown a mathematical puzzle involving the number four. As I started to awaken I had the word ’Zep Tepi’ 

49

It is possible it could have been merely word recall from books I had recently read. However, as I included these spoken words in my dream sharing account to Zanele, who passed them on to Baba to interpret, I include them here as being of possible significance.

It is now apparent that your ancestors have accepted you. To keep it up and to activate them I feel that you must report here as soon as possible so that you wear your uniform. Try to get the chance and come here as soon as possible, as you have been accepted. To me your dream was very, very clear.

Because of teaching commitments at the university I was only able to return to Baba four
months later but I continued to take the impande and Holy Water from the supply he had
given me. This I did surreptitiously as my family was struggling to come to terms with what I
was getting myself into. During this time I had an incredibly strong dream which I reported to
Baba via Zanele, and it was this that led to Baba insisting that I return as soon as possible to
get my ‘uniform’ (i.e. to be officially initiated as a novice when I would be adorned in the
signifying clothes). Taken from my dream diary, that I had now started, I wrote:

My dream was amazing! There were some builders repairing some damage on our
roof at the front door of our house. I remember standing at the door chatting to one of
the men working at the roof and he was peering down at me. There was suddenly a
crash of thunder. Worried that he might be struck by lightning [being so elevated], I
suggested he stop working. He laughed and said he would be fine. I then started
walking down the passage towards the lounge. As I was passing the kitchen I heard
my husband saying to me “how was your day today?”. As I looked up to answer
I saw
standing in front of me my father, as vivid and clear as daylight. He looked healthy
and younger than he was before he died. He had a huge smile on his face and seemed
so pleased to see me. I was amazed and felt radiantly happy to see him, but was
unsure how to respond to my husband. All I could say was “Dad is here”, knowing he
would not believe me as my father had died fourteen years earlier, and I fell into my
father’s arms and embraced him. The next moment I felt my father pick me up, without
any apparent effort [I felt as if I was in spirit form] and he then flew with me straight
through the window and into the garden past my son who was sitting in a chair eating
a sandwich. The next moment we came flying back through the window, straight
through the glass, that stayed intact, past my astounded smiling son. His expression
seemed to say “That’s cool!” As I landed, I awoke.

According to Zanele, Baba reacted ecstatically to this dream. It was further confirmation that I
had been accepted to the calling. For Baba, flying in the air is a key dream symbol of a
diviner’s ability, and doing it with my father showed me that it was my ancestors who were
calling me. He interpreted the man at the front of the house doing repairs as ‘God’, which is
why he laughed at my concern that he might be struck by lightning. In fact, I was told that
thunder in a dream signifies the sonic transition of the spirit as it enters into our dimension.
Zanele told me that it often occurs when you have a powerful visitation dream and this could
correlate with the transition effect Needham has observed with sonic percussion which allows
one to “communicate with the other world” (Needham, 1967: 606).

1.4 The research process

1.4.1 Reflection on my entry into the field

Thus far it can be seen how my choice of research topic was deeply enmeshed with my own
personal biographical history and experiences. It was also to a certain extent influenced (or enabled) by changes occurring in the methodological and textual writing styles of the anthropological discipline. Although at the outset I presented myself to Baba as a researcher in search of his ‘story’ (of the underwater experience) he in effect turned the tables on me and converted my research effort into a process of seeking to understand my own connection with that ‘story’. As I was invited to enter into Baba’s world as a member and participant, rather than just an observer and recorder, I had to alter my degree of commitment to his worldview, and to do this as honestly as possible (i.e. I could not pretend). This acceptance would have direct implications for not only me, but for my relatives and family, as they became (and to some extent were already) a ‘part of the plot’. Baba did not allow me, as Geertz puts it, to skulk about “at the edge of the grove” (Geertz, 2005: 14) trying to get a glimpse of how his religious and ontological framework operated from a distance, but he expected me to accept that I was a part of it. I must emphasise that my motivations to accept the invitation were not driven by purely academic instrumental reasons, to merely gain an insider perspective for the purposes of scholarly understanding, but because I genuinely felt he had something to offer that would help me to make sense of the existential and metaphysical ‘crises’ I had been experiencing, as well as the weirdly synchronistic events that had preceded my visit to him. I was impressed by his ability to accurately identify aspects of my own, as well as my family’s life, which he would not have had access to through normal everyday channels. The thought that I could make contact with my own ancestors, genuinely appealed to me and definitely gave my life more meaning. As I was not committed to any particular religion, conflict of faith had not been an impediment to my acceptance.

The synchronistic events that had led to our family connection with Zanele played a significant role in diminishing my anxiety for the step I had taken. Moreover, her own remarkable dream had set her on a path of discovery that was to interlink with my own. Although she was already a qualified isangoma who was training four amathwasa (novices) at the time I met her, her powerful snake dream signified to her that she had to go to a higher

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50 Zanele is adamant that one should rely on one’s own ancestors when becoming a diviner, as they are the spirits that are interested in the welfare of their descendants. This differs from spirit possession cults found elsewhere in Africa where the diviner may be under the control of one or more alien spirits.
level in her spiritual training. From the start she and I became firm friends and throughout the last twelve years she has been my trusted confidante, as well as cultural broker, who has attempted to help me make sense of my (and her) experiences within the *izangoma* conceptual framework. One could ask why I have relied on her assistance of cultural brokerage more than on Baba’s. One reason was the matter of language; Baba spoke minimal English while Zanele was more fluent\(^{51}\). The other, perhaps more important reason, was out of deference to Baba’s authority and power which tended to make him more difficult to access or to relate to on an equal footing. Despite his open friendliness he was still enigmatically powerful, remote and mysterious and I found these qualities of his fairly intimidating (as did Zanele). While this thesis could be critiqued for relying too heavily on Zanele’s and Baba’s interpretations, and thus being idiosyncratic, I argue that their dominant input has allowed for a certain degree of consistency, and wherever I could have tested their interpretations against others and found that they largely concurred\(^{52}\). I also argue that in autoethnography it is the quality of particular relationships that is important, rather than the quantity of different but more superficial informants: excellent examples of this are Karen McCarthy Brown’s ethnography on Mama Lola, a voudou princess in Brooklyn (2001), and Adam Ashforth’s immersion into the experienced realities of witchcraft in Soweto with his friend and informant Madumo (2000).

With the raw memories of apartheid and the lingering racial and political resentments in post-apartheid South Africa it would also have been extremely foolhardy for me, as a white woman, with limited grasp of the language or familiarity with the spiritual dangers to enter the *izangoma* world without someone like Zanele who I could trust to guide me. Together over the last decade we have experienced extreme family suffering and bureaucratic/political injustices (more her than I) and we have supported each other throughout. In the process we have both come to know each other’s extended family networks, which help contextualise each other’s experience. While there were undoubtedly benefits (especially material) that she

\(^{51}\) Zanele thus became my interpreter, even though I would still tape record our divination sessions, conversations with Baba and certain rituals for further clarification. Although my knowledge of Zulu has slowly improved over the years, it is still inadequate although I can understand more than I can speak.

\(^{52}\) As Zanele had already reached a certain grade of qualification as an *izangoma* (i.e. she was training other *umathwasa*) she was very familiar with the cultural cosmology, ritual and symbolism of this specialist group. Her personal history also tied her into the more conservative worldviews of rural Zulu speakers.
obtained from our friendship (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5) it did not come without cost, especially for her. It has provoked spiritual attacks from those envious of our friendship and even our trust in Baba’s integrity and trustworthiness was put to the test. I will discuss these problems in more detail in Chapter Seven.

As a result of my initiation into Baba’s training school and into the very system of thought I was hoping to understand, I was granted insights which I probably would not have accessed had I remained a more passive observer. Although this gave me more in depth understanding on a system of knowledge that is essentially esoteric in nature, it also had its limitations. Although the dream directed aspect of my research method led me to various sites outside of the Zulu context, where I was able to explore local ideas of the water divinities to a limited extent, it was difficult to disengage completely from the Zulu cosmological perspective to which I was still essentially committed. However, the local perspectives I gained at these other sites were of great assistance in helping me to understand the wider (southern African) cross-cultural significance of the ideas reflected in my dreams, and the fact that the sites indicated in my dreams were connected to similar bodies of ideas.

1.4.2 Boundaries between belief and anthropological analysis

In this chapter I have striven to explain and contextualise my research approach with reference to the methodological and textual styles of writing that became evident in the post ‘Writing Culture’ era of anthropology. In adopting the radical embodied participation method and opening myself up to potentially extraordinary experiences I had to first suspend my disbelief and allow myself to be open to a new way of seeing and understanding the world. In suspending disbelief one is thus obliged to ask, at what point does one accept another’s belief, and is a certain amount of belief a necessary precondition for an extraordinary experience to take place? From my own experiences I am inclined to say that a certain degree of willingness to believe assisted me in gaining access to what I experienced as the extraordinary, particularly as it related to my dreams. It is probable that if I was skeptical of Baba’s

53 Miller (2007) has noted that radical participation or experience-near research (as advocated in the anthropology of extraordinary experience) can expose one to danger and violence if one is not aware of the potential dangers involved. However, in experiencing these dangers one becomes more sympathetic to one’s informant’s fears.
pronouncements I would not have taken my dreams seriously and would not have acted upon them. While I was not prepared to believe everything I was told by the izangoma at face value, especially as it pertained to myself, I was willing to accept from the start the possibility that I was being guided by an extraneous ‘spirit’ force that I believed to be my ancestors. As I note in the section above, this principle (that I was being guided by my ancestors), which I accepted from my first meeting with Baba, was also relevant to the issues of ethics and integrity, not only with regard to my host group but also to myself. While I felt comfortable in accepting that my ancestors were guiding me, I also did not think it was right to pretend to believe in them merely for purposes of academic exploitation. This would not only be ethically unacceptable, but I might have compromised both myself and the diviners assisting me. I would also have stood a good chance of being accused as a fraud by the diviners. Thus, the material that I present relating to my own experiences needs to be considered in the light of my willingness to accept that I was being guided by my ancestral spirits. However, I do realize that this should not necessarily oblige the reader to believe in the existence of ancestral spirits, and that I need to maintain some form of distance in presenting my own experiences to enable the reader to determine for themselves the merits of what I understand as my evidence in support of the anthropological questions I have posed in this thesis.

While I have allowed myself to be a believer, from the start this was done within the context of my role as an anthropologist. My main intention in this thesis is to address the questions I have posed relating to the phenomenon of the water divinities within the framework of the anthropological model I have formulated, rather than attempt to prove that these water divinities exist. Thus, it must be re-iterated that this thesis is not seeking to explain my experiences (and the variety of interpretations that could be applied to them), but to reveal how I believe the izangoma responded to what I understood to be my extraordinary experiences, and how they interpreted and acted upon them. These responses to my experiences revealed more about their understanding of the water divinity phenomenon and

54 Searles has noted how skepticism tends to block our exploring of certain phenomena in fieldwork (Searles, 2007: 163).

55 Matthew Engelke has discussed, but not resolved, this “age-old question for anthropologists of religion”; that is, ‘the problem of belief’ (Engelke, 2002: 4-8). His argument suggests that the effectiveness of both E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s and Victor Turner’s ethnographic endeavours concerning African religion was a result of their own religious convictions and their sympathy with their informants’ beliefs.
also helped cast light on the possible continuity of ideas regarding the water divinity phenomenon across the region. To make sense of these experiences and the responses they generated I had to engage in a dialogical manner with the ethnographic material and information I obtained through other sources (*i.e.* literature sources) regarding the water divinity phenomenon. In order to keep within the bounds of my research questions and space restrictions for this thesis (which have already been overstretched), I have also utilized the reflexive technique in a more restrained manner than some scholars would advocate. In contrast to some of the excellent examples of reflexive ethnographies concerning extraordinary experiences (Friedson, 1996; Knab, 1995; Stoller, 1989; Stoller & Olkes, 1987; Van Binsbergen, 2003; Wreford, 2008), which present richly evocative texts depicting sensuous and visceral accounts of their experiences and emotions, I have attempted to engage with my experiences in a somewhat more detached and observed manner, in order to cast light on the ethnographic issues and anthropological questions that are under examination. It does not mean that I failed to have deeply moving, often disturbing emotions and sensations in the process of the cross-cultural encounter. The richly evocative experiences described by Wreford (2008) of her initiation as an *isangoma* are deeply reminiscent of my own experiences, but for the purposes of this thesis I cannot indulge in them in the way she has been able to.

1.5 Main objectives of thesis

With reference to the four levels of analysis model that I have proposed in Section 1.2.4 of this chapter, the main objectives of the thesis and the chapters in which they are predominantly addressed are as follows:

1. To explore and compare the various beliefs and practices pertaining to the water divinity phenomenon found among a number of groups in southern Africa (*viz.*, the Zulu and Xhosa (Natal and Cape Nguni) speaking groups, the Shona groups and the Khoisan (Khoekhoe and San), to identify their similarities and differences, and to propose reasons for the variations that exist (Chapters Three, Four and Five).

2. To explore whether the use of the radical participation method as advocated by the anthropology of extraordinary experience, can enhance our understanding of the water divinity phenomenon and its distribution across southern Africa
(principally in Chapter Six and intermittently throughout the rest of the chapters).

3. To explore how the beliefs and practices of the water divinities have been influenced by changing political-economic and social circumstances in the region, and how this influence may inform our understanding of why many people are ambivalent towards these beliefs and practices, especially as they relate to issues of human morality (Chapter Seven).

4. To explore how the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities in KwaZulu-Natal are integrated or blended into the ideas and practices of some Zulu Zionists (Chapter Eight).

5. To explore the possibility for the diffusion of knowledge relating to the water divinities, and the direction it may have taken, between the Khoisan and Nguni groups with reference to some of the debates regarding the shamanistic approach to San rock art (Chapter Nine).

1.6 Summary

In summary, the main purpose of this chapter has been to present the factors, both academic and personal, that led me into this research and to present the framework with which I aim to explore the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities across the southern African region and to explore the possible continuity of these beliefs across the region. I have presented the various approaches, both conventional and more recent (postmodern), that anthropologists have sought to employ to explain religious ideas and practices, particularly relating to ritual. I have argued that many of these approaches have merit and may be useful in explaining the similarities and differences in the beliefs and practices regarding the water divinities across the region. However, I have argued that each approach is not sufficient in itself. I have proposed a four level analytical model that can accommodate most of these approaches, and can give us a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities in the region. I have highlighted in particular the need to take into account the previously neglected level of experience, both of the anthropologist engaged in the intercultural encounter, and of his/her informants who claim to have had the underwater experience, or have claimed to have encountered the water divinities. I have adopted the radical participation method, especially as it relates to extraordinary experiences (notably my dreams), as the principle means by which I have
conducted my fieldwork. Thus, in this thesis I use my own dreams, most of which were experienced in the context of the Zulu/Nguni idiom, in a dialogical manner with the ethnographic material, both written and what I have obtained from my experiences and various informants across these groups.

1.6.1 A note on terminology

It should be evident in this introductory chapter that I prefer to use the term water divinity or deity rather than the more popular usage of water spirit. The reason for this will become clearer as I progress in the thesis as these entities are regarded as not only the source of healing but are also linked to the origin of humanity and creation itself. The Zulu ethnography in particular classifies these entities as linked to, if not actually, a manifestation of, the great creator deities themselves. I also prefer to refer to the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities as part of a 'complex' rather than a 'system' since the material I have gathered is fragmented and scattered, comprised of inherited knowledge passed through generations, or across groups, which is mixed with highly personal and sometimes idiosyncratic perspectives based on individual experience. It does not appear to exist in any particular structured form 'out there'.

The use of the term 'ancestors' also requires some clarification; the general usage of the term in the text refers to the collection of a person's deceased antecedents or forebears, which are generally thought to have concern for, and show benevolence towards their living descendants. The use of the term 'ancestral spirit' refers more to a particular deceased individual who may feature in dreams etc. In certain places in the text I elaborate in more detail as to the different categories of ancestral spirit found amongst the Zulu speakers; the main determining feature being the age of death, the nature of the death and whether the required rituals of cleansing and re-unification had been performed by the living. I should add though, that from my experiences with the Zulu izangoma, despite the Zulu historically/traditionally being strongly patrilineal, the term amadlozi (ancestors) or even amakhosi (great ancestors) referred equally to one's paternal and maternal forbears. Zanele, for instance, emphasized the the role of her maternal ancestral spirits in guiding her decisions by featuring in her dreams. Apart from the very occasional dream that featured her father, her
most common ancestral spirit guides that appeared in her dreams were her deceased sister and mother.

1.6.2 A note on perspective

While my main intention in this thesis is to provide evidence that the water divinities are an important component of the traditional healing cosmologies, particularly relating to diviners, in southern Africa, I do not want to give the impression that this is the only form of spiritual empowerment to be found in the region. There are many traditional healers that seem to operate independently of this complex of ideas and claim to gain their guidance through possession by their ancestral or possibly alien spirits. They may also put more emphasis on learning their techniques of divination or knowledge of herbalism through other specialists. Most existing studies on traditional healing in southern Africa have concentrated on these other forms of healing, with minimal reference to the water divinities. This thesis attempts to offer a corrective focus on the important role of water divinity phenomenon especially as it applies to diviner training, fertility and rain-making. However, it is necessary to be aware that it is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of a wide range of traditional healing strategies and forms of empowerment found in the southern African region.
CHAPTER 2
DREAMS, MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

2.1 Introduction
As I have adopted the insights offered by the anthropology of extraordinary experience as an important means by which I approach the phenomenon of the water divinities amongst diviner-healers in southern Africa, it stands to reason that it to a large extent shaped the methodologies I adopted. While participant observation was an essential part of my methodology, I went further than this to embrace a more radical form of participation (Goulet & Miller, 2007: 10). This initially involved the suspending of my disbelief of the cosmology of my izangoma informants and allowing my self (the physical, spiritual and mental aspects) to be the canvas on which I could explore their cosmology as well a key epistemological principle; that their knowledge largely comes via dreams, some of which are believed to come directly from the spirit world. This ‘radical embodied participation’ technique included the consumption of various herbal mixtures and becoming an active participant in rituals, which included animal sacrifice. After commencing radical participation, I experienced a radical shift in the nature of my dreams which had a transformative effect on the way I experienced reality and my place in it. As Goulet and Miller observe,

Radical participation as a process becomes intrinsic to our search for knowledge and understanding of the human experience. Through radical participation or experience of the ecstatic side of fieldwork, we discover new forms of engagement with others in the everyday world. We are then confronted with the realization that we often can’t find the line to know if we have passed it, that we have transcended the academically defined boundaries of the knowable and are therefore in relatively new territory (Goulet & Miller, 2007: 11).

While I accepted the principle that my ancestors were guiding me (see Chapter One, Section 1.4.2) and sought to suspend my disbelief in my informants’ cosmologies, I did not necessarily embrace everything I was told. It was only when I had a direct experience of the claimed effects of an activity or ritual that I was ready to accept that there might be more to my established concept of reality than I had hitherto allowed. Hence, as Goulet and Miller indicate in the above quote, radical participation and the experience of the extraordinary is a process,
not an abrupt crossover, whereby one slowly starts to acknowledge the validity and then even adopt (to varying degrees) the perspective of another group’s cosmology. This makes the task of writing about it a tricky endeavour since when one’s own ‘order of reality’ and notions of cause and effect are progressively transformed, the boundaries become difficult to determine and one has to take care to distinguish which ontological register, or ‘cognitive style’, one is writing in for a particular audience (for more on ‘cognitive style’ see Schutz, 1973/1974 and Chapter One, Section 1.2.3.1). This is especially the case when one seeks to understand an experience in terms of the particular cognitive style in which it is framed (i.e. the experience of water divinities as understood within the isangoma ‘cognitive style’), and then translating or explicating it into another, for instance when the audience is academic and endorses a more scientific paradigm of reality. Dreams are particularly challenging in that we have to seek to understand them outside of the order of reality or ‘finite province of meaning’ from which they emerge; it is thus unsurprising that perspectives of what dreams are, and their significance, vary widely, especially when one is seeking to understand them from either a scientific (psychological) or a religious viewpoint. It is widely acknowledged that dreams play a prominent role in the constitution of religious ideas and practices (Bulkeley, 1996; Kracke, 2003; Lohmann, 2000; Tylor, 1871; Willerslev, 2004) and thus an analysis of their role and significance across cultures can provide valuable ethnographic insights for anthropologists in the study of religion.

2.2 Dreams as an ethnographic tool

With the description of events given so far regarding my encounter with my first informants (Zanele and Baba), it is evident that dreams are of importance not only for the diviner-healers, but also for the direction this thesis is to take. They not only led me to my main area of research among some Zulu isangoma (through Zanele’s dream of finding work with my sister, and her subsequent snake dream that led her to Baba) but they also facilitated my acceptance as an isangoma novice under Baba, the powerful diviner to whom was attributed the rare distinction of being taken ‘underwater’. Subsequently I was to realise that the sharing of my

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1 Especially if it is based on a different order of reality to one’s own cosmology. In his essay on understanding religious experience, Ninian Smart has pointed out that understanding is not ‘all-or-nothing’ but rather ‘a matter of degree’ (Smart, 1978: 10).

2 Bulkeley is of the opinion that in psychology’s attempt to apply “scientific methodologies to the study of the human soul” it has been “a major front in the “war” between religion and science” (Bulkeley, 1996: 6).
dreams would provide the key to most other things I was to discover; it helped to direct the research process, and open doors that would have otherwise remained closed. Responses to dreams, both my own and Zanele’s, thus proved to be extremely useful in uncovering knowledge and promoting action, particularly in the area where they have greatest relevance, that of religious ritual and healing. I never consciously set out at the beginning of my research to employ my own dreams as a research tool, probably because I had never given my own dreams much weight. Dream sharing emerged naturally in the course of my affiliation with the izangoma and it was only later that I realized consciously how incredibly useful dreams were as path breakers to knowledge. The use of the anthropologist’s own dreams as a means of accessing ethnographic knowledge is by no means novel. A number of scholars have commented on their value and have used them for a variety of ethnographic purposes, which I explore in the next section.

2.2.1 The dreams of anthropologists

Barbara Tedlock has strongly advocated the inclusion of one’s own dreams in the anthropological research process. This was mainly as a result of her personal experience of their effectiveness in the field. As a result of dreams that she and her husband, Dennis Tedlock, experienced while studying the Quiche-Mayans of highland Guatemala, which they shared with their informants, they were formally apprenticed and later initiated as dream interpreters according to the Quiche-Mayan calendar system (Tedlock, 1987, 1987a, 1991a). They found that both their own and their informants’ dreams became matters of joint concern that naturally arose in the process of the inter-subjective encounter in the field. However, Tedlock has confessed that she only reflected on how useful they had been in the research process after she had completed her dissertation on Quiche-Maya divination ritual (Tedlock, 1987: 24). Like her, most other anthropological considerations of the value of dream-sharing have been considered in retrospect or have been coincidental to the main focus of study. However, a few anthropologists, such as George Foster (1973) and Waud Kracke (1987), consciously set out at the beginning of fieldwork to use their own dreams as a research tool; although curiously Foster never included his own dreams in his final text. Based on her

3 In a subsequent book The Woman in the Shaman’s Body (2005) Barbara Tedlock gives more detail of her healing heritage (her grandmother was an Ojibwe midwife and herbalist) and the importance of her dreams which culminated in her initiation.
experiences, Katherine Ewing (1990, 1994) is of the opinion that an anthropologist who fails to share his or her dreams in a society which regards dream-sharing as an important part of sociality and social ordering, is at risk of forever remaining an outsider. In such societies where dreams help shape identities and self-identity, failure to share dreams may lead to "non-identity".

Timothy Knab is another anthropologist who was initiated as a "dreamer" during his fieldwork with his host community in San Martin Zinacapan in the Sierra de Puebla of Mexico. The onset of his dreams followed a fairly dramatic chicken sacrifice that he had to perform in a cave that was regarded as an entrance to the underworld (tlalocan), which according to his Nahua hosts is the realm of the "lords of the earth", which one can navigate in dreams in order to overcome illness and bring about healing (Knab, 1995, 2004).

A number of other anthropologists have noticed how either the dreams of their informants, or the reporting their own dreams, have allowed them the privilege of admittance into the world of healing and greater secret knowledge (Friedson, 1996:102-118; Novaes da Mota 1997: 70-71). Occasionally anthropologists' own dreams may be of significance for others who are close to them, such as Aneesa Kassam (1999), who describes how a particular dream that she had led to her husband, an Oromo nationalist, becoming accepted as an initiate into the select Oromo male gadaammotjie ritual. Rosalind Shaw (1992) found that the recounting of her own dream experiences to her main diviner informant Pa Yamba provided her with some interesting perspectives on Temne divination.

Despite a general reluctance among scholars to attribute significance to their dreams in the field it is interesting to note how many scholars have been profoundly influenced by them, either as an indicator of their isolation and alienation in the field, their anxieties regarding the anthropological task, or of their distaste for their informants (Leiris, 1934; Tedlock, 1991a). Some anthropologists have kept detailed accounts of their dreams during fieldwork, but these have been kept out of their main scholarly works and published in separate memoirs or diaries (Malinowski, 1967). Robert Lowie was a prolific dreamer and kept a dream diary spanning nearly fifty years. His essay on these dreams was published posthumously by his wife (Lowie,

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4 Ewing gives an account of a dream she experienced while doing her research among Pakistani Sufis which resulted in her being identified as a disciple of a saint (Ewing, 1994: 572).
1966). Waud Kracke (1987), who did his fieldwork among the Kagwahiv Indians in Brazil, incorporated his own dreams into an analysis that sought to understand the psychological processes that take place when an anthropologist enters an alien society. Sometimes researcher’s own dreams can give them useful anthropological or scholarly insights into the nature of dream interpretation (Jackson, 1989: 16), while others’ dreams allow for a deeper understanding of the significance of the research encounter (Josephides, 2003; Salamon, 2003). Michel Leiris, who raised critical questions on the Eurocentric exercise of ethnographic research in Africa, also recognized the importance and relevance of the ethnographer’s dream world (Clifford, 1986b: 10). All these examples given above suggest that dreams play a large part in identity formation and the notions of self, and have the potential to contribute significant insights into the intercultural encounter.

Marianne George has given an account of a number of dreams she experienced while living with the Barok of New Ireland in Papua New Guinea (George, 1995), in which in each dream her adopted field ‘sister’, an old spiritual matriarch, featured. Although the dreams proved to be predictive in certain ways, what was remarkable about her experience was how the matriarch and her children had prior knowledge of her dreams before she shared them, as they claimed memory of being in them. This is one of a number of cases which disputes the general idea that individuals cannot share in the same dream.

The inclusion of the researcher’s own dreams in dream analysis have also had a long tradition in psychology. Freud and Jung, the grand patriarchs of dream psychoanalysis, frequently used their own dreams to illustrate their points. Subsequent psychologists (especially from the Jungian school) often include their dream reports in order to give greater clarity to their analyses e.g. Stevens (1995) and Globus (1987). The problem with merely using dreams to illustrate a point or argument is that they are frequently decontextualised and we are not given much insight into the other aspects of the researcher’s life trajectory, which may have a significant impact on how the dream is interpreted. Carl Jung had prolific and profound dreams that he frequently used to help explain the psychic processes of humanity. However, it is only when you read his life history Memories, Dreams, Reflections (Jung, 1963), that was first published in 1961, that you begin to appreciate the richness and depth of those dreams in relation to who he was as a person, as well as the full context of those dreams.

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Beyond the value that dreams provide regarding insight into one's own position in the field, it is the dreaming process (rather than just the dream) that is of most relevance to the anthropologist in ethnographic analysis (Tedlock, 1987; Price-Williams & Degarrod, 1996; Riches, 1995). Dreaming needs to be understood as being a part of a broader field of action, since dreams are not only affected by the dreamer’s psychological and socio-cultural context but the way they are interpreted and acted upon also depends on the explanatory framework which informs them. In the next section I identify, in brief, the main components of dreaming that can be subjected to analysis and their potential contribution to our understanding of the social and cultural determinants of dreaming. I will then present how my Zulu izangoma informants conceptualized these aspects, and how significant dreams are in the process of their training.

2.2.2 Analytical approaches to dreaming

2.2.2.1 The dream experience

The actual dream that an individual experiences is inaccessible for other observers as it emanates from a uniquely personal lived-experience -- an alternative mode of existence or order of reality. Rather, what is open for anthropological investigation is the process of dream selection, recall, reporting (dream-sharing), interpretation and the subsequent actions and activities that these generate. Drawing from the earlier philosophical works of Merleau-Ponty and Binswanger, Morley suggests that the dream that occurs while one is in the state of sleep is “one of passive and unreflective participation in existence” (Morley, 1999: 91-92); i.e. we do not participate in its creation. Schutz also points out that, apart from being passive, dreaming is essentially a solitary act and,

This conceals a serious difficulty for the description of dream phenomena. Only in the awakened state can I “consciously” turn to the dream. In this turning toward the dream I make use of concepts and categories (above all of language structure) of the everyday life-world, which are subject to the fundamental principles concerning the compatibility of this province of meaning...We can [thus] only grasp the sphere of dreams by means of “indirect communication” (Schutz, 1973/1974: 34).

In Schutz's terms this means that on awakening, the imagery of the dream may be recalled and described, but it then has to be subjected to a particular interpretation that is drawn from a
cognitive style that falls out of its normal “finite province of meaning” (Schutz, 1973/1974). Not only does the particular cognitive style used influence the interpretation, but a dream can be manipulated, either consciously or unconsciously, according to individual agency and intention. It can also suffer mistranslation or “editorial revision when being relayed to other people” (Price-Williams & Degarrod, 1996: 17). Despite this, it is precisely because of their “autonomous aspect” that some societies give great credence to the authority of dreams. Katie Glaskin (2005), for instance, has argued that the Australian aborigines regard dreams as a traditionally recognised form for introducing change and innovation into their practices since “their innovative imagery and creative effect cannot be attributed to deliberate conscious construction” and thus carry authority in terms of initiating change (Glaskin, 2005: 298).

Another aspect of the dream experience concerns their subject matter and how dreams can adapt to new cultural settings (Tedlock, 1991). It is this tendency that has interested scholars in the anthropology of extraordinary experience who note that dreams and visions tend to “often take the form and content of one’s host culture – even if the anthropologist is relatively new to that society” (Young & Goulet, 1994: 7).

2.2.2.2 Dream enhancement and incubation

In many societies where dreams are valued various methods are used to enhance their clarity and recall, or even to induce revelatory dreams of a different quality to the norm (Bulkeley, 1996). Meier has noted with respect to the widespread practice of dream incubation in ancient Greece that “Incubation’s effectiveness is very closely bound up with the importance accorded to dreams. Only when dreams are very highly valued can they exert great influence” (Meier, 1989: iii). This observation applies to the axiomatic values of dreams for Nguni diviners. Many groups use a variety of techniques to induce dreams, such as sleep deprivation, fasting, and rhythmic dancing or, as in the case of the Nguni groups of southern Africa, the ritual consumption of certain plants may be used (Hirst, 1990).

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5 Incubation is the practice of enhancing dreams by sleeping in a sacred space where it is thought that spiritual presence is intensified. Ritual procedures, such as cleansing with water and herbs and sometimes offerings in the form of food or animal sacrifices, are often required before admittance is granted (Meier, 1989).

6 Thomas Gregor observed that the Mehinaku Indians of Brazil, who place heavy emphasis on dream recall, facilitate the process by getting up at regular intervals throughout the night to stoke the fire. This enables them to recall as many as three to four dreams a night. He notes how these techniques of dream recall involving
2.2.2.3 Dream sharing and the dream narrative

The social aspects of dream-sharing are numerous and can reveal interesting cultural perspectives on the phenomenon of dreaming (Tedlock, 1987; Hollan, 2003). Relevant questions include whether dream-sharing is encouraged or avoided, when and where they are shared, and with whom one shares the dream narrative. In some instances only certain dreams may be shared and not others, while some may only be shared with specific people. Laura Graham (1994), for instance, has observed that dream sharing among the Xavante has an age and gender component, while Kempf & Hermann (2003) discuss dream narratives and their interpretation among Ngaeing male and female adolescent initiates of Papua New Guinea. The style in which the dream is narrated also provides valuable cultural insights. In some instances it may be presented in songs, as among the Xavante (Graham, 1994) and the Temiar (Roseman, 1998), while in others both song and mythic forms are used (Devereux, 1957; Kroeber, 1925). This so-called dialogic mode of analysis has been usefully adopted by a number of anthropologists (Graham, 1994; Knab, 2004).

2.2.2.4 The origin, function and interpretation of dreams

Oneirology, or the study of dreams, has a long history and the origin of dreams (and by this I mean more than just that part of the brain from where they originate) has still not been resolved to this day. While the origin of dreams and the functions of dreams need to be distinguished, they are nonetheless closely interconnected. How a dream is interpreted, and its value determined, is dependent on the cultural understanding of dream origins and their functions. Thus, if one sees dreams as the by-products of biological processes in the brain or the random fragments of previously experienced psychic events that have occurred in the waking state, they will probably hold little value and serve little purpose to that particular person. If they are seen as reflectors of the soul and the unconscious, revealing deeper clues to one’s psychic or soul state, then one will use them appropriately, seeking ways to adjust to what the soul is saying. Similarly if they are seen to come from an external source, a higher power, be it God, saints, ancestors or other spirits, then one will orient one’s life towards what those sources are saying and act according to the cultural framework in which they are found.

There are some people who may classify their dreams into each of these different categories,

"interrupted sleep and immediate verbalization of the dreams in the morning" are similar to those advocated by dream researchers and psychotherapists (Gregor, 1981: 710)
and the skill is being able to determine which are divine messages or soul reflectors, and which are of no import. Patricia Cox Miller (1994) has noted that in antiquity there were two broad ways of conceptualizing the origin or the “mechanics of production” of dreams. These still largely hold today. The first is the theological or spiritualist perspective, and the second is the psychobiological or naturalist perspective.

Theological/spiritualist theories.
These theories have probably the oldest and most widespread legacy throughout humanity. Simply put, from this perspective, the information conveyed in a dream is attributed to coming from a source outside of the individual, be it from God, the angels, saints, ancestors or other beneficent daemons, and on occasion they may come from evil spirits. Although some form of soul/spirit travel is suggested (Lohmann, 2003a), be it the spirits or deities coming to the dreamer, or the dreamer’s soul leaving the body and entering the world of spirit, the benevolent dream sources are seen as providing information, prophecies and/or warnings (i.e. these are their functions), due to the fact that these extrasensory agents are believed to have greater access to knowledge and are not affected by the space-time universe we occupy.

While some societies and religions, for example the ancient Greeks and many adherents of the major monotheistic religions, regard the sleeping subject as being a passive recipient of messages and visions that result from spirit visitation and revelation, others, especially many hunter-gatherer ‘shamanic’ groups, regard dreams as a form of soul travel (Lohmann, 2003a)

7 According to Cox Miller a “daemon” in ancient Greek thought merely meant “those presences pulsating in the aerial spaces around us” (1994: 55). Included under the category of daemon were the ghosts of the dead, ancestral shades and tutelary spirits. It was believed that a boundary existed between humans and the Gods and this boundary was mediated by the daemons. As they could also be lodged deeply in the mind and know the conscience of the person, they served as guardians of everyday life, “continually present as watchers of our acts and thoughts” (ibid: 58). They were seen as “sources of self-awareness and ethical reflection” (ibid: 59). Thus the Greeks did not describe a daemon in negative terms, in contrast to how a ‘demon’ is viewed today under the influence of Christianity.

8 Schutz has noted how dreams operate on a different temporal and spatial dimension. He states, “The time structure of the dream world is extraordinarily complex. Earlier and later, present, past, and future appear to be confounded. The dreaming person observes future events as if they were past; past events are dreamed of as open and modifiable and thereby bear a clear, future character; successions can be simultaneously transformed, and so forth” (Schutz, 1973/1974: 33).

9 Price-Williams and Degarrod (1996) note “The fact that the Greeks emphasized this kind of dream, by articulating it as “seeing,” suggests strongly that at the very least this kind of dream was reinforced in this culture” (1996:19). This emphasis on ‘seeing’ is very like the way the Zulu izangoma expressed the communications they received in their dreams.
where the dreamer’s soul detaches from the body and enters into the spirit world where it engages with other spirit forces (both positive and negative), be they departed souls, nature spirits or souls of other sleeping individuals (Desjarlais, 1996; Gregor, 1981; Lohmann, 2003a & b; Peters, 1982). In some instances both spirit/soul visitation and soul wandering may be acknowledged as a potential form of dream activity within a particular group of people (Lohmann, 2003a & b).

It should be pointed out that not all dreams may necessarily be seen as coming from a spiritual source. Most religions distinguish between ‘big’ or ‘numinous’ dreams and ‘little’ dreams. Another category that may be identified as separate to these is the nightmare which is usually regarded as the reliving of particularly unpleasant memories and experiences, often in exaggerated form; nightmares may occasionally be seen as a form of evil spirit attack (Hollan, 1989). Numinous dreams, which can have a powerful and transformative effect on the person’s psyche, are seen as coming from a spiritual source whereas ‘little’ dreams have little significance, and are not usually attributed to an external agent (Bulkeley, 1996). ‘Big’ dreams may be of broader cultural significance, revealing information beyond the personal context of the dreamer. Interpretation is usually directed at ‘big’ dreams, and these tend to be regarded as predictors of events, revelations of deep spiritual or existential matters, or as providing insight into some past or present event relevant to a particular individual’s or group’s situation.

Many different groups have their own set of interpretive codes by which a dream can be understood and these are usually culturally determined (Gregor, 1981; Reynolds, 1992; Tedlock, 1987a). However, these interpretive codes are not necessarily valid for all dreams and they may be waived according to individual situations (Hollan, 1989; Jackson, 1989). In many cases a number of different interpretations may be given to a dream and the correct meaning will only be confirmed in retrospect, when the dream meaning and its outcome are are held to have been realized. While standard interpretive codes have a long history in the various theological traditions, they do have their limitations. Artemidorus, the author of Oneirocritica (The Interpretation of Dreams) written in the second century A.D., was “the first to employ an empirical approach to dreams” (Stevens, 1995: 26). Artemidorus investigated over 3000 dreams in the course of his researches in Italy, Greece and the Ancient Near East and “consistently warned against looking up standard interpretations of dream
books, pointing out that symbolic meanings could change with time, across cultures, and from person to person” (Stevens 1995: 26). Artemidorus himself saw dreams as having two sources. According to his classification dreams were either prophetic (oneiroi), and he left open the possibility that these were sent by the Gods, or they were physical. The latter dreams, which he termed enypnia, originated from the physiological and psychic functioning of the body (Kilborne, 1987). This recognition of a dual origin of dreams is also found among the Nguni diviners whom I have worked with.

Psychobiological/Naturalist origin theories:
As suggested by Artemidorus’s classification, psychobiological or naturalist dreams theories have also had a long history. Most scholars identify the Greek philosopher Aristotle as the first scholar to reject the Homeric view that dreams came from the Gods or other external sources. Steven’s observes that Aristotle’s philosophical works “have been among the most influential writings in the history of Western civilization” (Stevens, 1995: 20). Dreams for Aristotle were the by-products of interconnecting biological/physiological processes and psychic memories from the waking state (Cox Miller, 1994: 43). Although Aristotle did not dispute the fact that sometime dreams do come true, he attributed this to “coincidence, luck and good guessing” (Cox Miller, 1994: 44).

The anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1871) theorized that dreams of ‘primitive’ man were probably the wellspring of the soul and its outward religious expressions. However, he regarded these ‘primitives’ as misguided because they did not have the benefit of western science and rationality to see dreams for what he thought they really were: the psychological and physiological by-products of the brain. He argued that this resulted in the inability of ‘primitive’ people to draw a distinction between waking and dreaming realities.

Freud and Jung have been the two most influential scholars in the psychology of dreaming and both argued that dreams emerge from the unconscious, “a vast psychological realm that extends far beyond the range of our ordinary awareness” (Bulkeley, 1996: 6). Freud’s publication The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) brought dreams firmly into the realm of the psyche and he distinguished between the latent and the manifest content of a dream. The latent content is what lies submerged in the subconscious, hidden because of its forbidden and
dangerous nature, while the manifest content is that which is remembered and recounted on awaking. In essence, Freud argued that dreams are manifestations of our deep and repressed desires or wishes that originate in childhood and are usually of a sexual nature; they are "the hallucinatory fulfillment of a forbidden wish" (Stevens, 1995: 37). The dream masks these repressed desires in symbols, thus preserving sleep, and it is the task of the psychotherapist to unmask these (ibid, 1995: 46-47). One of the biggest problems anthropologists have had with Freud's work is that he effectively denied any relevance to the cultural context of dreams. As Jèdrej and Shaw (1992) have noted, Freud's emphasis on the individual nature (and pathology) of dreams pushed the field of dreaming to the margins of anthropology since it could not accommodate more social and cultural phenomena (ibid: 3). Some anthropologists, for example Seligman (1921, 1923) and Lincoln (1935), received much criticism for neglecting this important issue (Tedlock, 1987). Stimulated by Freudian ideas, they conducted wide-scale research into the dream phenomenon without adequately considering the contextual relevance of the dreams they documented (Tedlock, 1987: 21).

Although Jung agreed with Freud on the existence and importance of the unconscious, especially with regard to it being the source of dreams, he parted company with him from that point. Jung rejected Freud's view that the manifest content was a distorted or disguised representation of a forbidden wish. For Jung dreams, "do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise....they are invariably seeking to express something that the ego does not know and does not understand" (Jung, 1968, CW16, para 317). In agreement with Freud he too saw the origin of these expressions as coming from the unconscious mind. The concept of the unconscious part of the mind is pivotal to all of Jung's work. Intimately associated with the unconscious was his concept of the archetype. For Jung there are two levels of the unconscious; one is the personal unconscious, which contains the more superficial aspects of one's own suppressed or forgotten thought forms; this rests upon a deeper layer, the collective unconscious "which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn" (Jung, 1968, CW 9, para 3). As the choice of the word 'collective' suggests,

...this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in everyone of us (ibid, para 3).
The unconscious contents contain the archaic images and blueprints from our ‘primordial’ past; these are the archetypes. As they emerge to the conscious mind through dreams they are transformed according to the existing repertoire of knowledge that we have, be it personal or cultural, into images that are often integrated into myths, tribal lore or beliefs. These are what he calls the “représentations collectives” (or collective representations). He emphasizes that once they have been changed by conscious or cultural formulae they are no longer strictly archetypes since this term only applies to “those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious elaboration ... The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear” (ibid: para 6).

The “conscious elaboration” of dreams is deeply influenced by the dreamer’s own cultural and personal context. Jung also recognized that not all dreams are of equal importance, and distinguished between the ‘big’ (or significant) dream, and the ‘little’ (insignificant) dream. For him ‘little’ dreams were the product of the subjective and personal sphere, and their meaning was limited to everyday affairs. Significant dreams, however, are “often remembered for a lifetime, and not infrequently prove to be the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience” (Jung 1969, CW 8: 554). For Jung, the origin of these ‘big’ or significant dreams is from the deeper levels of the collective unconscious, the source of “mythological motifs and mythologems” designated as archetypes. Both Jung and Freud agreed that dreams are helpful in psychotherapeutic healing and this has been corroborated by more recent scholars, many of whom have developed upon the work of Jung or Freud (Bulkeley, 1996: 8). I will return to this issue of Jung’s concept of archetypes and how it may inform our understanding of the water divinity phenomenon in more detail in Section 4.7.1 of Chapter Four.

One scholar whose ideas are relevant to this thesis is the depth psychologist James Hillman. In his book entitled The Dream and the Underworld, he answers the question “where do dreams come from?” with the response, “it is no secret that dreams belong to the underworld and its Gods” (Hillman, 1979: 2). Whether meant literally or metaphorically this response has a distinct religious ring to it. He further explains that he sees dreams as phenomena “that emerge
from a specific archetypal “place”, and that correspond with a distinct mythic geography” (ibid: 3). He argues that the dream has little to do with improving waking consciousness. Although he draws on the concept of the unconscious from Jung and Freud, he reworks it into an entity that goes deep into ancient Greek mythology. Hence, as he himself states, his contribution is relevant only “within the bounds of the western psyche, its cultural, geographical, and historical roots in our [presumably western] tradition” (ibid: 5). He offers no suggestion as to how we might seek to understand those who do not have their historical roots in Greek tradition, however; his comments on animals in dreams are especially interesting.

I prefer to consider animals in dream as Gods, as divine, intelligent, autochthonous powers demanding respect (147)...to look at them from an underworld perspective means to regard them as carriers of soul (148)....The wide belief that animals embody the souls of the dead should give us special respect for the animals that come to us in the night. From the nightworld perspective, they are presentations of specific soul qualities and behaviours, essentials that cannot present themselves than in this animal shape (ibid: 150).

The above quote reflects how the Zulu izangoma understand animals in dreams; although they would disagree with Hillman’s emphatic statement that dreams have little concern with waking life. From my own experiences and observations dreams are very relevant to their daily concerns and are essential in helping them navigate the uncertainties inherent in waking life, and for revealing the true nature of the universe (for similar ideas see Dadosky 1999; Devereux 1957; Poirier 2003).

2.2.2.5 Activity in response to dreams

While many anthropologists have been more interested in what the manifest content of their informant’s dreams tell them about the cultural perspectives of that society, a few have been interested in how dreams prompt social action and stimulate creative potential. The latter include such activities as the creation of songs and myths (Devereux, 1957; Graham, 1994; Kroeber, 1925; Roseman, 1991), as well as art and crafts (Dilley, 1992; Goodale, 2003; Price-Williams & Gaines, 1994). How people respond to dreams and act upon them depends on how they understand the origins and functions of dreams. From the theological perspective, where dreams are often regarded as coming from the spirit world, a variety of responses may be elicited. These may range from the acceptance of a calling to become a diviner or a religious functionary (Berglund, 1976; Ewing, 1990; Reynolds, 1992, 1996) to the avoidance of
something when a warning is received. It may also prompt the dreamer to go in search of something, or to initiate the performance of a ritual, or to participate in some form of ritual activity (Gilsenan, 2000; Hollan, 1995; Jedrej, 1992; Strathern, 1989). Dreams also serve as important sources of knowledge (Rushforth, 1992), and may be regarded as legitimate ways to prompt innovation and change in cultural practices (Glaskin, 2005). In some societies dream narratives, and their performance, are vitally important in the establishment of identity (Ewing, 1990; Graham, 1994) as well as in the claim to belonging to certain landscapes (Roseman, 1998). From my own experiences with the Zulu izangoma dreams are the primary instigators of action during the training of novices, and accordingly it was dreams that propelled my own training and research process. In the next section I examine the centrality of dreams for those Zulu izangoma who directed my training and how dream induction, interpretation, and ritual responses were understood by them.

2.2.3 The importance of dreams for Zulu diviners

A number of scholars have written about the significance of dreams for Zulu diviners (Lee, 1958; Berglund, 1976) and many of my own observations coincide with theirs. What I will be presenting in this section, however, is how I came to understand what dreams meant to the diviners I interacted with, and the various functions they serve especially with regard to becoming diviners. For the Zulu diviners dreams (amaphupho; uphupho – sing.; ukuphupha = to dream) fall into two broad categories. There are those (amaphupho nje – or ‘little dreams’) that are regarded as of no import but are merely the psychological reprocessing of fragments of events that have taken place in the waking world, much the same as we regard most dreams in western society. These are the most common and are experienced by all people, and are not acted upon. Then there are the great visionary ‘white’ dreams (amaphupho omhlophe), which are of a different order, magnitude, origin and frequency. These are usually seen to originate from one’s consanguinal ancestors but they may also come from the Holy Spirit. Any person may receive a ‘white’ dream but they are usually rare and are more likely to be had by those who have been called by their ancestors to be diviners and who have performed certain rituals that facilitate them. For such individuals ‘white’ dreams come more frequently. Very often, the tendency to become a diviner runs in families10, and quite a few family members may

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10 For instance Zanele’s divinatory skills are recognized as coming from her maternal ancestors.

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receive white or ‘big’ dreams at some stage of their life. As dreams are regarded as coming primarily from the spirit and ancestral world, it is believed that the living have a responsibility to help ‘strengthen’ and ‘clean’ (purify) their own ancestral spirits through the performance of sacrificial rituals and through their own washing in, and consumption of, herbal mixtures. In this way it is believed that their ancestors are able to send them reliable and clear dreams. It is believed that all members of a family may benefit from such rituals and, as a result, receive the occasional ‘white’ dream.

The primary focus of diviner (*izangoma*) training is to enhance one’s awareness of the various forms of communication that come from the spirit world. Of these, dreams are of utmost importance and they serve as the main guide for the training process. A potential diviner is often made aware of his/her calling by a dream and may even be shown the trainer that he/she must seek (Wreford, 2008). From the moment of ritual acceptance of the calling and the inclusion into the training ‘school’ under the guidance of a master diviner (adep), dreams are constantly sought. A novice will not progress in his/her training if no dreams are received. Likewise the trainer cannot force the training process or initiate any ritual procedure unless the novice has received a dream that indicates that action is needed. This means that the trainer is considerably restrained from abusing his/her powers over the novice. A dream may be clear and direct; involving visual imagery and or verbal instructions, in which case the action to be taken is obvious, or it may be obscure and metaphorical requiring further divination and clarification by the trainer. The way a white dream is described suggests the idea that it was delivered by an external agency. Hence one does not say ‘I had a dream’, which suggests individual agency, but rather ‘I was shown something in a dream’, or ‘I was told something in a dream’, or that ‘so-an-so visited me in a dream’. Zanele, for instance, would frequently start off her morning by saying to me, “my ancestors gave me a nice dream last night”. In other words, she saw her ancestors as bringing her special messages or visions. The concept of the television set was frequently used to explain how one gets vivid dreams or even waking visions. The use of plants (discussed in more detail below) to strengthen dream communication between different categories of spirit suggests, in the light of the television analogy, the idea that one can tune into certain channels or wavelengths in order to receive special information. I did not encounter the concept of soul flight or travel amongst those diviners with whom I trained.
Dream induction, incubation and methods to enhance dream recall are all extensively employed by *izangoma*, highlighting again the epistemological significance of dreams as sources of knowledge. A novice who is called to become *isangoma* is very often required to stay for long periods at his/her trainer's homestead. At Baba's homestead, all the novices belonging to his training school (*isibaya*) lived together in a large round hut, where they cooked, ate and slept. The novices would dance and sing (*ngoma*) regularly to the rhythmic beating of drums (*izigubho*) as this was seen to aid the enhancement and recall of dreams, and to attract the presence of their ancestors. Dancing to effect dream recall was usually performed after midnight in the early hours of the morning before daybreak, and chronic disruption of sleep was a common element in the daily life of the *amathwasa* (novices). Although I did not encounter it with the Zulu *izangoma*, among the Cape Nguni further to the south, dream incubation may also take place during the *fikama* ritual in a temporary reed shelter built near the edge of a pool or river (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4).

Both Zulu *izangoma* of KwaZulu-Natal and the Cape Nguni diviner-healers (*amagqirha*) seek to enhance the clarity and reception of powerful dream messages by using a variety of species of plants, collectively known as *ubulawu*. Zanele listed over forty species of plants that the *izangoma* used for the varying types of *ubulawu*. These include a range of trees, shrubs, climbers, grasses and small flowering plants that grow in a variety of habitats. Different parts of the plant (roots, stems, bark, bulbs and leaves) are used depending on the species (see also Hirst, 1990). They are combined into specific mixtures, depending on the individual's progress and the nature of his/her dreams. A mixture or combination of *ubulawu* species is used at the commencement of training, during the training process and after the healer has qualified (see also Wreford, 2008: 110-112). They are often administered during group rituals, or may be taken daily by novices, usually accompanied by prayer, invocation and/or singing. Certain species of *ubulawu* are also associated with different clans and are used during collective clan rituals, thus acting as identity markers. There were three broad categories of *ubulawu* that were used at Baba's training school, each with its own distinct species of plant. These plants were colour coded and associated with different categories of spirit. *Idlozi* was categorized as

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11 Some of the Cape Nguni groupings also refer to it as *isilawu*. 

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white, and was used to connect the novice with the collective group of his/her benevolent ancestors, the amadlozi, for whom appropriate mortuary rituals (ukubuyisa) had been performed by the agnatic kin group. These rituals were to bring the spirit of the dead back into the ancestral fold, which should ideally be performed a year after the death of the person, although over the last century many factors have inhibited the performance of such rituals. To address these failings, two categories of ubulawu, referred to as mndiki and mndawu were also frequently used\(^\text{12}\). According to Zanele mndiki was categorized as red and was used to clean and strengthen all the deceased male spirits of one’s family (from both the mother’s and father’s side of the family) for whom proper mortuary rituals had not been performed. Similarly mndawu (black and white) was used to clean and strengthen all the female spirits who had not had rituals performed. Both mndiki and mndawu spirits were regarded as being potentially troublesome if not ‘cleaned’.

The efficacy of ubulawu is held to be largely dependent on the ritual and cultural context in which it is used. The ubulawu is soaked in cold water and beaten to a thick foam with a forked stick (again made of a certain plant species) and as it is beaten the ancestors are invoked through speech and singing. The foam is then drunk and used to wash the whole body. The novice is encouraged to vomit (ukuphalaza) after the taking of some types of ubulawu, as this is regarded as the means by which ‘darkness’ (ubumnyama) can be expelled from the body. Ubulawu is usually imbibed in special ritual contexts, or on a daily or occasional basis. The ritual may often be performed at pools, rivers or in forests where the ancestors are thought to reside. The foam is regarded as having a special cleansing ability, in both a physical and a spiritual sense and, as such, ubulawu is used to ‘clean’ the ancestors. In this way ubulawu provides a conduit through which the ancestors can communicate with their living descendants in their dreams. The power of a healer is believed to be ultimately dependent on the power of his/her ancestors, and by ‘cleaning’ with ubulawu and the periodic sacrifices of goats, chickens and cattle, the ancestors are also strengthened, thus enabling the healer to do his or her tasks more effectively. Ubulawu is also an important element in animal sacrifice, as it forms a connecting thread between the sacrament, the initiate and his/her ancestors (see

\(^{12}\) No doubt these two categories of ubulawu relate to what Wreford’s informant referred to as the amandiki amandawu category of spiritual ancestors (Wreford, 2008: 59). Wreford’s trainer, Nosibele, who had been trained in the Zulu tradition described them as “the great-great-grandfathers and grandmothers,” and the “amakosi, the higher spirits” (ibid); in other words, she directly linked amandawu [and] amandiki with the amakosi (amakhosi).
Wreford, 2008: 144-148). The use of such plants without spiritual calling and sanction renders them ineffective. The izangoma were insistent that if a person has done wrong and offended his/her ancestors, or if the timing is not right, or the initiate is in a temporary state of pollution (e.g. female menstruation), then the ubulawu will not foam despite vigorous beating. Zanele was of the opinion that the ancestors are actually present in the foam, and lack of foam signified their refusal to manifest. It is preferable that healers collect their own ubulawu as there is less chance of pollution occurring this way. Although many of the ubulawu species are sold on the street markets, these are only used when it is not possible to gather them personally13.

During training the messages that one is held to receive are frequently linked to the requirements for an effective initiation process; these include being shown the following:

- The types of plants (especially various ubulawu species) that are suitable for connecting the novice to his/her ancestors, or that should be used for protection against evil. Being shown certain plants may signify that the novice has reached a certain stage in his/her training and is ready to progress to the next.

- The sites in the landscape where one’s ancestral spirit power is concentrated. There may be a number of these and they are usually located at certain waterfalls, deep pools, caves or forests. The novice is expected to locate these sites and will usually have to perform ritual offerings at these sites.

- The types of wild animals (isilwane/isilo) that one’s ancestors are associated with (leopards, elephant, python, birds etc). When these animals appear in a dream they are often regarded as an ancestral visitation itself. The skins of these animals can be incorporated into the person’s uniform.

- The domesticated beasts (and their number) that one’s ancestors have chosen for sacrifice. These are usually of a particular colour, coat pattern or sex. A dream such as this signifies that the ancestors are now waiting for the ritual to be done as soon as possible.

13 Cultivated species are also regarded as losing much of their spiritual potency (Prins, 1996a) and are not a viable alternative.
- The songs that one's ancestors prefer to have sung at certain rituals as well as the types of dance styles.
- The colours and designs of beaded clothing and instruments that are to be part of the *isangoma* uniform. The types of cloth that should be worn. Certain types of cloth are associated with maternal, paternal or other types of spirit.

Some dreams necessitate ritualised responses, while others require waiting for their eventual realization. Failure to act on dreams such as those listed above, especially during training, is believed to lead to cessation of progress and, in some instances, deterioration in health or even death. This is especially with regard to the performance of ritual, rather than adherence to one's ancestor's aesthetic preferences. The absence of dreams among *izangoma* and novices (*amathwasa*) provokes great anxiety as it is believed that jealous rivals may be interfering with the communicative process with one's ancestors. Those diviners who receive very strong and accurate dreams have to constantly guard against those who may wish to appropriate or block their ancestral power. Their jealous rivals are believed to do this through the use of sorcery and this is more easily achieved if the sorcerer gains access to any part of the flesh of an animal sacrificed by the one he/she wishes to afflict. This is why the use of protective medicine (*intelezi*) becomes so vital during rituals, as will become evident in Chapter Seven. When a diviner novice finds his/her dreams are becoming rare and vague he/she needs to undergo a series of ritual cleansing and/or sending the obstructing evil back to the sender (*ukucupha*). Although the majority of dreams are held to come from a neutral or positive source it is also believed that sometime evil forces can penetrate the dream world. This is very often the case when the dreams are sexual in nature.

It is also quite common to receive warning dreams, which are understood to indicate trouble is on its way such as political and social unrest, or most importantly, the evil intentions of others. The dreamer may be shown a person that he/she will meet who cannot be trusted, or someone who may be able to help with problems he/she may be encountering. Similarly diviners may be shown that someone close to them harbours grudges, and is either planning or has done something to negatively impact on their life. These dreams are seen to reveal the truth behind

14 This is a ritual that I have had to undergo (see Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.3).
the appearances of daily life, where one can be easily tricked and fooled by deceptive illusions. In this way dreams are seen to provide ‘privileged access’ (Strathern, 1989) to truth and secret knowledge. Dreams may also reveal that the spirits of certain people who have died, may be unsettled or lost, and are requiring the attention of the living to help settle them. Very often the circumstances surrounding the death of these unsettled spirits reveal breaches that have occurred in the fabric of social life, either in the present or the past. These may be through the failure to perform certain rituals, to observe proper exchange etiquette (such as during adolescent, marriage and death rituals), the past transgressions of deceased kin that need to be corrected (such as the killing of an ancestral animal), or the long range effects of sorcery that is passed down through the generations.

While the Zulu izangoma perspectives on dreams share many common features with other dream-based spiritualities across the world (e.g. Lohmann, 2003a; Strathern, 1994) the most distinctive feature that they seem to have, that has not been recorded elsewhere, is the extent to which they use plants to sharpen their receptivity to dreams and enhance their clarity. As far as I am aware ubulawu is only used among the Nguni groups and is not used further north, for instance among the Shona groups. Although there have been no records on its use amongst the Khoekhoe or San there is linguistic evidence that this knowledge may have been shared by them, not least for the fact that the Khoekhoe were referred to by the Cape Nguni as the amaLawu and the term isilawu in Zulu refers to either ‘Hottentot’ (i.e. Khoekhoe) language or custom (Dent & Nyembezi, 1969/1995: 403; see also Chapter Nine, Section 9.2.6 for more on the cross-cultural sharing between these groups). My own experience of using these techniques of dream enhancement had a profound effect on me, and I was to have dreams that covered the full range of information that has been listed in the above paragraphs. While there may be multiple ways in which my dreams could be interpreted by others scholars I must emphasise that this thesis seeks to reveal how my own dreams were interpreted and acted upon by the izangoma, and how these revealed glimpses into their understanding of the water divinities; it is thus not incumbent on me to do an exhaustive analysis on the range of possible interpretations to each of my dreams.

Beyond dreams there are a range of other sensations recognized by diviners that inform them not only about what is happening in the outside world, but also what has happened, and what
may happen. The sense of *umbelini* is one example, a fluttering sensation that occurs in the solar plexus when danger is immanent (what westerners often describe as a ‘gut feel’, or, more formally, as intuition or premonition). Strong thoughts or internal visual flashes in the mind (like a television screen) are other examples. For the Zulu diviners, however, all these intuitive senses are stimulated and mediated by their ancestors, and for them this constitutes reliable knowledge of things-as-they-are, rather than things-as-they-appear.

2.2.4 “Follow the dream” – a method of multi-sited research

Coinciding with the postmodernist ‘turn’ over the last three to four decades has been the increasing trend towards multi-sited research. To a large extent this has also coincided with, and been brought about by, the increasing flows of capital, communication, and mobility that has accompanied globalization. The use of the multi-sited approach recognizes that the existence of stable groups occupying recognised circumscribed physical spaces and sharing normalizing interactions, a common identity and culture has been thoroughly disrupted by these global processes. As a result fieldwork in anthropological research now allows for the unit of study to be drawn from a variety of social arrangements that are not necessarily fixed by place. Such approaches to fieldwork have become more acceptable in anthropology since Gupta and Ferguson’s influential critique on the assumptions of isomorphism of nations, territories and cultures within the “pulverised space of postmodernity” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 9; see also Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). This has forced us “to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference” (ibid) and explore other commonalities beyond the sharing of space.

In George Marcus’s seminal paper on the emergence of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995a: 102) he examines various means by which acceptable multi-sited research can develop. He notes one can “follow the people”, “follow the thing”, “follow the metaphor”, “follow the plot, story or allegory”, “follow the life or biography” or “follow the conflict” (Marcus, 1995a: 106-110). This thesis adds another possibility; the “follow the dream” approach. As already explained in the previous section, the Zulu diviners regard ‘white’ dreams as coming from an external, spiritual source and as such great credence is given them. They reason that the

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15 Obviously this is most appropriate when studying those social groups that put a high value on the revelatory
ancestral spirits that inform the dream-world have access to knowledge that is not available to the everyday waking reality. This belief implies that the ancestors operate on a temporal and spatial dimension different to this reality; where past, present and future events are all known, and distant spaces can be transcended. It follows that when one uses dreams as research tools in such societies the path that the research takes often becomes multi-focal both in time and space, revealing temporal and spatial continuities that may not have been evident without the benefit of the dream messages. Of particular relevance are those dreams that reveal special places that the diviner must visit. These are geographical sites where it is believed one’s ancestral spirit power is concentrated and/or where the water divinities reside. There may be a number of these and they are usually located at certain waterfalls or deep pools, and are often associated with caves or forests. After such a dream the novice/diviner is expected to locate the site and will usually have to spend some time there and perform ritual offerings. I have had a number of such dreams (seven in total) and it has been the discovery of these sites, which span a wide and diverse area, that has led me to interview local people living in the vicinity and discover that similar ideas surrounding water divinities are common to belief systems in all these diverse regions. Most notably, every site has people who recount stories or myths containing many of the elements I describe in the next three chapters. I will be drawing on some of the interviews conducted at these sites in more detail in later chapters.

The multi-sited approach was further facilitated by my association with Baba’s training school (isibaya), where members came from wide ranging and diverse groups. As my research data was generated largely from my inclusion into Baba’s isibaya, I drew both from my own experiences as a novice healer as well as from the relationships generated within the group. I also drew on the insights of some of the members as well as their own dream-directed activities, some of which extended to their broader kin groups (on both the mother’s and father’s sides). I focussed in particular on Zanele’s experiences and her dream-directed and kin-related activities as not only did she consent to my inquiry but these frequently intersected with my own. As these activities were directed largely by dreams or life crises affecting the

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16 For instance, I would have significant dreams relating to her, and she would of me.
individual or the broader kin group they necessitated the crossing of considerable spatial and temporal boundaries.

It also follows that in using radical participation as a fieldwork method other forms of research methodology (such as household surveys, questionnaires etc.) become more problematic to perform. This is because these more orthodox methods elicit a different form of relationship between the researcher and her/his hosts, which may be abrasive to the relationship that develops in radical participation. Thus, I found it very difficult to use such orthodox methods because of the nature of my own involvement within Baba’s isibaya as a novice. I felt it was not appropriate to assume the formal role of researcher as this might compromise my role as a novice healer. Despite this, Baba and Zanele were aware that although I was an ithwasa, I was also a researcher. It was also on the basis of this role that Baba originally invited me to his home. Kirsten Hastrup has noted how anthropologists assume a role of ‘double agent’ in the field (Hastrup, 2004: 465) where we have to act as researchers on the one hand and yet remain as active participants on the other. This poses certain ethical problems, which are accentuated when one engages in more radical forms of participation.

2.2.5 Ethical considerations

As noted above the ambiguity of my role raised a number of questions regarding ethics. This was accentuated in that I was dealing with a topic that was largely related to esoteric knowledge. Although some areas of the water divinity experience are kept secret and I have honoured these, the themes that I examine in this thesis have been in the public domain for many years. The ideas relating to the water divinities have been written about and published for well over the last century (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2), and are common knowledge among many of the indigenous groups in southern Africa. The sheer volume of published data that I draw on, although scattered, attests to that. What I have done is to consolidate these apparently idiosyncratic beliefs found scattered throughout the literature into a more comprehensive and significant entity. Much of my own ethnographically derived information

17 As my grasp of isiZulu is not that accomplished Baba consented to my use of a tape-recorder during our consultations and certain rituals.
that I utilise was either drawn from my own personal experiences or given to me spontaneously upon enquiry. Understandings of the water divinities in the public realm can be misinformed, and this has been exacerbated by some members’ of the Christian churches efforts to demonise traditional religions (see Chapter Seven and Eight). It is for this reason that I feel an extensive analysis will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the water divinities relate to the religious beliefs of a wide range of southern African groups.

The nature of radical participation means that you become intricately involved in the lives of those that you are seeking to understand. This means that you have to take the good with the bad, and you cannot just get out if things become uncomfortable. Goulet and Miller observe this is not done without risk to oneself or one’s own family. They note that,

As experiential ethnographers, we know that once engaged with our hosts in their lifeworld, we could not simply exit the field at a convenient time and declare the experience over and done with. Instead, we found that the field was co-extensive with our homes, our minds, and our dreams, and involved even the bodies of our own family members and friends who were themselves sometimes affected and transformed by our ethnographic practice (Goulet & Miller, 2007: 4).

This co-extension of radical participation into one’s home can be of great benefit, as I was to discover when Baba insisted on helping my family in Zimbabwe. It did however pose ethical challenges for me in that my family had a conception of reality that was thrust upon them, which challenged their own pre-conceptions and had the potential to effect their broader social relations, especially amongst friends and relatives who were less tolerant of such ideas. It was because of this ethical dilemma that I baulked at the idea of involving them in my activities, especially with regards to the expectation that they would have to perform an animal sacrifice on my behalf. However, it was the apparent sincerity of the izangoma’s desire to help my family through very difficult circumstances that helped them realize the importance of their role in my training process and led them to agree to play a part in it. I give more detail on how these processes unfolded in Chapter Six.

In Chapter One, Section 1.2.3, it was noted that an inherent aspect of the radical participation method was making oneself vulnerable; it means exposing oneself to dangers and fear. On the
basis of my experience of radical participation I can endorse this is the case; however, it should be pointed out that it may also make one’s informants, especially those with whom one becomes co-actors, vulnerable. Establishing close trusting relationships with certain informants can lead to the problems of jealousies from others (see also Wreford, 2008). This is especially evident in contexts of poverty and social distress, where a researcher may be seen as a useful source of social and material capital. Implicit in the radical participation method is that one becomes a part of the life-world of one’s informants; that means that relationships of exchange and reciprocity become an inherent part of the relationship. In light of the circumstances that led me to Zanele I have already outlined why she became not only my key informant, but also what I understood to be my friend and ally. When I first met Zanele it was evident that she was materially deprived, being an unmarried mother who was struggling to make ends meet in order to support her children (see Section 2.5.2, this chapter); this was aggravated a short time after our initial meeting when her shack was washed away in heavy rains and she and her children were compelled to live in a tent. None of the new accommodation that was promised by the city council to the victims of the flood materialized, and after six months I felt compelled to assist her in purchasing a small two-roomed brick structure where she still lives today (she has since built on and expanded it). In addition to giving her small financial remittances for her assistance in my fieldwork, I also assisted her with some of the financial costs of her final initiation when her other family members pleaded poverty; although some of her kin members were very financially constrained, I acknowledge that for some of them this claim to poverty could have been a ruse on their part since they probably suspected I would step in to help. I am well aware that this material assistance I gave to both Zanele and her family may have influenced the research data (including Zanele’s responses), and this should be factored in to the analysis. However, the alternative of leaving her to the mercy of her poverty while I made use of her insights and protection was not something I could entertain. Unfortunately, while she may have benefited from our relationship in number of ways¹⁸, it also made her vulnerable to alleged witchcraft attacks from other individuals who were apparently jealous of our friendship (see Chapter Seven). Although I made it clear to her that she did not need to assist me if she found our relationship

¹⁸ This included a dramatic incident when I was able to help save her life by applying my nursing skills after she haemorrhaged from an incomplete spontaneous abortion. I also assisted her in rituals to ‘recover’ the lost spirits of her two sons who had been tragically killed.
was compromising her safety or her position in the *izangoma* community, or even in her neighborhood, she appeared to willingly pursue our relationship and seemed keen to participate in our joint search for healing skills. In order to try and minimize the jealousy that might emanate from her kin group (*i.e.* her siblings) I have continued to make financial contributions whenever they have important rituals to perform (*e.g.* funerals etc).

In the case of Baba, my use of the radical participation method could also be seen to have made him vulnerable in a number of ways. While Baba seemed to relish having a white female *ithwasa* and did not appear concerned with what his fellow *izangoma* might think of such potential ‘deviance’ in accepting me into his training school, he was not only opening his activities up to investigation, but also potentially having his own skills questioned if he failed in his endeavour to train me. Based on his cosmological framework, in giving me skills in dreaming and (potentially) divination he was making himself vulnerable to the possibility of my ‘seeing’ any potential errors or transgressions he might have committed. In the end this is what transpired, although the insights into his alleged transgressions came from other diviners who had either personal grudges against him, or who I came to seek advice from as a result of my dreams (see Chapter 7 and 8). I have wrestled with the ethical dilemmas that his alleged transgressions and those of several others have placed on me. I must emphasise though, that allegations of spiritual interference and transgressions are hedged with a high degree of uncertainty (Reynolds-Whyte, 1997), and although I document the allegations that other *izangoma* made in respect of Baba’s and certain other *izangoma*’s transgressions regarding my training, I do not have substantial proof to verify them. I have included these alleged transgressions into the thesis because, in using the radical participation method and drawing on my own experiences to cast light onto how the water divinities are sometimes ambivalently understood, my narrative of how my experiences unfolded would have been abruptly curtailed and undermined, leaving the reader to wonder how the process of my training ultimately transpired. It would also have been difficult to contextualize the subsequent dreams and interventions made, not only by a Zulu Zionist minister/prophet, but also by a particular Xhosa diviner (see Chapters Seven and Eight). My only recourse in dealing with demands of keeping

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19 This relates especially to the problems that Wreford (2008) encountered where her two *izangoma* trainers were subjected to extreme provocation by a number of dissident *izangoma* who questioned the legitimacy of white people claiming to having ancestors and becoming diviners.
my narrative intact and comprehensible, and addressing this ethical problem, has been to protect the privacy of my informants. I have either used pseudonyms, general apppellations (Baba), or, as in the case of Zanele and Zweli, I have just used one of a number of their first names.

2.2.6 The temporal aspects of research

This thesis has had an extraordinarily long gestation, spanning a period of twelve years from 1997 to 2009. While I was not in the field for all of this time (in effect it was approximately twelve months) I was in regular contact with Zanele via the telephone for the duration of this period, as we shared and explored our dreams and family crises, and assisted each other in the training process. I would also make regular visits to KwaZulu-Natal, usually for short periods of 1-3 weeks at a time, to visit both her and Baba, and we would frequently have to travel together for various ritual ceremonies at our respective family homes. Both Baba and Zanele also visited me at my home in Grahamstown; in Baba's case this occurred once when he came to consecrate my shrine, and for Zanele, who came to assist me with personal rituals, it was on a number of occasions.

Experience is, by its nature, processual and emergent (Schutz, 1970: 60-62), even though it is fragmented and interrupted by a diversity of contemporaneous events and activities that may or may not be related to one another. Although experience can only be made meaningful in retrospect (Schutz, 1970: 63), as humans we are engaged in multiple experiences that have connection to past and potentially future events. Many of these experiences happen simultaneously, and are sometimes governed by events taking place both locally and at distant places. This may even be at a trans-global political-economic level. Although the meanings of these interconnections may not be evident initially, their significance may change over time, or their connections may emerge only once further events have occurred. This temporal dimension of making meaning from experience is also relevant to anthropological knowledge. Hastrup has noted that anthropological knowledge "is not simply knowledge about particular events, practices and ideas, but about the processes by which these come to appear meaningful" (Hastrup, 2004: 468). This process becomes even more demanding when

20 This was due to the constraints of teaching and family commitments.
embarking on the anthropology of extraordinary experience where one has to take cognizance of one's own metaphysical experience of the universe, and this may involve one's own kin, who may become implicated in the process.

Thus, in this thesis I have tried to tease out the themes that have characterised my multiple experiences, many of which happened contemporaneously with others, and I have categorized them into the various chapters in order that they can receive more analytical treatment depending on their respective themes. As a result each chapter may trace back to dreams and events that happened several years earlier, but these only began to make sense, and the picture was formed, once more events had taken place. Hence, although I use autoethnography to illuminate aspects of this thesis it is by no means one single chronological account of events and experiences—rather, it is an interconnected tapestry of them. Although I originally set out to study the phenomenon of the water divinities and the possible interconnectness of ideas regarding them across the region, greater understanding only came within the context of the dream- and lived-worlds of the various research participants, including myself. In the next three chapters I present the corpus of knowledge regarding the water spirits in southern Africa, and compare existing literature that has been documented about them. I also elaborate on some of the experiences of my fellow healers to clarify or reinforce some of these ideas. From Chapter Six I explore my own experiences of the water divinities and how I made sense of them. These experiences were contingent on other, sometimes remote events, encounters, politics, dreams and misfortunes experienced by various participants and their extended networks, including my own kin.

Marcus (1995a: 8) has advised that we “refuse to assimilate too easily or by foreclosure the object of study”, nor should we strive for “credible holism” since “the territory that defines the object of study is mapped by the ethnographer who is within the landscape, moving and acting within it, rather than drawn from a transcendent, detached point” (Marcus 1995a: 7-8). This resistance towards strict demarcation results in what Marcus refers to as ‘messy text’, and this is, as far as he is concerned, to be embraced. Marcus also notes that as the post-modern object (the self, according to Jackson) “is ultimately mobile and multiply situated”, all ethnography has a comparative dimension integral to it. This may often be in the form of “juxtapositions of seeming incommensurables or phenomena that might conventionally have appeared ‘worlds
apart" (Marcus, 1995a: 6). He notes that, "in multi-sited ethnography, comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation" (Marcus, 1995a: 102).

In this thesis I will be expanding on how my own dreams helped lead me to important sites, not only in KwaZulu Natal, but also in the Eastern Cape, Zimbabwe, and the Western Cape, which provided me with a unique perspective on the cross-cultural expressions of similar ideas relating to the water divinities in the region. The discovery of these sites has also assisted in the comparative dimension of this thesis.

It is important to emphasize at this point that I make no claim to represent the ideas of the Zulu people as a whole (assuming there is a discrete whole, which of course there is not - see Section 2.4.1). As ethnographers we are always positioned subjects (Hastrup, 1992: 119), and that position allows us certain insights and not others. Hence, as Marcus has observed, "Positioning assumes all work is incomplete" (Marcus, 1995a: 18). I make no claim to have 'solved the mystery' of the water divinity phenomenon; I can only claim some experiences of it. Neither have I investigated all aspects of local Zulu culture; rather I present only what I have been privileged to have been shown, and how 'I' have understood it. In embracing the radical participation approach advocated by the anthropology of extraordinary experience, I wish to argue and will seek to show that it is not necessary - indeed that it is not useful - to attempt to explain away my dream experiences or the (claimed) reality of beliefs and experiences as they have been told to me by my informants.

2.3 Variations on a theme: the value of a comparative approach

It is evident that in undertaking multi-sited research, which was facilitated by my dream-directed form of radical participation, a comparative dimension to my study would emerge. As my research was originally intended to be a comparative study across southern Africa, my personally based experiences have added an extra dimension to the more classical forms of comparison found in anthropology. In the next section I briefly examine the importance and

21 I have had a number of other dreams that have connected me to sites in Mpumalanga, Greece and Mexico. Unfortunately, I do not have space to explore these in the thesis or consider their implications.
relevance of comparative studies in anthropology and how I intend to approach the issue.

2.3.1 The comparative approach in anthropology

Robin Horton has argued for recognition of the need for anthropologists to trace the continuities of thought systems in Africa and elsewhere. To trace these continuities, the answer lies in comparative research, which according to him has been sorely neglected in more recent anthropological analyses. He states:

Now the besetting sin of many writers on African thought-systems has been to treat as unique many features, which in fact are much more widely shared or even universal. And the besetting sin of many modern social anthropologists has been the tendency to set up elaborate explanatory frameworks on the basis of monographic studies of single cultures or regional groups of cultures, without due concern for the kind of wider comparisons which might at least begin to test these frameworks (Horton, 1993: 2).

His caution reflects the proverbial concern of not being able to see the forest for the trees. Adam Kuper (1982), as Allan Barnard (2000) has observed, is regarded as a strong proponent of regional structural comparison. Barnard concludes that what Kuper demonstrates in his comparative study of the cattle and kinship complexes in southern Africa is that, “What at first may appear to be random traits are intelligible within a framework which takes account of the southern Bantu region as a whole” (Barnard, 2000: 58). I believe this argument holds for the material I present. Janzen (1991, 1992) has also subscribed to the potential value of the comparative approach to our understanding of African belief systems in his analysis of the African healing institution of ngoma. He argued that the comparative ethnographic approach reveals “certain core features of a classic civilizational healing system in Central and southern Africa.” Wim van Binsbergen has argued along much the same lines in his recent publication Intercultural Encounters (2003). More recent comparisons between Melanesian and African notions of the body are an extension to this awareness of the need for broader comparisons (Lambek & Strathern, 1998).

There has always been a general consensus that anthropology’s task is a comparative study of humanity (Barnard, 2000; Barth, 1966, 1987; Fardon 1990; Kuper, 1982, 2002; Malinowski, 1922; Moore, 1994; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). For instance Henrietta Moore has noted that,
What Malinowski insisted upon and what became the norm in fact, the requirement of professional acceptance in anthropology, which it remains to this day was that anthropology should be a comparative science, and that the job of the anthropologist was to derive theory from first-hand research (Moore, 1994: 111-112).

Despite this recognition of the centrality of comparative studies in anthropology there has been an aversion towards it over the last half century (Fox & Gingrich, 2002). There are a number of reasons for this, and these reflect the changing priorities in anthropology over the period. Initially, when context based anthropology emerged as the cornerstone of anthropology, there was a response against the gross generalisations characteristic of studies conducted by the scholars such as Frazer (1923) and Eliade (1958) who tended to remove symbolic content and practice from the context in which they were found, and lump them into an amalgam of common cognitive processes or as proof of past contact. Superficially similar symbolic structures were compared without regard for their contextual meaning and these similarities were often used, especially in the case of Frazer, to support his evolutionist arguments. Various groups, to re-enforce their own ethnocentric and political ideals, would often seize upon diffusionist perspectives. Similar criticism has been targeted at the Afrocentrists or pan-Africanist school (Diop 1974, 1989; Houtondji, 1996; Masolo, 1994; Mbili, 1970; Mudimbe, 1988; Olela, 1984) that likewise subsumed local specificities to broad generalisations regarding questions of a common African philosophy and its origins. Such decontextualised structure could not allow for specific social and cultural transformative modifications that were bound to arise from the dynamic that arises between social, economic and political forces. It also neglected the historical context of the society in which the symbolic content is located. Some anthropologists expressed concern with the over-corrective response that resulted from such concerns. The anthropological task was to try and explain both generalities, as well as differences between groups. Even Radcliffe-Brown expressed his concerns about the tendency that was developing in the 1950s for anthropologists to sideline regional similarities for the sake of local specificity. He stated,

The development of field studies has led to a relative neglect of studies making use of the comparative method. This is both understandable and excusable, but it does have some regrettable effects. The student is told that he must consider any feature of social life in its context, in its relation to the other features of the particular social system in which it is found. But he is often not taught to look at it in the wider context of human societies in general (Radcliffe-Brown, 1951: 109-110).
More recently, the post-modern critique levelled at the assumptions that attend to comparison put further constraint on comparative studies (Fox and Gingrich, 2002), as did cultural relativism and the awareness of the effect of globalization on societies. Fox and Gingrich observe,

The established methodologies of cross-cultural comparison came to be viewed as especially suspicious because they compared what were assumed to be self-contained, stable and highly integrated cultures, when the reality was that all local cultures existed within a single world system integrated by capitalist expansion and absorption (Fox & Gingrich, 2002: 2).

Both Kuper (1983, 2002) and Van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers (1985) have also discussed the problems facing scholars attempting to do comparative regional studies in African religion. Despite these problems, however, they endorse the need for a comparative approach to regional studies of African religion. How one overcomes such problems is not without difficulty, but Gingrich and Fox suggest that the main problems emerge when one tries to tie general comparison to grand theory (Fox & Gingrich, 2002: 15). Drawing from the wisdom of Malinowski, Kuper suggests that in comparative research we should rather study problems (i.e. bridewealth), not peoples,

If we begin with a problem, a question, an intuition, then the next step is contextualization. An alternative way of thinking about comparison is as the business of contextualizing information in order to address a question. The ethnic groups of conventional comparative research need not be our exclusive points of reference. Each question emanating at once from a particular discourse and a set of observations, will suggest its own contexts for investigation, through both fieldwork and comparison (Kuper, 2002: 161).

To a large extent this is the approach I have adopted, although, as far as I am aware, the use of both comparative ethnographic literature and radical participation using dreams to address a particular cross-cultural research problem (e.g. the water divinity complex) has not been used by other scholars.

Another challenge facing comparative studies is the enormity of the task it sets for the scholar who tries to explain why similarities and differences exist between groups. Fredrik Barth outlines the difficulties and complexities of such a task in his comparative study of certain
Mountain Ok groups in his book *Cosmologies in the Making* (1987). In this study he was particularly interested in the varieties of cosmological ideas and expressions that occur between "cognate and contiguous" Mountain Ok communities in Papua New Guinea. Over and above the ethnographic exercise he sought to use his material to develop a theoretical framework that would "contribute to the development of a comparative anthropology of knowledge" (*ibid:* 1). As he was concerned with how specialist knowledge regarding religious ideas, symbols and practices were shared across neighbouring group boundaries and why they differed, it is worth examining his findings in a bit more detail. Barth did his original study among the Baktaman Mountain Ok community in 1969, a group consisting of only 185 members. Focussing on cosmological lore, symbols and ritual practices relating to a number of religious initiation practices, he compared his results with work done by other scholars on neighbouring, closely related groups (the total population of which was a mere 15,000). Although there were broad similarities he noted that marked variation in beliefs and practices did occur between the groups. This was despite them all sharing very similar technology, subsistence practices and ecology. He observed that one group would use certain symbols in a way that would shock and affront members of another group, while some symbols that were elaborated explicitly in one group would be ignored as inconsequential in another. Even their modes of expression of religious ideas differed widely, some making extensive use of myths with others barely referring to them. What was significant about this cosmological knowledge was that it was held by a relatively small group of specialists and the rites were only enacted every ten years in public. Barth concluded that the variations could be explained from a parallel process of diffusion and innovation, and that modifications resulted from "the repeated oscillations of cosmological lore" held by private specialists, to its public manifestation during ritual enactment, where the modifications took place (*ibid:* 31).

Barth also observed how Ok knowledge itself was predominantly derived from their empirical observations of the natural world around them, which provided "a web of concepts, connections and identities whereby one's own attitudes and orientation to the various parts of the world are directed and moulded" (*ibid:* 72), and thus, presumably, knowledge could be shaped by particular habitats. Further he argued that, for the Ok, "reality is best apprehended by the cultivation of mystery, not by a search for definitive truth" (*ibid:* 76).

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22 Mary Douglas's has a similar argument in her book *Natural Symbols* (1970).
To some extent, these insights of Barth can be compared to the material that I present. Certain specialists who claim to have experienced submersion underwater hold in-depth knowledge of water divinities and the core of this knowledge tend to be very consistent across the specialists belonging to different groups, even though it may be shaped by individual experience and local interpretive systems. However, as it is important that a certain amount of information is also available to the public, the basic knowledge is not kept secret. The public (kin) need to know about the possibility of such events occurring since their responses and actions are critical to the success of the re-emergence of a chosen candidate, should one of their own kin members be taken. It is within this loose space of public knowledge that ideas take shape of their own, and these may often be driven by rumour fuelled by incomplete knowledge on the part of non-specialists. Such material may lend itself to imaginative construction and embellishment, or even conscious manipulation. Within this arena of general or public discourse the water divinities may be conceived as either positive or negative entities depending on the perceptions or motivations of the narrator. A good example of how different public interpretations/representations can produce a polarity of meanings, especially among the more secular population, is demonstrated in Lilford’s analysis of two contemporary literary works, which explore the water divinity theme in Zimbabwe\(^{23}\). More profound examples of how public understanding of these divinities can have a marked influence on social behaviour can be found in the examples of the ‘Great Sacrifice’ or ‘Cattle-Killing’ of the amaXhosa in the Eastern Cape during the mid-nineteenth century and the more recent Ambuya Juliana movement that occurred in south-east Zimbabwe. These two millenarian type responses to the pronouncements of particular prophets or emissaries from the water divinities are outlined in more detail in Appendix Nineteen.

What Barth’s analysis demonstrates is the need to accommodate agency into the equation

\(^{23}\) Lilford has analyzed the work of two contemporary Zimbabwean literary scholars, Christopher Tagwirei’s ‘Dziva reNjuzu’ and Wiseman Magwa’s ‘Njuzu’. Highlighting the ambivalent nature of the njuzu (mermaids/water spirits), Lilford compares how the two scholars have drawn opposite interpretations of these beings: ‘Tagwireyi’s narrative focuses on the positive aspects of njuzu, treating them as a catalyst for social change. Magwa’s play presents the njuzu as a negative figure which conspires with a hostile world against the hero’ (1996: 1). Similarly Dambudzo Marechera’s ‘House of Hunger’ (1978: 130) depicts them in negative terms.
when seeking to understand the dynamic that exists between notions and actions (Holy & Stuchlik (1983), or what Firth (1975) refers to as ‘modes of thought’ (notions) and ‘modes of action’ (see also Jacobson, 1991). According to Shaw (1988) the challenge facing studies of religion in Africa is how to reconcile agency, meaning and structure in the analysis of social and cultural forms. As I have argued in Chapter One, Section 1.2.4 this requires that we first differentiate the levels of analysis that are inherent in any ethnography and comparative study.

2.3.2 A note on the use of comparative literature in this thesis

As discussed in the previous sections it seems clear that knowledge about a cultural group emerges from the process of multiple inter-subjective engagements, and that as a result it is positional, partial and dynamic (Hastrup, 1992; Marcus, 1995a). It does not exist ‘out there’, as a discrete bounded object that one merely has to discover and collect, intact, as if it were a hidden treasure. Further, the inter-subjective encounter is a two way process between the observer and the observed. The observer does not just take from the observed but must, by necessity of the process, reciprocate. This process reveals information about the observer as well as the observed. However, there may be a corpus of knowledge about a group associated with the observed that exists outside of the inter-subjective encounter at any one moment. This is the accumulated written literary product of numerous other negotiated inter-subjective encounters that have emerged from the experiences of those other observers who have sought to engage with or understand a particular group. These accumulated written sources, despite their own ‘positional perspectives’ and partiality, provide one with a very useful foundation to make sense of one’s own encounters. As these literary/textual products arise from both historical and contemporaneous events they provide one with useful material for assessing the continuity of ideas both in time and space. The body of literature that exists about a particular group of people that have some common sense of affiliation and identity (such as the ‘Zulu’ or the ‘Xhosa’) may be regarded as real, fictional or mythical to a member of that group (depending on his or her own experiences, position in society, ‘worldview’ and outlook). Some may have detailed knowledge and experience of a cultural expression presented, while others may never have encountered it, or may only have vague ideas on it. What is crucial is when they do immediately recognise the cultural expression as valid and can endorse and

24 See Willerslev on a critique of this concept (Willerslev, 2004).
elaborate more on it. Hence in the next three chapters, that detail the body of literature that exists on the ‘water divinity complex’, recurring ideas and themes are very evident. These provide the golden threads that bind together a complex of cultural ideas, practices and expressions that transcend time and space, both within and between groups in the southern African region. What I have been struck with is how widespread and well recognised these ideas and expressions are. Among the many diverse African people I have encountered in my journeys over the last twelve years, it is remarkable how many of them know exactly what I am talking about, and frequently elaborate on their own or their kin’s experiences with the water divinities.

2.4 Contextualization of the various southern African ‘groups’

In Adam Kuper’s analysis of regional comparative studies in southern Africa he noted that one of the main problems facing comparativists was the issue of determining the boundaries of the various groups to be compared. To a large extent these boundaries are ephemeral constructions that have been shaped by past historical factors, and undermined or re-shaped by contemporary global processes. As already mentioned in Section 2.3.1 above, Kuper also pointed out that “the ethnic groups of conventional comparative research need not be our exclusive points of reference” (Kuper, 2002: 161). This alleviates the logistical problems of having to give detailed ethnographic contextualization of all the groups under question. Hence in this section, as most of my transformative experiences have been situated within the framework of a localized Zulu izangoma group in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, and these experiences have also taken me to other healers in Cape Nguni territory, I will briefly contextualise these two groups, and the problems that attend to their identities. I will then give a short outline on the Shona and Khoisan groups although I did not engage with them in any depth during the research. I will further examine the Khoisan groups in more detail in Chapter Nine with regard to the sharing of religious ideas with the Cape Nguni.

2.4.1 The Natal and Cape Nguni – Zulu and Xhosa speakers

The ‘Zulu’ and ‘Xhosa’ fall under a broad linguistic grouping known as the Nguni-speakers, who are mainly to be found south of the Limpopo River, and are a sub-group of the larger Bantu speaking groups that are spread across wide regions of Africa (Van Warmelo, 1974; Wilson & Thompson, 1969). When referring to the Nguni, or to the Zulu and Xhosa, we are thus referring to groups that are identified on the basis of sharing a common language or
dialect rather than a collection of groups who necessarily identify themselves with a self-ascribed culture\textsuperscript{25}. In fact Van Warmelo points out that the ‘Nguni-speakers’ had no collective term that described them as such (Van Warmelo, 1974: 60; see also Marks, 1969). The Zulu and Xhosa thus share mutually intelligible languages although variations and differences do exist between them, influenced mainly by the contiguous groups with whom they interacted; such as the Tsonga, Sotho, Khoekhoe and San (ibid). With the Zulu groups located in the northern zone and the Xhosa in the southern zone, they together occupy the eastern seaboard of South Africa on the strip of land, approximately three to four hundred kilometers wide, sandwiched between the Indian Ocean to the east and the great Ukhahlamba (Drakensberg) mountain range on the west (see Map 1). This spans an area of approximately two thousand kilometers in length, stretching between the Gamtoos River\textsuperscript{26} in the south and the Phongolo River in the north.

Map 1: Distribution of Shona, Nguni and Khoisan groups in Southern African.

\textsuperscript{25} There are other groups included under the Nguni-speakers. These include the Swazi, Ndebele, Ngoni and ‘Shangaan’ (although the latter are very intermixed with Tsonga – see van Warmelo, 1974: 68).

\textsuperscript{26} The southern boundary was originally regarded as the Fish River, although this has been contested by contemporary Xhosa-speakers who claim their grazing lands extended to the Gamtoos River.
Kuper (2002) has pointed out how contemporary ethnic identities or classifications in South Africa, such as the ‘Zulu’ or the ‘Xhosa’, are largely a construct of colonial processes. The Zulu-Xhosa division reflects the British colonial boundaries of certain demarcated geographical spaces that were set up for administrative purposes. These were further entrenched by apartheid policies of homeland ‘self-administration’ units known as the Bantustans, and are still being shaped by political processes to this day (see Sithole, 2009; Wright, 2009a). Thus even in the contemporary era where ‘Zulu’ or ‘Xhosa’ speakers are to be found right across South Africa from Cape Town to Gauteng, the Zulu are conceptually associated with the colonially demarcated boundaries of present day KwaZulu-Natal, and the Xhosa with the former Transkei and Ciskei regions of the present Eastern Cape Province. Allocated to these geographical boundaries “each ethnic or cultural group was assumed to be broadly uniform in its social institutions, language and culture,” (Kuper, 2002: 157). In reality, there has always been far more diversity within these groups than this and when examined more closely the boundaries between ‘Xhosa’ and ‘Zulu’ are porous and indistinct. Apart from speaking common, mutually intelligible languages the Zulu and Xhosa probably shared as many social and cultural institutions between them as they did within them.

Prior to the consolidation of the Zulu kingdom at the time of Shaka kaSenzangakhona in the 1820s both groups were comprised of numerous independent and autonomous chiefdoms (see Map 2) that were identified on the basis of clan affiliation (isibongo). While some were offshoots from other clans due to lineage segmentation there is a suggestion that some of these were regarded as having more authority, in terms of belonging to more royal or ‘pure’ Nguni groups. The Ntungwa (or Mntungwa)29 group, to which Zanele belongs, was one example of

27 While the influence of the colonial administrative boundaries, and the establishment of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka in the early nineteenth century had a marked influence on Zulu ethnic consciousness, Wright has argued that this ‘fixed group identity’ was more a “phenomenon of the twentieth century, not the nineteenth” (Wright, 2009a: 35).

28 The separation was reified by the western orthographers of the speech of the ‘Zulu’ and the ‘Xhosa’, each of which categories included several polités and linguistics variations dependant in part on the extent of contact with San languages, as well as Khoi, Sotho, Afrikaans and English.

29 Mntungwa is the praise name or isithakazelo of the Khumalo clan. For more on Zulu praise names see Koopman (2009) and Mzolo (1978).
the former (van Warmelo, 1974: 64), as were those belonging to the Mbo (e.g. Mkhize) and Lala groups (e.g. Zizi, Hlubi, Bhele and Tolo). According to Wilson and Thompson the Lala groups were “pre-eminent as iron-workers, and one section of them, the Zizi, exchanged metal weapons and implements across the Drakensberg” (Wilson & Thompson, 1969: 114). There is also some speculation that the Lala, being skilled metal-workers, were an offshoot of the Karanga who were located north of the Limpopo River in what is now Zimbabwe (Bryant, 1929; Soga, 1930). It should be pointed out, however, that the origins and identities of these groups are complex and disputed (see Marks, 1969). The Zulu clan itself prior to the rise of Shaka was regarded as a relatively minor chiefdom amongst these other clans. The Zulu clan traced its genealogy back to an individual known as Malandela who resided in the area near Babanango approximately six generations before Shaka came to power (Wilson & Thompson, 1969).


30 The Mpondomise, who are now located in the area around Tsolo in the Eastern Cape are said to have descended from Sibiside, the ruler of the Mbo nation who migrated from an area of lakes to the north, they progressively moved south over the centuries, leaving behind lineage segments, such as the Mthethwa clan in northern Zululand, and the Mpondo who still inhabit the coastal regions straddling the Mzimvubu River (Scheub, 1996). The Mpondomise presently inhabit an area near the Inxu River where I had a dream to go to (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.4 and 6.4.5.1).
The main modes of production for both the 'Xhosa' and 'Zulu' groups were based on pastoralism (mainly cattle and small stock) under the control of the patrilineal descent group, and cultivation, which was performed largely by the women. As will be seen in Chapter Four it is this aspect of cultivation, and the role of women in its execution, that has direct links with certain rituals that are still performed for the water divinities to this day. Hunting, by the males, usually with dogs, was another common feature (Wilson & Thompson, 1969: 107). The importance of cattle permeated all the institutions (including religion) and cannot be overemphasized. Marriage rules were based on strict clan-based exogamy, prohibiting marriage with “a woman from the clans of all four grandparents” (Preston-Whyte, 1974: 192) and the payment of bridewealth with cattle was a dominant practice. Polygyny was (and still is) an accepted practice, but usually confined to men with sufficient resources and rank. Descent and inheritance were traced down the patriline and the principle of primogeniture, based on sons born according to the order of rank of their father’s wives, was adhered to. Wilson and Thompson note that as a result of strict exogamy it is “generally supposed that all Nguni groups must at some point be related by descent as well as marriage” (Wilson & Thompson, 1969, 120 - original emphasis). Even residential arrangements were very similar, tending to be comprised of agnatically related male kin with their wives and families living in homesteads (imizi) constructed in similar designs. These agnatic household clusters were scattered across the territory usually on hill slopes rather than in the valleys (Sansom, 1974). Both groups revered the ancestors and practiced very similar types of ritual especially with regard to ‘bringing back’ (ukubuyisa) the spirits of the deceased to be incorporated into the benevolent body of the ancestors (Hammond-Tooke, 1974a). The notion of a high god appears to have existed throughout the region although he (or he/she) was usually regarded as remote and not concerned with the daily problems of the living, with the ancestors being more concerned with the latter (Chidester, 1996). Prior to the Christian influence the high god would be approached via the ancestors and only when it concerned the welfare of the broader group. It seems that the various Zulu concepts of a high god (see Berglund, 1976) were more developed and detailed than that of the Xhosa groups (Hammond-Tooke, 1975b; Hodgson, 1982). Where the Zulu differed more substantially from the Xhosa groups was in their notion of the ‘daughter of God’ or the goddess figure of Nomkhuluwana who I will be discussing in more detail in Chapter Four (Section 4.5). Prior to Shaka’s rise to power both groups practiced
male adolescent circumcision, although Shaka, as did his Mthethwa benefactor Dingiswayo, discontinued the practice amongst the subjugated chiefdoms during his military conquest. While circumcision is still a very important institution amongst the Xhosa (although it was dropped amongst the Mpondo), and is an important identity marker, most Zulu sub-groups did not resume this practice (Wilson & Thompson, 1969).

While both groups shared similar jural and administrative systems of law and order primarily through the chiefs (amakhosi) and their subsidiaries, the sub-chiefs and the headmen, it was from the time of Shaka that the main political transformations were to happen. This occurred when the relatively minor Zulu clan to which Shaka belonged overcame, with the help of the Mthethwa clan, the other independent chiefdoms and incorporated them under its authority. This centralization of power in the form of the Zulu kingdom, although initially resisted by many of the subjugated chiefdoms was to eventually lead to a significant shift in Zulu ethnic consciousness; Wright has argued that this ‘ethnogenesis’ emerged mainly in the 1870s to counter British expansionist aggression and was to be further entrenched in later nationalist political processes31 (Wright, 2009a; see also Wright & Hamilton, 1989). Whether or not all the original autonomous chiefdoms recognized, or still recognize, the authority of the Zulu royal household (see Reader, 1966; Sithole, 2009; Van Warmelo, 1974; Wright, 2009a), the political centralizing effects of the Zulu kingdom had a homogenizing influence on cultural expression and practice (Wilson & Thompson, 1969). Although there is much debate and dispute surrounding the issue of the so-called mfecane effect of Shaka’s deprivations (Cobbing, 1983, 1988; Hamilton, 1995; Wright, 2009b) it is generally accepted that many clan chiefdoms migrated south (and some north) as a result. Many of these groups such as the Zizi, Hlubi, Bhele, Tolo32, Xesibe and Bhaca are to be found in the Eastern Cape and are now identified as sub-groups of the Cape Nguni speakers. Van Warmelo (1974) and Hammond-Tooke (1975a: 14) refer to the collectivity of the Zizi, Hlubi, Bhele and Tolo who migrated

31 A dominant influence in shaping Zulu ethnic consciousness was the emergence of the Zulu nationalist movement Inkatha in 1975, led by a descendent of the Zulu monarchs, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi (see Waetjen & Maré, 2009). For more on the Buthelezi clan see Buthelezi (1978).

32 Wilson and Thompson note that the Zizi, Hlubi, Bhele and Tolo occupied the region between the upper Tugela River and the Drakensberg mountains in the seventeenth century (Wilson & Thompson, 1969: 90). There are still substantial numbers of Hlubi in that area of KwaZulu-Natal to the present day.
southwards as the Mfengu, however it should be pointed out that Webster (1991) and Stapleton (1996) argue that the Mfengu category was largely a colonial construct. The pre-existing autonomous chiefdoms that were in the region at the time of the arrival of the dispersed Natal Nguni groups also had distant genealogical histories that traced back to the Natal region. These included the Mpondo and the closely affiliated Mpondomise, the Thembu, Bomvana and the Xhosa, the latter which subsequently branched into the Gcaleka and Rharabe clans. Most of these sub-groups found among the 'Xhosa' (see also Peires, 1981) thus share a more distant history of either common descent or close affiliation with certain groups found amongst the Zulu (see Wilson & Thompson, 1969; Soga, 1930).

Somewhat ironically, along with the increasing shift to the monolithic constructions of Zulu and Xhosa ethnic identities in the twentieth century, the 'idealized' principles of social organization as briefly outlined above, became increasingly undermined as the effects of European rule took hold of all facets of the Nguni people's lives. This included the effects of urbanization, industrialization, migrant labour, land appropriation, and Christianity. The legacy of apartheid and its divisive policies, and concomitant violent struggle of the subjugated peoples to shed its yoke, left a large number of families, homesteads, villages and communities torn apart and fragmented. Many families were deprived of their land as well as the main currency of their cultural exchange systems, cattle, which led to increasing fragmentation of households, shifts in gender relations and marriage institutions (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Lambert, 2002, 2009; MacKinnon, 2009; McClendon, 2009; Reader, 1966). The rise of female-centred households became increasingly common (Marwick, 1978; Preston-Whyte, 1978) especially for those women struggling to survive in either the rural hinterland or in the urban slums. Formal western education and the evangelizing effects of Christianity served to assist those trying to cope in the new political-economic order, and this led to many abandoning or modifying rituals for the ancestors. Although the traditional systems of governance were deliberately undermined to suit the needs of the colonial state (Hammond-

33 The term Mfengu is a Gcaleka term meaning ‘destitute wanderers’. Webster (1991) and Stapleton (1996) argue that the Mfengu were mainly comprised of remnants of groups belonging to Gcaleka and Rharabe who had been captured and forced into servitude by the British colonists. They were utilized by the colonial government to quell unrest amongst other rebellious Cape Nguni.

34 For instance, earliest records show that there were Xhosa-speakers close to the Mthatha River in 1593 (Wilson & Thompson, 1969: 87).
Tooke, 1975a; MacKinnon, 2009), and later the apartheid government, not all peoples were affected equally. Those people who resided in the designated homelands or Bantustans (such as in the Transkei and KwaZulu) still fell under a modified form of traditional governance while those who had migrated to the towns and cities, or who became farm labourers or tenants on ‘white’ designated land, no longer fell under any form of traditional leadership. As will be seen in Chapter Four and Five these differences have influenced the differing emphases that are placed on the water divinities and the nature of the rituals that are performed.

2.4.2 Shona speakers
To a large extent many of the same problems of boundary establishment and ethnogenesis found among the Zulu and Xhosa can be also be detected among the various ‘Shona’ groups in Zimbabwe. The term Shona is evidently an ascribed term\(^\text{35}\) denoting a group on the basis of speaking a number of mutually intelligible dialects. Within this larger linguistic group are a number of identifiable sub-groups which Latham claims,

> ...maintain a set of basic institutions and socio-political arrangements which are comprehensible to the entire group and who have common oral traditions (charter myths), which are validated and mutually reinforced by a religious system centered upon the belief in a High God (Mwari), in association with historical hero figures, who are in constant communication with the living population through ritually identifiable spirit mediums (masvikiro - singular svikiro) (Latham, 1986: 2).

The major groups that make up the Shona are the Karanga in the south-east, the Zezuru in the central zone, the Korekore in the north, and the Manyika and Ndaun in the east. The Kalanga who are more predominant in Botswana, and the Venda from the Soutspanberg region in South Africa, are also connected to this broad linguistic grouping (Boudillon, 1976; Latham, 1986), although there are marked variations in their dialects. Despite the similarities listed above by Latham there are some differences that exist between these groups, including their religious ‘cults’, and these are based largely on their different historical trajectories and

\(^{35}\) While some scholars were of the opinion that the word Shona was a derogatory word given to the peoples by the incoming Ndebele (Bourdillon, 1976), Latham (1986) is of the opinion that the term predates this era by several centuries and links it possibly to those people who were associated with a place in Mozambique known as Sena.
surrounding environmental influences.

According to Bourdillon (1976) there were two main waves of Bantu migration into the mineral rich area between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers over the last two millennia. The first Bantu speakers arrived around the second century AD, kept cattle and were cultivators and iron-workers (early Iron Age). They resided on the plateau for nearly one thousand years before the arrival of the second wave in 1000-1200 AD. Bourdillon claims that the first Bantu inhabitants were probably the forebears of the present groups found south of the Limpopo River; that is, the Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga, Venda and Chopi. It is unclear whether there was a connection between these early Iron Age peoples and the groups that were regarded as autochthons by the Shona, namely the Tavara (in the north-east of the country) and the Dziva (pool) culture which stretched from the north east of the country down as far as the Soutspanberg in South Africa. Of the Tavara in the north east of Zimbabwe Bourdillon says they “appear to have been the earliest of the present Bantu tribes to occupy this area just south of the Zambezi River. They apparently settled here even before the southward migration of the Mbire people who moved from the northern lake district to south Shona country around the fourteenth century” (Bourdillon, 1979/1999: 235). Regarding the Dziva groups, Rennie notes the following, “Dziva and related groups, which are not particularly numerous or dominant; seem to have occurred in two main identifiable areas. The western group was spread down the Bubye river, and to the south of the Limpopo, while the eastern group occurred along the Sabi river” (Rennie, 1979/1999: 261). Rennie further notes how the religious culture of the Dziva groups was characterized by a number of features,

...one is the veneration of pools, and the use of them as burial places for chiefs (in contrast to the highland Shona and Rozvi use of caves and hills). The veneration of stones from pools, for their ritual ‘cooling’ power, is recorded for the Venda and among the Lovedu. Another feature is the totemic avoidance of certain animals associated with water — crocodile, fish, or otter, for example. A third is the evident association of chiefs of the group with the ability to make rain” (ibid).

36 According to Newman linguistic evidence suggests that the Bantu originated on the border region of present day Cameroon and Nigeria as far back as 5000 years ago. As the group expanded there were a series of migrations east and south, initially as far as central Africa and the region around the Great Lakes. As these groups expanded, branches hived off and started moving further south across the Zambezi River (Newman, 1995: 140).
As will be seen in later chapters, in agreement with this observation, the Dziva groups hold some significance in relation to the ideas regarding the water divinities.

The second waves of Bantu settlers were more skilled in mining techniques (late Iron Age) and were also agro-pastoralists. They also had a unique way of building with stone; Great Zimbabwe apparently being their most famous achievement. Due to their wealth in mining and trade they were powerful and expansionist and a number of centralized dynasties emerged; these including the Torwa, Rosvi Changamire, Mutapa and Barwe (Bourdillon, 1976). By the mid-nineteenth century these dynasties had collapsed, the last being overcome by the Nguni Ndebele led by Mzilikazi who had migrated north to escape Shaka’s deprivations and the Dutch/Afrikaner expansion into the Transvaal (Brown, 1969; Cobbing, 1976). The Ndebele settled in the south-west of the country where the most important cave shrines dedicated to Mwari were already established (Ranger, 1999). I will return to discuss this very significant site and its relevance to the water divinities in more detail in Chapter Four.

The Shona groups shared many similar features in their social arrangements to the Nguni; they were agro-pastoralists, patrilineal peoples, although adelphic inheritance was sometimes practiced (Latham, 1986). Each patrilineal group was linked to a particular clan (*mutupo/mitupo*), which was sub-divided into sub-clans each with their own name (*chidau/zvidau* – sing/pl); clans were linked to totem animals, members of which were forbidden to eat their totemic animal. Marriage was prohibited between two members of the same sub-clan (Bourdillon, 1976) and bridewealth was an important part of the institution. Although they all recognized the supreme deity Mwari (alternatively termed Dzivaguru or Musikavanhu) and revered the ancestors (*midzimu*), there was a difference in that they also paid homage to tutelary spirits that controlled certain territories (territorial spirit cults). These cut across ancestral divisions and traditional administrative areas, and were primarily concerned with rain, land and its fertility (see Schoffleers, 1978/1999; Garbett, 1977; Werbner, 1977). Among the Korekore and Zezuru certain powerful tutelary spirits (*mhondoro*)
could possess certain people who would become mediums to convey their messages\textsuperscript{37}. The \textit{mhondoro} could also mediate with Mwari. In the southern region, especially among the Karanga, mediation between the Mwari and the people would take place at the important cave shrines in the Matopos Hills which were under the control of a priesthood. This is still an important pilgrimage site and it was here where it was claimed that the voice of God (Mwari) could be heard coming from certain caves (Daneel, 1970, 1971; Nthoi, 2006; Ranger, 1999; Werbner, 1977, 1989). As with the Nguni all these institutions have been influenced dramatically by the colonial and post-colonial processes.

\textbf{2.4.3 The Khoisan}

The term Khoisan is used to refer to two broad categories of people who “share features of territorial organization, gender relations, kinship, ritual, and cosmology” (Barnard, 1992: 3), as well as some forms of linguistic (particularly in the usage of click languages) and genetic unity. They are regarded as being descendents of the earliest inhabitants of the southern African sub-continent. The two broad categories are comprised of the Khoi, or Khoekhoe\textsuperscript{38}, who at the time of European colonisation were predominantly pastoralists, and the San, a large and diverse group of hunter-gatherers who are regarded as the true ‘authocthons’ of the land. Of the two broad categories, the hunter-gatherer San were far more diverse linguistically and, to some extent culturally, while the pastoralist Khoekhoe (a self-ascribed term meaning ‘people of people’) were more uniform (Barnard, 1992; Elphick, 1985; Schapera 1930/1965; Westphal 1963). Elphick argues that “This extraordinary linguistic diversity (of the San)\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{37} According to Garbett among the Korekore the \textit{mhondoro} are said to be “remote ancestors who, according to belief, ate special medicines (mbando) when alive, and thus ensured that their spirits would return to inhabit animal hosts, usually lions, but occasionally pythons and birds, and to speak, from time to time, through human mediums (svikiro)” (Garbett, 1977: 56).

\textsuperscript{38} There seems to be no consistency in the academic records as to whether this should be spelt Khoekhoe or Khoikhoi. For instance, in the proceedings of the \textit{Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference} (Bank, 1998), scholars such as Barnard used the term Khoekhoe, while others, such as Ross, used the term Khoikhoi. Barnard notes that the traditional spelling of the name Khoi-by linguists has now been replaced by the the modern spelling of Kho- (Barnard, 1992: 7). I will use the modern spelling Kho- in my own text in this thesis.

\textsuperscript{39} Although San language was said to vary considerably from band to band, Schapera identified three main San linguistic groups: the Northern, Central and Southern Groups (Schapera, 1930/1965: 31). Westphal however, identifies four ‘Bush’ (i.e. San) language groups across southern Africa, which he classifies as ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’. He notes that these language groups appear unrelated although in “some of these there are a few words which appear to be similar” (1963: 244). Westphal notes that more of the click words in Xhosa derive from Hottentot (Khoekhoe), than those in Zulu, which are derived from both Bush (San) and Hottentot (ibid: 242).
indicates that hunters spread throughout southern Africa a very long time ago – certainly much earlier than the Khoikhoi, whose linguistic homogeneity points to a comparatively recent dispersal” (Elphick, 1985: 10). Khoekhoe homogeneity has been attributed to the fact that they were a more recent offshoot from an original San grouping, with whom they still share a common language (referred to as Central or Khoe Bushmen40). The Central Khoe-speaking San are presently located in the central Kalahari, and the Okavango delta regions in Botswana (Barnard, 1992). Archaeological, genetic and linguistic evidence suggests that the Khoekhoe originated as a hunter-gatherer group in the region of what is now northern Botswana, where they acquired cattle and sheep and became pastoralists. Over several hundred years which straddled the birth of Christ (200BC – 300 AD), they slowly migrated south, arriving in the southern and western Cape regions from about 100 - 200AD41 (Elphick, 1985: 13). Some of the hunter-gatherer San groups the pastoralist Khoekhoe encountered and intermingled with over that period became more genetically and linguistically similar with them (e.g. the G/wi and Naron). This variability in interaction and dispersal accounts for the fact that some San groups speak a language more closely akin to Khoekhoe, while others (such as the Southern San that once occupied the Sneuuberg Mountains of the Eastern Cape) were mutually incomprehensible.

Of the Khoekhoe there are now three broad groups that are recognised42. These are the Korana or !Kora, who are predominantly located just south of the Orange River in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa; the Nama, mainly to be found in the territories that were known as Little and Great Namaqualand, and in Namibia; and the Cape Khoekhoe. The Cape Khoekhoe were comprised of three sub-divisions: the Western, Central and Eastern Khoekhoe (Barnard, 1992: 156). It was the Eastern Khoekhoe who had the most recent contact and

40 Barnard notes that “the word Khoe designates the linguistic division which includes both those peoples today commonly called Khoekhoe or ‘Hottentots’ (the Khoe-speaking herders) and those people called Central or Khoe Bushmen” (Barnard, 1992: 25).

41 This estimation is based on archaeological deposits found in the Western Cape which include sheep remains and pottery styles. It should also be pointed out that there are varying perspectives on the origins of the Khoekhoe with some previous scholars, such as Bleek and Schapera, suggesting influences from north and East Africa, including from the Hamites (Barnard, 1992: 29-30).

42 Schapera identified four main groups of ‘Hottentots’ or Khoekhoe: the Cape Hottentot, Eastern Hottentot, the Korana and the Nama/Nama (Schapera 1930/1965: 45).
intermingling with the Cape Nguni. With Dutch and British colonization, both the Cape Khoekhoe and the Korana suffered marked acculturation and their identities have largely become subsumed either under the Cape Nguni groups, or under the category of ‘coloured’, often in conjunction with other groups that were mainly of mixed Khoekhoe and European descent, such as the Griqua and Baster people 43 (see Carstens, 1966, for more on this process of acculturation that took place among the Nama in the Steinkopf Reserve in Little Namaqualand).

For the purposes of this study most of the written evidence that I will be drawing upon for the San comes from the southern San group known as the /Xam 44 (Hoff, 1997, 1998, 2007), who occupied a large area of the western regions of the Northern Cape Province in the Upper Karoo and Bushmanland (see map). According to Barnard (1992) the Khoekhoe and /Xam languages were mutually incomprehensible. Two other groups, which along with the /Xam belonged to the Southern San category (Hoff, 2007: 5), the //Xegwi of Mpumalanga Province (Potgeiter, 1955), and the “Mountain Bushmen” (Jolly, 1986; Orpen, 1874; Prins, 1990, 1996b) of the Drakensberg, held similar ideas of certain people who were called under water to become healers. I also draw on data from the Cape Khoekhoe (Hahn, 1881), the Nama/Korana from the Upington area (Carstens, 1966, 1975; Lange et al, 2007) and from Namibia (Schmidt, 1989), and the Griqua/Korana from the Kimberley area (Waldman, 1989). I will return to examine relevant cultural aspects of these groups in more detail in Chapter Nine.

43 Carstens describes the Basters as “descendants of Dutch colonist and frontiersman fathers, and Namaqua and Cape Khoi Khoin mothers. Their culture was neither Khoi Khoin nor Dutch but is best described as a synthesis of the two traditions” (Carstens, 1966: 19). The Griqua were of similar unions between white male employees of the Dutch East India Company and Khoekhoe or San mothers. They were originally located in the St Helena region and later migrated north to the region known as Griqualand West between Kimberley and Upington, with a small offshoot going to Griqualand East on the border between present day Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (Barnard, 1992: 193-194).

44 Although it is claimed by some scholars that the /Xam have died out, Ansie Hoff has interviewed individuals who claim to be descendants of this San group and still held “considerable knowledge” of /Xam culture (see Hoff, 2007: 7-9). Most of the early information on the /Xam comes from the archives of the linguists W.H.I. Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd and Bleek’s daughter Dorothea Bleek (1933a, 1933b, 1935).
2.5 Background of key informants

In this final section I give brief details on the background of my key informants, namely my teacher (Baba) and isangoma 'sister' Zanele, in order to help contextualize my experiences with them. There were a few other individuals who were of great assistance to me in Zimbabwe and the Eastern Cape and I will mention them briefly before concluding this chapter.

2.5.1 Baba's background

Baba is the second eldest son in a family of six siblings, and is married with three children. In an extensive interview I had with Baba about his early years and his calling (see Appendix One), Baba narrates how, although he was a clever child, he was also sickly and sometimes marginalized by his peers. His calling occurred at about the age of ten years and over the next nine years he went through a series of trainers over a wide ranging area. These ranged from his local area near Pietermaritzburg and Estcourt (both in KwaZulu-Natal) to Mount Fletcher in the former Transkei, and eventually to the Port Shepstone area in KwaZulu-Natal. He also spent some time training in the former Gazankulu. His calling under the sea happened close to Durban when he was 19 years old. I deal more extensively with this aspect of his life in Chapter Three, Section 3.4. Although his mother has always featured strongly in his life and has been a constant support to him, his father, who suffered from alcohol abuse, was a fairly marginal character. In Baba’s narrative (see Appendix One) he makes mention of the fact that his underwater experience and subsequent divinatory powers have helped him to give his family material support and especially to take his mother “out of shame and sorrow”. As his genealogy shows (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5) Baba claims he inherited his powers as an isangoma from his maternal side (see Figure 2, Chapter Three). There has been at least one member in each of the last four generations who it has been claimed had either had a direct confrontation with the giant mystical snake referred to as inkosi (chief/lord), or had been taken under the water. His maternal grandmother gave me a very dramatic account of her encounter with the snake in the Estcourt region of KwaZulu-Natal (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3).

45 It is believed that the ‘talent’ to be a diviner is inherited, and among the Nguni speakers this seems to occur more frequently from the maternal side. See Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5 for more of this issue on inheritance.
Since early 1980 the areas where Baba resided in his relatively short life (he was born in 1968) were shaken by severe political unrest, violence, corruption and crime and this should be born in mind when considering the topic of morality discussed in Chapter Seven. He resided in a semi-rural region near Pietermaritzburg for most of his life, but spent periods, and still has close family ties, in the sprawling urban townships of Hammarsdale and Mpumalanga near Durban. It was while he was living in Hammarsdale during the height of the unrest in the late 1980s that his house there was burnt down by an angry mob and his family was forced to flee back to Pietermaritzburg. According to Baba the reason why his house was targeted was because he was such a powerful diviner, and as Zanele explained further, it was because he was so powerful in that he “comes from the water and the snake”; as a result he was able to identify and expose the individuals behind some of the violent and criminal activity in the region. It was because he was recognized as having remarkable divination skills, with a resultantlty large clientele that he was relatively well off and this subsequently led to some jealousy and conflicts amongst his siblings and broader kin group (see Chapter Seven). He presently lives in a fairly large sprawling homestead consisting of a comfortable three bed roomed brick house surrounded by at least four large rondavels and a number of other outbuildings. One of these rondavels is the emakhosini (the ancestral hut where he consults with clients), and the rest house where the numerous amathwasa and izangoma who visit periodically or stay for longer periods of time are accommodated.

2.5.2 Zanele's background

Zanele was born in 1967 into a family of five sisters and one brother. Her early and teenage years were spent in a small rural pocket of the fragmented KwaZulu homeland, which fell under traditional governance and was a short distance away from the small farming village of Mid-Ilovo in Natal. The area was a fragmented portion of land located in broken hilly country with steep sided valleys that swept down to the river below. These areas were typical of many of the designated homelands (formerly known as ‘native reserves’), being the least arable and

46 In the 1980s to mid 1990s while apartheid in South Africa was being challenged and the last vestiges being cast off, the Kwazulu-Natal Midlands gained a certain amount of notoriety for violent conflict (Linscott, 1990: 84; Steinberg, 2002). In the post-democratic phase after 1994, KwaZulu-Natal was recognised as the most politically volatile and violent of all the provinces in South Africa (Johnston, 1997; Gwala, 1989). This was largely as result of a complex dynamic of political-economic, ethnic, racial and social tensions (Johnston, 1997). This was exacerbated by the conflicting political interests of the more traditionalist Inkatha Freedom Party and the nationalist ANC (African National Congress) that came to power in 1994 (Johnston, 1997; Louw, 1995,1997).
providing inadequate grazing for the cattle-keeping Zulu people. On the flat arable lands between the rivers the land was allocated to the white commercial farmers who put most of it under sugarcane and timber. These former ‘native reserves’ were the ‘dormitories’ that provided the commercial farmers with the seasonal cheap labour necessary for intensive cane growing (Reader, 1966)\(^{47}\). Increased population pressure had put excessive strain on the existing reserves, leading to the breakdown of the Zulu homestead economies (Lambert, 2002; Sithole, 2003) and had seen the flood of migrants leaving in search of wage-labour on more distant farms, mines and cities. Zanele’s father had been employed on one of the nearby farms and the various children had managed to supplement the family income from working ‘\textit{togi}’ (casual labour) on these same farms. Conditions of the sugar plantations were harsh and salaries were low (Beinart, 1997), and after a while her father became ill\(^{48}\) and lost his job. Her mother was forced to sell their small herd of cattle and survival became increasingly difficult.

During her childhood Zanele had periodic illnesses which hampered her schooling so that at the end of standard three (when she was 12 years old) she abandoned her education. These illnesses were to be linked to her calling to be an \textit{isangoma} because even at that age she was having powerful dreams. When she was fourteen years old Zanele was betrothed to an older man and soon after fell pregnant. Her ‘husband’, however, soon abandoned her, and, as he had never paid the full brideprice (\textit{lobola}), they were in effect never formally married. Two years later her ‘husband’ returned and she went to live with him on a farm near Richmond. She soon found she was pregnant again, and a short time later the relationship soured and she returned to her father’s homestead. Her father, who was very ill at the time, was furious in that \textit{lobola} was not complete and forbade Zanele to ever return to the husband. Her father died soon thereafter and Zanele left to find work in Durban so she could support her children, who were left under the grandmother’s care in Mid-Illovo.

She arrived in Durban in 1987 at the height of the violent unrest that was occurring at the

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\(^{47}\) Until democratic governance in 1994 the Zulu people had seen little improved land allocation in well over 100 years from when the land for Native Reserves was first apportioned in 1864 by the then British colonial government (Brookes & Hurwitz, 1957).

\(^{48}\) It was suspected that he was a victim of lineage sorcery (\textit{amanz’mnyama}) apparently wrought by his jealous brother. Ngubane gives more detail on this form of witchcraft (1977).
time. She found a number of poorly paid jobs but life in the city was harsh. During this time she would periodically visit her children and mother in Mid-Illovo, taking them what little food and money she could afford. In 1991 Zanele had found she was pregnant again, this time by another man who had also told her that he wished to marry her. It was not long before he also abandoned her. It was during this relationship that Zanele had some powerful dreams from her ancestors that indicated they wished her to become an isangoma. In one of the dreams they showed her the lady she should go to for training in the neighbouring suburb of Clermont. Employment however was increasingly difficult to secure, and now she needed money to help feed her three children and pay for the various expenses that go with diviner training. One day, when she was in great despair, she had a dream where she saw an old woman who was lying in a coffin. She was ‘shouting’ at Zanele, saying she was ‘tired’ and wanted the red ochre (linked with the isangoma training). It was important for Zanele to find a job so she could afford to complete her diviner training in order that the old woman could rest. She was instructed in the dream to go and look for a job the next day at the church and she was shown the white lady who would employ her; it was my sister. As I have already detailed in Chapter One this was how I eventually got to meet her (see Section 1.3.3).

When I first met Zanele she was living with her children in a two roomed structure in a shack settlement in Clermont. In 1999 heavy rain caused her ‘house’ to collapse and she and her children were housed in a tent as ‘temporary’ shelter. I assisted her in purchasing a small three roomed structure in a low cost housing area close to Clermont where she has lived since. Although her new residence was small and situated in a densely packed and overcrowded settlement, her house gave her adequate shelter and she could at least call it her own. It was also a place at which I was able to visit her.

In all this hardship, her most painful experiences have been the loss of her two sons. In 1996 her youngest son, aged five years, was run over by a speeding taxi, and in 2003 her eldest son was fatally stabbed by his sister’s former boyfriend. It was after the first tragedy that Zanele

49 This was the time when there was mass mobilization of the youth through the alliance between the United Democratic Front (UDM) and the trade union solidarity movement (COSATU). Their enemies were the South African government forces and their perceived ‘lackeys’, the Zulu traditionalist based Inkatha (Beinart 1992; Gwala 1989; Sitas 1992).
had a dream that would take her to Khekhekhe, direct descendant of the great Mthethwa King
Dingiswayo, who was to help advise her on how to perform the cleansing rituals for her
deceased son. Khekhekhe, who was well known for his ability in handling extremely toxic
snakes, told us that he had himself been taken under water for a period of three months and
nine days when he was a younger man and this added an extra dimension to my study (see
Chapter Five, Section 5.3.3). Throughout these difficult years Zanele’s main source of comfort
has been the dreams she understands that she has received from her deceased family members.
The many rituals that have been performed to clean and settle their spirits have softened the
pain of her loss and have given her the strength to continue.

2.5.3 Extending the research beyond Kwazulu-Natal

Prior to my first encounter with Baba my intention was to do standard comparative research on
the similarities and the differences between Xhosa and Shona ideas on the water divinity
complex, and to then attempt to explain them according to a variety of existing theories. As it
turned out, it would seem as if ‘fate’ had other ideas. The political (and racial) crisis in
Zimbabwe that started to become evident in 1997 meant that my plans of spending time in the
field there became impossible. In all, I was only able to do two weeks of more formal research
in Zimbabwe, whereby I was able to interview a number of individuals in the Karoi, Nyanga,
Chimanimani, and Gutu districts, who claimed to have had experiences with the water
divinities, and whose accounts I include in the next three chapters. One of these was Timothy,
who was a caretaker on my elderly mother’s property. His father was a powerful healer who
had allegedly been taken underwater and had also worked for my parents. Timothy was also a
spirit medium (svikiro) and proved immensely helpful as a mediator when I had to go to the
Nyamakati Pool in N.E. Zimbabwe with the izangoma and when my family had to perform the
sacrificial ritual in Zimbabwe (see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1 and 6.4.5). As it turned out it
was to be a combination of my dreams, broader political events, and associated research
activities\(^{50}\) that would lead me not only to KwaZulu Natal but to other regions of South Africa,
as well as to Zimbabwe and beyond (see Chapters Six and Nine).

\(^{50}\) This refers to my funded research project on sacred natural sites that commenced in 2001.
My plans to do more detailed research with Xhosa healers did not materialize mainly for the fact that I was not able to find any Xhosa healers who had themselves claimed to have been taken under water. However, my dreams were to lead me to an important site near Tsolo in the former Transkei where I was able to gain valuable data from a number of Mpondomise/Xhosa healers regarding their insights on the water divinity complex in the area (see Chapter Six and Chapter Nine). During the early phase of my research one of my most valuable Xhosa contacts was Zweli, an employee at Rhodes University, who attended one of my undergraduate courses. Having come from a family of powerful healers linked to the river, on both the patriline and matriline (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5), he had an extensive knowledge on Xhosa culture and healing practices. He was called to be a healer at a young age (see Appendix Ten) and he claimed that his family had been able to request the ancestors that they delay it in order that he could complete his formal education. In 1999 he became seriously ill and it was divined that the ancestors had now determined it was time for him to take up the calling, which he did with remarkable improvement to his health. He invited me and several students to attend a number of river rituals which were of great value to this thesis (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1).

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31 In Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.3 I detail how in 2007 I was to meet Shorty, a healer in Grahamstown, who I had been shown in a dream. He was able to assist me with various problems I had encountered with Baba. Although both he and his wife are linked to the water divinities I have not interviewed him in sufficient detail on these matters to include in this thesis. In April and July 2009 I was invited to attend two river rituals performed by his family that were very similar to the ones described in Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1, which I had attended with Zweli.
CHAPTER 3
THE WATER DIVINITIES AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND HEALING – COMMON THEMES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

3.1 Introduction
From the southern tip of Africa to at least as far as the Zambezi River and across many different ethnic and linguistic African groups, certain individuals claim that they have been taken by a serpent, or its natural manifestation (e.g. a strong wind), into the depths of the ocean or deep river pools. Here it is claimed that they enter a dry space where they encounter a giant snake and/or an assortment of smaller snakes, and/or a fish-tailed woman (mermaid) and/or a multitude of other creatures; some also claim that they meet some of their ancestors who live peacefully in houses and have livestock such as goats, cattle and chickens. While in this underwater world they are taught the art of healing and the ability to communicate with the spirit world. They may also be provided with medicines to come back and heal the living. As a result of these experiences they become healers of great skill and have powerful abilities in divination, their communities often hold them in great awe. Despite there being a range of historical ethnographic texts (to be discussed) that have documented such ideas across the southern Africa region, and which show remarkably consistent core elements, there has not been any attempt to compare them or suggest that they may be connected, in terms of historical-cultural continuity or symbolic archetypes of the mind etc.

In the next two chapters I present these commonly shared core features, as identified through existing literature sources, and augment these with similar ideas that I have obtained from my own interviews with informants. I focus mainly on three major Bantu-speaking groups: the Cape Nguni or Xhosa speakers, the Natal Nguni or Zulu speakers, and the Shona speakers from Zimbabwe. I will also examine evidence for these ideas among the recognised “autochthons” of southern Africa, the Khoekhoe and San (collectively referred to as the Khoisan). I have limited my focus to these aforementioned groups mainly for logistical
purposes as well as for the fact that I have had dream experiences that have connected me to the regions where these groups predominate. However, ideas on the water divinity complex are not limited to only these groups and my investigations have revealed that they also feature in other Bantu-speaking groups such as the Swazi, Venda, Sotho, Shangaan, Ndebele, Tswana, as well as groups from Malawi, such as the Chewa.

As this chapter focuses mainly on existing evidence of the water divinity complex in the literature I will start off by briefly identifying the main ethnographic sources that I draw from for the groups in question. Although the bulk of the documented ethnographic evidence is mainly descriptive, and not the main focus of their respective texts, there are some scholars who have attempted to explain certain aspects of the phenomenon using various theoretical approaches, the major ones which I will examine in the Section 3.3 of this chapter. At the end of Chapter Four (Section 4.7.1), after presenting the core elements found across southern Africa, I will evaluate the existing theories further and make suggestions of how we can make sense of both the similarities and differences cross-culturally with reference to the framework set out in Chapter One (Section 1.2.4).

3.2 Ethnographic records

3.2.1 Records in Cape Nguni ethnographic literature

The phenomenon of the "people of the river" (abantu bomlambo, or River People) amongst the Cape Nguni of the Eastern Cape has been researched in varying degrees by a number of anthropologists (de Jager & Gitywa, 1963; Hammond-Tooke, 1962, 1975b; Hirst, 1990, 1997; Hunter, 1936) as well as by psychologists/psychiatrists (Buhrmann, 1986; Laubscher, 1937, 1975). They also feature strongly in the writings of experienced, but non-academic, specialists (popular writers) in Xhosa traditions (Broster, 1981; Elliott, 1970). In addition, the theme of the water spirits occurs in a number of works by literary scholars such as A.C. Jordan (1980), and Felicity Wood (2000, 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

Hunter recorded these beliefs in the course of her research among the Mpondo, and these are scattered in an anecdotal fashion throughout her seminal ethnography Reaction to Conquest, although she did not attempt any major interpretive analysis of them. De Jager and Gitywa (1963) focussed on one particular ritual, the umhlwayelelo ceremony that is performed for Xhosa novice healers at certain pools during their training. Their account proved to be of great
interest for my research because of its similarity with present day rituals practiced in the region (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1). Likewise, Vera Buhrmann (1986), in her psychological analysis of diviner experience and training, dedicated a chapter of her book to two river rituals frequently performed for novice healers amongst the Xhosa speakers, that of the umhwayelelo (sometimes spelt intlwayalelo), and fukama rituals (what she refers to as the first and second river ceremonies).

Hammond-Tooke (1962) mentioned the phenomenon briefly in his ethnographic studies of the amaBhaca, where he discussed the idea of the snake (ichanti), and its somewhat confusing association with both negative witchcraft familiars and positive ancestral callings. He also included in his appendix to the book an account of a diviner's 'dream' of going under the water in a river pool to collect a stone from under a snake (see Appendix 7.2). This 'dream' account bears all the hallmarks of other similar experiences recorded throughout the southern African region (see Appendices). He later used the complex of beliefs pertaining to the abantu bomlambo (the "people of the river") that he had encountered amongst the broader Cape Nguni linguistic groups to attempt a structuralist analysis of the phenomenon (Hammond-Tooke, 1975b).

Hirst has offered us the most comprehensive account of the role of the water divinities in diviner training and offers the most systematic analysis, primarily from a structuralist approach (Hirst, 1990, 1997). In his 1997 publication he attempts to analyse the 'River Myth' using Gidden's (1984) concept of the 'duality of structure' whereby the 'myth' provides "both the outcome and medium of events" for aspirant diviners. He was without doubt one of the first anthropologists to highlight the profound significance of the so-called 'River Myth' for Xhosa diviner/healers, and the complex of belief and practices surrounding it, even though he considers it as purely metaphorical (Hirst, 1997: 240). Known to the Cape Nguni as the 'abantu bomlambo' or the 'abantu basemlanjeni', these various scholars all attribute to the water divinities a pivotal role in the calling, initiation and final induction of certain diviners in the Eastern Cape. This suggests that the water divinities are an important source of certain forms of specialist esoteric knowledge.

It should be mentioned that Wreford (2005, 2008), who was initiated as an isangoma under the
direction of a Xhosa speaking diviner, Nosibele, who had received her training initially from a Shona healer (n'anga) in Zimbabwe, and later by a Xhosa igqirha in the Transkei, followed by an isangoma in KwaZulu-Natal. Interestingly, although she saw rituals were performed for her, and she makes mention of the River People and the amakosi and their high ranking position in the spiritual hierarchy (Wreford, 2008: 50-51), she does not seem to have been given much insight into these water divinities by her trainers.

3.2.2 Records in Natal Nguni or Zulu ethnographic literature

Very little focussed research on these divinities has been conducted amongst the scholars of Zulu culture, but varying emphasis has been made of them, ranging from anecdotal (Samuelson) to more serious consideration. These have been made by both anthropologists (i.e. Krige, Gluckman, Turner, and de Heusch) and missionaries or scholars of African religion (i.e. Bryant, Callaway, Berglund, Köhler).

Bryant (1949), while making mention of the Zulu belief of ancestral spirits returning to earth as snakes, devotes most of his attention to the mysteries and myths of the benign Goddess “Nomkhubulwana, alias the iNkosazana ya-s-eZulweni (the Sky princess)” (ibid: 665), particularly with respect to her role in fertility of the earth and people.1 Krige, the ‘grand dame’ of Zulu ethnography, gives a number of accounts of Nomkhubulwana (Inkosazana yase zulwini) in her main ethnography The Social System of the Zulus (Krige, 1936/1974), but makes no mention of her appearance as a mermaid. In a 1968 publication she documents extensively the various women’s rituals that are performed for Nomkhubulwana. In this latter publication she draws mainly from her own field data whereas in the earlier ethnography The Social System of the Zulus, the material is drawn primarily from Bryant (1905), Samuelson (1929, 1974) and Callaway (1884/1970). The latter (Callaway) is perhaps the most informative on the subject of Inkosazana, where he translates directly from his informants, a disparate group of displaced Zulu speakers who had sought refuge at his mission station in south-west Natal in the late 1850s (Chidester, 1996: 153). Callaway did not attempt to interpret, analyse or judge the material presented by his informants, which allows for the exegesis to be clearer and more cohesive, and less tainted with interpretive bias.

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1 According to my Zulu informants, Inkosazana (Nomkhubulwana) resides in the water and can manifest as a mermaid, a snake, the rain or a rainbow, an animal and even a tree.
Köhler (1941) who was a missionary doctor based at Centocow Mission near Bulwer in KwaZulu-Natal documented many narratives told to him by patients or healers. One narrative, which he describes as a great dream or vision, was particularly embellished and dramatic, and was given to him by an old diviner who had an underwater experience but claimed to have later become converted to Christianity (see Appendix Three). This conversion, and the fact that she was narrating her experience to a Christian missionary, who was also her attending doctor, could possibly account for her more negative attitude towards the experience.

Berglund makes mention of the shades (active ancestral spirits) that manifest in the form of the snake (1976: 94-97), and gives more detail on the notions of Inkosazana and the rituals that are performed for her (ibid: 63-77). He gives us the most comprehensive account of a diviner who is taken by the water divinities (ibid: 140-156 – see Appendix 2.1), reaffirming the core features of the experiences that are identified below. Early Zulu cultural historical documentation reveals that the significance of the ancestral snake (see Chapter Four, Section 4.2) is paramount, and represented one of the key markers of Zulu religion (Chidester, 1996).

Other scholars who have been fascinated by the theoretical potential offered by the ideas of the water divinities (such as the mermaid Inkosazana) held by the Zulu speaking peoples and the rituals performed for them are de Heusch (1985), Max Gluckman (1954) and Victor Turner (1970). De Heusch (1985) attempted a structuralist analysis of the Zulu sacrificial rituals based on Berglund’s exegetic material, focussing on the beliefs in Inkosazana and her symbolic associations (python, rainbow and hornbill). Gluckman used existing documented data to support his ‘ritual of rebellion’ hypothesis (1954), while Turner (1970) focussed more on the origins of certain African Zionist water rituals. Leclerc-Madlala (2001) and Scorgie (2002) briefly touch on the beliefs of Nomkhubulwana in their analysis of contemporary virginity testing practices, while Krige (1968) and Kendall (1998, 1999) give more detailed analysis of her role in women’s fertility rituals. The concepts of Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana held by the Zulu, and how she fits in with the water divinity healing complex, are examined in more detail in Chapters Four and Five. Ngubane’s (1977) authoritative work Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine makes very little mention of the importance of the water divinities for healers or of the water rituals that are performed. She makes brief mention of the fact that a novice diviner,
in addition to other behaviour changes, may feel compelled “to go and plunge herself into the river (where she often sees a huge snake that coils around her, which other people, however, do not see)” (Ngubane, 1977: 87). Beyond this she says no more about the subject, nor does she discuss the ideas about Nomkhubulwana/Inkosazana or the rituals dedicated to her. In his Master’s thesis Chang makes a brief reference to one of his isangoma informants being a ‘whistle diviner’, or isangoma yemilozi, who claimed to have had an encounter with a ‘white woman’ and a snake at a river, after which he was instructed to go into the river to find medicine with which to heal children (Chang, 1998: 58).

Despite this relative lack of detailed documentation, my research has revealed the centrality of beliefs pertaining to the water divinities among the Zulu speaking diviners with whom I associate, and these beliefs have been central to my own experiences and initiation into the group. Water rituals performed to connect a novice with his/her ancestors and these water divinities are an essential part of the process of becoming a healer. Furthermore, it appears that much symbolism and ritual has been transposed from the traditional belief system of the water divinities into Zulu Zionist baptismal practice (Kiernan, 1975, 1978; Oosthuizen, 1992, 1996; Oosthuizen et al, 1994; Sundkler, 1961, 1976; Turner, 1970). In Chapter Eight I will examine this blending of traditional Zulu religion with elements of the Christian church, focussing especially on Zulu Zionist practices.

3.2.3 Records in Shona ethnographic literature

Scholars of Shona myth and ritual have indicated briefly in passing that water divinities are responsible for the calling and training of certain powerful diviners (Chavunduka 1994, Daneel, 1971; Frobenius in Haberland, 1973; Gelfand, 1959, 1964; Latham, 1986; Matowanyika & Madondo, 1994; Reynolds, 1996). Aschwanden, however, has given the subject more detailed attention and dedicated most of his publication Karanga Mythology (1989) to this theme. The link between the water divinities/mermaids (njuzu), the python and

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2 One possible reason for not dwelling on this aspect is that many Zulu people (the group to which Ngubane belongs) are reluctant to discuss the water divinities openly, as they fear that in so doing they will attract the water divinities attention to them, thus leading to a calling or possible drowning in the family. Ngubane also raises the difficulty of her position as a Christianized Zulu researching traditional beliefs in the introduction to her book (1977: 2-4).
puffadder, with the spiritual centres of the High God Mwari/Dzivaguru (the Matonjeni shrine complex in SW Zimbabwe and the Nyamakati pool in NE Zimbabwe) have been emphasised especially by Aschwanden, but also in the works of Dancel (1971), Ranger (1999, 2003), and Latham (1986). Mafu (1995) and Mawere & Wilson (1995) draw extensively on the njuzu phenomenon in their analyses of the responses of local peoples in SW Zimbabwe to the severe drought of 1991-1992 (for more detail on the latter see Appendix Nineteen). Jacobson-Widding has also encountered such 'stories' and 'myths' during her research in the Eastern Highlands (Jacobson-Widding, 1993 – see Appendix 12). My brief research in Zimbabwe confirmed widespread public knowledge and recognition of the water divinities, among all the major groups. The term given to these spirits varies from region to region but the most common are the 'njuzu', 'njuvi', 'ndusu', 'jukwa', 'nzuzu' or 'wadzivod' spirits. The accounts and reports are expressed in very similar ways to those given to me by both the Zulu and Cape Nguni healers.

### 3.2.4 Records in Khoekhoe and San ethnographic literature

Hoff’s recent publications (1997, 1998, 2007) present accounts she has gathered from contemporary descendants of the hunter-gatherer /Xam, a Southern San group, and the related descendants of the pastoralist Khoekhoe groups, namely the Nama, Korana, and Griqua asserting the reality of the Great Snake or the Water Snake, and the Water Bull, for these people. She describes the Great Snake (or Water Snake) as a large snake “with supernatural abilities” (Hoff, 1997: 21) and the Water Bull, while having supernatural qualities, as more ambiguous; some of her informants refer to it as an actual bull that lives under water or resides

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3 Dzivaguru (pronounced Shivaguru) means the Great Pool (dziva = pool; guru = great). One Zulu informant confirmed he was also familiar with that term but the Zulu pronounce it Zibakhulu (ziba = deep pool; -khulu = great).

4 Aschwanden notes that water sources and wetlands are guarded by the snakes that are sent from the Mwari shrines in the Matopos Hills. He goes on to state “Although many Karanga no longer recognise this connection - the njuzu-cult has become a separate unit to them - it was in fact the best informants who referred to the connection with God in the Matopos again and again” (1989: 137).

5 In her 2007 publication regarding the /khwa-ka lge:ten (healers whose power derives from the water), Hoff focuses on the narratives collected from twenty-eight informants, all of whom considered themselves /Xam descendants and “who displayed considerable knowledge of /Xam culture” (Hoff, 2007: 8). Most of these informants were elderly, some having been born prior to 1910.
near fountains, others regard it as a rain bearing cloud, while others say it is the snake which has a cow like head, or even a rhinoceros (Hoff, 1998). Both creatures are closely associated with water, rain and fertility. Many of their ideas bear resemblance to the perceptions of these entities held by the Bantu-speaking groups. In Hoff's 2007 publication concerning /Xam beliefs and practices relating to the water, she focuses primarily on the 'ritual specialists' who "drew sickness out of people" (/gi:ten), as well as those who controlled the rain (/khwa-ka /gi:ten) and assisted in the hunting of game (opwai-ka /gi:ten). Another category she mentions, who were referred to as /xi:ka /gi:ten, were those ritual specialists that used their power to harm others (Hoff, 2007: 5).

Waldman's research detailing female initiation rituals of contemporary Griqua communities near Kimberley in the Northern Cape Province reveals the central importance of the river snake in these rituals, and these reflect the same recurring themes related to virgins and fertility found elsewhere (Waldman, 1989). A recent collection of narratives published by Lange (Lange et al, 2007), that were recounted to her by a group of women who were of mixed descent (Khoekhoe, Tswana, Sotho, Xhosa and European) in the Upington region on the edge of the Orange/Gariep River, reflect on all these themes, and demonstrate quite clearly the widespread and magnetic appeal of these beliefs. Pienaar also came across similar ideas whilst she was an apprentice to a Griqua healer in the Karoo (Pienaar, 2009: 47-53).

Schmidt (1998) details remarkably similar beliefs of the Great Snake among the Nama and Damara groups of Namibia, while Prins (1996b) has sought to explain the connection between the San and the Xhosa beliefs in the water and the various rituals that are performed at pools near San rock art sites (see Chapter Nine). Likewise, Jolly has made reference to these claimed underwater experiences in his analysis of the hermeneutics of San rock art and the diffusion of ideas between the south-eastern San and the Sotho and Nguni speakers located in the southern Drakensberg region (Jolly, 1986, 1995, 2006a). Potgieter also referred to San beliefs concerning the underwater experience among the remaining //Xegwi San residing in the Lake Chrissie area of Mpumulanga (1955).

Increasingly, scholars engaged in San rock art interpretation, especially those of the 'trance' school, have also drawn their ideas from the water divinity complex (Lewis-Williams 1977,
Perhaps one of the earliest accounts of the Khoekhoe beliefs in the existence of mermaids (watermeide) comes from a story documented by Ballot and given to Bleek sometime prior to 1873. Leeuwenburg (1970) was able to trace a copy of this story which documents a young girl’s experience of being taken underwater by the watermeide (see Appendix Seventeen), and uses it, as does Lewis-Williams (1977), as evidence for the inspiration of a number of ‘mermaid’ rock art paintings found in the Outeniqua region of the southern Cape (see Chapter Nine). Hollmann has recently contested this mermaid interpretation of the region’s rock art with his ‘Swift­People’ hypothesis (2003, 2005). As I have discovered that a number of the sacred water sites I have seen in my dreams are strongly linked with a history of San and/or Khoekhoe presence, I will examine the archaeological arguments concerning rock art and beliefs regarding the water in relation to trance experience in more detail in Chapter Nine.

3.3 Main theoretical approaches
It must be emphasised that of those scholars who have attempted to incorporate theory into their analyses of the water divinities, the majority have only utilized fragments or certain aspects of the water divinity complex to support the particular theoretical perspective they advance. The actual complex in its entirety has not been explained. Hirst perhaps comes closest to attempting to theorise the complex as a whole (1990, 1997), whilst scholars such as Buhrmann have sought to explain elements of the phenomenon within the broader framework of a diviner’s calling and training using a Jungian depth psychology approach. However, although she makes reference to the River People, and certain rituals that are performed for them at the river, she does not examine the complex of ideas surrounding them or their core elements. As Buhrmann’s Jungian psychology approach complements those anthropological approaches that fall under the broader umbrella of cognitive anthropology (see Milton, 1997), which also includes Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, I will examine these together.

It should be pointed out that many of the scholars who have recorded the ideas connected with the water divinity complex describe these as ‘myths’. Although there are multiple meanings to the word ‘myth’ (Degenaar, 2007; Ullyatt, 2007), Cohen (1969) has identified the main
characteristics of myths as they are predominantly used in an anthropological sense, and clearly many of the accounts recorded in this thesis cannot be classified as falling into such a category. Much of the data obtained regarding the water divinity phenomenon have not been obtained in the style of narrative he identifies as specific to myth, but rather as first or second-hand accounts of what an individual person purports to have experienced. Describing such information as 'myth' may thus confuse the categories of transmitted information and imply that it cannot possibly be true. Cohen observes, “In popular usage the term ‘myth’ is almost always intended pejoratively...Myths, on this view, are erroneous beliefs clung to against all evidence” (Cohen, 1969: 337). Although the term ‘myth’ is used fairly indiscriminately in the various texts that make reference to the water divinities, I avoid its usage in my own descriptions in order to avoid implying that these are ‘erroneous beliefs’.

3.3.1 Psychological/cognitive Approaches

One of the striking features of many of the writings by scholars who have examined the narratives and beliefs surrounding the water divinity complex is their somewhat ambivalent attitudes towards their material. Many of the authors are clearly impressed by the profundity of the ideas and claims expressed by their informants, and implicitly endorse the subjective reality of these in their description of the material. However, as soon as they attempt to give a rational explanation for the phenomenon, or aspects of it, whatever subjective reality it might have is effectively undermined. These rationalised explanations tend to portray the processes of becoming a diviner as either cleverly contrived strategies to achieve certain ends, as reflections of deeper unconscious processes of the mind, or even as a psychopathology.

For instance, regarding the psychopathology explanation, psychiatrist B.J.F Laubscher, one of the earlier scholars of Cape Nguni ideas on the phenomenon, was clearly in awe of the ‘myths’ recounted to him by his patients. However, he states that the symptoms displayed by a

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6 Cohen identifies the following characteristics of myths: “a myth is a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations. The narrative quality distinguishes a myth from a general idea or set of ideas, such as a cosmology. The sacred quality and the reference to origins and transformations distinguish myth from legend and other types of folk-tale. The narration of events and reference to objects unknown outside the world of myth differentiates myth from history or pseudo-history (Cohen, 1969: 337).
person prior to being taken under water are a fairly accurate portrayal of “a catatonic or depressive phase in a schizophrenic or manic-depressive or epileptic psychosis” (1937: 5), and that the account of the underwater experience is an expression of the guilt evoked from “the birth process or womb fantasies”, explicable by using Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex. Despite this psychopathological manifestation he admits,

This delusional experience is of interest. Anyone who has visited the River People is a wiser and greater and better being than before. There is some mysterious inflation of the ego, as if he had shed his former bad qualities and had almost been in contact with Nirvana (Laubscher, 1937: 6).

Laubscher fails to explain the paradox that such delusion and guilt can leave one wiser, greater and better than before.

Vera Buhrmann was also a psychiatrist, and she was more forthright about the profound impression her informants had on her own experience of their reality. She adopted a more experiential approach, living with her main informants, a husband and wife diviner team who trained novice diviners (amathwasa), in the Keiskammahoek region of the former Ciskei region of the Eastern Cape. Although she was not identified with a calling, they allowed her to be an active participant in their rituals. She was, however, more open and candid in her sympathy with their experiences and sought to apply Jungian psychotherapeutic concepts and practices to her own inner experiences of her informant’s ritual activities (Buhrmann, 1986: 15). She draws on Jung’s concepts of the collective unconscious, the personal unconscious (which is mediated by a cultural layer) and the ego, and the dialectic that operates between these psychic levels. She also focuses extensively on the importance of dreams and their compensatory function in Jungian theory in correcting the imbalance that arises between the ego and the unconscious (ibid: 92). For Buhrmann, the ‘mythological’ ideas of the River People are the cultural products or projections of the collective unconscious (that unconscious primitive realm of the psyche which is commonly shared by all humans), that emerges and combines with the partly conscious cultural layers, into manifest images or affects. The collective unconscious is thus the source of the “original pattern of psychic perception”, the archetype (ibid: 21). These universally shared archetypal images that emerge “are coloured by cultural factors” (ibid). Thus for Buhrmann, those entities which western rationalism might dismiss as misguided and false, such as ancestors, witches (abathakathi), and the River
People\(^7\) (mermaids) are all examples of archetypal projections from the collective unconscious, which may also emerge in dream form. One may then question whether such an explanation implies that these archetypal images (ancestors, witches, and mermaids) are merely products of the mind. If this is the case then does this negate their existential reality? Buhmann, it seems, is not prepared to admit this. She argues that regarding these ‘supapersonal’ forces, they “cannot be intellectually understood or rationally explained; they can only be experienced and as such carry undisputed conviction” (ibid: 96).

Unlike Buhmann, Hirst is less sympathetic regarding the possible ontological reality of these ‘archetypal’ images. This is despite the fact that Hirst was himself identified as having a calling from the ancestors and was apprenticed as a diviner to his main informant. Apart from briefly mentioning this fact, he tells us nothing else about his own experiences, but despite this he gives a detailed and insightful rendition of the various ideas that his informants and colleagues (i.e. co-diviners) share with him. He combines a more sociological approach, drawing on Lewis’s deprivation theory of possession (1966, 1988), with a Levi-Straussian structuralist approach. He first endorses Lewis’s now largely discredited deprivation theory (Boddy, 1988; McIntosh, 2004a; Sharp, 1999) by arguing that the ‘calling’ to be a diviner constitutes “a strategy to manipulate interpersonal relations to achieve, whether consciously or unconsciously, certain desired benefits or secondary gains from significant others in the social network” (Hirst 1990: 128). Thus, for Hirst, the claim of a calling and the process of becoming a diviner are instrumental and manipulative strategies – even a form of political strategising – used by certain marginalised individuals to achieve desired gains (ibid: 99-100); these gains being status, prestige and relative material wealth in an otherwise socially and economically deprived environment, such as in the townships of Grahamstown in South Africa. Hirst suggests it is also a process of conscious attention seeking, and the person who “throws himself” into the river does this as a last resort when all else has failed (ibid: 132; 1997: 226). Levi-Strauss’s idea of a bricoleur provides Hirst with a useful explanatory tool for how the diviner - “a professional do-it-yourself healer” (Hirst, 1990: 152) - collects and ‘manipulates’ an assortment of commonly shared symbolic images, myths, beliefs etc. to construct meaningful and convincing “ideological castles” for his clients; he states, “Like the bricoleur,

\(^7\) She makes no mention of the snake as an archetypal symbol.
the diviner manipulates ideas and images in the mind – understandings in a general sense – both to communicate to people and to affect their perceptions of events and experiences in their own lives" (ibid:160).

For Hirst, the reality the diviner constructs for his clients is not literal but figurative, “it addresses the subjective ‘reality’ of ideas, images and constructs in the mind” (ibid: 160). The building blocks of this construct are the symbols and metaphors found in the popular imagination, such as the ancestral spirits, witches, the domains of the river, grassland and forest, as well as their associated animals and plants. Thus for Hirst, the river imagery, especially that articulated through the ‘River Myth’ (see Appendix Six) that he claims is narrated to all diviners at the completion of their training, serves as a useful metaphor for the role of the paternal ancestors in the diviner’s art. According to Hirst, his informants claimed that the River Myth recorded what happened to the first member of the patrilineage who became the original diviner far back in the mists of time. Hirst speculates that this could have been the Xhosa Paramount Chief Gcaleka who was regarded as having been called underwater and became a great diviner. Gcaleka and his father Phalo were both buried on the banks of a river and these events, he feels, were impressive enough to be incorporated into the final induction ritual of all diviners (ibid: 260-261). Thus he interprets the river as representing the patrilineage and the cavern under water as the grave of the apical chief. The lady with the fish-tailed girdle represents clan exogamy, in that she is seen as a female representative of the in-marrying affinal group to the chieftaincy. For Hirst, the fish-tailed girdle is also the symbol of the diviner’s skirt (umthika), which is comprised of the skins of certain selected clan animals, which serve as symbols for ritual action. To justify this ‘symbolic woman’ he draws on an account given by Alberti in 1807 who reported that when a Xhosa chief died, an old commoner woman, identified as a witch, would be smelt out by diviners, suffocated and placed under the body of the dead chief at his burial. Why a commoner woman, and a witch at that, could be used in his model to represent the in-marrying female clans of the chieftaincy, he does not explain. However, this leads him to conclude that,

8 Hirst does not clarify whether he regards these claimed events in a literal or figurative light.

9 He does not actually give any evidence to support this claim that the myth is always recited at the completion of training.
Clearly, the River People with their fish tails is an extended metaphor cleverly contrived from the original nuance or image coined in the use of the term *abantu bomlambo* as a term of respect for the ancestors and all of this is sheer bricolage, the very epitome of the diviner's art (ibid: 215).

After reading his complex arguments one is left in awe of Hirst's own ability as bricoleur. One of the problems with Hirst's explanation of the so-called 'myth' is that if this was an event that happened to one particular clan, as one of his informants claimed (assuming that is what he meant), why is it found across a wide range of ethnic groups in the southern African region? I have not come across this explanation of a single clan origin among any of the informants I have spoken to; rather there is general agreement that such an event can occur cross-culturally and is not specific to a particular agnatic group. What is more, if one accepts his argument that becoming a diviner is merely a cleverly contrived strategy to achieve certain gains then one is obliged to consider whether, as a person 'called', he is any less guilty of that. In effect Hirst argues his point from not only a structuralist perspective but also from a sociological structure-agency perspective, with hints of transactionalism. In a later publication (Hirst, 1997) he applies Gidden's (1984) concept of the 'duality of structure' to the River Myth and attempts to demonstrate that the 'myth' provides "both the outcome and medium of events" for aspirant diviners. The problem with this argument, as he applies it, is that it is does not really explain anything.

Hammond-Tooke (1975b) also utilized the structuralist approach, although not in the same way as Hirst, to analyse the "disparate domains" and their homologous structures that he found were part of the symbolic structures of Cape Nguni cosmology. Hammond-Tooke identified these domains as being:

- the forest, which was associated with wild and dangerous flesh-eating animals (*amarancwa*) and supernatural witches; this domain was associated with unmerited misfortune and badness.
- the grassland which was associated with edible meat species (*iinyamkazi*), rivers (which flowed through grassland even though their origins were often from the mountain forest sources) and the supernatural River People; this domain was characterised mainly by moral ambiguity and structural freedom.
- the homestead, the place of culture, domesticated animals (*imifuyo*) and the supernatural ancestors; this domain was characterised by goodness, merited misfortune
Keeping true to Levi-Strauss’s fundamental argument that “mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation” (Levi-Strauss, 1955: 440), he identified the forest and homestead as being in opposition to each other and these two domains and their attendant homologous symbols as being mediated by the ambiguous domain of grassland, with their rivers containing the half-human half-fish River People. Hammond-Tooke’s conclusion was that the underlying message being communicated in such a system is that the forest/witch category is also negatively characterised by individualism, and that this is opposed to the idealised representation of societas and lineage solidarity associated with the homestead/ancestors. The ambiguous River People and their emissaries, the diviners, mediate between these two opposing poles in an effort to overcome their contradictions.

In this relatively short paper Hammond-Tooke clearly asserts that “In a structural study such as this, the primary object is to demonstrate structure, the ‘fit’ between the series of homologues, and not to seek ‘explanation’ in any causal or functional sense” (ibid: 30). In this endeavour he differs quite radically from Hirst, who seeks to expose underlying motivations of such symbolic strategies. Hirst has critiqued Hammond-Tooke’s analysis but his arguments are dense and complex and space does not allow me to elaborate further here.

Perhaps one of the major weaknesses of Hammond-Tooke’s classificatory model is that the domains and their homologues (or paradigmatic associations) he identifies are not so clear cut as he would have us suppose, since forests are also often associated with positive ancestral forces which also manifest in the form of the wild animals associated with that domain e.g. leopards, which are associated with chiefs who are the guardians of societas. Witches, although they may gather together in the forests to plan their evil deeds, emanate from the homestead, as the most common suspects are neighbours or kinsmen. The River People are not only found in rivers that are located in grasslands but frequently are associated with pools situated deep in forests, or even in springs and wetlands at river sources, and even the sea….and so these deviations that befuddle such categorizations can continue to the point that the categories themselves appear quite arbitrary.
Aschwanden (1989) also utilises a more symbolic interpretation and analysis of the numerous ‘stories’ he collected from his Karanga patients near Masvingo in Zimbabwe, which he describes as their ‘mythology’. These symbolic representations invariably connect the cosmic forces of rain and fertility with human biological phenomena. For instance, the pool and its cavern is symbolically associated with a woman’s uterus, the small opening into the cavern with the cervix, a fish with the male sperm, the snake/s (there are often two of them) encountered underwater symbolises the oviduct etc. He claims his informants agree with these symbolic associations\(^\text{10}\), yet they also insist that the ‘stories’ of the underwater experience are absolutely real to them: the mythology “comprehends a symbolical experience which is as real as the belief in the truth of the stories” (ibid: 9). He further argues that “Human reality is reflected in nature, or, God’s creation is symbol of man, but this creation is real too...The “snakes” of the uterus are as real to the Karanga as the water-snakes” (ibid: 136). While symbolization as a psycho-social projection that metaphorically aligns cosmic processes with bodily and social processes may be demonstrated in his material, Aschwanden is not prepared to rule out the very real nature of the experiences for his informants.

It is quite evident in the description of the core elements to be described in the next section that the water divinity complex carries a heavy symbolic load. An animal, both real and ‘mythical’, is extremely good to think with (Douglas, 1970/1973; Tambiah, 1969), but is that all there is to it? Or can we begin to consider whether it may offer insights into a reality which some western scholars have not yet been able to contemplate?

3.3.2 A diffusionist explanation

In his publication *The Zulu People: As they were before the White Man came*, Bryant adopted a diffusionist argument to explain the striking similarity between the Zulu ideas and rituals performed for Nomkhubulwana/Inkosanzana with similar ideas and rituals held for the Mother-Virgin Daughter goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, of ancient Greece. His argument is that the source of ideas held by the ancient Greeks probably emanated from Africa, in particular from Egypt (Bryant, 1949: 669-676). He claims that this knowledge spread not only north to the Mediterranean littoral civilizations, but also spread south to

\(^{10}\) It is unclear whether these were eric associations volunteered to Aschwanden without his suggestion.
southern Africa. Even though there may be some substance to such arguments, attempting to prove them is hazardous as one is dealing with processes of cultural transmission that have happened over millenia, and reliable and indisputable evidence is extremely hard to come by. Some recent scholars have attempted to argue along much the same lines as Bryant, although not with reference to Nomkhubulwana (Bernal, 1987, 1991; Diop, 1974, 1989; van Binsbergen, 2003). It should be pointed out that the diffusionist arguments are as difficult to prove as they are to disprove. However, it is undeniable that the diffusion of knowledge, practice, as well as artefacts, does occur, not only between contiguous groups but also between those that are more distant. This diffusion occurs through numerous routes and modes of transmission which have been accelerated in recent times through mass communication and ease of travel – my own experiences, documented in this thesis, which has modified my knowledge, perception and practices, provide evidence for this.

3.3.3 Sociological explanations

Beyond Hirst’s use of Lewis’s deprivation hypothesis of possession the only substantial sociological explanation was Gluckman’s use of the Zulu Nomkhubulwana rituals to argue his rituals of rebellion hypothesis (Gluckman, 1954). Very briefly, this argument proposed that the rituals dedicated to the Zulu heavenly princess, Nomkhubulwana, served to reinforce the gendered power relations and patriarchal control of the Zulu agnatic clan system. I discuss this hypothesis in more detail in Chapter Four, Section 4.5.

3.3.4 An assessment of the various approaches

There have thus been a number of theoretical approaches put forward to explain various aspects of the water divinity complex. These range from psychopathology (Laubscher), symbolism (Aschwanden), Jungian archetypes (Buhrmann), structuralism (Hirst and Hammond-Tooke) to the more sociological arguments of structural-functionalism (Gluckman) and Gidden’s notion of structure and agency (Hirst). While I dismiss the psychopathology argument on the basis of the fact that most diviners are active, fully functional members of society (and are often highly respected advisors and guardians of knowledge), I am hesitant to reject the other approaches outright since, although they are not able to explain the complex in its totality, they may provide insight into certain aspects of it. With reference to the model I have formulated in Chapter One, Section 1.2.4, which seeks to accommodate these varying
approaches I will address how they can be applied to the material I present on the water divinity phenomenon in more detail at the end of Chapter Four (Section 4.7.1).

3.4 A common stream of thought - core elements of the underwater experience

A search through the ethnographic literature on southern African peoples reveals, time and again, references to diviner-healers who claim to have been taken under water to receive skills, wisdom and medicines in order to return and heal the living\textsuperscript{11}. As already mentioned it is while they are under water that they claim to encounter their ancestors, snakes, and occasionally a mermaid, who are responsible for imparting knowledge and gifts of healing. In order to capture the full import of the various narratives documented, and to maintain their internal coherence, I have selected the most detailed accounts available and transcribed them in Appendices One to Nineteen. I recommend that the reader refer to these 'full' accounts as I progress in identifying the core features. The central feature of these narratives, stories and personal accounts, is the association with the "calling" of individuals to become diviners. The physical submersion may occur in a river pool, the sea, or in a well (notably in dry areas where little surface water occurs). The period spent underwater varies between individuals and it is claimed may range from as little as a few hours to 4 years. When the individual emerges he or she may be covered in white clay, have a symbolic snake wrapped around his/her body, and may be carrying medicines or other gifts (an axe, an egg/white 'stone', ndoro shells and occasionally gold).

As an opening example I present a summarised version of my teacher Baba's account of his early 'calling' by the ancestors, and his subsequent underwater experience. The full transcript of my interview with him, which took place in his sacred hut, two years after my acceptance into his training school, is to be found in Appendix One.

\textit{A calling to the water to 'collect the snake'}

Baba's early childhood was like that of many other Zulu people in the 1960s, who were victims of the inequities of the harsh racially based apartheid laws, and the resulting poverty and fragmentation of families that came in its wake. The second eldest of six siblings, Baba

\textsuperscript{11} While Hirst (1990) makes it clear that actual physical submersion does not occur, in all the interviews I have conducted across the southern African region all informants are insistent that actual physical submersion occurs; it is not merely a psychological experience.
was brought up by his mother after his father had abandoned them. Despite his intellectual ability at school, he describes himself as a sensitive and sickly child. He was also a prolific dreamer and snakes were often the subject of those dreams: “Even in broad daylight, even going to school and even when I was asleep I would dream [or have visions] of snakes. But when I dreamed of them coming to me, I did not become afraid and it would be like they were my friends”. Of note, was his memory of the ‘beautiful snake’ that he discovered lying under a stone one day while playing with his friends and siblings. Fearing they would kill it, he kept its presence secret. He told me that “Every Saturday I used to go there to that stone and put five cents [there], not knowing why I was doing it.” At the age of 10 years it was evident that the ancestors wanted him to become an isangoma (i.e. to ‘thwasa’). He describes the dream that he had where his ancestors explained how they wanted to help his mother out of her ‘shame and sorrow’ by him becoming an isangoma. In this dream he was shown a room with plenty of food (signifying luck and prosperity) and him wearing the regalia of an isangoma: the white beaded headdress (umyeko) and the cow tail whisk (umshoba). In his dream he was dancing the isangoma dance style. The next day he forgot the dream but suddenly, in the afternoon, he claims that he experienced what is called ‘hayisa’. This condition is well recognised by Zulu people and occurs when the ancestors cause a person to temporarily ‘lose one’s mind’, making him/her run spontaneously to a teacher for training as an isangoma. One just happens to find oneself at the teacher’s home without being aware of how he/she got there. His first teacher (Bhuka) resided in the Elandskop/Taylor’s Halt region of the Natal Midlands. He only stayed there for a short time and then ‘ran away’ to be trained by another isangoma in Estcourt, some two hundred kilometres north. After training under this individual he returned home but claims that he was told in a dream that he needed to go further, and he was subsequently directed to continue training under a healer in the Mount Fletcher area of the former Transkei (about 400 kilometres to the south in Mpondomise/Tlokwa/HLubi territory). He continued there as a thwasa and was initiated as a diviner using the jackal as his ancestral animal (isilo). On his return home, the ancestors informed him that his training was still not complete since he still had to ‘fetch the snake’. He was thus sent to an old isangoma at Gamalakhe, just inland from Port Shepstone. It was under her direction that he was to ‘raise

12 He did not elaborate why he ran away from this trainer.

13 The importance of isilo (or ancestral animals) in diviner training has been noted by Hammond-Tooke (1975), Hirst (1990) and Broster (nd).
the amakhosi' (the powerful great ancestors) and ‘collect the snake’ from the water. While under her guidance he had a dream where he was shown the bull ‘with a white tail and white face’ that had backward pointing horns, as well as two specific coloured goats, that were to be sacrificed to the ancestors on his return from the water to ‘collect the snake’. He explained that the fact that he was destined to go under water to fetch the snake came as no surprise to him since snakes dominated his dreams, and he understood it as a hereditary calling (note the encounter documented in Chapter Four, Section 4.3.3, of his grandmother’s narrow escape from being ‘called’ by a large snake). His worry about not finding the animals, as they had been shown in his dream, turned out to be groundless when the bull apparently arrived at his doorstep, broke down the door and entered straight into his house. Realising it was the bull shown to him in his dreams, but not wanting to divulge his dream to others, he tried to chase it away but without success. He soon discovered who the owners were and negotiated a sale. Then a neighbour visited him asking him if he was interested in buying her goat since she wanted to get rid of it as it was becoming aggressive. It was the exactly like one of the goats he had been shown in his dream. Having now secured two of the animals that would need to be sacrificed on his return from the water, he instructed the women in the homestead to start preparing Zulu beer (utshwala). The other goat that he says he had been shown in his dream was given to him by one of his patients later that same day, as she was unable to make cash payment for his services. He then arranged for taxis to take his grandmother, trainer, and her associates, with him down to the sea. Fortuitously he earned enough in consultations that day to pay for their costs. On the appointed day he was taken to the sea. At the beach he had to remove his clothes and burn them in imphepho (plant incense used to attract the presence of the ancestors). In an earlier unrecorded account I was told that it was at this stage that the snake came out of the sea, wrapped itself around him, and with its head on top of his, took him into the water. It was at this stage that he ‘lost his brains’ (i.e. blacked out or went into an altered state of consciousness). His description of what occurred under water is fairly brief, and because of its secretive nature I did not press him to elaborate more than what he chose to tell me. He claimed he found himself in a dry place (yet still under water) and describes, “As I came to the Zulu round grass-houses, two old women came out. They had a present with them, as if they were happy to see me. She [one of them] hugged me and said ‘take this and go
back’, but as she was hugging me she put something around my neck. I realised later that it was a snake.” He claimed he was escorted back to the beach by a dolphin, the snake still around his neck, to be received by his maternal grandmother (who corroborated with me that the events took place) and the waiting izangoma. The izangoma ‘ran away’ at the sight of him emerging from the water with the snake; however his maternal grandmother stayed to help dress his naked body. His mind was still in a trance state and they returned to his homestead where the beasts were sacrificed by his kin to give thanks for his safe return. It was only after drinking the bull’s blood, as it gushed out from its wound, that his mind slowly started to return to this reality. His grandmother explained to him everything that had happened and there was much joyous celebration, “even the chief came” he noted. In an earlier account he told me he had to kill the snake that was placed around his neck, as well as the dolphin. On my first visit to him he had proudly shown me their skins hanging above the sacred umsamo (shrine) in his ancestral hut. I was told by Zanele that his ancestors, in the form of the snake, dwelt in the pools of the river below his house, where they maintained constant contact with him and protected him.

This account of Baba’s calling under the water contains some of the core elements that are to be found in many similar accounts in southern Africa. Beyond these core elements, which I examine in more detail in the rest of this chapter, it is worth emphasising the importance Baba placed on his childhood experiences, as these provided him with a chain of meaningful events that provided continuity with his later experiences. These were strengthened by a series of otherwise inexplicable synchronicities or ‘coincidences’ which for him connected his dreams with his lived reality. The claim that his western education was obstructed by his ancestors in order that he could progress in his training to be a diviner is a common feature found in many diviner narratives, as is the claim to being directed to a number of different teachers during the long course of training. What is fairly unique about Baba’s submersion under the sea is that it was reputedly witnessed by his grandmother and other izangoma, who escorted him to the beach and were able to corroborate his claims with me.

14 The dolphin is regarded as a messenger animal of the water divinities.

15 This snake is not regarded as an ancestor but is seen as a symbol of the underwater experience and the newly acquired skills of healing that result. It is also not the same as the snake that caused him to black out before taking him under water.
3.4.1 Experiencing the transcendent through an altered state of consciousness

3.4.1.1 The importance of dreams:

In his analysis of Zulu dreams, Lee mentions the final “Great Dream” that an isangoma will receive that signifies the completion of training and that he/she is a “new person”. He notes that in this dream the diviner “will go out to the river and then go under the water in a deep pool. There he will meet with a hug[e] (sic) python who will give him his future power by allowing him to collect white earth from beneath it” (Lee, 1958: 266). As far as I am aware not all diviners necessarily receive such a dream to signify their new status, but for those that do the dream is highly significant and usually requires further ritual action (see for instance my own experiences of this in Chapter Six, Section 6.4). According to my informants this experience of being taken by a snake may happen in a dream but this is usually notification that the individual’s ancestors (on either the paternal or, more frequently, the maternal side) are connected to the water and the possibility of physical submersion exists in the future. As far as Zulu/Nguni people are concerned, many diviners and even novices have the ability to communicate with the ancestors through various means even if they do not experience submersion. What the experience seems to offer are exceptional abilities in divination and healing beyond what can normally be acquired by other means. According to Hirst (1997) the ‘myth’ narrated to him by his informant Mandla Tyota, serves as a core reference to the ultimate source of divinatory power (the agnatic ancestors) and serves as a mythical charter for Xhosa (Cape Nguni) diviners in general, even if they do not experience submersion16. While there is a wide repertoire of stories and accounts of people who have experienced a calling underwater amongst Zulu speakers I have not come across any reports of a formal myth that is recounted during, or at the completion of a diviner’s training as has been described by Hirst for some Grahamstown healers in the Eastern Cape.

When such a dream occurs it is often a sign for a novice/initiate to transfer to a more powerful

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16 For instance he states “It (the myth) records what is believed to have happened to the first diviner in the distant past. The narration of the myth is the prerogative of a fully-fledged diviner, and constitutes the final part of the diviner’s instruction to the novice or candidate diviner, concluding the candidate’s initiation and training.” 

....Thus the myth articulates the ontological charter of the diviner institution as a long established form of conduct” (Hirst 1997: 217).
healer who has undergone such an experience. Zanele was referred to Baba for this reason (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3). Hirst also notes that among the Cape Nguni, although it is claimed in very few cases that individuals actually have the experience of physical submersion, the dream experience is fairly common. He states, “It appeared that most diviners and their initiates merely dreamed about being submerged in the river” (Hirst, 1997: 219). Although the dream experience is not held to bestow divinatory ability, as the actual physical experience is held to, it signifies a calling to this higher level of skills and alerts one to the potentiality of later physical submersion. In some instances, as in the case of Baba, ‘being taken under the water’ will only occur some time after a healer has qualified. The “calling” is often preceded by the candidate suffering an illness, although sometimes, especially in the case of children, the submersion is believed to happen spontaneously when they are playing near the water (e.g. see Gelfand, 1959, Reynolds, 1996, for such cases occurring amongst the Shona). The age at which one is taken seems to range widely, but in the accounts given in the literature, children are the most common. If they are taken spontaneously without any signs of illness or warning dreams, they will have to be apprenticed to a healer who has him/herself been held to have survived the same experience, after emerging from the water. This is to complete the process of learning and to acquire the uniform/insignia of office, as well as to become associated with a healer group.

For instance Thandi, who was one of the main officiates at my first initiation ceremony (she was about twelve years old at this time), was reputedly taken under the water when she was still a toddler. She was recovered from the water’s edge after three days. At the age of five she was apprenticed as a novice (thwasa) to Baba and at the age of eight had qualified and was training other izangoma.

A number of Köhler’s informants indicated the importance of a preceding dream. For instance, his main informant Sikhumbana stated,

17 According to my observations, healers form associational ‘families’ (or guilds) where they are linked to their trainer, and trainer’s trainer through a fictive kin based structure; the trainer is the parent and trainer’s trainer the grandparent. All novices who train under the same teacher refer to each other as siblings. These groups attend rituals and support one another and to some extent ensure that members adhere to certain codes of conduct. Each isibaya (this is the term Baba uses to describe his ‘family’ of trainees - it literally means the cattle byre) has its own distinctive uniform which enables one to easily identify a common member of the group.

18 This young age of calling can be problematic since most children are not emotionally or intellectually mature to deal with such powerful abilities and responsibilities. For instance, Thandi fell pregnant at the age of fourteen and was tragically murdered (apparently by the father of the child) during her pregnancy.
A person who *thwasa's*, i.e. who is developing into an *isangoma*, begins by being ill, he is continually ill and has many dreams. He dreams about all sorts of things. When he has eaten medicines pertaining to *ukuthwesa*, he begins to dig medicines for himself. One may have a dream and upon awaking will get up and go to the river; he enters the water and goes straight to where the snake called *ixhanti* is (Köhler 1941: 17 para 64).

The account given by Manyoni, a Bhaca diviner, to Hammond-Tooke (1962) also emphasises the initial dream aspect,

She became sick with pains in the body and dreamed about the deceased chief, Mngcisana. Her husband was a member of the royal (Zulu) clan and this is an interesting example of how a relative of a husband can be the troubling spirit. In one hand he held an *isiyaca*, the fringed bead head-dress worn by diviners, and in the other the white stone (*ikhubalo*), also associated with the cult. In her dream he placed the *isiyaca* on her head, but told her that she would have to find the stone herself. All this happened in ‘a very difficult and dangerous place in a pool in the river’. She then awoke (Hammond-Tooke 1962: 313).

Although Hammond-Tooke seems to treat her subsequent description of going under water as a continuation of the dream, in the above account Manyoni makes it clear that she felt instructed to find the white stone in her dream which, on awakening from her sleep, prompted her to go to the pool where she “sank down until she reached the river bed, where she saw an old woman with one leg” (ibid: 313), and subsequently retrieved the stone. This statement suggests that she did actually go to the pool on waking up and that her account that follows is describing what she experienced upon physical immersion, although she was probably in a trance-like state.

Aschwanden gives the accounts of three *n'angas* (healers), Angela, Nheya and Salani, who he interviewed whilst they were his patients at a hospital near Masvingo in Zimbabwe. All three reported dreams of water in which *njuzu* (mermaids) featured which signalled their calling (Aschwanden, 1989: 155-183). Of the three only Salani claimed to have been physically taken

19 Note that according to Marjorie Broster this search in a river for the white stone (*ikhubalo*) appears to be unique to the amaBhaca (Broster, nd: 56).

20 She could be alluding here to the woman’s fish tail.
underwater whilst the other two were known to be possessed by *njuzu* spirits.

Jacobson-Widding’s account of “The girl who got gold”, which was a ‘story’ given to her by the grand-daughter of a “legendary *n’ganga*” who resided on the Zimbabwe/Mozambique border region, also includes the initial dream instruction,

One day, there was a girl who had a dream. She dreamed about a mermaid who wanted a person in order to make a doctor of him. She also dreamed that many people tried, but made mistakes, and thus did not succeed, and got killed instead. The girl had no parents. She lived with her *tete* (= paternal aunt), who had taken care of her. One day, she said: “*Tete*, I have been dreaming something, and now I want to visit a foreign country. I might stay away for a week or a month, but don’t cry while I am away! I will not die there, but I will show you what I have dreamt when I come back.” The aunt quarreled a little. The girl said: “*Tete*, it is impossible for me to stay, because what I have dreamed about is so great. But if you cry, I will be killed, and will not come back. I intend to travel very far away, and I will travel under water” (Jacobson-Widding, 1993: 24-25).

Similarly in the cases of Tyota’s (claimed) submersion in the Kowie River near Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape (Hirst, 1997), and Salani’s (claimed) submersion under the Mtilikwe River near Masvingo in Zimbabwe (Ashwanden, 1989), both experienced preceding dreams that were significant.

One of Buhrmann’s informants in the Keiskammahoek region suggested that seeing the snake *ichanti* (*ixhanti*) in a dream was more preferable than seeing it whilst awake since “to see it while awake can cause blindness, insanity and death” (Buhrmann, 1986: 29).

### 3.4.1.2 Entering the water in a trance state

A number of informants who claimed to have gone under the water explained that when they entered the water they were not in their normal conscious state. They sometimes report an initial vision of a bright light, a serpent or even a strong wind which put them into an altered state of consciousness before entering the water. Baba told me that when he entered the sea a snake emerged and wrapped itself around him and this made him ‘lose his brains’ (*i.e.* go into trance) before he entered the water. MaDuma (pseudonym) is a diviner who described her experience of going under water when we interviewed her in the Mtolwa region of KwaZulu Natal. In trying to explain she said, “This is a problem, really, because of the way in which it takes place; it’s like you are dreaming. But you are not dreaming because you are not asleep”
(interviewed 15 January 2002 by Sibongiseni Kumalo). Nombuso, who gave an account to Broster of her submersion at a pool beneath a waterfall in the former Transkei, also described how upon reaching the pool she surrendered her mind and sank into the water naked and in trance (Broster, 1981: 47). Similarly Tyota described to Hirst his experience,

I saw something on the bridge [which they were about to cross at Port Alfred], as if it were shining like a ring of light. I wanted to ask Tshawe [his companion] if he could see it but I did not see him there...I did not know the reason for this [Tshawe's disappearance] because I lost my mind, I ran into the river (Hirst, 1997: 225).

Laubscher observed the psychic state of a person who was about to be called under water and described it thus,

When a member of the kraal appears listless, looks queer, roamlessly about, looks worried and anxious, ignores the questions addressed to him and fails to associate and communicate with those around, they know the power of the River People is at work and he may at any time be called to the River. He is kept under observation and soon, maybe, he will stand looking about as if in a dream and then start to run for the River (Laubscher, 1937: 3).

In those accounts where trance is not specified one gets the impression that the event of submersion was beyond the control of the victim. Many informants describe their inability to resist the pull into the water, often because they are drawn in by a strong wind. This was a frequently mentioned cause in the Zimbabwe accounts (Aschwanden, 1983; Gelfand, 1959; Latham, 1986).

The /Xam and Khoekhoe informants reported to Hoff a wide range of methods by which, in their understanding, the Water Snake could catch its victims to take them under the water. These ranged from its ability to entangle the victim in mystical 'threads', to suddenly raising the water levels to engulf the person, to magical enticement with pleasant smells or desirable objects (Hoff, 1997: 28-29).

3.4.1.3 The persistence of a trance state on return

In a number of the accounts given, it is evident that the trance states persist for a while after the individual is held to return from the water. For instance, when Tyota returned following his
underwater experience in the Kowie River in the Eastern Cape “he was in a dishevelled state, unable to speak and without his clothes and belongings” (Hirst, 1997: 225). Similarly Baba commented that on his return after his sojourn under the sea, “my mind was so blind. I was only aware what was happening at 12 o’clock, as if I was waking from a dream. I called grandma. I was already dressed. She told me what was happening. Then I cried”.

Even the dream experience itself can have a significant effect on the dreamer’s consciousness on waking. In Zanele’s case she appeared on my sister’s doorstep in a dishevelled and disoriented mental state after her two day dream experience of going under water (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3).

It appears that the initiate is in a vulnerable transitional state on re-emergence from the water and has to be handled with great care, preferably by a specialist who knows how to return the person’s mind to a normal conscious state. According to Aschwanden’s account of Salani’s submersion

After his return, nobody present was allowed to touch Salani – or he would have been pulled back into the pool immediately. Only the n’ganga [diviner], carrying special medicines which bound Salani, was permitted to approach him (Aschwanden, 1989:175-176).

Both Hoff’s (2007: 42) and Lange’s (2007: 43) informants made very similar claims, emphasising that the one called usually desires to return to the Water Snake and thus must be carefully managed by the attending diviner for some time after emergence from the water. The return to full consciousness is facilitated by ritual procedures such as the drinking of herbal medicines or the drinking of the blood of sacrificed animals, and these are discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.3 of this chapter.

3.4.1.4 Summary

From the accounts documented above it appears that the informants distinguish between the dream event and the actual submersion event. As such, from the informants’ perspective, we should regard them as separate modes of experience. It appears the majority of those who claim to have had the underwater experience received what they understood as prior warnings in their dreams regarding their pending submersion. As to whether the preceding dream is a
pre-requisite to submersion I cannot be certain, since in some reports no dream experiences are mentioned. In the case of very young children being taken underwater, such as Thandi, it is highly unlikely that they would have any comprehension of a prior dream.

If one ‘receives’ a dream it is not taken as a guarantee that a submersion event will follow, but merely as confirmation that a diviner or novice is connected to the water divinities, and that one could possibly experience actual submersion in the future. In these terms, for those that do subsequently get taken under water it appears that this occurs when they are in an altered state of consciousness or in a state whereby they cannot resist the pull into the water. As with Baba, the trance state persists on their return from the water and this can only be rectified by the careful management of the individual on his/her return and the performance of certain ritual procedures.

3.4.2 Codes of conduct: restrictions and taboos

3.4.2.1 Accepting and resisting the call

In African beliefs systems, it is the ancestors who choose the person to be a diviner, not the other way around, and resistance to the ‘calling’ usually leads to misfortune. Failing to accept the call of the ancestors and the water people can lead to insanity and death of the person chosen. Laubscher, a psychiatrist treating mentally ill patients among the Cape Nguni in the Eastern Cape, reports “I know of many who were called but were restrained and in consequence lost their senses and are now patients in the mental hospital” (Laubscher, 1937: 4).

Reasons for resisting the call vary widely but are mainly linked to the forces of modernity, religious faith, and the inability of relatives to afford the expenses entailed in becoming a healer. Several reports indicate that should an individual who has been called to be a diviner resist the calling, it will then be transmitted to their offspring. This was the case with Hirst’s main informant, Tyota, whose father Moni had resisted a calling (Hirst 1997: 223). It was also the case with Zanele and her mother’s aunts, after her great grandmother resisted the calling. Mrs T in Zimbabwe was subsequently called after her mother escaped being taken underwater (see Section 3.4.5).
There are also certain steps and techniques that can be used to persuade the ancestors to forgo the calling or delay it, although these are not always successful or the person called may have to accept the calling at a later date. Zweli claims that he was able to delay his calling for forty-two years after he received his first calling in 1958 at the age of sixteen years while he was still a schoolboy (Luck, 2000: 11, see also Appendix 10). His father, who was also a diviner-healer, had enlisted the help of a Basotho herbalist, who was able to quieten Zweli’s ancestral spirits through advising Zweli’s agnatic relatives to sacrifice a black sheep in order to appease their ancestors. Zweli then had to consume the meat of the sacrificed animal with some bitter medicines.

Although the anticipation of being called underwater can evoke anxiety, mainly due to the failure of relatives to act appropriately (see Section 3.4.2.2 below), or in the case of Zweli, due to interfering with one’s formal education and career, some await the event with anticipation. For instance, following a series of dreams involving both snakes and a mermaid (see Chapter Four, Section 4.4.1) Thandiswa (from Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape) told Roadnight,

I am happy to go [underwater], I will be a sangoma. I will know when [to go] because I will dream of going under the water first before it will happen. I know that when I go under I will not be afraid of the snake[s] as [it] they will be my friend. Going under the water, it is good (Roadnight, 2008: 18).

This statement by Thandiswa also reaffirms that a dream normally precedes actual submergence, as discussed in the previous section.

3.4.2.2 Prohibition on crying or mourning

One of the most commonly expressed codes of conduct found across all the ethnic groups examined is the taboo against relatives crying. No-one, especially a relative, is allowed to display any grief at the disappearance of one who has gone under the water or he/she may never be returned to the living. The River Myth, documented by Hirst (see Appendix 6), clearly emphasises the importance of this prohibition. The use of the term ‘complaint’ is synonymous with grief and mourning. The account given by Jacobson-Widding (see Section 3.4.1.1) and Reynolds (see below) also emphasises the extent of this crying taboo in Zimbabwe. This fear of relatives breaking the taboo on mourning provokes great anxiety in those individuals who have had warning that they may at some stage in their lives ‘go under
the water'. As a result they actively avoid pools of water where the water divinities are believed to reside. This is especially during the early morning, midday and late evening, the times when they are believed to be at their peak of activity. In Nyanga, Zimbabwe, a member of the Varemba (Mwenye) group told me how his mother’s sister had been taken under the water and how he had been warned the same might happen to him. He avoids all pools of water because he knows that should he be taken under “his family would be too sad and would cry” resulting in him never returning. Zweli says much the same. He claims to have had two encounters with the People of the River in his childhood and is aware that he has a strong chance of being taken under water. His first encounter occurred when he was still a young boy when he and his friends had been swimming in a pool on the Bushmen’s River near Salem in the Eastern Cape (this was a pool where his agnatic elders often performed rituals). While he was in the water he noticed that his friends had got out and left him. When he looked around to find them he saw a lady sitting on a rock in the middle of the pool and had what he saw as a fish tail. She then dived into the water and disappeared. His second encounter was more dramatic and involved a visit by messengers of the River People while he was at school (see Appendix 10). As a result of these experiences and the fact that he comes from a long line of powerful healers on his father’s side he is very nervous of going near rivers and pools for fear that they may recognise him and draw him into the water. His fear is linked to the belief that if someone grieves, or the family fail to do the correct procedures to ensure his return, then he will remain there. On the taboo as it exists among the Cape Nguni Laubscher notes, “It is simply and credulously accepted that if the one “called” does not return alive, someone has wept; there is no need for objective evidence, since only weeping can cause his death” (1937: 5).

Thandiswa described to Roadnight (2008: 17-18) how when she was a young girl she witnessed the disappearance of her mother’s maternal aunt in the Peddie area of the Eastern Cape who was held to have been taken underwater. She emphasised how her family were instructed by a diviner that nobody was to cry. On the seventh day of her disappearance they were instructed to prepare the house (a thatched hut) by smearing the floors with fresh cow manure and to leave the door open. The men had to wrap themselves in blankets and to go and sit in silence in the cattle byre. They had to make a fire and eat and sleep there until the aunt was returned from the water. On her aunt’s return she had to sleep on the floor of the hut. A
week later the family sacrificed a cow to give thanks for her safe return. Thandiswa described how her aunt became a powerful healer as a result of this experience.

Latham also elaborates on the taboo among the Shona and gives an example of a mother who wailed and cursed the *njuzu* for taking her daughter after she had fallen and disappeared into a pool in the Sabi River. The mother was reprimanded by the other villagers and elders for her rash actions, and was encouraged to give offerings of appeasement to the *njuzu* in the hope that the child would be returned.

Shortly afterwards the child’s corpse surfaced. This was seen as a partial forgiveness by the *njuzu*. Had the mother not behaved so rashly, they would probably, it was considered, have released the child as an adult to be a powerful *nganga*, underscoring the point that the *njuzu* are essentially kind hearted (Latham, 1986: 76).

Lange was told a similar story by her informant Nana in Upington. In this case a small boy had disappeared into a river and the family had sought the help of a ‘Hottentot’ *sangoma*, who had then sprinkled *buchu* on the water. As the child emerged from the river, the mother started to curse the Water Snake with the result that the child was taken back underwater. The child’s corpse was found the next day, with his neck broken, on the bank of the river (Lange et al, 2007:25-27). The !Xam have a similar taboo where Hoff’s informants told her that after someone had been taken in by the Water Snake then “it is important for the surviving relatives not to cry, for fear the snake will kill the victim...the Water Snake will think that the relatives begrudge him the person” (Hoff, 1997: 32). Some reports also mention a taboo on the mounting of search parties to recover the body of the ‘drowned’ victim, as this will result in the death of the initiate (Elliott, 1970: 102-103; Hoff, 1997: 29).

### 3.4.2.3 Avoidance of pool sites where water divinities reside

There are certain pools that are recognised by local people as being the abode of the water divinities and these are signified by the presence of certain plants and hydrological features, as well as various events and sightings that have taken place at the pool (see also Chapter Five, Section 5.2.2). The pools are very often remote and difficult to access, surrounded by dense
vegetation and precipitous cliffs. They are frequently very deep and are found at the base of waterfalls (often with caves behind them), or in pools which have certain forms of vegetation such as various types of reeds (*typha capensis*) and certain willow trees.

People who try to gain the favour of the water divinities for purposes of greed and self-enrichment, or who approach these water sources without the calling, risk drowning. This point was emphasized in Jacobson-Widding’s account of “The Girl who got Gold” (see Appendix Twelve) and in Matowanyika et al.’s (1994) account of the Birira pool in Eastern Zimbabwe (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.2). This theme was also emphasized to me by informants who were familiar with the two pools that I understood myself to be directed to in my dreams (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4). There seems to be agreement that the water divinities are offended by noise and human activity and as such pools associated with them should be left in peace.

### 3.4.2.4 Food taboos whilst underwater

While little reference is made regarding the food taboos imposed on the captured person whilst under the water amongst the Cape or Natal Nguni, this aspect is often emphasized amongst the Shona and to some extent by the Khoisan. Aschwanden’s (1989: 191-192), Daneel’s (1971: 129) and Gelfand’s (1964: 62) informants emphasized that whilst under water the initiate is obliged to eat mud and refrain from accepting ‘good’ food, especially fish or “mash made from pumpkins” (Daneel, 1971: 129), even if offered. Failure to adhere to such requirements will see the abducted person never being returned to the living. Lilford notes that Tagwirei’s text *Dziva reNjuzu* (1980) also stresses these restrictions, suggesting that eating the watery mud (and maggots) is a test or ‘rite of passage’ for the victim (Lilford, 1996: 3). There is also a suggestion that eating food other than mud (or maggots) will make the abducted individual too attached to the underwater world and he/she will desire to stay there. Hoff’s /Xam informants mentioned that a person abducted underwater would form an attachment to the Water Snake and keep “longing for the water” even after being returned to the land. Hoff states that she was told that “such a person was used to the food of the snake, such as grass and

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21 This description fits all the pools that I have visited for ritual purposes in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.
flowers” (Hoff, 2007: 42). For this reason after his/her return from the water the initiate would have to stay secluded with a /gi:xa (initiated healer) for several months, whilst undergoing treatment to break the desire to return to the water. Leeuwenberg’s account also mentions certain food taboos, particularly fish, as this was regarded as an insult to the fish-tailed divinities. The story tells of how the mother of the abducted girl had previously warned her of how to behave should she be taken by the watermeide: “If they ask you: “What will you eat, fish or meat?” you must say “I eat neither, give me bread to eat”. If you ask for fish or meat, it will be certain death to you, as the Waterwomen are half fish, half flesh, they would think that you would want to eat them” (Leeuwenberg, 1970: 146; see Appendix Seventeen).

3.4.2.5 Summary

The evidence from these documented sources suggests that the water divinities are regarded ambivalently, with a combination of fear, awe, and desirability. The fear and awe is provoked mainly from the fact that they hold the power to determine one’s fate and if chosen to be a diviner there is little one can do to resist. When they take people underwater this fear is heightened as relatives may break the codes of conduct prohibiting mourning and crying, with the result that the person called may never return alive. There is also the fear that the relatives will fail to perform the correct rituals for the victim on his/her return from the water. On the other hand what these entities seem to offer in the way of gifts and skills are highly desirable. Beyond the more positive social and spiritual goals of healing the afflicted, they have the potential to attract fame and wealth to the home, but this may come at a price. I will discuss this issue further in Chapters Seven and Eight.

The question of why the taboo on crying exists can first be considered at an emic level. Informants report that the water divinities will feel ‘begrudged’ or ‘angered’ at the relatives’ reluctance to allow their loved ones the opportunity to serve a higher social need – that of gaining knowledge and medicines in order to heal the living. Rather than begrudging such gifts, the relatives should make offerings in exchange for the return of the loved one. The symbolic significance of this is intriguing as it emphasises the fundamental principles of reciprocity and exchange that generate and sustain the processes of social interaction in this world. It seems that these reciprocal relations apply equally between this world and the world of spirit, or the underworld (Godelier, 1999). I will consider this principle of exchange in more
detail later in the thesis. Grieving and mourning also symbolise the recognition of death which is an irreversible transition from the world of physicality to that of spirit. As such this act negates any possibility that the one who has been taken can return. The taboo on eating seems to be more about testing the restraint and strength of the initiate him/herself. Most reports suggest an idyllic world exists underwater and ‘tasting the food’, other than mud, maggots or, in Leuwenberg’s account, bread, will lead to the overwhelming temptation for the initiate to remain.

3.4.3 Codes of conduct: methods employed to gain the release of the initiate

If a person disappears underwater there seems to be a common agreement in the accounts that the relatives should immediately consult a diviner before assuming it is a drowning or initiating any further action. Accidental drowning is thus regarded as a possibility and not all disappearances under water are regarded as callings. If the diviner determines that it is a calling the relatives are expected to restrain themselves from any rash actions, such as grieving or sending out search parties, and should appeal to the ancestors through the brewing of beer or offering of gifts to indicate that they assent to the calling of the one taken (Hammond-Tooke, 1975; Hirst: 1997), and to encourage his/her safe return. They then have to wait patiently, searching for a sign of their loved one’s pending return.

A commonly performed ritual done by the relatives either to persuade the water divinities to release the captured individual, or to thank them for his/her successful return, is the offering of a cow and/or goat. In some instances the victim will have received dreams prior to his immersion indicating the colour of the cow/goat necessary (colour symbolism is very important) for sacrifice. Indeed the ancestors are believed to facilitate the process by which the prospective initiate obtains the desired animals. The account given on Baba’s calling (see Section 3.4) is an example of how this can come about.

If the family are not sure which colour beast is to be sacrificed a common method is to drive a herd of cattle to the pool in which the victim disappeared and the chosen beast would be the one that walks the furthest into the water. A qualified diviner must usually do this; for example Laubscher notes:
..but it happens at times that the one called will outstrip his pursuers and plunge straight into a deep pool. As soon as this happens they quickly return to the kraal to tell the others and to warn them not to weep, for if anyone weeps, he will surely be killed. The isanuse (diviner) is immediately called. He, with all the people of the kraal driving their cattle in front of them, proceed to the pool. The cattle are driven into the pool and the one that goes the farthest is selected by the River People. This beast is slaughtered at the side of the pool, the flesh is cut into sections and thrown into the water (Laubscher 1937: 3).

Laubscher also describes in some detail the dancing and music that takes place on the banks of the river, performed by the related kin, the chief diviner (isanuse) and affiliated novice diviners. Hammond-Tooke has given a very similar account for the Mpondomise (1975b), and the Bhaca (1962), who live over 500 kilometres to the north of Laubscher’s Cape Nguni informants, who resided near Port Elizabeth. Hammond-Tooke notes:

If they call (bizo) a person into the water they keep him at their home for one or two days and, if those of his home do not bring an offering in the form of a dark beast, they kill him and let him float to the surface. Cattle should be driven into the water where he disappeared. One of the beasts sinks and the victim comes to the surface alive. The victim may not be able to remember all that happened, but he will always talk of the kindness of the River People and their beautiful country where not a drop of water falls (Hammond-Tooke, 1975b: 21).

There is a slight variation in the role of cattle being driven into the water in another account given to Hammond-Tooke by the Bhaca diviner Manyoni,

When she regained the bank she found herself in the midst of a large herd of cattle. She learnt later that they been driven to the river by her husband who thought that she had been taken by ichanti (a legendary river snake believed to claim victims who can only be saved by driving cattle into the river). She explained it thus: ‘When the first beast entered the water it passed water, and after that all the cattle were forced to do so, so that the water was dirty and the snake could not see me’ (Hammond-Tooke 1962: 312-313).

Strangely Hirst’s informants make no mention of any animal sacrifice that is required. In the

22 These are presumably those relatives etc who are trying to restrain him.

23 Hammond-Tooke does not consider the symbolic significance of why the cow’s urine dirties the water, and this is the only record that I came across regarding this.
account given by Tyota only *ubulawu* is beaten, and beer and white beads are offered.

Pamela Reynolds (1996) has documented the testimony of a renowned diviner-healer, Chihata, from the Makota area of Zimbabwe. Chihata who was born in Mozambique before coming to Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), was called at a young age. In the following account, which contains all the key elements, a goat is used to facilitate the girl’s return from the water,

Soon after arriving in the country Chihata fell ill and began to dream of flying and then dropping into the river. The dream recurred frequently. She told her parents the dream and they consulted diviners who said she would be “collected” (possessed) one day...She began to dream of plants and to heal. But, she says, she was a wild, naughty child and resented the idea of healing... To stop her being rude and naughty the spirits made her ill. At the age of about thirteen the *njuzu* (river) spirits decided to end her nonsense and make her treat willingly by taking her beneath the water. While she was fishing in the Magaba River with a friend, the spirits caused a whirlwind to pull her in, and they kept her for four days. Her friend called the family and her mother began to cry. She was quickly told to stop because if you cry for one taken by the *njuzu* they will never allow the person to return. Senior diviners were called and a ritual was held on the river bank. Drums were played and a female goat was thrown in the water. After four days one of the diviners, called Mutukumirwa, saw the child on a rock in the river. He swam to her and found beside her a small axe (*kana*), a shell-like white ornament (*ndara*), and a cowrie-shell headband (*mbanda*). Once out of the river she vomited fish24 and did not eat for two days. Then a *bira* (ritual feast) was held. Thereafter she treated conscientiously. She is the tenth person in her family to be possessed by a healing shaved (Reynolds, 1996:117-118).

Gelfand (1964) also cites a case from Zimbabwe regarding the calling underwater of a renowned *nganga*, Chiremba,

Chiremba had gone to a pool, called Bedzanyaya, to quench his thirst in the company of some girls. When he dipped his calabash into the water, some hidden force attracted him towards the water and as the waters engulfed him he was drawn headlong to the bottom of the pool. When he regained his feet he found himself in a village peopled with incarnate spirits: the realm of the immortal dead. He proceeded to the *dare* (meeting place) of the subterranean village and sat down, as befitted one from a strange country. He was fed with mud and generally made to feel at home, and was then given a hut in which to rest. 

While everyone in his real village slept, Chiremba’s brother, Watepepa, who believed his brother to be drowned, dreamed and heard a voice saying: ‘Come, bring hither a

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24 In this account the girl did eat fish while underwater, and yet she was still returned.
fine ox and drive it into our pool that we may restore to you your brother, Chiremba. Your brother is not dead. He is alive but is nourishing himself on mud taken from the floor of our abode.' Everyone decided that the dream was a good omen, so the family drove the ox to the pool and with many heavy blows forced it into the water. As it disappeared beneath the surface accompanied by the beating of drums and the shrilling of women, their brother Chiremba rose out of the water, sitting cross-legged and beating the medicine drum. He had qualified as a great doctor (Gelfand, 1964: 62-63).

While Gelfand gives the above account and another similar one, which he obtained from other written sources, he notes that he himself had never met a nganga who had claimed to have been taken underwater.

Makhwela, one of Köhler’s Zulu informants, also indicates that when an isangoma ‘goes to the sea’ (alluding to an underwater experience) he returns in an state of altered consciousness which can be corrected by ‘a goat’ that is taken (i.e. the sacrifice of a goat),

An isangoma often goes about without the people of his village knowing of it. Sometimes he goes to the sea, and his relatives, not knowing where he has gone, seek him until they find him when he has returned home of his own accord. When he comes back thus, he will never tell whence he came, he will barely have entered the hut when he falls down and faints. Then a goat is taken and they awaken him with it (Köhler, 1941: 16).

With regard to the hunter-gatherer San groups such as the /Xam, most sources put emphasis on efforts to placate the Water Snake to not take a victim under water (see Hoff, 1997: 30-31; Hoff, 2007: 34-38), or to return a person who has been taken (Lange, 2007: 16, 26). The narratives collected by Mary Lange (2007: 28, 29, 32) from the Khoe descendents in the Upington area, suggest that the offering of a cow or goat was a recognised means by which a person could be returned alive from the water. However, most accounts emphasise the use of the aromatic buchu plant to pacify the Water Snake or Water Bull. In the account given to Leeuwenburg (1970) of the young girl who was taken under water it seems that the ‘Waterwoman’ (mermaid) was enticed to relinquish the girl after certain ground herbs were sprinkled on the water. Although the type of herb was not specified it was probably buchu, since, according to Hoff’s and Lange’s informants, these plants are used to placate the Water

25 Gelfand obtained this account from Reverend A Burbridge (nd), Native Affairs Department Annual, 8: 85. He notes that the word Chiremba is now synonymous with nganga.
Snake because of their pleasant smell (*ibid*). Hoff’s informants also mentioned the use of a variety of other plants as pacifiers; these being, the branches of the wild olive tree, and two unidentified water plants, referred to as *kalmus* and water rushes (Hoff, 2007: 38). It seems that the role of placating the Water Snake was one of the primary functions of the ‘water doctors’, the !kwa-ka !gi:ten, as well as retrieving those who had been taken underwater. Hoff states “Among both the Khoekhoen and /Xam a doctor is asked to determine by means of divination whether the vanished person has been caught by the Water Snake. The doctor then retrieves the victim. This was one of the most important functions of a doctor” (Hoff, 1997: 32). Hoff’s informants also mentioned that a goat with a spot on its forehead would sometimes be taken to the pool where a person had submerged and “if accepted by the Water Snake, (the goat) walked in of its own accord” (Hoff, 2007: 41). In Hoff’s 2007 publication, in which she concentrates on the role of the !kwa-ka !gi:ten among the /Xam, she makes brief mention of an animal sacrifice being done at the pool when it is claimed that an initiate is introduced to the Water Snake by her trainer (a !gi:xa). She states,

As a final test the !gi:xa sent the initiate unaccompanied to the water. It had to be a fountain which was “alive and aggressive” and which had been “treated so that it would not be vicious”. This test had to prove to the !gi:xa that the initiate would in future be able to work at any fountain without being caught by the Snake.

According to Tittie [an informant] a goat or goats with red and black heads were slaughtered and their heads thrown into the water. All the meat had to be eaten by the initiate and the !gi:xa, while the bones, stomach, offal and skin were thrown into the water (Hoff, 2007: 20).

### 3.4.3.1 Summary

As I have already observed in the previous section, within the cosmology of the groupings concerned, the expectations on the family following the calling of an initiate under water contains the inherent assumptions embedded in a system of reciprocity and exchange. Although unsolicited, the calling itself should be regarded as an honour, whereby the spirit world gives gifts and skills to the chosen individual, who will later return to help the living. The return of the initiate should thus be appropriately recognised by the living through an act of reciprocity. It is this principle of exchange and the benefits and obligations that result, within the dictates of the broader moral economy, that provides insight into why the relationship established between the water divinities and the living beneficiaries may be
understood to assume a more malevolent aspect in certain instances. I will return to this point in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Among the Bantu groups (Nguni and Shona speakers) the most common offering is a live domesticated animal, a goat, a cow or bull. The importance of cattle sacrifice for agropastoralist groups such as the Nguni speakers is widespread and of paramount importance for the final initiation of diviners. A diviner whose family has not performed a cattle sacrifice is not entitled to become a teacher and trainer of others, even if he/she has powerful abilities of divination. If a person is believed to have been seized and taken to the underwater world then the only way that their life can be secured and returned is through the giving of another life (the ‘life for a life’ principle). As I have noted, among the Khoisan groups it appears that the water-divinities are enticed to release the victim through the use of plant medicines, rather than through entering into reciprocal life-for-life gift exchange. Although there is some mention from /Xam and Khoekhoe descendants that stock may be sacrificed for the Water Snake (see above), it was not a strategy that was emphasised by them. As blood sacrifice of domesticated stock was not found among the hunter-gatherer groups, such as the /Xam, it is possible that these contemporary accounts given by /Xam descendants have been influenced by diffusion of ideas from the Nguni or Khoekhoe groups who they now cohabit with. It is these differences, however, that could offer insights into how a complex of core ideas may adapt to accommodate local cultural cosmologies and practices.

3.4.4 Core symbols

3.4.4.1 Messenger animals

A recurring theme found throughout all the literature pertains to the role of various animals, insects, crustacea or reptiles in the calling of the person underwater, or in notifying their relatives of the person’s immanent emergence from the water. Certain creatures encountered in the underwater realm also recur across the different ethnic groups. They include the snake or python, the water monitor (leguuan), the hippopotamus, the dolphin, the otter, the crab, the frog, the brown fly and certain other insects, and certain birds. The account below is from
Berglund’s informant in Natal. This particular informant (who was a ‘ventriloquist’\(^{26}\)) suffered the symptoms of *ukuthwasa* prior to the experience.

I was very sick, having dreamt much for many nights. The body was painful everywhere, especially the shoulders and the sides. The whole body was in sickness.

On a certain day, in the evening, I was sitting in the doorway. Just sitting there, there came a beetle (*umsifisi*). It came closer. It was white. It came closer and closer until it was next to me. I heard it saying certain words. It said, ‘Stand up! Follow me! Stand up! (*Sukuma! Ngilandele!*)’ It was saying these words very much, flying around about me. It spoke those words until I stood up. It flew in a certain direction, calling me all the time. I followed it. I walked and walked, following the beetle which was calling me all the time, saying the same words...... It was flying in front. I was walking behind. I felt strong. The energy returned to the bones. I even followed running. I was amazed, finding myself running but being such a sick man. The beetle flew to a certain pool, all the time calling me. I followed it to the pool. It entered the pool, all the time saying to me, ‘Ngilandele!’ I walked on the stones in the pool until I came to the bottom, all the time following the beetle. There I stopped, I looked everywhere, seeing many things. I saw a very great python (*inhlwathi*) coiled on medicines. It was surrounded by many other snakes, big ones and small ones. They were the snakes of our fathers...... There was also a lady there with very big breasts, suckling the children of the python. There were many children of the python. It (the python) put spittle (*amathe*) into the woman. She became pregnant and gave birth, producing the children of the snake (Berglund, 1976: 140-141).

It seems that different people have different types of messenger creatures that are believed to summon them or warn them of an impending calling\(^{27}\), but the snake and woman encountered whilst underwater remain fairly consistent. In Tyota’s account in the Eastern Cape, two Nile monitors (*Varanus niloticus*) followed him like pet dogs one day when he was walking in the veldt and these were seen as a sign of his pending calling to the river. It was not long after his encounter with the monitors that he was taken under water (Hirst, 1997: 224). The River Myth (see Appendix Six for the full myth) specifies the role of the messengers that call the chosen individual. It also emphasises the encounter with a large snake and a woman. The latter is described later in the narrative as being half fish – half woman.

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\(^{26}\) These are the diviners that communicate with the *amakhosi*limilazi or whistling spirits. Previous scholars (Berglund, 1976; Callaway, 1970) have attributed their divination methods to an ability to project sounds using ventriloquism and in so doing increase their credibility with clients. I discuss the whistling spirits in more detail in Section 3.4.6.1 of this chapter.

\(^{27}\) For instance in the ‘Great Dream’ narrated to Köhler by diviner informant A.M.N. a white bird flew into her house at night and this signalled her being taken to the river (Appendix Three).
When you belong to the river, you are called to the river, not by accident, but because you have been called by the ancestors. Because you are going to become a diviner. I am not talking about drowning. It happens that you are not thinking of going to the river with your clothes on. You go to the river as if by magic, undressing as though you are going to swim, but you are out of your mind. What happens to you first is that a brown fly sticks on to your forehead. That is the one that is calling you when you are being called to the river. Where you enter there is a path by which you go into the river. You do not enter just anyhow when you are called here. You do not drown; you go in and you do not die. You [would] die if a complaint comes from your people when it is heard that you are in the river. . . . . When you enter there, you pass a big oval grindstone containing the white clay called ifutha, which is smeared on the face and body by diviners. When you have gone past there, you will see a snake. There is a snake which resides in that place. Beyond the snake, there are medicines which have been spread out. These are spread out on rushes (imizi). Beyond the rushes, there is a human being, an old woman, wearing a girdle round her waist, who lives there. She will come to see you to inquire what you want here. Now this old woman is the one who initiates diviners at the river. The snake is a messenger that kills. It kills you if you are a person who does not belong in the river, or if there has been a complaint [from your kinsfolk] . . . . That old woman is a human being in the upper part of the body and a fish in the lower part. Her hair reaches her back, and her skin is a scaly covering with no flesh on it. . . . She is a person of the river. This old woman is the one who resides in the river. She is the female diviner of that place who has favoured you when you have met the ancestors of the river (Hirst, 1997: 229-230).

Although the 'myth' emphasises a brown fly as being responsible for taking the person to the water, alternative accounts do not endorse that this is always the case. It is also relevant that in the account of his own experience Tyota did not mention a brown fly sticking on his forehead, but spoke of a bright light that emitted from the Kowie River, putting him into trance. He also makes no mention of what he experienced or encountered underwater, merely that he found himself back on the bank covered in white clay. In his analysis of the River Myth Hirst comments on the water birds that go to the home of the relatives to warn them to start the preparation of beer as an offering to the spirits of thanks for the return of the initiate from the water (Hirst, 1990: 222-223). It was this that made him suggest that the messenger animals act as symbols for ritual action.

The key 'symbols' of the snake and the mermaid appear to occur in most accounts. As they are very important I will deal with these two 'symbols' separately in more detail in the next

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28 All accounts concur that the initiate enters the water naked.
chapter, particularly as they relate to my own dreams and experiences and to the diviners’ responses to them. Occasionally crocodiles feature as significant creatures involved in the calling. Aschwanden’s account of Salani’s submersion in Zimbabwe (see Appendix Eleven) emphasises both the role of the crocodile and the snake. Ashwanden however suggests that the crocodile symbol is sometimes viewed negatively by Karanga informants as it is often linked to witchcraft; however the snake is regarded in a positive light (Aschwanden, 1989: 190-193).

Far to the south among the Mpondo people, a region where crocodiles no longer occur, Hunter has noted that the crocodile is sometimes seen as responsible for the calling of individuals. She states:

The idea of persons being ‘called’ into a pool by a crocodile which some believe to be the messenger of ‘the People of the River’ (abantu base mlanjeni) who, some say, are really ancestral spirits, is common in town, as in country. One day a child was drowned in a pond near the location. It was said: ‘He was called.’ A diviner living permanently in town told how once as a boy of 13 in the country he had been drawn into a river.

“I was playing on the bank with five other boys. Suddenly I stared into two burning eyes. I undressed hastily, and went into the river up to my neck. When I got into the deepest part I turned and waved to my companions. They had the presence of mind to throw stones into the deep water ahead of me. At that time I was looking straight at the ‘animal of the river’. When my companions threw stones it winked, and I was able to come back. It looks like a crocodile” (Hunter, 1961: 488, my emphasis).

It is possible that the words ‘like a crocodile’ here were used by the informant as the closest description he could think of to depict what he had claimed to have encountered29. Unfortunately Hunter does not mention whether this individual had ever seen a live crocodile before, from which to draw his analogy. The description of being drawn into the water by a creature that has ‘two burning eyes’ (or a shining light on its forehead) fits with the claims of many others who have had similar encounters. The bright light is often what puts them into a trance state and I describe this phenomenon in more detail in the following chapter (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.2.1). The narrator of this tale also claims he was able to resist being taken underwater by the actions of his companions who broke the ‘animal’s trance-inducing stare by throwing stones at it.

Many of the accounts that come from the southern Cape regions have detailed description of

29 He could have also been making reference to a teguana or water monitor.

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the dry habitat which the *abantu bomlambo* (the River People) inhabit. Access to these ‘other-worlds’ is very often described as being through channels on the river bank, or in sealed underwater caves. The water monitor (or leguaan) features strongly in many of these descriptions and his task is often to collect the cow dung from the land to bring to the River People who use it to line the floors of their abodes. It believed that the ancestors or spirits of the water live in a dry area at the bottom of these pools and they have a very similar life style to people living on earth *i.e.* they have houses, cattle, chickens *etc.* and they are prosperous, peaceful and happy. In fact they lead an idyllic life. For instance, a Tembu patient who claimed to have gone underwater told Laubscher “There were beautiful huts decorated with paintings in coloured clay, of flowers and animals. There were kraals full of cattle and fowls and dogs were roaming between the huts. The people, with long hair, were half human and half fish” (Laubscher, 1937: 6). Thandiswa similarly described the underwater world in positive terms. According to Thandiswa she was told by her great aunt who went underwater in the Peddie area that this was her “real home”. The house was similar to those on earth “with cows and houses, but she could not tell anymore to us. She was very happy [while underwater]. She said that her real home had animals, lions and elephants, lots of animals but they were all friendly. Even the snakes were her friends in this home” (Roadnight, 2008: 18).

### 3.4.4.2 The cattle from the water

Regarding the cows and small stock that the River People keep, there is a fair amount of consistency in reports among the Cape Nguni groups. Not only do they have fine herds of stock ‘on the other side’ but these beasts are able to emerge out of the water and mingle with, or even impregnate, the stock belonging to the living (Hammond-Tooke, 1975b: 27)\(^3\). Elliott was also told that the ‘river people’ come out of the water with their animals at night and it was for that reason that many of the Cape Nguni are reluctant to go near rivers or the sea after dark (Elliott, 1972: 99).

In the Balase area of the Inxu River in Mpondomise territory, there is a well known clan that is strongly associated with the *abantu bomlambo*. This is the Njuza clan, and it is said that they

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30 The Xhosa Cattle killing (see Appendix Nineteen), fuelled by the belief that the ancestors would return with fat beasts from the deep pools and the sea, reflects the potency of this belief.
have the only type of stock in the region of a certain colour and pattern. It is believed that these unique animals were born as a result of an 'underwater bull', the *inkomo yomlambo* that came out of the water and mated with their cows. Similarly in the Bushman’s River area 600 km to the south, Zweli gave me an account of a mystery bull that impregnated the cows in his father’s herd of cattle (after he had allegedly been spitefully denied access to a farmer’s bull to mate with his cows by fellow workers). After impregnating the cows, which subsequently gave birth to beautiful calves, Zweli describes how it was later seen descending and disappearing into a pool on the Bushmen’s River.

3.4.4.3 Nakedness and white clay

Many of the accounts also emphasise the need for the one who is called to be naked on entering the water. Although no explanations are offered for this it is possible that the symbolism of nakedness is linked to the idea that on going underwater to the land of spirit, beyond the realm of culture and its artefacts, the initiate crosses the threshold that separates life from death. In so doing he/she can only go in the natural state. The return is symbolic of rebirth, a return from the world of nature and of spirit (nakedness) to the world of physicality and culture (clothed). The symbolic white clay that the initiate has to smear on his/her body symbolises a state of purity at birth. The white clay also resembles *vernix caseosa*, the creamy white substance that covers a new born baby emerging from the waters of the womb. As infants are born to us as gifts from the ancestors, their whiteness at birth is identified directly with the whiteness and purified state of the ancestors. The above interpretations were emphasised by Berglund’s informant who claimed to have gone underwater (Berglund, 1976: 149).

The colour white is a very important symbol in Zulu and Cape Nguni thought and represents the most positive and life-giving force of the three colours involved in healing, that is the white-red-black triad, that have been comprehensively analysed by Harriet Ngubane (1977: 113-139; see also Turner, 1967). Unlike the equivocal colours red and black, white is regarded by the Nguni groups as unequivocally good, representing light, clarity, goodness, purity, health, coolness and fertility (Ngubane, 1977). It is the colour associated with the beneficent

31 Interview conducted by Mr David Wopula with Mamqoba (wife of a Njuza man) near Umnga (04-05-2002).
ancestors (ibid)\textsuperscript{32} and neophyte diviners frequently besmear themselves with white clay (ifutha). Whiteness in this state represents what Ngubane refers to as “excessive goodness or excessive power” (ibid: 96) and this can signify a person is in a vulnerable marginal situation or liminal state (Hirst, 1997) who must be protected from contamination by darkness or blackness (umnyama). The smearing of white clay on the body while underwater is a significant feature and symbol in all the Nguni accounts, which does not appear in the accounts from further north. Köhler’s, Berglund’s, Broster’s, Elliott’s, Hammond-Tooke’s and Hirst’s informants emphasise the importance of the smearing of the white clay on the initiate’s body and the fact that it has to be obtained by lifting or confronting the snake. Many of Köhler’s informants emphasised this feature of the underwater experience. Sikhambana for instance stated,

One may have a dream and upon awaking will get up and go to the river; he enters the water and goes straight to where the snake called ixhanti is. The ixhanti stays at the bottom of a pool where there is some earth, white like paper. He moves the snake aside and takes some of the earth and brings it home. With it he smears the dish out of which he eats medicines, and also besmears his face and body with it. He also mixes the white earth with his medicines (Köhler, 1941: 17 para 64).

Another Zulu informant, the old diviner M.J.D., corroborated this stating that when an ithwasa sleeps, “he dreams of his ancestors who are dead, who take him down into a pool in a river; there they paint him with white earth” (Köhler, 1941: 17-18).

In the Eastern Cape Thandiswa, who was witness to her mother’s aunt’s disappearance (see 3.4.2.2) described how on her return “She was dressed in white, white duka [headscarf], white shawl, white skirt and she was wearing white beads around her neck. She had white clay (ifutha) on her face. All of these things the river people had given to her. She did not have any of these things before she went under the water” (Roadnight, 2008: 18). Although she makes no mention of her aunt being naked on submersion it is of interest that she returns fully clothed.

Among the Cape Nguni white clay is directly associated with the water divinities, and being

32 Berglund’s evidence also agrees with this. For instance, on questioning why the python lay on white clay “the diviner very clearly and definitely identified the whiteness of the clay with the shades” (Berglund, 1976: 144).
smeared in white clay is a key marker of divinership and especially symbolic of the novice stage\(^\text{33}\). When supplicants make offerings at the sea or various pools and river sites they always smear their faces with white clay (*ifutha*) as a sign of 'agreement' and respect for the water divinities (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4 for more details on river rituals in the Eastern Cape).

A distinctive cosmetic practice used by contemporary Xhosa-speaking woman is still widely practiced and this derives from symbols associated with the river spirits. During cultural events women often decorate their faces with a variety of attractive patterns using white clay spots. Ordinary clay (*dongwe*), itself is seen to hold great power and potential, because of its link to the river divinities. In the Hogsback e-Hala region in the Eastern Cape, Morrow and Vokwana (2001; 2003) have researched the cosmology surrounding the making of sun-dried clay figurines and have indicated that as symbol, clay has a highly ambivalent status. They draw on the more popular (and sinister) representations of the snake/mermaid entities, *iChanti*, *uMamlambo*, and the Inkanyamba snakes\(^\text{34}\) to argue why clay assumes such a mixed reception.

It is of interest to note that a clay modeller confided to Felicity Wood that the inspiration for the *uMamlambo* dragon models that are commonly fashioned by him and his colleagues, has been drawn from the ubiquitous dragon symbols adorning the residences and buildings of some of the more Bohemian European population in the area. She notes:

I asked one group of artists if they based their models on descriptions of *inkanyamba* that they had received from their elders and they looked at me in amazement. *Inkanyamba*\(^\text{35}\) is invisible, they told me. No one has seen *inkanyamba*. Then where, I persisted, did they get their ideas from? For Zithobile Mona, Sandile Nqweniso and Nash Xwembe, it was a noticeboard at Hobbiton, featuring a picture of a dragon. (Pictures of Smaug, the dragon from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, have influenced the Hobbiton image) (Wood, 2000: 86).

While this excerpt may serve as a caution against making simplistic assumptions regarding certain symbolic images, it must be remembered that it is the complex of associated ideas that

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33 The Cape Nguni call the state of *ukuthwasa* and the calling that leads up to it 'white sickness' (*ingula emhlopho*) (Luck, 2000).

34 For a discussion on *iChanti* and *uMamlambo* as evil entities refer to Chapter Seven, Section 7.2.

35 *Inkanyamba* is seen as the force behind destructive tornadoes.
is important, rather than just one symbolic representation.

3.4.4.4 Summary

Messenger animals that are held to call a person to the water are core elements that recur in many of the experiences recorded. Although the type of animal may differ between different individuals their roles are essentially the same. They are responsible for the calling of the individual to the water, and could be seen as being responsible for putting the individual into a trance state. Whilst underwater the person encounters many creatures but the most important and frequently mentioned is a large snake, and a breastfeeding lady who some specify has a fish tail. In some accounts she is directly linked with the teaching of skills in healing, while in others this is the role of the snake. This lady can be seen to symbolise the regenerative powers of life. The messenger animals are also often responsible for escorting the initiate out of the underwater realm. I will explore the symbolism of these various creatures when I examine them in more detail in the next chapter.

The significance of white clay, especially among the Nguni groups, is important as its symbolic meaning indicates that the water divinities are seen as linked with the goodness and purity of whiteness, and all its other connotations. They are thus regarded as positive and life giving forces.

3.4.5 Hereditary connections

It is very evident that the potential to be called under the water is strongly linked to one’s ancestry. Many informants, who are associated with the water divinities, including the few who are regarded as having been taken under the water, and those who are anticipating it as a result of a dream, claim to have had ancestors who went underwater in the past, be this in a dream or as in physical immersion. From the evidence I have obtained the majority of these inherit such a tendency from the maternal side. However, this is not always the case. Figures 2, 3 and 4 depict the genealogical links of Baba, Zanele, and Thandiswa in relation to other members of their family group who have either been called under the water to be healers, or who have been prophets, or have had encounters with the water divinities in one form or another. In Chapter Eight I discuss the similarities between prophets and diviners and note how becoming a prophet of the church may be an alternative to becoming an isangomaliqirha. In the cases of figures 2-4 all reveal a preponderance of relatives who can
trace their calling through the maternal line.

**Figure 2: Baba’s genealogical chart tracing diviner callings**

1. Baba – called underwater at sea near Durban.
3. Maternal uncle (MB) – saw the Snake near Mooi River, managed to evade the light from eyes (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.3).
5. Baba’s maternal grandmother (MM) born 1987 – saw the Snake near Estcourt (KZN) but escaped (see account Chapter Four, Section 4.3.3).
6. Baba’s maternal grandmother’s maternal aunt (MMMZ) – called underwater by Snake.

**Figure 3: Zanele’s genealogical chart tracing diviner callings**

1. Zanele – isangoma; had a dream of being taken by the Snake.
2. Maternal aunt (MZ) – isangoma; called through hayisa.
4. Mother’s maternal aunt (MMZ) – called underwater for 7 days near Umbumbulo.
5. Mother’s maternal grandmother (MMM) – visited by python that was then killed – died soon thereafter.
6. Mother’s paternal grandfather (MFF) – isangoma and prophet.
1. Thandiswa – ithwasa; dreams of mermaids and snakes.
3. MZD – igqirha; encounter with abantu bomlamba.
4. MBD – igqirha; encounter with abantu bomlamba.
5. MMZ – igqirha; called underwater.
6. MMZ – had dream of being called underwater, called to be igqirha but refused – went mad as result.
7. MMF – herbalist.

Figure 4: Thandiswa’s genealogical chart tracing diviner callings.

1. Zweili – ithwasa; had encounter with abantu bomlamba as a child.
2. Father – igqirha.
3. FF – prophet.
4. FFZ – taken underwater and features in Zweili’s dreams, linked with his calling.
5. FFZ – igqirha.
6. FFM – igqirha (Mpondo)
7. FFF – igqirha.
8. FFFM – igqirha (Sotho).

Figure 5: Zweili’s genealogical chart tracing diviner callings.
Although Zweli (Figure 5) emphasised the healing skills as coming predominantly from his father’s side, on closer examination it seems that this may have been passed through the maternal side in the previous generations. There is also a possibility that he could have also inherited the tendency from his mother, a Thembu woman who also came from a family of diviners (he gave no details on her). While his agnatic line is descended from Cirha, a former Mpondomise king, his genealogy is instructive in that it shows a fair degree of intermarriage between different groups. His great-great grandmother on his father’s side was a Sotho diviner and both her son and his wife, who was Mpondo, were diviners. It was the latter’s daughter, Nomphoselwa, who was reputedly taken underwater and became a very powerful diviner. Zweli explained that as Nomphoselwa had no children she chose her favoured nephew Fengu (Zweli’s father) to pass on her knowledge. He argues that it was also Nomphoselwa’s spirit that put pressure on Zweli to become a diviner (Luck, 2000: 42-44).

Hammond-Tooke agrees that the tendency to becoming a diviner is passed through the maternal ancestors (1975b: 32), but Hirst disagrees by insisting that for the Xhosa inheritance of such power is traced only through the patriline. One must be mindful that this insistence may be because it fits with his argument that the whole complex of ideas, including the River Myth itself, is a cleverly orchestrated expression of the symbolic power held by the patrilineal exogamous group among the Cape Nguni. In acknowledgement to Hirst, however, it is true that the Cape Nguni put considerable emphasis on their patrilineal ancestry (Hammond-Tooke, 1985) especially when it comes to the training of members called to be diviners as well as to issues of rank, identity and unity, which are essential concerns during family rituals (Luck, 2000).

My own Zulu informants tend to support Hammond-Tooke’s claim. Baba himself stated that “when you get idlozi from your mother’s line it becomes very strong. My grandmother did not become a thwasa to anyone, but a snake [i.e. her ancestors] worked with her, and then left her a complete healer.” What he is meaning here is that if your divinatory power comes from your

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36 Charles Brownlee, in the mid-nineteenth century observed that among the Cape Nguni “The doctors [i.e. diviners] are women as frequently as men, and the profession is often hereditary. It is supposed that the doctor receives inspiration, and that chiefly from his or her ancestors, and that this inspiration is frequently transmitted from father to son, but chiefly from mother to daughters, after the death of the parent” (Brownlee, 1896:188, my emphasis).
mother’s side it is often so strong that you can be taught directly by your ancestors without being apprenticed to another isangoma.

Similarly an old lady who I interviewed in Nyanga in Zimbabwe, Mrs T, described how her maternal grandmother had almost been taken underwater by a strong wind once when she was crossing the river. She claims she was spared from being taken into the water because she had a baby strapped on her back, however as she had been identified and chosen by the njuzu she had in effect been ‘marked’. As she escaped being taken underwater the spirit (i.e. calling) was passed onto the narrator, her granddaughter Mrs T., whose explanation continues,

It happened to my grandmother i.e. my mother’s mother. The spirit only came to me after I had stayed with my grandmother. I used to wash the cloth she wore when practicing and when she was possessed by the spirit. Anyway my grandmother passed away a long time ago. However let me finish the story. “So when she [her grandmother] was in the centre of the river she thought to herself ‘Should I go back or should I continue?’ But then she realized that where she was going was nearer and proceeded to her uncle’s place. When she arrived there she was very tired and she retired straight to bed. So when she was sleeping, her body and that of the child [that she had been carrying on her back while crossing the river] started developing large pimples37. Her uncle then realized that something had happened to her before she got to his place. Her uncle was very worried and consulted an n’anga who stayed close by. He was told that the gourd that she had ignored back at the river was of significance and that it was meant for her. She should have picked it up. The following morning she went to the river to see if the gourd was still there but it had gone [the gourd contained the healing medicines for her work]. So when she got better she went back home. The spirit started manifesting itself bit by bit and that’s when the spirit got interested in me (Interview January 13th 1999).

According to this account it seems that although the grandmother avoided being taken underwater, and failed to accept the gift offered to her in the river (the gourd of medicines) the spirit still manifested in her over time and was later transmitted to the granddaughter, the narrator, through the close association she had with her grandmother.

Jacobson-Widding has also noted that “Most n’anga who ‘have’ a nzuzu say that they have

37 Skin rashes appear in one of the accounts given to Kohler in KwaZulu-Natal where it was stated, “if a person goes down to the river early in the morning, and walks on a snake’s trail, the whole body breaks out in a rash or it becomes corrupted and full of ugly sores. They say such a person walked on a snake’s track and was “entered by the river”” (Kohler, 1941: 41). Hirst (1990: 218) has also noted that certain skin rashes are linked to the river sickness (umlambo).
'inherited' the \textit{nzuzu} from the dead relative with whom they communicate. The \textit{nzuzu} will inform her medium about medicines, via the spirit of the dead relative” (Jacobson-Widding, 1993: 26). This hereditary link was also observed with the \textit{svikiro} Timothy (who took care of my aged parents) who claimed to have inherited his skills through his father who went underwater.

This perceived hereditary tendency of being called to become a diviner, and/or to be taken underwater poses some interesting questions. If the ability, as Hirst claims, was only passed through the male line in a patrilineal society, such as among the Zulu and Cape Nguni, then a sociological explanation that argues it serves to maintain spiritual control in the patriline, could hold true. However, the evidence seems to point to the fact that inheritance of such skills may come from the father’s or the mother’s side, and that in southern Africa at least, the latter is more common and stronger, even in patrilineal societies.

Although all of the diviners I have interviewed have an ancestral history with such skills it is unclear in the existing literature if one can be called to be a diviner when no history exists\footnote{This may be related to the fact that many scholars failed to see the relevance of such a question and did not pursue it in their interviews.}, although presumably it has to start somewhere. If a history is important then a pertinent question to ask is why I, as a European, sensed and was perceived to have received the calling when I have no known history of diviners in my ancestry. Even if I did have such an ancestry it is unlikely that I would know since such skills have been actively suppressed or misdiagnosed (\textit{i.e.} as insanity) over the last several centuries in Europe. Anecdotal evidence from my mother, however, is that her maternal grandmother was a ‘seer’ who foresaw her own son’s death in a vision. Baba did not pick up on this possible link during divination but claimed that my ‘talent’ rather comes from my maternal grandfather.

\subsection*{3.4.6 Gifts given and abilities imparted to the initiate:}

A common theme found throughout all the accounts are the skills in healing and psychic abilities that seem to be imparted to these people chosen by the water divinities. Some claim they are taught about the secrets of life, healing and medicines, while many claim that after such an experience they make regular visits under the water to obtain the special herbs that are
used for healing. These are provided by the ancestors or the ancestral spirit ‘animals’ (snake and/or mermaid/s) who they encounter whilst under water.

Laubscher notes many of these elements from his interviews with Cape Nguni diviners,

...the *ukutwasa* may be manifested by being called to the River (*ukubizelwa ngomlambo*) by the River People. The doctor may stay for ten days or more with these people underneath the pools. This is where he is taught the secrets of the medicines and gains much wisdom about the hidden mysteries of life. When he returns after several days, with many roots, barks and other herbal medicines and claims to have been with the River People, they know he has obtained much knowledge and is a wise man. He is not questioned about his sojourn ‘neath the deep pools, for if this is revealed he will be called again and killed. Thus his mysterious training underneath the water remains sealed throughout his life. The people merely accept that he has been there because he displays the gift of looking into the future as well as bringing to light hidden things of the past, giving love-charms, healing the sick, telling where stray and stolen cattle may be, knowing the wishes and secrets in the minds of others and, above all, speaking to the departed ancestors. His sojourn with the mysterious River People is like a journey to a distant world, indeed to a treasure house of knowledge, and thus his reputation as a doctor or diviner is greatly enhanced (Laubscher, 1937: 2).

In his analysis of the many *Dzivoa* myths he encountered in Eastern Zimbabwe in the late 1800s, Frobenius (Haberland, 1973) indicates that the water divinities or *njuzu* were seen as providing not only psychic abilities and skills of healing but also technical skills (such as blacksmithing skills) as well as instructions relating to governance. A member of the Barwe group gave him a list of skills and gifts one could obtain from the *Ndusu* (same as *njuzu*). These were,

1. the knowledge of weaving and forging, 2. the knowledge of *makona* (medicines), 3. instructions on how to bury the Mambo (king), 4. instructions on how to offer sacrifices for rain, 5. the knowledge of the *mukuabpassi* (high priest), 6. the *mbira* (musical instrument) and the art of playing it (Frobenius in Haberland, 1973: 199).

The *njuzu* are also especially fond of music and, as suggested above, the *mbira* hand piano is seen as a gift from these water creatures. Many people claim they are taught special songs while they are under water (Reynolds, 1996: 118-119), or during their dreams, that are connected to these water spirit beings.

As in Laubscher’s account above, plant medicines are the most common gifts that are mentioned in many accounts. Sometimes these are described as being spread out on mats near
the snake or the fish-tailed woman (Hirst 1990, 1997), while others claim they may be instructed to pluck the plants off the back of the snake or the crocodile (Aschwanden, 1989). In some cases the medicines appear to be associated with the white clay that the initiate has to remove from underneath the giant snake and smear on his/her body (Berglund, 1976; Köhler, 1941). Rather than white clay, Hoff’s /Xam informants tended to emphasise the symbolic significance of “blue mud” (Hoff, 2007).

In the accounts from Zimbabwe, apart from the plant medicines and knowledge of healing, it is held that additional gifts are given to the person whilst underwater, which are not mentioned among the more southern groups. These include items such as bars of gold, double headed axes and shell bracelets, headbands or necklaces (usually made cowrie or ndoro shells). For instance, Chihata received “a small axe (kano), a shell-like white ornament (ndoro), and a cowrie-shell headband (mbanda)” (Reynolds, 1996: 118). I have not encountered these among the Nguni groups, although it is worth noting that after consulting Baba and the amakhosi about a particular dream I had, he informed me that I had to go to the pool of Dzivaguru in NE Zimbabwe as the spirits wanted to give me some gold (see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1).

Among the various myths and stories of the Khoe groups, there are repeated references to chosen people being given a crystal or sparkling stone and this is sometimes associated with the bright light that shines from the head of the Water Snake. In some of the accounts this stone is taken from the snake by subterfuge or deception (Hoff, 1997, 2007; Schmidt, 1998). According to Hoff’s informants the stone could emit a whistling sound if someone approached with the intention of stealing it, and that securing a stone would confer the holder with special potency and the ability to “see” (Hoff, 2007: 23). Hoff’s informants also referred to a horn that some /khwa-ka lgi:ten (i.e. rain specialists) possessed, conferring on them special powers, that

39 Zimbabwe is famous for its mineral wealth, especially gold and other precious minerals and stones. Ancient mine-workings are found over a large area of the country dating back several millennia.

40 This may be linked to the long history of iron ore smelting and manufacture of iron implements in the region.

41 Zimbabwe is presently a land locked country. However it has had a long history of trading networks with the peoples of the Mozambique coastline, and the most famous trading port that linked the inland gold bearing regions with the coast, Sofala, is less than 200 kilometres from the present Zimbabwe border. According to Linden “The mpande or ndoro shell is a widespread symbol of ritual authority throughout Central Africa” (Linden, 1999: 206).
came from the Water Bull (Hoff, 2007: 22). Hunter referred to the Mpondo stone of Gqoloma (Hunter, 1936/1961: 496) which could bring great luck and wealth to the owner while Hammond-Tooke (1962: 247) recorded the search for the white ubalo stone among the Bhaca. In Zimbabwe I was told by the husband of a woman who was reputedly taken underwater by njuzu that certain small white stones were important gifts. He suggested that the person swallows the stones to tap into their powers (see Appendix Fifteen).

Numerous accounts also mention the spittle, or saliva, which the snake licks onto the initiate that seems to endow the recipient with power, protection, and/or fertility. This was a dominant feature from the one documented case among the Tswana recorded by Schapera (1971: see Appendix 18). Hoff also observed that for the /Xam,

Underwater substances, such as medicinal plants, blue mud and the saliva of the Water Animal, were regarded as exceptionally potent. Persons licked by the Water Animal therefore became extremely potent and could become !khwa-ka !gi:ten. Because of their potency, !khwa-ka !gi:ten could visit the underworld where they could enhance their potency by contact with underworld phenomena and by obtaining underwater medicine (Hoff, 2007: 57).

3.4.6.1 Powers of healing and divination

The healers, such as Baba, who are seen as being called by the water divinities in southern Africa, are widely recognised by their communities as the most powerful of all diviners (Elliott, 1970). Aschwanden noted that,

The Karanga constantly maintained that the njuzu-creatures are stronger and more intelligent than humans, pointing out their experiences with doctors. Those who return safely from the pool possess greater powers than all other people, and this is said to reveal the special strength of the water-creatures (Aschwanden, 1989: 186).

Similarly Elliott observed that “Xhosa from all around flock to consult such a man and ‘will pay anything’ for his services because he knows everything after having been trained by the People of the River. There is no greater witch-doctor than such a man” (Elliott, 1970: 101). The Zulu call them the diviners of the amakhosi amakhulu (the diviners of the great ancestors)

42 In the case she cites it was often wealthy Europeans who were believed to have obtained this after shooting the Snake with the stone on its head.
or those who frequently work with the *imilozi/abalozl*\textsuperscript{43} (whistling spirits) and they are seen as the most accurate with divination. They are called whistling spirit doctors because of their unique way of receiving direct communication with the ancestors through whistles which emanate from the rafters or ceilings of the hut (see Berglund, 1976: 105-106). For instance, when Berglund enquired from the ‘ventriloquist’ why the ancestors communicated in whistles with him, the ‘ventriloquist’ responded “That is the language of the *amakhosi*. They choose it for themselves. I cannot choose for them. They teach me how to interpret what they say” (Berglund, 1976: 105).

Although Ngubane makes only passing reference to this form of divination, that is of the ‘whistling great ancestors’ (*amakhosi amakhulu*), she does state that they are regarded as the highest in the graded scale of divination among Zulu healers and are frequently consulted by chiefs and kings regarding grave matters of state (Ngubane, 1977: 103). Ngubane also mentions that such diviners can charge the highest fees because of their accuracy in divination and their relative scarcity among the population (*ibid*: 104). Wreford (2008) includes a description of the ‘*amakosi*’ (sic) that was given to her by one of her trainers, Dr Kubukeli, which re-affirms their high status. He told her,

> There’s a natural *amakosi, amakosi ndawu, amakosi ndabukho*, well, they don’t cause you to fall down [go into trance]. When they come to talk to you they just make you sit down and then you will talk. Some of them will just whistle up...here (pointing at the ceiling). Yes! (he whistles to illustrate) right inside, those are the *amakosi*, those are the spirits from the river...those are the great spirits from the river (Wreford, 2008: 60)

Some scholars, such as Berglund (1976) and Hunter (1936/1961) refer to such diviners as ventriloquists. Soga also made reference to the *awemilozi* whistling spirits among the amaXhosa, which he also described in terms of ventriloquism, although he did ponder that “It

\textsuperscript{43} The Zulu diviners refer to them as the *amakhosi* and when addressing them salute them with the exclamation *Makhosi!* (Great Ones). They tell me that their proper identity is the *abalozl/balozl* spirits but they refrain from using this name out of respect (*ukuhlonipha*). Living chiefs are also addressed as the *amakhosi*. My Cape Nguni informants refer to them as either the *imilozi* or *oomathatholo*. The term *amakhosi* among the Cape Nguni in the Grahamstown area refers to bad familiar spirits that can be obtained through the use of medicine. They can apparently make a person go mad.
is remarkable how large a number of diviners possess the gift of ventriloquism, and yet it is so rare among ordinary individuals” (Soga, 1931:169). He adds, however, that “such a remarkable accomplishment should be regarded as supernatural, by a great body of people, is understandable” (ibid). Despite this Soga suggested a “great deal of chicanery” probably took place because, according to him, communication with the imilozi took place in darkened huts and clients did not face the diviner (something I did not observe). However, Hunter is more outspoken in her scepticism of such abilities when she claims that in most of the diviner’s art, including with those rare individuals who divine by ventriloquism, “trickery is definitely practiced” (1936/1961: 346). She gives no substantive evidence for her claim, beyond the fact that because these skills are inherited within families, “those who are most skilled have learnt tricks from initiated relatives” (ibid: 346). However Bryant, who also makes reference to the relative rarity and skills of ventriloquist diviners, expresses his doubts about dismissing it as pure trickery.

The one (type of diviner), very rare, is said to be possessed of an umLozi or umLozikazana, that is, a speaking (or rather whistling) spirit. In this case the diviner remains perfectly silent, the spirit itself doing the speaking. Europeans are wont to explain this as mere ventriloquism. And such, indeed it may be; though if it is, it is certainly strange that ventriloquism should remain an idea otherwise absolutely unknown to the ordinary Zulu. Again, ventriloquism would not suffice to explain the phenomenon of the diviners being able to reveal facts otherwise inaccessible to our normal senses (Bryant, 1917: 141).

Callaway’s informant reveals a fair amount on this issue. Callaway translates the amakhosi used in the Zulu text as ‘masters’ and describes the diviners who converse with them as those who work with familiars;

The supposed voice of the familiar spirits is always in a shrill, whistling tone; hence they are called imilozi and he causes them to speak by asking them questions; if he does not understand what they say, they make him understand every thing they see.....if they do not speak, he does not know what they will say; he cannot tell those who come for divination what they will be told (Callaway, 1970: 265-266).

He goes on to say “It is therefore difficult to understand that it is a deception, when we hear many voices speaking with the man who has familiar spirits and him too speaking with them”

44 Charles Brownlee also mentions certain ‘ventriloquist’ diviners that he encountered in Kaffraria in the middle of the nineteenth century (Brownlee, 1896: 188).
(ibid: 267). Hunter also describes a consultation she had with a ‘ventriloquist’ diviner in Grahamstown (Hunter, 1936/1961: 498).

As has already been mentioned Baba communicates with the amakhosi. When he wishes to communicate with them he burns incense (imphepho) and with the aid of his umshoba (the tail of the sacrificed cow) calls on them to reveal the problems affecting the client. Although the whistles are usually heard in response to his summons, there are occasions I have observed that this is not the case, and he has had to abandon a divination session. When Baba communicates with the amakhosi amakhulu the whistles appear to emanate from the rafters of the sacred hut (emakhosini), above the shrine opposite the main doorway, which is regarded as the place where the ancestors reside (umsamo).

Hirst’s informants associated the whistling spirits, or ooNomathotholo, directly with the River People (abantu bomlambo),

Diviners associate the River People in thought and belief with the high-pitched spirit voices, ooNomathotholo, creatures reputedly half human and half animal (fish) which eat the ubulawu of the river, closely associated with diviners (Hirst 1990: 215).

Some of my informants claim they are taught how to interpret the whistles whilst underwater in the land of the ancestors. However, this interpretive ability is apparently also aided by the imbibing of certain herbs (imithi) which are shown to the initiate in his/her dreams45. Whether these are the same as the ‘ubulawu of the river’ that Hirst’s informants refer to I cannot be sure. For the Zulu this is regarded as the final and most important stage of becoming a powerful healer and enables direct communication with the ancestors46. They refer to this stage as ‘being taken up47’ to the amakhosi, or the ‘completion’ of diviner skills, (uthatha amakhosi inyangeni or ukuphula amadlozi/amakhosi kuphelele). For instance, MaDuma stated “I went under water as part of the final stage of my initiation as a sangoma. I had to go there to

45 I had a dream showing me certain unidentified plant leaves that I had to put under my. Baba informed me that this was to obtain the ability to communicate with the amakhosi. However he has still not done this ritual for me. I discuss this problem in more detail in Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.1.

46 This could well be the so-called ‘imphepho’ mentioned by Callaway’s informant who stated “When we say ‘a diviner has not eaten imphepho,’ we speak of reality; imphepho means true knowledge” (1884/1970: 321). This is not the same imphepho species as the one used for incense.

47 In the sense that it is a higher grade of communication with the great ancestors.
fetch the *abalozi*, the whistles.” Many healers never reach this final stage and such individuals who can communicate in this way are relatively rare. Even in the mid-nineteenth century Callaway’s informant noted how few healers were completing this final stage.

Among diviners of the present time [1860s] there is no longer any clear evidence that they are diviners; and we now say, they have not eaten *imphepho*, and we call them *amabuda*, that is, things which do not speak the truth (Callaway, 1970: 321).

Sikumbana, one of Köhler’s informants, describes the process of divination through what he calls the *imilozi* thus,

This is done with the medicines of the ancestor spirits. These are medicines used to make the diviners vomit, so that the spirits may speak by whistling. These *imilozi* do not speak from the person of the diviner but from the roof of the hut, and then the diviner interprets what the spirit has said (Köhler, 1941:28).

This consensus that the manifestation of the whistling spirits is triggered by the taking of certain secret herbs and not only from the underwater experience could explain why they do not occur further north among the Shona groups. Although among the Zulu there seems to be a strong connection between those who claim to have been taken underwater and the *amakhosi amakhulu* (whistling spirits) 48 there is obviously more involved to it than this as one would expect to find this form of divination occurring among the Shona.

On comparing the different forms of divinatory skills that an initiate will be endowed with, another of Kohler’s informants stated “they await developments expectantly, namely whether he will become a bone-thrower or a diviner through *imilozi*. For the latter sort is highly thought of” (ibid: 29). Elliott describes diviners who communicate with high-pitched ‘whistling’ voices and says,

These diviners are not common but the Xhosa have an enormous amount of faith in them and, where they are available, the Xhosa will go to great lengths to acquire their services. The mystery of their powers apparently commands a great deal of respect and leaves the audience overawed (Elliott, 1970: 118).

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48 Note that it was a ‘ventriloquist’ who related his underwater experience to Berglund (see Appendix 2.1).
In support of Elliott’s, Ngubane’s and Bryant’s observation of their rarity, I have only met two individuals who claim to communicate with the whistling spirits (both being healers) among several others, who have directed or assisted me in my own training.

Sometimes the whistling spirits will evidently suddenly appear at a certain healer’s house, but the healer is not able to understand the whistles until appropriate rituals have been performed. A close isangoma colleague, Mathonsi, reports she often has them visit her but so far she has not been able to find any healer who can help her connect with them. Many of our journeys together over the last few years have been in search of someone who can assist her in this regard. While the spontaneous emanation of whistles from certain people’s homes, which are heard by all the people present, raise questions as to their possible extraneous origin, it is also well known among the Zulu that certain individuals are prone to purchasing small mechanical whistles that they insert into their noses to make a sound like the whistling imilozi. Zanele was of the opinion that while in some instances they regard such actions by izangoma as mere trickery, as an effort to fool their clients that they are linked to the powerful amakhosi (for evidence of this alleged trickery see Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.1), there are times when the ancestors instruct the isangoma to use one as the sound will assist in the divination process.

It is important to note that healers who claim to have been physically taken under the water are relatively rare. Chavunduka (1994) & Reynolds (1996) both note this, as does Hirst (1997). Reynolds knew of only four such healers while Chavunduka, who was the chairman of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA), says “only a few people claim to have entered the traditional health profession this way. I have personally met and interviewed only five spirit mediums of this kind” (Chavunduka, 1994: 47). Despite the relative rarity of such diviners the symbolism with which they are associated seems have profound significance for all spiritual healers and appears to form a central part of their narratives in the process of becoming a healer.

3.4.6.2 Discussion

In conclusion, the material presented thus far from the existing ethnographic literature provides convincing evidence amongst the groups identified that there is a co-incidence of
similar ideas regarding the water divinities and the experiences of people who have been called by them. The main similarities are with regard to the calling. These are, the preceding dreams; the trance state while undergoing the experience; the taboo on crying; the periods (of varying duration) of being in a dry, almost paradisical land beyond the water; the skills of healing and knowledge that are imparted; and the safe return which usually necessitates a gift exchange. The main variations seem to be in what is encountered underwater, and what the person has to do there, and the material gifts that they return with. For instance, among the Cape Nguni there is great emphasis placed on the white clay and the snake that lies upon it, while among the Shona there is more emphasis on the plant medicines that are given. The Shona also emphasize the gifts of gold, shells \textit{(ndoro)} and articles such as double-headed axes, whereas the Zulu emphasize the snake that the person returns with around the neck, the Cape Nguni emphasize the white clothes and clay that adorn the returnee from the water, while the Khoi and /Xam make frequent reference to the highly potent white stone obtained from the forehead of the Water Snake. I will examine these variations in more detail in the next chapter and propose a possible explanation for them.

Perhaps the most pronounced difference between the Nguni (both Cape and Natal) and the Shona is the different forms of divination they are granted. Among the Shona there is more emphasis placed on spirit possession while the Nguni seem to be unique in the use of the whistling divination technique. In the next chapter, I consider the possible reasons for the Shona emphasis on spirit possession in more detail (see Chapter Four, Section 4.4.3). As to the whistling \textit{imilozi} phenomenon among the Nguni, I have suggested in the previous section that this could be due to the fact that it is also linked to the taking of certain medicinal plants to activate the skills of translation. These could well be plants that are endemic only to the area in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape\textsuperscript{49}.

In the next chapter I examine what the different ethnographic sources and my informants reveal about the two most dominant symbols encountered, that of the snake and the mermaid,

\textsuperscript{49} It is worth noting that Callaway compares the Zulu whistling spirits to those mentioned in the Bible (Isaiah viii, vs19). He states, "The Hebrew \\textit{Ooth}, according to Gesenius, was "a soothsayer who evoked the names of the dead by incantations and magical songs in order to give answers to future and doubtful things."(585,778),(911,993) The demon or familiar spirit spoke in a half-whisper, half-whistling voice; and the Septuagint renders the word by "ventriloquist," just as those who have witnessed divination by the \textit{imilozi} have been disposed to attribute the phenomenon to ventriloquism" (Callaway, 1884/1970: 374).
before proceeding to examine my own experience of these. These two entities (the snake and the mermaid) have featured strongly in my own training, especially my dreams, and it is through these dreams and the izangoma's responses to them that I have gained a greater insight into their significance.
CHAPTER 4
THE SNAKE/S AND THE MERMAID/S

"What are the stories of the snake and creation?" asked the school principal.
"The snake has been there since the making of men" responded Baba

4.1 Introduction
It is evident from the previous chapters that snakes and mermaids feature strongly in the accounts and narratives concerning the water divinities amongst a diverse range of peoples. This was indeed the case from the discussions and narratives I obtained from my many sources, especially from Zulu-speaking people. In the course of my research among the Zulu it has been made evident that the snake and the mermaid are differing entities. They are however intricately associated, hence a fair amount of confusion frequently arises. Added to the confusion is the apparent metamorphosing ability of these creatures, with the mermaid allegedly being able to transform into a snake, and with conflicting stories of their having both negative destructive qualities and life-giving divine qualities. These ambiguous qualities are augmented in the imagination of both the general population and of the diviners themselves, with the belief that certain people who masquerade as ‘healers’ or diviners, have not obtained their powers from the beneficent water divinities and the ancestors, but have obtained the assistance of evil spirits and their snake familiars, such as mamlambo, using certain muti (plant based) and ritual procedures, or that such charlatans may have become genuine healers with the aid of the beneficent ancestors1, but have then resorted to certain activities that offended the ancestors, causing them to withdraw their grace. Rather than admit to losing their skills, or face the prospect of loss of income, these ‘healers’ are believed to then obtain the services of spirit familiars or evil spirits though the ritual manipulation of certain plants. It was for this

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1 ‘Traditional’ Zulu concepts hold that only certain people become ancestors after death. These are usually people who led worthy and responsible lives having lived to become elders, and for whom appropriate funerary rites have been performed by the living. Those people of bad character, or who had an early (often violent) death, may become troublesome spirits. It is possible for the living to rectify the ‘darkness’ of these spirits, especially of those who died young or violently, by performing certain cleansing and incorporation rituals. Due to the impact of Christianity and westernization, such rituals are rarely performed these days, leading to the belief that evil spirits, or those of lesser moral persuasion, can roam about and possess certain people, or sometimes enter into pacts with them (Ngubane, 1977).
reason that Baba emphasised right at the beginning of my first consultation with him that my talent (or power) came from the snake in the river and not from the muti (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.4); he was emphasising that what he saw as my potential ability came from a socially recognised positive source. Chapter Seven deals in more detail with these conceptions of the evil snake and the dubious practices of certain ‘healers’. In this chapter I will focus exclusively on the ideas surrounding the snakes in their positive forms, as well as those of the mermaid with which they are often associated. I will draw mainly from the written ethnographic sources and augment these with information I have obtained from interviews with various informants across the region.

It is evident that snakes featured in both Baba’s claimed underwater experience (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4) and Zanele’s dream experience of being taken by the ancestors (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3). Both of them had close encounters with snakes while they were young, which they regarded as significant and indicative of their future calling. Baba mentions this in the early part of his narrative (Appendix One), while from the first time I met Zanele she told me about her own, and her family’s, encounters with snakes, which for them served to authenticate their links to hereditary divinership connected to the water (see Figure 2, Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5). Zanele emphasized two stories; the first related to the python (inhlwathi) that had been killed by her maternal ancestors when it visited the house of her great grandmother (MMM) who was at that time a novice diviner (ithwasa) in training (see Figure Two, Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5). The family had tried to kill it with a spear and it took well over a day to kill it. Shortly after this her great grandmother had a dream visitation from her ancestors, expressing their disappointment at the way they had been treated (in the form of the python) and that they were now leaving the house. She died shortly thereafter. The family then realised their mistake in killing the inhlwathi, as they now believed this had inadvertently led to her death. Zanele told me that subsequently her daughter (Zanele’s MMZ) was taken underwater for seven days and became a diviner. In the next generation two of Zanele’s maternal aunts (MZs) became izangoma. Zanele’s mother’s father was also an isangoma but he combined this with the ‘church spirit’ (i.e. Holy Spirit).

The other experience Zanele emphasised was her own encounter with a python in a pool in the river below her homestead. She told me that as a child she once jumped into the pool to have a
swim and her feet landed on top of a coiled python. However it did not harm her. Shortly after this two girls unrelated to Zanele, who were twins, went to swim in the same pool and they disappeared. Although this pool was known to have a dangerous whirlpool, many believed they had been swallowed by the python. Zanele reported that years later she was told in a dream that the ‘thing’ she had jumped on in the pool was the *inhlwathi*. It did not hurt her because ‘it liked her’ and her touching it signalled her calling to become an *isangoma* in the future. She thus sees herself as connected to that particular pool.

Zanele’s snake experiences given above refer to actual snakes that one encounters in everyday life; one could easily mistake them for an ordinary snake, but it is their slightly abnormal behaviour which is held to provide the clue to their spirit status. These are regarded as ancestral snakes that serve to bring messages to the living, or just to notify the living of their presence in the homestead. They are regarded as being of a different order to the more mystically charged large snake that is encountered by those who are taken underwater or even occasionally when walking out in the veld. The latter is frequently described as having a bright light shining from its forehead or eyes (if the head is revealed at all) and a pulsating change of colours. At this point it is worthwhile considering what the ethnographic sources have to say about the significance of these differing snake manifestations and what they represent.

4.2 The spirit snakes encountered in everyday life

4.2.1 Zulu records

A recent comparative literature review of southern African religions by Chidester observes the significance of snakes as documented in early literature on the Zulu. He notes,

This ritual regard for snakes fascinated European commentators on Zulu religion. Gardiner saw it as evidence of Zulu belief in the transmigration of souls, while William Holden went so far as to conclude that the Zulus were ‘serpent-worshippers’ (Chidester, 1996:128).

Callaway’s informant also reveals the long history of so-called ‘serpent worship’ amongst the Zulu speaking people.

The ancients used to say before the arrival of the missionaries, that all things were made by *Umvelingangi* [the great creator]; but they were not acquainted with his name
[the ineffable name]. But they lived by worshipping snakes; and they still worship them (Callaway, 1884/1970: 10).

Although the use of the word ‘worship’ could be too strong a term (Hammond-Tooke, 1978), there is evidence that a number of different species of snake are certainly revered amongst the Zulu even at the present time; the reason being that they are regarded as the metamorphosed amalgam of the ancestors. As Bryant in 1917 described in his characteristic floral prose,

A man dies; but only in the flesh: his spirit (iDlozi, pl. amaDlozi) still endures. Whither, then, does it betake itself? ...........it certainly does betake itself where he, and every succeeding ancestor betook themselves, namely, to the nearest velt [sic]. There it becomes changed; and having shuffled out of one corruptible body, it now proceeds to put on another. In due course it reappears in visible form, in the guise of a snake. It does not enter into the body of any already existing snake, but simply materialises into one .... To kill one of these spirit-snakes was no doubt in former times an infringement of the native moral code (Bryant, 1917: 140).

Ancestral snakes may come to visit an individual either in dreams or in reality and those that enter the house and are unthreatening should be viewed as ‘family’ and as such should never be harmed. This was where Zanele’s ancestral maternal kin had greatly erred at the expense of her own great grandmother’s life. As in their case, it is believed that snakes often appear in the house when they are trying to attract someone to become a healer. Such a visitation would normally prompt a visit to another isangoma to divine the purpose and intention of the visit, and a goat would usually be slaughtered to appease them. One of Köhler’s informants (M.J.D.) elaborated more on the importance of the animal sacrifice,

Another spirit, namely So-and-so, (naming a deceased clan member), they say so even before that deceased person has been “brought back” (the custom of ukubuyisa). Thereupon the kraal-head, fearing lest So-and-so might kill people of the village, addresses it (the snake they have seen, of course) by that name, and then they slaughter a beast to make him go away, without having done any harm. And indeed the snake goes away and does not return. Until sacrifice has been made, it stays in the hut or in the cattle kraal (Köhler, 1941: 10).

What is striking in the above account is that there is no suggestion that anyone would consider trying to kill the snake, which would be seen as a normal human response. One has to assume that such an action was incomprehensible to the informant because of the possible
repercussions. Krige also noted how her informants regarded the presence of a snake in the homestead as a sign of ancestral presence. If no ancestral snake appeared after a family had moved their residence to another location this was a sign that their ancestors had failed to relocate to the new homestead. Certain rituals would then be performed to encourage their ancestors to accompany them (Krige, 1936/1974; 53). Although Krige does not discuss the significance of the python in any detail she does note that the sacred ring of kingship, the *ink’atha*, is covered with the skin of a python (*ibid*; 244). This ring symbolises the unity of the Zulu kingdom (*ibid*).

An elderly lady, Mrs X, who resides near the Mvoti River several hundred kilometres north of Zanele’s home, told us what happened to her mother-in-law when family members killed a python that visited the homestead,

My mother-in-law was not taken under the water. As she was in the kitchen she saw something like a beautiful handkerchief as she was cooking. The strange thing about this thing was that it was changing its colours. She saw this thing somewhere on the roof [in the ceiling] of the house. This thing attracted her such that she went on to touch it. As she was touching it she realised that it was an ‘*inkosi*’ [the respectful term for a python. It also can mean a chief or king]. She ran away crying out loud for help. She called everyone in the house and her husband was there - my father-in-law. The snake was then killed. From there on my mother-in-law became very sick [that] she could not walk on her own. The amazing thing about her sickness was that whenever there was a *sangoma* ceremony in the area she would wake up and literally run to that ceremony as though she was never ill. This happened even if we knew absolutely nothing about the ceremony. After the ceremony she would come back home. When she got home, she would become sick as before. While she was in the ceremony participating there she was fine. She was taken to a number of *sangomas* to see what could be done about her illness. Most *sangomas* told her the same thing; that the python was not supposed to be killed. Apparently, it had come to fetch her to where it resides, in the river. This meant that she was called to be a *sangoma*. Again, after this had been found out from the *sangoma*, her father forbade her to become a *sangoma*. For many years she was in bed. She died as a result.

This python described by Mrs X, which was changing its colours, has some of the qualities of

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2 Berglund argues that the python skin that is wrapped around the *inkhatha* symbolizes national unity and togetherness, “It is only when *inkhatha* has been enveloped with the skin of a python that it is really and truly the national emblem, even though it could lack other ingredients. But under no condition may the skin of the python be omitted” (1976: 61).

the more mystical snake that certain informants claim to have encountered while out walking in the veld, rather than a snake of normal appearance (see Section 4.3). Thus the distinction between a normal python and the python that has more mystical and metamorphosing abilities is not definite or clear.

In quite a few of the accounts (see Appendices) mention is made of a number of different types of snake that either come to people’s homes, or that one encounters while underwater. Callaway’s informant (Appendix Four) seems to suggest that these differ depending on one’s social rank in this life. Hence, he asserts that chiefs come back in the form of the black or green mamba, while commoners may come in the form of the puffadder or other species. Bryant considered the question of how the Zulu could distinguish between an ordinary snake and a spirit-snake. Unlike the more harmful snakes that Callaway’s informants mention, he noted that spirit-snakes are all harmless,

The iNyandezulu (pl. iziNyandezulu), bright green of colour with black spotings on the upper body about the neck, is, if fully grown, always the spirit of a man of importance, a kraal head or even a chief. When still young, being then not more than half an inch in thickness and a couple of feet long, it is a frequent and fearless visitor of the kraal fences, where it may often be seen leisurely about or basking in the sun. At that size it is regarded as the spirit of a man of insignificance, or even of a male child….The short, brown umMabibini (pl. omMabibini), also called umZingandhlu, very fond of taking up its abode in dark nooks within the hut, is the spirit of a female generally; though an old woman may take to herself the more imposing form of the large brown umSenene (pl. imiSenene), likewise occasionally called an umHlwazi. Some aged females, however, seem to object to becoming snakes. They prefer the guise of little lizards (Bryant, 1917: 140).

In this account one is struck by how the snakes that represent the ancestors are seen to display fearlessness of humans and a predisposition to reside in those areas of the Zulu homestead that are symbolic of the gendered relations of power and production; namely the cattle byre for the male ancestors, and the dark recesses of the hut, the domestic space for the female ancestors; a space that is also symbolic of the womb (Kuper, 1980). These symbolic associations and the perceived behaviour of the creatures provide useful clues to the Zulu as to the alleged nature of a snake’s spirit status.

According to one of Berglund’s informants there are certain characteristics by which one can
determine whether a snake is merely an ordinary snake (isinyoka nje), or a 'shade-snake' (idlozi). The latter do not have forked tongues and they also shed their skins. Regarding the shedding of skin, the informant associated this with the fact that a shade-snake does not die but merely renews itself annually (Berglund, 1976: 94).

4.2.2 Cape Nguni records

Although the snake (and python) features to a lesser extent among the Cape Nguni, certain clans are also associated with specific types of snake. The most well known and celebrated is the Majola snake of the Mpondomise. The Majola clan is famous amongst Xhosa speakers for the stories of their ancestors that come to visit them in the form of a snake⁴. According to Scheub's (1996) informant, an old respected historian (Mdukiswa Tyabashe) of the Mpondomise clan, Majola was born to the great wife of Qengebe, King of the Mpondomise. Qengebe was a descendant of Cirha, the famous Mpondomise king born of Ngcwina and his abaThwa (Bushman) wife, Manxangashe (Scheub, 1996: 243). At the time of Majola's birth it is said that a snake had appeared at his mother's side⁵ and after it had been coaxed away (they were too fearful to kill it) she delivered Majola. According to Mdukiswa Tyabashe, whose oral testimony Scheub documents, from the time of his birth the snake would frequently be seen in close contact with Majola:

It would happen that, when Majola was asleep, the snake would suddenly be seen right there beside him. But it would be left alone, and it would depart in its own time. If Majola happened to fall sick, the snake would suddenly appear, and the next morning Majola would get up, recovered — after the snake had paid a visit. This is quite a common snake, well known. But it had this peculiarity that it repeatedly visited this child; this child would be seen with that creature that had been beside him before he was born. The child grew up, constantly being visited by this snake....Because the king's child was named Majola, as time passed the snake too was named Majola, after him.....So Majola ruled Mpondomiseland, and then he died. Regarding Majola's death: we are not told why it was that his grave should be in a pool. But he was not buried like former kings of the Mpondomise. His grave was made in a pool, in the deepest pool in the Mzimvubu River (Scheub, 1996: 243-244).

Knowledge of the Majola clan and its connection with the snake that has been given the same

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⁴The documented oral history of the Majola snake is to be found in Scheub (1996:243-245).

⁵It was reasoned that she had given birth to it; but it could have just as easily appeared at the house at that time.
name is still widely known and talked about in both KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape (even the izangoma in central KwaZulu-Natal discuss it). The celebrated novel *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1968/2004), written by A.C. Jordan who was raised at St Cuthbert’s mission not far from the sacred pools on the Inxu River where I was to have dream-related rituals performed for me (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.4), is a dramatic example of the depth of these ideas surrounding the Majola snake amongst the Mpondomise, and the tragic consequences that are held to arise when they are not respected. The significance of the pool burial should also be noted, as it indicates the connection of the snake, and the chief, with the abantu bomlambo (the People of the River). There are other chiefly groups in the Eastern Cape (e.g. Gcaleka, Rharhabe, amaNgqosini, amaTshawe) that are allegedly linked to the abantu bomlambo, and similarly, their deceased chiefs or kings are buried in certain river pools (Hirst, 1990: 172, 260).

Hunter (1961) has noted the variety of ancestral snakes that various clans among the Mpondo are supposed to manifest as,

Snakes come to the imizi (homesteads) of the people of the rivers to which they ukunikelale\(^6\). Different clans regard a particular species of snake as being a manifestation of their ithongo (ancestor), and treat it with respect, not killing it or driving it away when it comes to the umzi, for it is umninimizi (the owner of the umzi). The amaKhonjwayo respect the izilenzi, a long black snake, probably non-poisonous. ‘Even when it crawls over us we do not touch it.’ The amaNdosine, the inkwakwa, a brown poisonous snake. The amaTshezi, the izilenzi and isiphakula. The Khonjwayo snake is addressed as Nyewula, the name given to it when it is seen in the river (but in the river it is fabulously large, and at the imizi a common variety of snake), the tshezi snake as Tshezi. The amaJola respect another snake and address it as Jola (Hunter, 1961: 260) (see also Appendix Nine).

She also gives details of the various rivers and their pools to which each clan makes regular offerings (ukunikela emlanjent) to appease the spirits (see Appendix Nine). Of these river pools she notes:

The connexion [sic] of the pools to which the offerings are made with the graves of the chief, the calling upon the ancestors when a beast is killed on the bank, and the connexion of the snakes which are addressed by the clan name with the pool to which

\(^6\) These are when ritual offerings are made to the river divinities by clan members (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4).
the offering is made, leave no doubt that the offering is to ancestral spirits (Hunter, 1936/1961: 262).

She also points out that in-marrying wives from other clans are obliged to pay ritual respect (umkhlonipha) to the rivers and pools associated with their husband’s clans (ibid: 260).

Hence it appears that the ideas surrounding the manifestation of the human soul into different varieties of snake among the various Cape Nguni, as with the Zulu, is fairly widespread. There is a general belief that the different clan ancestors may manifest in particular species of snake, which are also associated with certain pools or rivers. Moreover Hunter mentions that the Khonjwayo snake will appear as an ordinary snake at the homestead but is believed to change into a ‘fabulously large’ snake when in the river.

Jacob Tropp (2003) has done an historical environmental analysis of certain ideas held in the Gqogqora area of the former Transkei, regarding a certain forest, which purportedly contained within it an “enchanted vlei” that was associated with a python and linked to diviner-healers. He considers the assertion made by local people (mainly of amaZizi descent) that the ‘python’ had been killed by Henkel, a European who was in charge of the forestry conservancies in the late 1880s, as a “critical historical commentary” and metaphorical reference to the fact that the Europeans, as renowned snake-slayers, were responsible for the destruction of not only the peoples’ beliefs but also of their cultural landscapes.

4.2.3 Shona records
In Zimbabwe the Karanga also claim their ancestors may appear in the form of the snake. For instance Aschwanden states,

As the ancestors are the actual bearers of the fertility it is not surprising that the snake can also be symbol of an ancestor. If a puffadder appears in the house, or where the men sit, one says: ‘Our grandfather has come to see his family. He wants to tell us something.’........this makes the inhabitants of the kraal happy.......children are not afraid either, and no-one would dream of killing the animal (Aschwanden, 1989: 231).

Aschwanden also identifies three main types of snake associated with the Shona God (nyoka dzokwaMwari) and with rain. These snakes are associated with different habitats and sacred spaces and are regarded as the guardians of such places; the puffadder (hvumbi) is associated
with the land or veld, while the python (shato) is connected with the mountains. The third type of ‘snake’ he identifies is njuzu, the fish or snake tailed beings, which guard the water. The puff-adder, which is territorial, and quiet or ‘soft’ by nature is also associated with women, and fertility, and is regarded as the representative of the chief wife (i.e. the queen) of the king (ibid: 244 - 246). The high ranking jukwa spirits which are the spirits of deceased rain-priests, the manyusa (nyusa = singular), who have direct contact with God at the Matopos Hills7, are also believed to manifest in the form of the puff-adder (Aschwanden, 1989: 253). At rain-making rituals performed at the sacred ancestral shrines (mutoro) the nyusa is said to be possessed by the jukwa spirit and while in this state he (or she) runs into the bush,

When he returns, after some time, he is carrying a puff-adder, playing with it and dancing. The snake then begins to coil itself around his arm, and the dancing rain-priest points with that arm in the direction of the immanent rain. Dancing he approaches the muchakata-tree8 and then climbs it, together with the snake. At the top he lets the puff-adder go – It is supposed to start raining afterwards (Aschwanden, 1989: 253).

The role of the nyusa cuts across family and tribal groupings and he intercedes on behalf of the living to plead for rain from both the great tribal ancestors (kings and chiefs) at the mutoro and with the God Mwari at the important cave shrines in the Matopos Hills9.

The python, which he also refers to as the ‘giant snake’, is held to be able to repel evil spirits and is regarded as a conduit to God (Mwari). It is for its evil-repelling powers that the skin and bones of the python are used by diviner-healers in their ritual paraphernalia (ibid: 232). Aschwanden argues that all three of these ‘snakes’ come together as a powerful symbolic triad at the sacred Mwari shrines of the Matopos Hills (ibid: 239-248), where rain-making rituals are directed.

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7 For instance, Daneel comments that the main function of the jukwa spirits “is to act as rain emissaries in the spiritual realm. They come from Matonjeni (an Mwari cave shrine in the Matopos) and their nearness to Mwari enables them to mediate directly with God on behalf of the inhabitants in those districts where their hosts reside” (Daneel, 1971: 129).

8 This is regarded as a sacred tree (parinari curatellaefolia) which is planted in the ground where a great chief or king is buried. Once planted in the soil that is “blood-soaked” it becomes an important rain-shrine (see Aschwanden, 1989: 239).

9 As I do not have space to elaborate more on the cave shrines of the Matopos I refer the reader to Daneel (1971), Ranger (1999) and Nthoi (2006) for more detail.
In his recently published book on his research based at the sacred Mwali (Mwari) shrines in the Matopos Hills, Lesley Nthoi observed that the term ‘snakes’ in Ndebele, izinyoka, is frequently used to describe ancestral presence. He goes on to say,

I was not given any explanation why these benevolent ancestral spirits are referred to as snakes, particularly that snakes are generally considered dangerous....Ndebele do not consider all snakes to be dangerous, particularly those that are not scared by human presence. Small and harmless snakes that frequent households are believed to be embodiments of ancestral spirits. They are therefore treated with kindness and respect (Nthoi, 2006: 29).

As the Ndebele are an offshoot from the Zulu and share many similar clans, this association is not surprising.

4.2.4 Ancestral manifestation in other animals

For the Zulu, although ancestral manifestation is believed to be predominantly in the form of snakes; they can also appear in different bird and animal forms (izilwane–pl; isilwane-sing), and these are held to be revealed in dreams. This idea is also well expressed among the Cape Nguni who refer to the ancestral animals and creatures that one encounters in dreams or in the awakened state as the izilo (sing. isilo). An Mpondomise diviner, Mantshawe, clearly explained the idea of the izilo to Hammond-Tooke as well as her own encounter with those associated with her (see also Appendix 7.1):

Every person has an isilo of his home. They are the same izilo as the ones found in the forest, i.e. elephants (?oobade, Xhosa indlovu), lions, leopards, jackals, baboons, and so on. There are also river animals (izilo zomlambo) such as crocodiles and hippo. The isilo looks after a person and protects him from danger. When a person is ill the isilo will come and help him. They help diviners but they also help ordinary people. They can come as dreams, or as ideas in the mind. Izilo of the home are very important and it is necessary that something should be slaughtered for them at times. Normally your isilo will not attack you, even if you come across it in the forest\(^1\). Even if you do not

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\(^1\) I was given an account of such an episode by a Xhosa woman whose father had followed the call of a honey guide bird near the Alexandria Forest in the Eastern Cape in the hope of finding honey. When he arrived at the point where the bird-call was emanating he looked up into the tree and saw a serval cat (ihlazi). As this was a known ancestral manifestation for his clan he immediately had to avert his eyes out of respect. The cat did not attack him, which was seen as further confirmation that it was an ancestral manifestation. As I have had three dreams of a serval cat, an animal I have never seen in its live form, I have been informed that this is one of the ways my ancestors manifest and I have been urged by Baba and Zanele to obtain its skin to adorn my isangoma uniform.
notice it at first it will make you realize that it is present. You must then move off
(Hammond-Tooke, 1975b: 26).

When an animal appears in a novice diviner’s dream it is taken to indicate that this is one of
the *izilo* for the family and one should find the skin of the animal to wear in the diviner
uniform.

Hirst distinguishes between three categories of ancestral animals among the Cape Nguni in the
Grahamstown area, namely, the *izilo* (the sacred animals), the *izihwanyana* (the small sacred
animals), and the *izithunywa* (the messengers):

The *izilo* category includes, for example, elephant, hippopotamus, lion, leopard, serval,
Cape python, mole snake, buffalo, kudu and domestic cattle. The *izihwanyana* category
includes, for example, Cape otter, spotted-necked otter, spotted hyena, black backed
jackal, grey slender mongoose, chacma baboon, springbok, klipspringer, bushbuck,
steenbok, duiker and domestic goats and dogs. Finally, the *izithunywa* category
includes, for example, the olive-brown water snake, the nile monitor, the frog, the crab,
the horse-fly, the honey-bee, the wagtail, the sparrow, the swallow, river ducks and
fowls, the Cape dikkop, the owl and the giant eagle owl (Hirst, 1990: 193).

As to whether these distinctions are as clear cut as this among all the Cape Nguni, I cannot be
certain, but there is a fair amount of overlap between these categories for my Zulu informants.
For instance the *izilwane* can also serve as *izithunywa*, as their presence in the home is likened
to that of a messenger. Furthermore with the influence of the Christian faith in traditional
healing practices, the *izithunywa* are also associated with non-animals, such as the angels
(*ingelosi*) as they are regarded as messengers of God (see Chapter Eight, Section 8.5).

Hunter notes that among the Mpondo the animal that appears to an initiate in his/her dreams or
when awake is referred to as an *ityala* and this animal is not clan dependent but specific to that
particular individual, “An *ityala* is an *ithongo* (ancestor) which takes the shape of a wild
animal – lion, leopard, elephant, &c. – and the patient is said to *(uku)*thwasa *ngetyala* – to
*(uku)* thwasa by [means of] an *ityala*” (Hunter, 1936/1961: 321). This is what Baba was
referring to in his narrative (Appendix One) when he showed me the jackal skin that he
‘thwasa’d by’ in Mt Fletcher in the former Transkei. His emphasis that the “Xhosa *thwasa* by
animals” suggested that this method was in some way different to the way the Zulu become
diviners.
4.2.5 Why the ancestors come in animal form

There seems to be widespread consensus among all the groups that the ancestors can come to visit the living in animal form both in dreams and while the person is awake. Although the snake appears to be the most common manifestation of ancestral power, especially among the Zulu, they are not exclusive to this form and the ancestors are believed to appear in a number of animal or bird guises. The ancestors are not held to always appear in one animal form for a particular clan, but may adopt several different manifestations. I suggest that their manifestation in a particular animal form is constrained by where those species are normally distributed. Hence, in those areas where pythons have become extremely rare or extinct, such as in the Eastern Cape, it is very unlikely that the ancestors would appear in this form. Such an argument would imply that instead of only being able to spontaneously manifest in a particular animal form, the ancestors are understood to possess an ability to take over, or inhabit, the existing body of any creature. Dreams do not offer such constraints and they can still come to the initiate in the python form in his/her dreams. The same rule applies to elephant, leopard, lion etc., which until their recent re-introduction with the expansion of game farming, were for a large part of the previous century virtually extinct in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

Why can the ancestors not just manifest in their spirit form? According to some informants it appears to have something to do with their levels of energy which could prove harmful to mortals. A diviner in the Bulwer region explained this to me “The ancestors come in different forms, they come with the snake, with the birds...they can talk with you, just because if you saw them you can die. They are very strong (in energy), that’s why they come with (as) different animals.” This statement resembles one given to Berglund by his ‘ventriloquist’ informant, discussed below in Section 4.3. Berglund explains that the python is regarded as the ultimate symbol of divinity because of its properties of coolness, strength, measured thoughtfulness and calm temperament; virtues that are highly valued among the Zulu (Berglund, 1976: 60-61). As he explains of the python,

Firstly, it is physically cold. Zulu are convinced that it is “the coolest of all the animals in the whole world”. Several informants, including rain-makers and heaven-herds, agree that the coolness of the water, especially that of deep pools, is brought about by the coolness of the python which is believed to live in the pools. Secondly, there is the coolness related to calmness and an even temperament (Berglund, 1976: 60).
Thus, while the Zulu may explain the transformation of spiritual power (the ancestors) into a physical animal form in more metaphysical terms (as a means of countering their high energy effect), they are also quite aware that the animal chosen as a carrier of spiritual power possesses qualities similar to those attributed to the ancestors. In other words the ‘spirit’ animal can be both a real entity and carry symbolic power at the same time.

From the data presented above it seems that some snakes one encounters in everyday life appear to have dominant symbolic capacity in that they represent powers, and embody qualities, that cut across clan divisions (such as the python for the Zulu which represents the great amakhosi). However there are also different snake/animal manifestations that are clan specific, or in the case of the Mpondo ityala, are specific to individuals. Although these creatures do not always rigidly adhere to particular kin-based units, they may be used as symbolic metaphors for exogamous clan units, as a form of totemic classification (Hirst, 1990). However, the latter explanation is insufficient to explain those ‘symbols’ that cut across clan and ethnic differences, such as the mystical giant Snake reputedly encountered by certain healers while underwater, or in their dreams, that Hirst regarded as having some kind of symbolic connection to an apical clan ancestor.

4.3 The mystical Snake or the Snake as God
The great Snake that one encounters in the underwater experience was described to Berglund by his ventriloquist informant as a “very great python (inhlwathi)” with “a lamp (isikhethekethe) on its head” that was surrounded by a multitude of other different types of snakes which he described as “the snakes of our fathers (e.g. ancestral or ‘shade snakes’)” (Berglund, 1976: 141; see also Appendix 2.1 and 2.2). His informant applies various descriptive praise terms to the very large ‘python’ that lies on a bed of clay, which suggest that this is the Supreme Deity. Berglund was told that this great Snake is none other than inkosi yamadlozi (lit. the lord of the ancestors, the great one), or inkosi yamakhosi omkhulu (lit. the greatest Lord of Lords), or ‘the one above’, whose normal abode is in the sky (as Lord-of-the-Sky), and yet he also resides in the pool. According to Berglund’s informant he is in the pool “because of the coolness of water. It gives coolness to him” (ibid: 142). If he came to earth “then everybody would be eaten up by fire” (ibid: 143). He is so powerful that to observe him would bring insanity and death. He is in the pool “...because the pool is the place of uhlanga”.
and *uhlanga*¹¹ "...is the origin, the place of the coming out of men", furthermore it is the "snake of the waters that gives life" *(ibid: 144)*. The association of water and whiteness with the python and large mystical snake thus points to their complementary value of coolness, which subdues the inherent heat and high energy of ancestral and godly power.

The ventriloquist informant made it very clear to Berglund that the underwater visions that he experienced were symbols, signs or 'pictures', that were used to convey greater truths to him *(Berglund, 1976: 143)*. In his interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the underwater vision, it was quite clear that this great Snake is seen as the male source of life. The Snake's spittle, symbolic of semen, impregnated the (original) woman who consequently gave life to all humans. The informant explained to Berglund that the lady, into whom the Snake placed his spittle, was suckling and nourishing many snakes (which were symbols of the ancestors) and these "were signs showing that the children come from the great one. That is what they were saying. They were just pictures, saying that the children of men come from *inkosi*" *(ibid: 143)*¹². It is also through the great Snake that power is given to the shade-snakes, "They come to men with it, giving power to men. That is how it is’” *(ibid: 141)*. Berglund notes that the Lord-of-the-Sky (*iNkosi yezili* or *iNkosi yamaKhosl*), who is sometimes referred to as *uNkulunkulu*¹³, is also associated with lightning and thunder and it is the resultant rain that fertilises the earth *(ibid: 37)*. Hence, the cosmic analogy of rain as the male semen, fertilising the female earth.

According to Berglund, when he tried to clarify whether the python could ever be seen as just an ordinary animal or a ‘shade-snake’, he was told emphatically that the python was not an animal, nor was it a shade snake: “Pythons are *amakhosi* (lords)” *(Berglund, 1976: 181)*. This

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¹¹ Note that Callaway’s informant differentiates between *Uhlanga* which is the “‘potential’ source of being” (Callaway, 1884/1970: 7), from which humans 'broke off', and *Umhlanga* which means a bed of reeds *(ibid: 9)*. However, their meanings appear to be coterminous since the Zulu myth of origin tells that *Unkulunkulu* (the first human) “sprang from a bed of reeds” *(ibid: 40-41)*, as did all life on earth. In a footnote Callaway comments that “We must not confound *umhlanga* with *uhlanga*. *Umhlanga* is the place where they broke off – or out-came – from *Uhlanga*” *(ibid: 9)*.

¹² Köhler’s informant touches on a similar theme “I also saw a black woman. Wo! But she was black! She went naked, having no garment on her body, and there were children of the snake near her that she suckled. She had breasts all over her body, many of them and large also” *(Köhler, 1941: para 82)*.

¹³ Berglund states that the praise term *Nkulunkulu* is applied to both the Lord-of-the-Sky (as *uNkulunkulu*) and one’s ancestors (as *oNkulunkulu*) *(Berglund, 1976: 36)*, thus making the terminology somewhat confusing.
adds a somewhat confusing dimension to the concept of the python encountered underwater which is referred to as the singular ‘Lord of Lords’, and the python encountered in physical reality but understood as either *inkosi* or the representations of the collective great ancestors, the *amakhosi*. The impression I get from my informants is that the python that comes to one’s house is seen as the representative of the *amakhosi*, the great ancestors, not of the Supreme God. The two are connected, however, as the *amakhosi* are the believed to be the intermediaries of God. In order to try to ease the confusion regarding the use of these words, snake and python, to denote the singular god of the sky (or water) or the multiple groups of ancestors I will use upper case ‘Python’ and ‘Snake’ to refer to the former (Lord-of-the-Sky or the mystical snake found underwater) and lower case ‘python’ and ‘snake’ to refer to various ancestral manifestations.

With regard to the *amakhosi* it must be born in mind that although some of one’s ancestors may be accorded the status of *amakhosi*, the latter may not always be connected directly to one’s genealogy, and are granted more divine or godlike status. So, for instance, Baba was quite emphatic when he claimed that Jesus occupied the higher realms of the hierarchy of *amakhosi* and as such could also manifest as the python\(^\text{14}\) (*inhlwathi*). Moreover, he asserted that the Snake, *inhlwathi*, is linked with the origin of humans and it has been present ‘since the making of men’.

As with the Snake encountered underwater, the normal python that one occasionally comes across in the veld is also referred to as *Inkosi*. Sibongiseni Kumalo, a post-graduate student who assisted me with interviews at the Ikhamanzi River valley in KwaZulu Natal in 2002, had an interesting experience with regard to this notion of the python being regarded as *Inkosi*. The following account is an extract from his diary:

On one of the sunny days as we were climbing down the mountain, we were accompanied by a middle-aged man. He told me not to look around but to look at the path. I wasn’t supposed to shake the trees as we were passing them. In my mind I just took this for granted and didn’t question why I should not do as I want. On our way back, it was still the three of us. At the same spot this man ordered Nathi (the guide) and I to walk faster. He told us that we would rest on the top of the mountain. I walked

\(^{14}\) Jesus himself made a similar comparison. This was in reference to the snake that Moses lifted up in the wilderness as the means of ascending to heaven (John, Chapter Three, Verses 14-15).
behind them so that I could rest when I had to. When we got to the top of the mountain we sat down under the tree. It was then that I questioned him on why I should not touch the trees or look around. He reminded me of a place on the path on the mountain. This was a flatter place with tall soft grass. The grass showed signs of some animals having walked over it, crossing the path. He told me that people don’t frequently use the path and that inKosi stays there. Literally inKosi is a king or a chief and it can also refer to God. I asked him further what he meant by this. Apparently the term is a euphemism for a python. Out of respect, people around here don’t refer to it by its name. Almost everyone I have spoken to knows it stays there but the amazing thing is that people don’t talk about it unless you ask them. Still they call it inKosi. I was interested in the link between inKosi the animal and inKosi a traditional leader (S. Kumalo, fieldnotes, 24 January 2002).

This account recorded in the Mvoti region in 2002 by Mr Kumalo is very similar to an event experienced by Berglund,

Walking in the Nkwaleni valley with friends and our conversation being lively, their silence became very noticeable when all at the same time they stopped talking and the foremost man quickened the pace considerably for some five hundred meters. Then the pace slowed down again and the conversation continued as if nothing had happened. My friends explained their behaviour thus: “did you not smell something?” I admitted that I had smelt nothing. I was told that had I been attentive I would have noticed a smell “like sour milk”. Curious to see whether it was really so, I suggested that we return to the place, but under no circumstance would my friends accept this, the smell having been that of the python.....They all denied being afraid of it and claimed that they had been silent as a sign of respect, passing by it quickly because they were close “to the animal of inKosi” (Berglund, 1976: 61-61)

Beyond the normal python which is revered as inKosi, there are many reports of a more mystically charged snake that people encounter while walking in the veld (see Section 4.3 for more on this mystical snake). This snake is sometimes referred to by the Zulu as inhlwathi, or inKosi, but its characteristics seem to exceed those attributed to a normal python. Hence the boundaries between these categories and the names applied to them are far from distinct or clear.

The great Snake that the healer encounters under water is frequently given the name ixhanti or ichanti among the Cape Nguni (Hammond-Tooke 1962; Hirst; 1990, 1997). As Berglund’s

15 Ixhanti and ichanti refer to the same entity. The click pronunciations have probably led to these orthographic
informant indicated, the Zulu are less inclined to use this word (Berglund, 1976: 145) and this could be due to the fact that pythons are still quite common in KwaZulu-Natal. Berglund reasons that the use of the term *ixhanti* coincides with where pythons are very rare. He explains, “Evidence shows that this particular snake (*ixhanti*) plays a greater role in thinking than does the python in areas where pythons are not known or have become extinct. On the other hand, where pythons are found, *ixhanti* is known only by hearsay,” (Berglund, 1976: 145). When I asked Zanele if she knew what *ixhanti* was her response was dismissive “That is a Xhosa snake, only they know about it”. The reason for her dismissal of this name may be the confusion of terms and the negative connotations attributed to *ixhanti*. Hunter has also noted this aversion to *ixhanti* among Christianised groups (Hunter, 1961: 287). The reports of Köhler’s Zulu informants though, suggest that *ixhanti* is the same Snake that healers claim to confront when under water, from under which the white clay must be removed. For instance, he was told by Sikhumbana that, “An *isangoma* enters a pool, sinks and arrives at the place where the snake *ixanti* [sic] lies, and takes off the white ochre. He gets to where the *ixanti* is, because it lies on top of white ochre” (Köhler, 1941: 21). Similarly, some of the Cape Nguni texts (Hirst, 1990, 1997; Hammond-Tooke, 1962, 1975b; Hunter, 1936) infer that it is the same as the great Snake that resides under the water and is encountered by diviners; in other words it is what the Zulu call *inkosi yamaKhosi* (lit: the king or chief of the ancestors). Some of Berglund’s informants were insistent that only diviners have seen *ixhanti* and that it is to be found in the bottom of rivers and pools (1976: 145 - 146). It is described as having large protruding and mesmerising eyes that can ‘catch’ people to take them underwater, is black in colour and has pronounced vertebrae protruding from its back. It is also associated with white clay and fertility. It is definitely not regarded as an ancestral or shade snake but the ancestors, which are the smaller snakes that are also seen in the pool, are seen as responsible for bringing the chosen person underwater to meet the great Snake (*ixhanti* or *inkosi yamadlozi*). Hammond-Tooke notes that among the Bhaca,

There appears to be some connection of *ichanti* with the ancestral shades, as the Bhaca say that a person who sees an *ichanti* will probably become an *isangoma* and, despite the danger, “The *amathfongo* [i.e. their ancestors] show the *ichanti* to those whom they love” (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 313-314).
It can thus be inferred that *inkosi yamadlozi* of the Zulu, and *ichanti/ixhanti* of the Cape Nguni, are probably equivalent.

In popular usage, however, confusion persists, and the term *ixhanti/ichanti* is often used synonymously with the term *mamlambo* (*umamlambo*) (see Broster, 1981:59-60), which is known as a witch’s familiar that the Zulu assert is made with medicines (*muti*). Hence it is often associated in the popular imagination as something negative, and this may be why Zanele was dismissive of it and did not regard it as the same as *inkosi yamadlozi*. I will return to this dual nature of the snake with its evil counterpart in Chapter Seven.

The Khoekhoe and /Xam distinguish between a number of different snakes that have mystical abilities. Hoff refers to these as ‘Great Snakes’ and remarks that,

> ....to the Khoesan the Great Snakes are supernatural beings which really exist in nature.....Over the years I have listened to literally hundreds of accounts from informants who have had personal encounters with a Great Snake, or knew of someone who had. While carrying out my research among descendents of the /Xam it became clear that not only was there a belief in Great Snakes but also in other Water-animals with supernatural abilities (Hoff, 1997: 23).

Hoff reports that some of her informants distinguish between two main categories of Great Snake. The one Great Snake is associated with the veld, which is referred to as the Veld Snake or the Mountain Snake, and the other is the Water Snake. While it is claimed that the Veld Snake is encountered or witnessed in grasslands or mountains it also has a strong connection with water and rain, and if someone attempts to kill it this allegedly results “in drought or in severe and dangerous rain and lightening” (Hoff, 1997: 23). The Water Snake, while also connected to rain and fertility, is seen as more strongly connected with rivers and fountains. It is claimed that the role of these Great Snakes is to maintain the cosmic balance of power and the life giving forces of rain. Hoff notes that “The Khoekhoe believe that these entities use their power against very strong energy fields which threaten the power balance” (*ibid*: 26-27).

Latham (1986), Aschwanden (1989) and Daneel (1971) have indicated for Shona the close link between the Supreme Deity, *Dzivaguru* (or *Mwari*), from whence comes rain and fertility, and the spirits of the pool. Indeed, the Nyamakati pool, the sacred shrine of *Dzivaguru* in NE
Zimbabwe, was where Dzivaguru resided on earth after his emergence from the pool. Dzivaguru, like uNkulunkulu also has an androgynous manifestation (Nthoi, 2006: 22).

4.3.1 The symbolic snake draped around the neck

The emergence of the initiate out of the water with a snake around his/her neck is a theme that is emphasised especially among the Zulu. Baba described to me how the snake coiled around him and, with its head resting on his, took him into the sea. On his return he was accompanied by a dolphin and a smallish snake was around his neck\(^{16}\).

Samuelson has also noted this for the Zulu, when in a fairly simplified account, she stated “When at last the new Diviner comes out of his shell, he runs to throw himself into a pond, from which he emerges with a green snake coiled around his neck” (1974: 58).

Callaway’s informant is a bit more dramatic

> On his initiation, he [diviner] goes like one mad to a pool, and dives into it, seeking for snakes; having found them, he seizes them and comes out of the water with them, and entwines them still living about his body, that the people may see that he is indeed a diviner (Callaway, 1884/1970: 299).

His informant’s description of a ‘great inyanga’ by the name of Umwathleni underlines the idea that the action of going under water and coming out with snakes entwined around him can be an act that is repeated a number of times:

> Sometimes he would go out when it was about to dawn, and proceed to the river, and go into a pool, and would come out having his neck entirely circled with a living mamba. He would catch it and twist it round his neck, or wear it as a fillet [?]; when he reached home he was fearful to look at; and he would call the people of the village to come and sing the songs he had composed (Callaway, 1884/1970: 319).

Unfortunately none of these accounts are clear about what the snake that is believed to come out of the water with the initiate actually represents. The impression I got from Baba is that this is an ordinary snake which serves to both escort the initiate out of the water and also is symbolic of the initiate’s underwater experience and newly acquired skills. This snake should

\(^{16}\) Zanele claimed to have had a similar experience when she recounted the snakes in her dream; one wrapped around her belly while the other two entwined around her body with their faces up near hers (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3).
be killed in order to return the initiate's consciousness back to normality and the snake's body thus becomes an important part of the diviner's accoutrement symbolic of his underwater sojourn. This snake is definitely not regarded as an ancestor or as *inkosi yamadlozi*.

The emphasis of the snake around the neck, or the catching of a snake as proof of one's powers, is not given much prominence in reports from the other groups. No mention is made of initiates emerging from the water with a snake around the neck in the Cape Nguni accounts; instead the emphasis here is put on the white clay that is smeared on the initiate's body. Such a feature is also not mentioned in the Shona material. While there is a hint of similar imagery in Aschwanden's account of Salani's submersion and re-emergence in the river pool in Zimbabwe there are significant differences from the Zulu material. The companions that escorted Salani out of the water were not mere symbolic emissaries but were experienced as a giant snake and crocodile that had been responsible for imparting knowledge to him whilst underwater. Aschwanden describes Salani's account,

> Early in the morning it happened: Salani returned from the pool. He rode on the crocodile's back with the snake coiled around his body, its head on his. Before leaving the pool, he had been given medicines by the "animals", and on that morning the snake had vomited two eggs for him (with them, Salani can remove evil from patients' bodies). - The animals, unseen by the other people, accompanied him to the shore and then returned to their abode at once (Aschwanden, 1989: 175).

In the above account the Snake and the crocodile are represented as invisible beings to all but Salani and they return to their abode, but they leave him with gifts, symbolic eggs with which to heal. Salani is able to continue to call upon their presence in the river when required. In the Zulu accounts, the emissary snake is experienced as real and visible and its body becomes symbolic proof of the diviner's power. Why the physical evidence of the snake should be emphasised more among the Zulu than the other groups is not overtly clear but could point to the symbolic weight of snakes, especially as manifestations of ancestral power, in Zulu culture (see Section 4.2.1). What these differences reveal, particularly in terms of the items that the initiate is held to return with from the water with, is that the material representations of the underwater experience are influenced by culturally specific factors.

Among the Zulu there is also emphasis put on being able to demonstrate one's fearlessness in
combating danger, which a diviner’s role demands. Beyond those people who are regarded as actually experiencing a submersion under water, the catching of a snake, or another dangerous animal (e.g. porcupine), is required to demonstrate this fearlessness. Berglund notes that:

Of the thirty-one novices interviewed, twenty-four claimed to have caught snakes. Of the twenty-four, eighteen had returned with the snakes around their necks. These had given considerable importance to their carrying the snake around the neck and it is probable that this importance is associated with the fact that the vertebrae of this reptile at a later stage will make the diviner’s necklace (Berglund, 1976: 155-156).

It seems that this is the test of a diviner’s courage, and even for those who are not held to go underwater this can be demonstrated by the catching of a dangerous creature from the bush. The catching of such a dangerous creature not only demonstrates bravery but verifies that the diviner enjoys supernatural assistance for such an endeavour to succeed. Berglund quotes a diviner’s opinion on this matter from eThelezini:

When we say that the novice must return with a snake, we say it to see what courage she has. If she is a coward, she still have [has] nothing with her. If she is really called by the shades, she will return with the snake around her neck. Then we know that she is not playing but doing her work given her by her fathers (Berglund, 1976: 156).

Despite the above statement there does seem to be agreement among all the groups that not all people called to be diviners necessarily have the underwater experience and return with the snake. As I have already noted such people who can claim to have experienced this are very few and far between, but the fact remains that those people who are regarded as having a genuine claim to the experience are seen as more powerful and skilful diviners than those who do not.

4.3.2 Common anatomical features of the Snake

4.3.2.1 The shining/mesmerizing light in the Snake’s forehead

The description of the large Snake emitting a bright light from its eyes or head, that can put people into trance is a recurrent theme right throughout the region and is confirmed in the literature. Berglund’s informant who claims to have been led into the water by a beetle describes this feature when he first encountered the Python (inkosi yamadlozi) coiled on the white clay and ‘medicine’,
It [the Python] was surrounded by many other snakes, big ones and small ones. They were the snakes of our fathers....the python had a lamp (*isikethethe*) on its head. It was shining in the pool, throwing light everywhere and revealing the things there in the pool (Berglund, 1976: 141).

Köhler’s informant (A.M.N.) who reported experiencing the great ‘dream’ as well as going underwater, also makes mention of the light,

The snake stared at me, and I stared at it all the time. It had a head like a large stone, its body was dark brown, it was huge and terrifying; its wicked eyes were blood red; its head was bigger than a pot. A lamp was shining on its back, a small lamp which shone like all ordinary lamps (Köhler, 1941: para 81).

The close association in people’s minds of the great Snake with beams of light that it emits from its head was demonstrated one day to me when Zanele accompanied me to the sea near Port Alfred. She was terrified when she looked out to sea on the first evening and saw a bright sweeping light. She came rushing to tell me that the Snake was in the sea. It was, much to her relief, the beam from the lighthouse. While this episode may provide evidence for the view that such ideas are derived from an overactive imagination, the question remains: why is a bright light near water associated with a snake? Once she was reassured that there was another explanation for the light Zanele happily accepted that, but this did not in any way reduce her conviction that the Snake could have been the source of light.

Farther north in Zimbabwe, in Aschwanden’s account of Salani who spoke of spending time underwater sitting between the Snake and crocodile, “the snake showed him medicines [plants] which he would later use as a *n’anga*. On its head it had red hair, and it had big, radiant eyes (Salani compared them to a car’s headlights)” (Aschwanden, 1989: 174).

Among the Khoekhoen and /Xam the bright light on the Snake’s forehead features prominently in the descriptions. For instance Hoff noted that,

Two prominent characteristics, pointed out by all Khoekhoen and /Xam, are the interlocking eyebrows of the Water Snake, which is regarded as an attractive feature (as it is in humans), and a light on the forehead visible during the night. The light is described as a spot, a star, a stone, a mirror, or a diamond (Hoff, 1997: 24).
Among the Nama and Damara groups Schmidt observes that the most conspicuous part of the
Big Snake, Kai/aob, is its head. It is described as having “a human face with eyebrows
meeting at the bridge of its nose” and in some reports it has a beard. It also has horns and a
shining stone on its forehead, which are often visible at night:

People observe the Snake particularly at night when it moves around in the mountains,
usually the mountains nearest to the home of the informants. For the light of the bright
stone at its forehead enables it to graze in the dark. This shining stone is called a
“lamp”, “mirror” or “diamond” and only very rarely a “blaze” (Schmidt, 1997: 270).

Waldman has noted similar descriptions among the Griqua located west of Kimberley.
During her observation of female puberty rituals among the Griqua, which involve a period of
seclusion and ritual sacrifice prior to the young girls being introduced to the Water Snake at a
spring or fountain she was told that, “Inside the spring lives a watersnake. Pauline told me that
it was a very beautiful male watersnake. Mietha added that it had long eyelashes and big
beautiful eyes. On its forehead is a bright shining spot” (Waldman, 1989: 38).

Waldman also noted that “Several of my informants linked the watersnake with the rainbow,
with rivers and with the weather” (ibid: 42). A very similar description was given to Carstens
by his Khoekhoe informants who told him that the big Snake, which they were emphatic
existed, had “an attractive light-brown body with a head resembling that of a beautiful man. It
had bright eyes and long black eyelashes. On its forehead is a precious stone, which shines
like a torch at night while it feeds in the hills” (Carstens, 1975: 90). Furthermore this Snake
was believed to be so large it could straddle the Orange River.

Similar ideas of a snake that resides in pools or caves in the mountains of the former Northern
Province in South Africa (now part of Limpopo Province) have been recorded by de Beer
(1999). According to de Beer (see Appendix Sixteen) the BaKoni (Sotho/Pedi) of Matlala and
the Langa of the Bakenberg area strongly believe in a large snake that has transformative
powers and is linked with rainmaking. She/he is called mamogaśwa, and like all other reports,

17 Waldman observes that these Griqua communities are of mixed Khoe, Koranna and Nama descent (Waldman,
1989: 12).

18 Waldman’s informants distinguished between a male and female water Snake. The male Snake is partial to
human females, while the female Snake is partial to human males (ibid).
is associated with a glowing light,

*Mamogašwa* is believed to have been created by the supreme being himself and can manifest itself in male or female form of virtually any phenomenon, although its most common manifestation is in the form of a snake. It is particularly associated with tornados and other very strong winds coming from the south. A red glow in or near water at night is also an indication of the presence of *mamogašwa* (de Beer, 1999: 23).

In his book *The Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes* (1971) Schapera documents the testimony of Kgabyana, daughter to the Chief Lentswe of the Kgatla tribe in S.E. Botswana (see Appendix Eighteen). He details her experience of visiting the big Snake that resided on top of Modipe hill in a cave which contained a small pool. This Snake, Kgwanyape, was a central element of the chief’s rain-making ability. Kgabyana’s testimony contains many references to the bright light that the Snake is held to emit,

Kgabyana said she herself had been to Modipe several times. She told me (6 September 1934) that her father used to send her there when he was running short of essential medicines. She would leave Mochudi at dusk, so that when she got to Modipane village all would be quiet and dark, with no light visible except that emanating from the snake. At the foot of the hill she removed all her clothes, smeared her body with *tshitlho* (protective medicine), and started to climb. The light from the snake was sometimes so strong that it ‘weakened’ her and prevented her from climbing, but she was generally able to ascend to the top (Schapera, 1971: 39-41).

Further on in her testimony she told Schapera, “Its light is usually visible about Christmas time, and can be seen by anybody, even from Sikwane (fifteen miles east). It goes about, moving through the veld, and uproots the trees in its path” (*ibid*). The occurrence of the light at Christmas (December) could be due to the fact that this coincides with the rainy season in the region, with which the Snake is associated.

4.3.2.2 Feathers, tufts of hair and pronounced vertebrae

In both Salani’s and Kgabyana’s accounts there is also mention of the Snake having tufts of hair, ears or feathers[^19]. For instance Kgabyana describes how,

> I drew near to the little pool which had been described to me by my father. It was close

[^19]: These could be different interpretations of the same perceived anatomical phenomena.
to the entrance of a cave, and when I reached it I trod on water. As I stood there, a wind sprung up and clouds began to form, the water in the pool rippled, the trees rustled, and an angry noise (kgaruru) started in the cave. The snake came out and approached me, with its eyes flashing. It startled me, but I stood still. As I looked at it approaching, it seemed to have facial features of a human being. Its body gleamed, and on its head was (what looked like) untidy thatch (setlhankhukhu). The chief and his doctors tell the people that this is straw (motlhaka), but it is not; it is a clump of hair (sekhu saboditse), to which many mosquitoes were clinging (Schapera, 1971: 174).

Both Zanele and Lindiwe, a Zulu isangoma whom I discuss in more detail below, have recounted dreams to me which have featured a snake with a feather coming from its head (a feathered serpent). Reference to the feathered serpent ‘ndlondlo’ is included in Baba’s standard praise poem recited by all in his isibaya as a sign of respect to the amakhosi. Baba also mentioned that the Snake that he claims took him under water had pronounced vertebrae, whilst M.J.D mentions the Snake that erected the crest on its back (Köhler, 1941: 20). Berglund’s informants also emphasized the “protruding vertebrae, especially along the upper back, nearest the head” (Berglund, 1976: 146). These could presumably be mistaken for feathers or hair. Berglund points out that while the term ixhanti is used to describe the “upper row of dorsal vertebrae in either humans or, in animals, in cattle and goats in particular” (ibid: 147) – it is also the region of the animal’s body which the supplicant brushes with a stick when invoking his/her ancestors to be present at an animal sacrifice. The region around the lower cervical and upper thoracic vertebrae, and the scapulae, is also the site on the human body that is particularly favoured by the ancestors. When one suffers sharp pains or aches in this region it is regarded as a sign that the ancestors are trying to attract the attention of the person. Among the Xhosa the term ixhanti is also used to refer to the central pole of the kraal which is dedicated to the ancestors during ritual sacrifice. It is at the ixhanti where a man can appeal to his ancestors for help. The usage of this term to describe the mystical Snake thus seems to emphasize not only its pronounced anatomical features but also its central role for accessing ancestral power.

4.3.3 The transformative powers of the Snake

Although ordinary looking snakes, such as pythons, can enter one’s home and be regarded as a manifestation of the ancestors, there are also reports throughout the region of a more mystical large Snake that one can encounter in the veld (countryside) which can change its size, makes a strange sound and can entrance people if it catches their gaze. This could reflect the /Xam’s
distinction of the Veld Snake and the Water Snake, as already mentioned by Hoff (1997). It seems to manifest to those who are being called to become a diviner or whose descendants will be called. This creature is described more as electrical or high energy force rather than an ordinary animal manifestation. It is not clear whether this mystical Snake is the same as the Python but in the account given by Mrs X from Mvoti (see Section 4.2.1) of the Python’s visitation to her house, she describes it as appearing like ‘a beautiful handkerchief’ that was changing colours. Baba’s aged maternal grandmother (Gogo) claims to have encountered such an entity, which she likened to ‘a woven blanket’, when she was a young woman (she was evidently born in 1897). She referred to this Snake as inhlwathi or iNlwsi (or Lord), which suggests it was like a python. In her account she describes how she was walking in the hills in the Estcourt region of Natal looking for a lost cow, when she came across inhlwathi:

I looked at it, since its head was hidden. I realised that it was inhlwathi. Its body was showing. When I saw this body, it was so beautiful, with different marks and coloured like a woven blanket. I said what I saw was beautiful, then I heard something saying ‘raaa’ - then these colours that were small began to be big, and then as I looked, it became bigger. Then I heard another ‘raaa’ sound. The colours became bigger, until they were very big. I got a shock now and exclaimed and said ‘Oh! What is this?’ It was rising but no head was shown. When it said ‘raaa’ it was moving and rising, in the pit [? a hole], and it was getting nearer. I thought it would catch me. I saw as if someone was calling me, telling me that it was the Snake that I was watching. Then I looked with shock and said ‘Oh Lord! What’s happening?’ What I said is quite right to say ‘Lord’, because the Snake is called ‘Lord’. I tried to run away, unfortunately I fell down twice. I started screaming for help, thinking it was my hour of death. Somebody heard me crying and called from the hill asking what was wrong. I was running towards home by then. I responded that I had seen something. He asked if it [the Snake] had bitten me. I said no, but all I could see was as if the Snake was sparkling in my eyes. It seemed as if the Snake was moving all over, and I ran to my parent’s home. There they gave me ‘izihlungu’ [medicine]. Then I went home, but before entering it [home], they washed me with ‘intelezi’ [medicines used to cleanse and protect people]. They [her family] called my husband’s brother to come and thank the ancestors for what had happened. That is how I was saved. I gradually got better and people told me I was going to be a sangoma. On hearing that I could be a sangoma, I knelt down and prayed to God. I also fasted for several days. But it was beyond my powers, it was said that my late mother wanted me to be an ‘umthandazi’ [prophet] and I became so. This did not only end with me, it [prophecy] spread to my children, my son and my daughter. By the time my children were filled with this spirit of prophecy, I was already aware what was happening to them, because it started with me.

Note that this need to cleanse with medicines after sighting the mystical Snake has also been observed amongst the Nguni groups by Soga (1931: 193-195).
Sometime later an elder brother of Baba (Samuel) had a similar experience near Mooi River, but this time the Snake was seen to emit a bright light from its head. He was able to avert his eyes and escape being ‘taken’, but this close encounter was regarded by his family as the prelude to Baba’s subsequent submersion. Baba’s submersion under the sea was seen as a later consequence of both his grandmother’s and his brother’s narrow escapes. It was this grandmother who was on hand to assist him when he returned from the water.

Berglund’s informants suggested that pythons can have this mesmerising and light emitting effect,

One informant said that if one looks at a python it will “catch the eye and you will never be able to look away again.” Another said that if one stared at the reptile one’s eyesight would be damaged and one would be dazzled “as when you look into the sun. You see simply nothing, just sharpness of light and white” (Berglund, 1976: 61).

Lindiwe is a thwasa from the Lidgerton area in KwaZulu Natal. Her maternal grandmother was a very powerful healer who ‘worked with the water’ (i.e. her ancestral powers came from the water) and who claimed to have had the underwater experience. Lindiwe dreams frequently of snakes and has had frequent real encounters with them, one even staying in her room for over a week. She described it as constantly changing its colour but she was not afraid because she knew it was her ancestors. She believes that she witnessed the more mystical big Snake when she was a child in the Nottingham Road area. She had been playing near a forest with some other children. Somehow she became separated from them and found herself confronted by the large Snake (over six metres long and 30cm in diameter). She was transfixed by it and could not move. She tried to climb a tree without success. It was making a strange noise like the wind and its eyes were covered (similar to Gogo’s account given above). Eventually all the children she was playing with returned and she was able to move again. The Snake had disappeared back into the earth. Lindiwe is expecting that sometime in the future she will be taken underwater as she claims to have already been shown the appearance of the cow and goat that must be sacrificed on her return. Both these accounts describe the great Snake as if it was capable of radiating a powerful energy field from its eyes, which it can apparently control by keeping its eyelids hooded or closed. In informants’ thinking this probably has some connection to the powerful light which is said to radiate from them, for if one focuses on them and sees the light, then one can ‘lose one’s mind’ (consciousness).
Its ability to expand from being small to very large was the essential part of a description given to me by a hotel manager in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, who was brought up near to the farm where I resided as a child. He claims that he witnessed the great Snake that stretched over the land and filled everyone’s eyes. People who were separated by great distances reported seeing it at the same time. It made the sound of a strong wind, yet it was not the wind, it appeared like a snake. The ability of the Snake to expand up to vast distances was also given in Salani’s account “This snake was able to suddenly stretch a long way (up to a mile, Salani insisted) and then shrink again into a small snake” (Aschwanden, 1989: 174). Reynolds also mentions reports on sightings of a snake which is so long one cannot see its head or tail (Reynolds, 1996: 40).

Schmidt has documented very similar themes from his Nama informants: “Everybody has heard about the “wires” or “rays” with which it catches its victims. These wires are invisible but work, so people say, just as electrical wires or like magnetism” (Schmidt, 1998: 270). Hoff (1997) has recorded similar ideas. She notes that the Water Snake found in rivers and fountains “has the ability to change its colour and shape in order to attract and catch people” (Hoff, 1997: 24). Lange’s informants mentioned that the Water Snake can often appear as a shiny gold chain that floats on the surface of the water (Lange et al., 2007: 19, 22).

Hunter’s informants also emphasised that “ichanti has great eyes with which to stare at people” (Hunter, 1936/1961: 286). She reports that one of the ways used to escape its mesmerising effect is for companions of the one who has been summoned to throw stones ahead of the person in order to break the gaze of the Snake. Ichanti (or ixhanti) also has great powers of metamorphosis and can appear in any form, but its original morphological identity is as a snake (Hunter, 1961: 286). She recounts a fascinating incident that was recounted to her by Rev. J. Lennox,

Once at a Sunday-school treat a magic-lantern show was given. The last picture was of geometric patterns which formed and reformed on the screen. When it appeared one of the audience shouted, ‘Lichanti!’ and the whole audience of children and parents fled.

21 Schmidt’s use of such terms suggests that this creature is regarded in a more malignant, negative light.
These descriptions suggest the great Snake is far more than an ordinary snake or even a ‘shade snake’, which enters a descendant’s house. Rather, it is a powerful serpent-like force, which has a magical and mesmerizing effect on those who gaze on it. Aschwanden’s Karanga informants suggest that this snake is also a njuzu, or mermaid, and were more specific on this,

A group of old Karanga remarked that the njuzu was not really a snake but masaramusi (from masara and meso, that which fills the eyes), meaning mysterious beings one can see as a snake or as a hybrid (mermaid), or even as a black animal (Aschwanden, 1989: 188).

This statement connects strongly with Gogo’s given above, who resides over a thousand kilometres to the south. It also implies that the mermaid is equated with the mystical Snake. When we asked the old lady who had narrowly escaped being taken under water while crossing a river in Nyanga Zimbabwe, whether she had heard about the Snake that resides in the river, her response was “What I heard from my Granny is that this njuzu at times changes into a big Snake”.

4.3.4 Summary

There is abundant evidence that snakes, in various forms, are significant features in the cosmologies of the various groups described and these are linked with the divine powers, the ancestors, rain and the calling of individuals to become diviner-healers. While the three Bantu-speaking groups regard certain snakes as manifestations of the ancestors this is not a feature that has been recorded amongst the San or Khoekhoe groups. For the San this could be due to the fact that the ancestors played a relatively insignificant part in their lives (Schapera, 1930/1965:172) and this indicates that there are cultural constraints that limit the relevance and certain expression of such ideas – a theme I will develop further in the thesis. For the Khoekhoe little has been recorded regarding their beliefs pertaining to the dead (Schapera, 1930/1965: 366) or the role of the ancestors, so one cannot be certain that such ideas did not exist. The belief in the transmutation of the ancestors into snakes (among other animal forms) is especially pronounced among the Zulu and these snakes range from a variety of common species that are linked with certain clans or families, to the python (inhlwathi), which is regarded as the manifestation of the great ancestors (the amakhosi amakhulu) that cut across
clans. In Zimbabwe, while both the python and puff-adder are regarded as manifestations of God (Mwari) and the ancestors respectively, there does not appear to be as much emphasis on the ancestors taking the form of other species of common snake as among the Zulu and Mpondo. However, the various Shona clans are known to recognise totemic affiliation with a variety of different creatures which “have links with the clan’s history and spirit guardians” (Shoko, 2007: 18), such as the monkey (Shoko), lion (Shumba), fish (Hove) and bird (Shiri). The eating of totem animals (zvidau) are taboo for members of the clan (see also Bourdillon, 1976). Among the Shona groups the crocodile features more prominently in the water divinity complex, and is a species commonly found there. However, according to Aschwanden (1989: 190-191), it is linked more with witchcraft than with healing, rain and fertility. Both the Zulu and the Shona regard the python in a predominantly positive light and demonstrate profound reverence towards it. The importance of the python seems to diminish with its natural distribution, so that among the Cape Nguni it does not feature prominently, although it may be linked in historical accounts to certain royal houses (Peires, 1989/2003: 103).

All of the groups, including the Khoekhoe and San (see also Chapter Nine), describe rare but remarkably similar encounters with a large mystical Snake that appears either on land or underwater, and is specifically associated with those people who are called to become diviners. It can occasionally be perceived in a conscious state, but more frequently during altered states of consciousness such as in trance or dreams. As a ‘mystical’ Snake its manifestation is not constrained by species distribution, as in the case of the python. Those that are held to perceive it, no matter in what form of consciousness, are regarded as potential diviners and they or their descendents stand the chance of being called underwater. The broad descriptions of this Snake across the groups are remarkably similar, both in its appearance and its activity. It is seen as having the ability to change size and transform itself; it emits a bright mesmerising light from its eyes or head; it has distinctive facial appearance (often described as human-like with large eyes and nostrils); it has pronounced upper dorsal vertebrae which are sometimes described as feathers or hair. While it is potentially dangerous, due mainly to its powerful energetic force field that can put one into trance, it is also regarded as a benevolent being. Some Zulu informants regard it as the manifestation of God, inkosi yaphezulu, while the Cape Nguni refer to it principally as ixhanti and although they recognise its importance to healers they do not seem to attribute a godlike status to it. In Zimbabwe the mystical Snake is
linked in some way to both the python and the njuzu, and as such is connected to the androgynous High God Mwari. Exactly how the mystical Snake, the python, the ancestors and the mermaid are linked remains veiled and indistinct among all the groups, with no informants being able to classify them with absolute certainty. This is probably due to its transformative and mysterious nature and the fact that it is held to have been perceived only by a few, mostly while in an altered state of consciousness.

While most accounts of people who claim to have had underwater experiences distinguish between the mystical Snake and the mermaid, there seems to be widespread consensus that the mermaid can also sometimes manifest in the form of a snake. In the next section I examine these concepts in more detail.

4.4 The nature of the mermaid
Reports of encounters with fish-tailed beings are found in a number of the ethnographic records of all the groups examined. Some of the Cape Nguni records make a direct connection between these beings and the abantu bomlambo (the People of the River), while the Shona refer to them as njuzu. As both the Karanga and Cape Nguni tend to refer to the njuzu and the abantu bomlambo as a multiple group of beings, I will discuss their ideas first before I examine the Zulu ideas of the singular entity, Inkosazana or Nomkhubulwana, who can sometimes manifest as a mermaid.

4.4.1 Cape Nguni concepts of ‘The People of the River’ – the abantu bomlambo
In Laubscher’s book entitled Sex, Custom and Psychopathology (1937), his introductory chapter commences with the ‘folk-lore’ of the ‘Abantubomlambo’ (the River People) that he obtained from interviews with diviners and patients in his psychiatric practice. I quote his passage at length because it holds all the essential details that are found in more fragmented form in the other ethnographies on the Cape Nguni beliefs.

In shape and form these people conform to what is known in Western mythology as mermaids. They are half fish and half human, with heads of beautiful long flowing hair. They are said to live in kraals deep down under the river, especially below the deep pools. They have their own customs and traditions, even their food and manner of preparation is different from that of the people on land.

They are mysterious people with great powers of magic, but are elusive and not
easily observed, if at all. But there are people who have seen them sitting on the rocks in the river, drying their long flowing hair in the sun. However, such occurrences are rare, for the Abantubomlambo are extremely sensitive to the presence of land people and, as soon as human beings are sensed or espied, they disappear to their homes in the depths of the pools.

Hardened elders speak of them in hushed voices, reassuringly repeating that the river people are harmless if left alone, for whatever they may do they have the right to do as guardians of tribal law and custom. They never exercise their magic powers unless someone has violated tribal traditions or requires their aid to become a healer. They are reputed to have knowledge and wisdom far beyond that which any human can attain, and it is not unusual for those in training to become doctors and diviners, during the period of ukutwasa when abnormal psychic powers are developing, to have the secrets of life revealed to them by the Abantubomlambo ............

So the Abantubomlambo serve the people of the land by giving knowledge and wisdom to those suitable persons who are to heal the sick and combat the evils of witchcraft. But as guardians of morality they also punish those who offend against the moral conscience of the tribe and from time to time demand a sacrifice for a life that should have been paid by a human being (Laubscher, 1937: 2).

Laubscher is quite clear in this text that these creatures are very much like humans, although they have fish-tails, live under water and have extra-ordinary abilities. Although they are not the ancestors they are very concerned with human affairs and well-being, and as I discuss later, appear to act as moral guardians of tradition.

Elliott’s description also suggests that although they have human like qualities they could possibly be conceived of as mermaids,

The Xhosa say that the People of the River are the same size as humans and have long hair down to their shoulders, like the white people have, but their skin can be any colour ....white, yellow or black. There are men, women and children and they have families and babies, but they do not wear clothes. Their wrists and ankles are ‘soft’ [a suggestion of flippers22], and because of this they cannot walk upright and so go around on all fours in the water (Elliott, 1972: 97).

Elliott emphasizes that the People of the River are regarded as tangible embodied beings (i.e. not spirits), just like humans, and although they are very elusive, they cannot become invisible. Despite this he was told they do have great powers of ‘magic’ (or supernatural power), derived from the medicines they use. Like Laubscher’s impression, Elliott’s

22 My suggestion.
description suggests that they are regarded as being benevolent and kind. Apart from occasionally taking potential diviners underwater to grant them skills of healing, they are also believed to assist humans when they encounter trouble in water by keeping them afloat. They can also “set up invisible protection around a homestead at night and bless its inhabitants with health and good fortune” (Elliott, 1972: 100). He states that they are able to achieve this, even at a distance while in their watery abode, as they seem to be able to enlist the help of “the actual spirits of ancient ancestors who somehow manifest themselves in and through the People of the River” (ibid). These blessings from the People of the River are especially effective when an animal (an ox or a goat) is ritually slaughtered for them at the sea (or river) and left overnight for the abantu bomlambo to enjoy (ibid).

Hirst's data also agrees with the morphological description given by Laubscher and he affirms the description that the River People “are human from the head down to the waist below which they have tails like fish” (Hirst, 1990: 215), but as already mentioned in Chapter Three he sees this description as an “an extended metaphor cleverly contrived...as a term of respect for the ancestors” (Hirst, 1990: 215). He also sees the fish-tailed woman, with her scale like skin as being a “succinct metaphor for the diviner’s (animal) skin skirt (umthika); and both fish-tail and skin skirt symbolize or stand for the dietary ascetism (taboo on eating fish) of the diviner” (ibid: 219-220). In the ‘River Myth’ recounted to Hirst by his informant Tyota (see Appendix Six), he describes his encounter with a single female mermaid23, reminiscent of that conceived by the Zulu, who appears to have a central role in the calling of the diviner. In the ‘myth’ initiates are told that after passing the oval grindstone containing the white clay, one will first see the Snake (which seems to be the gatekeeper in that it will kill those not invited), and then one will then see an old woman wearing a girdle around her waist,

That old woman is a human being in the upper part [of her body] and a fish in the lower part. Her hair reaches her back, [and] her skin is a scaly covering with no flesh thereon. She is a fish but a fish which is a human being in the upper part [of the body]. She is a person of the river. This old woman is the one who resides in the river; she is the female diviner of that place who has favoured one when one has met the ancestors of the river (Hirst, 1990:

23 The narrative given to Hammond-Tooke by Manyoni (1962) also features an old woman who has ‘one leg’ who plays a key role in the underwater experience (Appendix 7.2). One can surmise whether this ‘one leg’ may be describing a mermaid’s fish tail.
The representation is clearly that of a mermaid, as a single old woman, but somewhat confusingly this description changes to refer to a multiple grouping when he goes on to say:

Having gone past this [the Snake], one is going to that ubulawu of one’s home; that same one [ubulawu] is there in the river, the one that is eaten by the ooNomathotholo [the high-pitched spirit voices]. From there now one proceeds to the old woman, the one that is called upon even now by everybody who is a diviner. They are called old women, that is how they are called at the river, it is those old women residing there. But there is one called for the amaNgqosini, another called for the amaMzangwa or such and such a clan (isiduko) – people who have thwasa’đ at the river. This one [i.e. the old woman] is going to tell one what has called one there – it is one’s ancestors (Hirst, 1990: 264) (My emphasis).

What I interpret from this rather obscure description is that those ancestors (and their clans) connected to the water, especially those who were also once diviners who had gone under water (as already mentioned in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.5 this is regarded as an inherited condition), are seen to work in conjunction with the ‘old woman’ (i.e. the mermaid) in the calling and teaching process of future diviners. It is not quite clear why Tyota changes his reference halfway through the text from the singular ‘old woman’ to the multiple ‘old women’.

Roadnight has documented a series of dreams that were related to her by Thandiswa, a Xhosa novice diviner in Grahamstown, which were regarded by Thandiswa as warnings that she would be taken under water at some stage in the future. Notably, in these dreams Thandiswa encounters a single woman, who she regards as living under water,

**Dream One:**
She (Thandiswa) was inside a house which was floating on top of the sea. The house had many windows and there was water everywhere. There was a door, which was opened by a white lady dressed in long flowing white robes which trailed in the sea. Her face was half covered and she was white [i.e. like a European]. She had a big shiny golden key. She called Thandiswa to join her. As Thandiswa went to leave the house a long thin stick appeared at the entrance which she had to balance on. The lady helped her and held her hand tightly. Her [Thandiswa’s] feet were wet but she walked across the sea for a long time. The stick was rocking up and down with the waves. Thandiswa believes that the dream meant she was being called to the water and that when she goes under she will meet this lady (Roadnight, 2008: 24-25).
Dream Two (verbatim from Thandiswa):
I dreamed about a lady. It was the same lady but this time she had a black face. I do not know this lady but she is very beautiful. She came to me and showed me her tail. She had no legs, just a big tail and a bowl\(^{24}\) for her feet. The tail was brown with yellow dots like a snake. She had a shawl or a kind of coat on also, which looked like it was made of animal fur, like a dog. She was dancing - but jumping up and down because she had a fish tail and no feet, but a bowl for her feet. She had long shiny hair, not a black person’s hair, and she asked me to brush it. She gave me the brush and I sat with her and brushed. As I brushed she talked to me and told me that I must only wear white beads in my ears for earrings. She said I must take out my earrings. I asked her if I must buy some white beads and she said no, that she will give me the white beads for my earrings when I meet her again under the water (Roadnight, 2008: 25).

Again, both of these dreams emphasize one single woman, rather than a multiple grouping, and the same recurring symbols appear that are found in other accounts. In the first dream, whiteness both in skin color and dress is emphasized and the metaphorical significance that the ‘lady’ holds the key to crossing the water is explicit. I interpret the narrow stick or plank that Thandiswa has to walk along with the ‘lady’s’ aid as signifying the importance of the diviner keeping to the ‘straight and narrow’ path especially in terms of morality (discussed more in Chapter Seven). In the second dream, the lady reveals more of herself, especially her snake or fish-like tail. The fact that her skin color had changed did not seem to make Thandiswa doubt she was the same woman, suggesting that Thandiswa was aware that the ‘lady’ could transform her appearance in different contexts. The brushing or combing of the mermaid’s hair is a theme that crops up in several accounts (e.g. Zanele mentioned this to me), and is a universal image that is especially emphasized in West African mermaid iconography\(^{25}\).

Hammond-Tooke does not mention that the River People are mermaids. He notes that they are thought to live in deep pools; where they have houses and cattle, and that some informants emphasize that they have pale skins and long hair (Hammond-Tooke, 1975b:20). Some of his informants were emphatic that the River People are not ancestors, although, as Hirst’s

\(^{24}\) This could be a coiled snake tail which may have a ‘bowl’ or pot like appearance.

\(^{25}\) Several scholars argue that this West African iconography was adapted from European and Indian sources (Drewal, 1988a & b; Salmons, 1977), while others argue these images were derived from pre-colonial traditional ideas that later incorporated or appropriated foreign imagery (Isichei, 2004; Jell-Bahlsen, 1995). The use of such mermaid imagery and iconography as are found in West African shrines are not common in southern Africa.
evidence suggests, some clans have a stronger link to them than others. Hammond-Tooke (ibid) also notes how the River People appear to be concerned with human affairs and that their “influence can be both baleful and benevolent”. Their benefits include the calling of diviners underwater, where they meet the Snake and are given knowledge as well as the symbolic white stone. They are also associated with the provision of rain. However, they do have the ability to punish and inflict illness on people especially those who have transgressed certain taboos or moral codes, and they may drown certain individuals if the taboos on crying are not observed (ibid: 20-21).

Although Buhrmann (1986) mentions the River People in relation to certain rituals that are performed at the river, she makes no comment on their appearance or qualities. She only mentions that supplicants who give offerings at the water will always paint their faces with white clay so as “not to scare the River People who are white” (Buhrmann, 1986: 72-73). Similarly although Broster mentions the People of the River as being linked to the diviner’s underwater calling she does not give any description as to their nature and appearance. Surprisingly, Hunter (1936/1961) does not discuss the concept of the River People among the Mpondo.

4.4.2 Shona ideas on the mermaids (njuzu)

It is of interest to note Terence Ranger’s (1995) observations following a ‘Research Day of the British-Zimbabwe Society at St Antony’s College, Oxford,’ in 1994, regarding the pervasiveness of reports of mermaids in many of the papers presented on Shona traditional religion. In his report of the various papers delivered he noted the following:

There also emerged from Ravaí’s paper an example of a common idiom, which has come to be shared by all the African peoples of Zimbabwe, although interpreted and integrated differently in their belief systems. She told us of female Tsungani spirits, who live on mud and fish, communicate with humans only when warning of either flood or drought........as we shall see, these ‘mermaids’, under different names, recurred throughout the Research Day, in report after report on rather different religious systems in other parts of Zimbabwe. I would hazard a guess that ‘mermaids’ represent a very old strata of belief over which other ideas and institutions have been overlaid (Ranger, 1995:230).

In a recent publication Tabona Shoko gives a comprehensive description on the ideas of the mermaids (njuzu) among the Karanga from the Mberengwa region of Zimbabwe. These ideas
correlate with many of the ideas on the *abantu bomlambo*. Like Laubscher's description of the *abantu bomlambo* for the Cape Nguni, Shoko's description is also relatively comprehensive, even though he does not explore the topic beyond this description.

*Njuzu* [mermaid] spirits are associated with water. People describe the mermaid as a weird creature with a fish's body and human head. It bears the features of a woman with long hair and breasts. It resembles a beautiful white woman with smooth skin. It grows a reed at the back. *Njuzu* lives in water but occasionally moves out. It is frightening to see a mermaid. The creature can kidnap a person who moves near the pool. Victims are people drawing water, fishing or swimming at the river. The spirit drags the victim underneath the water to a special enclosure where it resides. The victim's companions and relatives are not allowed to mourn lest the captured person dies. The spirit provides the captive with food comprising mud, water, insects and creatures. After some time the relatives consult a *n'anga* [diviner] about the disappearance of their relative. A spirit medium identifies the mermaid spirit as responsible. A ritual is organized by senior spirit mediums with drumming, singing and dancing at the river side. The *njuzu* spirit releases the captive alive. He is possessed by a *njuzu* spirit and joins the ceremony. He becomes a skilled *n'anga* called *godobori*. He is renowned for using medicine from the underworld. *Njuzu* are 'ambiguous'. They transform a person from captivity to a traditional medical practitioner who provides important services to the community (Shoko, 2007: 41).

Shoko is quite clear in this description that the *njuzu* are mermaids, emphasising their feminine nature, but he uses the term 'creature' interchangeably with 'spirit', so it is unclear in this text whether they are regarded as embodied beings or spirits. Aschwanden, however, has clarified this point when he states "*njuzu* is itself a creature, like man" (i.e. it is a tangible physical being) and thus, instead of the descriptive term 'spirit', "the term water-creature is more apt" (Aschwanden, 1989: 187). Like humans it is believed these creatures can die and will then assume spirit status, and these spirits can then possess certain mediums. Spirit possession, especially by alien (foreign) spirits, *mashave*, is far more prominent in Zimbabwe (see

26 This is reminiscent of Salani's account in Aschwanden where he describes removing plant medicines from the back of the crocodile (Aschwanden, 1989: 174, 176).

27 This ability of *njuzu* to become a possessing spirit could explain why Reynolds refers to them as spirits. She notes that the Shona are quite specific that they are classified as alien spirits - *mashave* - a term which can apply to spirits of either of human or non-human origin (Reynolds, 1996). However, like many other reports she notes that they are supposed to have pale skins and long hair, 'Njuzu are spirits that live in water and take those whom they wish to possess - usually granting them healing powers - beneath water to train. They are said to be pale-skinned and to have long fair hair. Their healing powers are said to be greater than those granted by ancestral spirits. *Njuzu* are classified as alien spirits - *mashave* (Reynolds, 1996: x). Daneel also classifies *njuzu* as alien spirits (1971).
Gelfand, 1959: 121-152) than among the Nguni groups who tend to emphasise other mechanisms of divination with the ancestors, such as head divination, cleromancy (throwing of bones) and whistling spirit communication. According to Zanele, possession by alien or foreign spirits is regarded in a negative light by the Zulu, who emphasise the importance of working with, or being possessed by one’s own ancestors who can be trusted. This point of view is corroborated by Ngubane who asserts that the phenomenon of alien spirit possession in the form of *ufunjanye* and *indiki* is seen as a “violation of the principle of patrilineage” (Ngubane, 1977: 146) among the Zulu. She further states that, “A spirit that takes possession indiscriminately outside the patrilineal descent principle is thus regarded as evil. The evilness inheres not so much in the spirit itself as in confusing the categories” (ibid). While Ngubane emphasizes the patrilineal principle, I have not found aversion to possession by spirits from the maternal side. As long as the spirit is of your bloodline, be it paternal or maternal, it is acceptable.

Although ancestral spirit possession does occur with some Zulu diviners it is in no way the only means of gaining communication with one’s ancestors. Thus although the notion of being possessed by a mermaid spirit does not seem to feature amongst the Cape Nguni diviners, they work in conjunction with the mermaids (*abantu bomlambo*) through their intermediary ancestors. This emphasis on the ancestral alliance with the River People, rather than possession by the spirits of the River People, comes through clearly in their river rituals which I describe in the next chapter. The question of why the Shona place more emphasis on alien spirit possession, whether it be by *njuzu* spirits or spirits of other ethnic groups, could possibly be attributed to the long history of incursions by a diversity of foreign traders, from many areas of the Indian Ocean littoral, in search of precious minerals in Zimbabwe (Garlake, 1973). Spirit possession cults may thus have been used to accommodate, naturalise and domesticate the troublesome spirits of dead foreigners, as well as deal with issues of identity and power (see Larsen, 1998; MacIntosh, 2004a; Werbner, 1977).

28 Gelfand lists thirteen different types of alien spirit possession among the Zezuru Shona group.

29 This fact was highlighted to me when the Zulu *izangoma* from my grouping accompanied me to the sacred pool of Nyamakati in Zimbabwe (See Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1). The host community insisted that I had to become possessed by a spirit in order to convince them of my claims to have been sent there in a dream. Baba and Zanele were puzzled, and somewhat aghast at such a request.
These qualities of the mermaid’s (*njuzu*) tangibility as an embodied being, and its distinction from that of a spirit (*i.e.* an ancestral spirit - a *midzimu*) were clearly expressed to me when interviewing the husband (H) of an *njuzu* diviner, Alice (pseudonym), who was reputedly taken underwater in the Murewa district of Zimbabwe (see Appendix Fifteen). It appears from this interview that I conducted through an interpreter that a mermaid will only reveal itself to people who have ‘good hearts’ (*i.e.* not darkened by greed, hatred or jealousy),

Q: Have you ever seen an *njuzu* or has someone [you know] seen it before?
H: Yes, people have seen *njuzu* before, but it can only be seen by good people [as in kind or good hearted people]. The way you see it is just the same as the way a hippopotamus shows itself by showing its nose above water.
Q: She [Bernard] is asking whether *njuzu* and *midzimu* [ancestral spirits] go hand in hand.
H: *Njuzu* is on its own and likewise [the *midzimu*]. *Midzimu* [ancestral spirit] is not tangible but *njuzu* is tangible.

Regarding the tangible or physically embodied nature of *njuzu*, Aschwanden states that they are creatures associated with three main domains; they are variably termed creatures of ‘below the ground’ (*vari pasi*), ‘water-people’ (*vanhu vomumvura*), or ‘people of God’ (*vanhu vokwaMwari*). It is their association with the Mwari shrines of the Matopos Hills that afford them the latter association. They definitely seem to have a divine status, but they are like humans in that “They experience their subterranean world as we humans do ours, and a blue sky spans both worlds. They also build huts and have cattle and fields” (Aschwanden, 1989: 187).

Daneel has elaborated in more detail on this underwater realm, which his informants referred to as the ‘city of the *Njuzu*’ (*Guta re*Njuzu*), and its association with goodness,

There are numerous variations in the descriptions of the *Njuzu*’s dwelling places, but the following outstanding features can be determined: No deaths occur, since the surrounding streams of boiling water prevent all witches from reaching the place. *Njuzuland* is therefore thought of a place freed of all evil influence. All the ‘people’ in *Njuzu* territory are in a state of well-being, even if some of them are so old that they cannot feed themselves. Due to all these positive features of the *Njuzu* abode, the medicines prescribed by these spirits can be used for constructive purposes only. The spirits supply their mediums with medicative reeds, water plants, white clay, etc [all medicines associated with water], which are the only things to be taken back on the return journey (Daneel, 1971: 129).
Two points are worth considering in the above description. The first is the emphasis that this underwater world is seen as a place where no evil exists. Danee’s description of the streams of boiling water that protect this realm is the only one I have encountered. In a later Chapter I consider how with the influence of capitalism and Christianity, and the corresponding rise of the occult economy, such ideas of utopian underwater cities are inverted to be associated with realms of evil excess, governed by witches and Satan (e.g. see Ellis & Ter Haar, 2004: 49); this is especially the case in West Africa. The other point to consider is the claim that no death occurs in this realm. While this may appear to counter Aschwanden’s claim that njuzu can die and assume spirit status, it should be pointed out that Aschwanden never elaborates on where they may die (in their underwater realm or out of it). It could well be that when they leave their watery realms and cross the threshold into the world of humans, mermaids are regarded as being subject to the same laws of mortality. In Section 4.5 I present a case where it was claimed that a mermaid was shot and killed by some Zulu youth, who were unaware of its significance, after being spotted at a river in the Mvoti District of KwaZulu-Natal, which re-enforces the claim that they can die.

As with reports of the abantu bomlambo for the Cape Nguni, the njuzu appear to have a great many more powers than humans, and, as Daneel suggests in the excerpt above, they are extremely clever with medicines and healing. It is believed that the njuzu can communicate easily with the ancestral spirits as well as with God. However, picking up on their ambiguous character, Aschwanden admits that “the question of njuzu descent has never been answered absolutely satisfactorily or without contradictions” (Aschwanden, 1989: 188). The confusion as to what exactly the njuzu are is without doubt linked to the transformative abilities these creatures are supposed to have. For instance Aschwanden observes that njuzu are,

described mainly as snakes. Other forms mentioned are the fish, crocodile, an old woman or a black animal (ox, goat). The observation that the njuzu are creatures that can change shape is important to the Karanga. In that way, those hybrid beings came into existence which appear in half-human, half-animal form (especially snakes and fishes with human heads) (Aschwanden, 1989: 187).

This transformative ability of mermaids, and their somewhat anomalous attributes, are recurring themes throughout the region and no doubt contributes to their imaginative appeal
under different economic and social contexts, an issue that I discuss in Section 4.7.1. Aschwanden notes that "Njuzu are described as having many different forms, most frequently as beings with human heads and fish- or snake-bodies, but sometimes also as a beautiful woman, an old woman, a snake, and so on" (1989:137). This crossover between fish, snake and human characteristics brings us back to the various statements given in Section 4.2.3 regarding the mermaid being the same as the mystical Snake that entices humans to itself through the mesmerizing effect of its eyes. Thus the boundaries between these entities (i.e. the mermaid and the Snake) remain ambiguous.

4.4.3 Ranking the water divinities in Cape Nguni and Shona cosmological schemes

It is worth considering where these fish-tailed beings and snakes fit into the overall cosmological schemes of the Shona and Cape Nguni groups, who both regard them as a multiple group of beings. The closest attempt that has been made to place the abantu bomlombo into the Cape Nguni cosmological framework is by Hammond-Tooke who recognised four “disparate domains” of “superhuman intelligences” in Cape Nguni belief (1975b). He attempted a structuralist analysis of three of these domains; these being the more negative pole, that of the forest (associated with the witch/familiar, nature etc) and the more positive pole, that of homestead (associated with the ancestors, culture etc). The river and its abantu bomlombo (as an ambiguous category), mediates between these two domains. However, despite identifying the Supreme Being (known variably as uDali, uQamatha or uThixo)\(^\text{30}\) as being one of the four “superhuman intelligences” existing in the Cape Nguni cosmology (the witch/familiar, ancestors and the River People being the other three), he did not attempt to incorporate this entity into his framework. His argument for this was that for the Cape Nguni, prior to Christianity, the role of the Supreme Being was not of great relevance in their day to day matters (see also Hodgson, 1982: 26). They neither dedicated rituals to the Supreme Being of the macrocosm, nor observed any taboos or regulations regarding Him. Rather, Hammond-Tooke argues that the emphasis was placed on “the ancestral shades of the departed chiefs” (1975b: 17). One could postulate that this more microcosmic focus reflected the political system of the Cape Nguni which consisted of “congeries of chiefdoms, stretching

\(^{30}\) Hodgson points out how the Nguni tended to use praise names rather than direct names for important authorities (Hodgson, 1982: 42). uDali was an earlier praise name, also used by the Zulu, to refer to the Creator of all life, while uThixo and uQamatha are terms that refer to the Supreme Being or Creator, that have been borrowed from the Khoekhoe and the San (Hodgson, 1982: 62-97).
from the Natal border to the Fish River, Cape Province" (ibid: 15) which were semi-autonomous and, beyond each paramount chiefship or royal house, were not controlled by any centralised power (see also Hammond-Tooke, 1975a). This socio-political structure could hypothetically explain the notable absence in the Cape Nguni cosmology of any direct link between the abantu bomlambo and God. As Hunter’s, Hirst’s and Hammond-Tooke’s evidence supports, the River People relate more to the patrilineal exogamous clans and their respective apical chiefs than to God. The burial of chiefs at special pools gives evidence for this (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.1).

In Figure 6 below I attempt to construct a model of how the abantu bomlambo may fit into the broader cosmological scheme of the Cape Nguni, based on existing evidence. The emphasis lies on the ancestors (especially with those ancestors of the royal chiefly groups) and the River People co-operating together and being at a more or less equivalent level of rank. They especially work together in the calling of diviner-healers (amagqirha), who in turn serve their communities. During certain rituals the living descendants, especially those of the agnatic group, communicate and appeal not only to their ancestors but, as we will see in the next chapter, to the abantu bomlambo as well (see Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1). Such rituals are usually presided over by diviner adepts, who appeal to the abantu bomlambo and their ancestors on behalf of the family group. However, there are silences that exist in existing analyses of the Cape Nguni cosmological framework. These are, firstly, with regard to why the calling underwater tends to be passed from the mother’s side, and secondly, how the abantu bomlambo relate to the Supreme Being uQamatha or uThixo. Cape Nguni ancestor ritual emphasises the patriline and this, somewhat incongruously, co-exists with the recognition that a key symbol of the underwater world is actually an ancestress (possibly of each particular clan - see River Myth cited by Hirst), albeit a woman sometimes depicted with a fish or snake tail. Similarly, with the emphasis being placed on the patrilineal ancestors and their apical chiefs, how they and the abantu bomlambo connect with the Supreme Being is never made explicit. I will refer back to this diagram when I compare it to the cosmological model for the Zulu-speakers, and make more reference to possible socio-ecological and political explanations for the differences between them (see Section 4.5.1).
Conversely, for the Karanga, although they trace patrilineal descent, the water divinities are more closely linked to Mwari, the Supreme Being whose centre of power is located in the Matopos Hills at a number of cave shrines (Ranger, 1999). It is at these cave shrines that the voice of God (Mwari) speaks, and delegations of pilgrims visit from over a vast area (Daneel, 1970; Nthoi, 2006; Ranger, 1999). This regional high God cult actually cuts across a wide range of tribal/ethnic affiliations and even international boundaries (Daneel, 1970; Werbner, 1977) and while its principal function is in matters relating to rain and fertility of the land, it also plays a role in chiefly succession disputes (see Daneel, 1970; Shoko, 2007). Aschwanden has put forward a model based on Karanga data which I reproduce in Figure 7 below.

31 That is the Karanga, Kalanga, Venda and Ndebele groups that occupy in varying degrees present Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana.
In this model Aschwanden has separated the role of the rain-priests (*manyusa*) and their possessing *jukwa* spirits (see Section 4.2.3), as they have a direct connection to Mwari and operate independently of the ancestors. The *manyusa* are sent to the Mwari cave complex (also known as Matonjeni) by the various chiefs across the territory to appeal for rain from Mwari. As Aschwanden has pointed out, both the *jukwa* spirits and the royal ancestors (especially the queens) can manifest as the puff-adder, while the python and *njuzu* are regarded as the 'snakes' of God. There is some suggestion in the literature that the ancestors of certain clans are believed to appear as snakes, especially puff-adders, so I have included a stipple arrow on the diagram to indicate that possible link. However, the most dominant feature of this cosmology is the central importance of the High God cult of the androgynous Mwari and its close connection with the water divinities (or 'snakes' of God), in their form of *njuzu* and python. Both environmental and historical socio-political reasons could provide the answer for this alignment of emphasis. Rainfall is of central concern for the wide swathe of groups that occupy the region as it is seasonal (falling only in the summer months) and notoriously unpredictable; not only are there frequent droughts or floods affecting the region, but also the rainfall, in the form of thunderstorms, tends to be highly localised. The appeasement of the spirits of the land (that are believed to determine the success or failure of rainfall, crops, wild game and fruits) lies in the hands of the chiefs, who are regarded as the guardians of the land, under the guidance of the tribal ancestral spirits and are responsible for the correct actions of
their subjects (Shoko, 2007: 11; see also Mawere & Wilson, 1995; Schoffeleers, 1979/1999). They are also obliged to maintain good relations with Mwari whose shrines are located in the Matopos Hills, and where gifts and offerings are regularly sent by the chiefs on behalf of their subjects.

Prior to colonization this region was under the centralised control of powerful dynasties, such as the Torwa (or Togwa) dynasty based at Khami (Rennie, 1999: 260), the Changamire dynasty of the Rozvi (Shoko, 2007: 7), and the Mwene Mutapa dynasty of the Karanga (see Bourdillon, 1976: 23-24) which had overcome and subjugated the pre-existing groups, one of which was the Dziva or pool-totem group. The establishment of these powerful dynastic groups was facilitated by the abundant mineral wealth, especially in the form of gold and other precious minerals, and the associated trading networks that were maintained with the Arabs, Portuguese and the Far East (see Garlake, 1973). According to Rennie (1999: 260) it was the last ruler of the Torwa dynasty32 (of the Shoko totem) who oversaw the centralization of ritual power in the form of the Mwari cult at the Matopos. Rennie, however, points out that,

...the Shoko rulers of Khami did not obliterate previous populations; which suggest that one of the earlier established groups with which they had to contend was the Dziva or pool-totem group; and which suggest that these early groups may have been seen by their Shoko rulers as having a particular relationship with the rain. They seem to have been accommodated, in a variety of places, as institutionalized ritual experts (Rennie, 1999: 260-261).

On a related theme, another Dziva group which was overcome by Mutota of the Mwene Mutapa dynasty (see Bourdillon, 1999: 235-255; Latham, 1986) in the north east of the country, continues to exert similar ritual power over rain and fertility in the region. The central shrine to which all groups still show homage is the pool of Dzivaguru where his/her ‘son’ Kuruva disappeared when overcome by the Mutapa dynasty. It was this shrine that I was instructed to go to by Baba after a dream I had in 1997 (see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1).

This combination of environmental features (rainfall patterns and rich mineral wealth) and powerful centralised polities could thus explain the heavy emphasis on the high God cult and

32 Bourdillon presumes that Mwari Cult was established by the conquering Changamire Rosvi dynasty (Bourdillon, 1976: 26).
the role of ritual experts associated with rain-making at the shrines. Archaeological evidence also points to the possibility that the ruling elites took control of these powerful fertility and rain symbols associated with the water divinities (Huffman, 1996) in order to entrench their power.

4.4.4 Summary

The above review of ethnographic reports on the Cape Nguni ideas on the *abantu bomlambo* and the Shona *njuzu* (or *nzuu, ndusu* etc.) reveals that striking similarities exist regarding these creatures. The main similarity relates to the fact that these creatures are seen as a multiple grouping of beings rather than a single female entity as is believed among the Zulu in KwaZulu-Natal under the name of Inkosazana or Nomkhubulwana (see below, Section 4.4), although elements of a single fish- or snake-tailed woman exists among some Cape Nguni groupings. These half-human, half-fish or snake creatures are not seen as spirits but as embodied physical beings, they are pale skinned with long hair, live in houses under water with domestic animals, call people under water to become very knowledgeable and skilled in the art of divination and healing, have powerful medicines and skills of magic, have abilities to transform themselves in a variety of forms, and although ambiguous, are essentially kind-hearted and concerned with the welfare of humans. Reynolds has noted that the *njuzu* are regarded as good ‘spirits’, or creatures, and are held in higher esteem than ordinary ancestral spirits. If a person who has been chosen by them uses his/her power for selfish or bad reasons they will be destroyed (Reynolds, 1996: 78).

While there are some important similarities between the *njuzu* and *abantu bomlambo* described for the Shona and Cape Nguni groups respectively, there are some significant differences. The main difference is that the Cape Nguni do not seem to have a clearly expressed connection between the *abantu bomlambo* and their concept of the High God or Supreme Being in contrast to that of the Karanga, and even the Zulu (see Section 4.4). According to Aschwanden’s diagram (Figure 7) the *njuzu*, the python and the puffadder are closely affiliated to God and are an integral part of the centralised Mwari cult situated in the caves of the Matopos Hills (see also Daneel, 1970, 1971). I have suggested that the particular cosmological models that characterise the Shona may be related to environmental factors and the particular political-economic and social histories. I will examine these factors in relation to
the Cape Nguni model when I compare it to the cosmological model which the Zulu have adopted with regard to the water divinities (see Section 4.5.1), particularly the fish/snake-tailed goddess Nomkhubulwana (Inkosazana), which I now turn my attention to.

4.5 Zulu ideas on Inkosazana and Nomkhubulwana.
The most detailed descriptions of Inkosazana come from Berglund (1976), Bryant (1949), Gluckman (1954), and Krige (1968, 1936/1974), all of whom refer to her as the Princess of Heaven, or the Sky or Heavenly Princess, *Inkosazana yezulu* or *Inkosazana yasezulwini*, where her role as a fertility goddess is emphasised. In the literature and interviews with informants the names of Nomkhubulwana and Inkosazana (lit. = the daughter of a king or chief) are often used interchangeably. This is quite evident in Krige’s ethnography where, under the sub-title ‘Inkosazana’, she immediately starts discussing Nomkhubulwana, who is regarded as “the daughter (*inkosazana*) of Unkulunkulu, and that she came out on the same day that man came out of the earth” (Krige, 1936/1974: 282-283). This passage suggests that Nomkhubulwana is her name, while Inkosazana is her title, and she is clearly one and the same ‘person’.

Some scholars have observed that in the past there were in fact two female divinities that were revered by the Zulus. They were a mother-daughter dyad; the mother, *Inkosikazi yaseZulwini*, the Queen of Heaven, consort of Unkulunkulu or the Lord-of-the-Sky (*inkosi yaseZulwini*)34, and their daughter, *Inkosazana yaseZulwini*, the Princess of Heaven. For instance, Samuelson made reference to Inkosikazi (lit. = the king’s principal wife),

The Zulus believe in a glorious being whom they call the Queen of Heaven, of great and wondrous beauty, and the rainbow is supposed to be an emanation of her glory. This “Queen of Heaven” (Inkosikazi) is a different person from the Heavenly Princess, to whom the young girls pray regularly once a year (Samuelson, 1974: 161).

Thus Samuelson clearly distinguishes between the Queen of Heaven and the Heavenly Princess, the latter who “bears the name of Nomkhubulwana” (Inkosazana) and to whom the Zulu dedicate small fields of corn on which they give her offerings of beer, in return for

33 Note that some scholars spell this name Nomkhubulwane. I use the most common form of spelling which is Nomkhubulwana.

34 Also occasionally referred to as *uMvelingqangi*, derived from the word root *vela*, which means to “come forth, appear, come into view”, and -*mangl* which “refers to the first born of twins” (Berglund, 1976: 34).
abundant crops (Samuelson, 1974: 164).

Krige is fairly vague about the distinction between these two female deities, and briefly mentions that “The Zulus also hold dances on the hills in honour of some Inkosikazi, but whether this “Queen of Heaven” is the same as Inkosazana, is not quite clear” (Krige, 1936/1974: 283). Although most of Berglund’s urban informants did not know of Inkosikazi, a few of his rural informants had heard of her and were able to distinguish between her and the heavenly princess Nomkhubulwana “described as iNkosazana yeZulu or iNkosazana yasezulwini” (Berglund, 1976: 64). In the latter quote he indicates that Nomkhubulwana is one and the same as Inkosazana. While Inkosikazi appeared to be a mere remnant of memory when Berglund did his research in the 1960s, he argues that a definite women’s cult dedicated to the virgin princess Nomkhubulwana/Inkosazana still existed.

There are however some suggestions in the literature and among my informants that Nomkhubulwana is the mother aspect of the mother-daughter dyad. For instance, one of Kendall’s informants, Ntombini KaNdabuko who was “an aged member of the Zulu royal family”, specified that Nomkhubulwana is a queen, who has been present “from the beginning” (Kendall, 1999: 98). My informant Mr T who I interviewed after I had a dream, the interpretation of which led me to Inkosazana’s pool (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.3), suggested the same. He argued that as mother of the Zulu nation she is concerned with the Zulu rituals for female fertility and their traditions. He distinguished her from Inkosazana, the young virgin lady who has a fish tail and is associated with the rainbow, diviners and kings/chiefs. Indeed this conflation persists when we consider that present day Zulu refer to the rainbow as uthingo lweNkosazana (the bow of Inkosazana) as this is believed to be one of her emanations. However, Samuelson tells us that in the past the rainbow was called ‘uthingo lweNkosikazi, “The Queen’s Bow” (1974: 162). This interchangeable terminology and conflation of entities suggests to me that as a principal female deity she is seen to have both a mother and virgin daughter aspect, somewhat like the multiple aspects of the ancient Greek and Roman goddesses (see also Lambert, 1990). In this text I use the terms Inkosazana and Nomkhubulwana as synonymous with the virgin Princess of Heaven.

One of the first scholars to document the Zulu beliefs about Inkosazana was the missionary
Callaway. In his book The Religious System of the AmaZulu (1884/1970), which was largely verbatim text by his main informant and Christian convert Mpengula Mpande, a short chapter is dedicated to the subject of Inkosazana. She was ambiguously described as a “very little animal, as large as a polecat, and is marked with white and black stripes; one side there grows a bed of reeds, a forest, and grass, the other side is that of a man” (Callaway 1884/1970: 253). This fairly cryptic description of her being likened to a landscape scene rather than an anthropomorphic being recurs in a number of other scholars’ accounts35. There is some evidence that similar descriptions were a result of sharing of information between scholarly texts rather than descriptions given to the scholars individually by their informants. For instance Gluckman utilizes Samuelson’s description of Inkosazana,

She is described as being robed with light as a garment and having come down from heaven to teach people to make beer, to plant, to harvest, and all the useful arts...She is a maiden and she makes her visit to the earth in the Spring of the year. She is also described as presenting the appearance of a beautiful landscape with verdant forests on some parts of her body, grass-covered slopes on others and cultivated fields on the rest (Samuelson, 1929; 303 cited in Gluckman, 1954: 4).

Bryant, another missionary and ethnographer who lived with the Zulu people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also picks up on her landscape persona. He describes her as, “Nomkhubulwana, ‘who moveth with the mist; on one side human-being, on one side a wood, on one side a river, on one side overgrown with grass’” (Bryant 1949: 667).

Some of Krige’s informants gave descriptions which suggested to Krige that Nomkhubulwana is the personification of nature, “Nomkhubulwana is everything – she is a big cloud; a river, a forest, mealies, pumpkin, corn – she is everything there is on earth” (Krige, 1968: 180). However Berglund, also a missionary and ethnographer, has written the most comprehensive accounts of her and claims none of his informants described her in terms of the landscape. Rather,

...the Princess is described as being “a very beautiful girl of twenty years with shiny skin and white attractive teeth. She is always smiling, except when something bad has

35 One must bear in mind that much of the information given to the missionaries, such as Callaway, was from converts whose accounts may have been translated into terms which made sense to, or even to please, the missionaries. However, this does not seem to be so much the case with Berglund’s informants.
happened or she brings news of drought or famine.” ...All informants agree that Nomkhubulwana appears in the morning mists and that she is closely associated with the rainbow, a small number saying she is the rainbow itself. They are equally convinced that the Princess has the ability to bring steady and frequent rains, these brought by pleading with her father, the Lord-of-the-Sky (Berglund 1976: 65).

This description of Berglund’s comes closest to those I have encountered in my interviews, yet interestingly the majority of the authors make no reference to her being able to manifest as a mermaid or the snake, or of her connection with certain rivers and pools. However, there are a few brief references in the literature to these possible morphological transformations of Nomkhubulwana/Inkosazana. In a response to Berglund’s question about an alleged “great snake” which was multicoloured, and had ten heads which rested on a particular mountain, his informant claimed that it was the “snake of iNkosazana” (Berglund, 1976: 96). Kendall mentions that “Nomkhubulwane lives near bodies of water, emanating mists. She is associated with light, with rain, and with fertility. The rainbow, in particular, is Nomkhubulwana’s symbol. Her emissary is the snake, especially a two-headed snake” (Kendall, 1999: 96). One of Kendall’s principal informants, the isangoma MaMkhulise, also referred to the presence of Nomkhubulwana sitting at the side of the ancestors whilst underwater: “When a person is ukuthwasa [experiencing an illness associated with the call to become isangoma]’ the person sees a lake where Nomkhubulwane is. You see her sitting at the side of your ancestors, deep in the lake but at the side […]” (Kendall, 1999: 102).

The statement above suggests that this informant associates Nomkhubulwana with the lady that diviner initiates claim to encounter while underwater, who is often found sitting next to the Snake or Python. This correlates to some extent with what Berglund was told regarding Nomkhubulwana’s emanation as a rainbow,

At least one end of the rainbow always stands on the earth, the base buried deep in a pool of water in which lives a snake with as many colours as the rainbow. “That is why snakes and animals with many colours are always very much feared. They come from the rainbow.” Diviners and heaven-herds36 are said to take careful note in which pool in a river the arch of the rainbow ends, so that they know where the snake is to be found (Berglund, 1976: 70).

36 The ‘heaven-herds’ (abelusi bezulu) were specialists in controlling the rain (Berglund, 1976: 46-51).
Despite the lack of association of Inkosazana with the appearance of a mermaid in the literature, a number of informants that we conducted interviews with in the Mvoti River valley region in 2002 mentioned this feature to us. Although the majority of the thirty seven people interviewed could not describe her appearance, mostly on the basis that they had not seen her, four informants said she was half-fish and half-human, while one said she was half-human, half-forest. For instance one informant said, “I heard about her from when I was young. People say she is half fish and half human, others say she is half frog”.

One reason that could account for the absence of any mermaid reference to Inkosazana is that most of the early accounts were given to missionary scholars by their own converts. In these accounts there are cryptic descriptions of her being able to manifest in all natural forms but they also stress her heavenly rather than her aquatic status. This would conform more to the Christian emphasis on the relationship between the Virgin Mary with the heavenly Father. However, these perceptions, both “missionized” and “traditional”, seem to be closely linked to water, the source of life which is not wholly reliable and predictable, and hence the centre of prayer and theological speculation. This informant bias could also explain the minimal reference to Inkosazana’s role in the training of diviner-healers, a practice that was anathema to the Church, although Berglund’s informants did not seem as restricted by such revelations. The fact that I was able to obtain information from a very different perspective, as an initiate with a diviner-healer group, also meant such restrictions were not necessary.

As her descriptive title, *Inkosazana yasezulwini*, suggests, she definitely appears to be attributed divine status in that she is regarded as the heavenly princess, associated with the sky, yet at the same time with the earth. As already mentioned she is sometimes equated as the daughter of God (in the Zulu sense of the Lord-of-the-Sky). Kendall’s informant, Mabe,

37 With thanks to Michael Whisson for this observation.

38 It has been well recognized that Berglund commanded a great degree of trust amongst his informants. As Prof Monica Wilson points out his publication was “the fruit of twelve years of field-work, of a depth made possible by Dr Berglund’s command of Zulu (almost a mother-tongue knowledge since he grew up in daily association with Zulu playmates and has worked in Zulu throughout his adult life), and by his acceptability to persons of all rank in Zululand” (Berglund, 1979: backcover).

39 It should be pointed out that a number of the authors have drawn a parallel with her and the ancient Greek goddesses (Bryant, 1949: 672; Gluckman, 1954: 4; Krige, 1974: 197; Lambert, 1990).
was emphatic that she was not merely one ‘rain-goddess’ among many, but “she is the daughter of god, the only daughter. There is only one goddess. She is not separate from god. She is the female part of god. She is god. Nomkhubulwane” (Kendall, 1999: 97). The last section of this statement suggests that she represents the female aspect of a potentially androgynous god. MaDuma (pseudonym), an isangoma who claims to have been taken under water and was interviewed by Sibongiseni Kumalo, also picked up on many of the associations already described in the literature, including Nomkhubulwana’s close association with the Zulu concept of God. She also emphasised Nomkhubulwana’s transformative abilities, “Nomkhubulwana is a living being.... She appears as a tree, sometimes as a beautiful woman sitting on the river, which means she is a person but she can change herself to something else. Maybe we can say she is uMvelingqangi.

Despite the lack of scholarly reference to her being a mermaid in the literature many of my informants have emphasised this characteristic, as well as her association with water, mist, and the rain, and her residence in certain pools. These pools, like the preferences of the abantu bomlambo and njuzu, are deep, often at the bottom of waterfalls, and are dangerous and difficult to access. They are usually surrounded by a dense canopy of trees. I have also found striking correlation among informants that her characteristics are very similar to those described for the abantu bomlambo and the njuzu; she is fair skinned, with long fair, dark or wet hair, and has the torso of a human and lower body of a fish; she is a tangible, embodied being and can both punish humans and provide them with benefits. Her gifts include fertility of the land and children, healing skills and material success, while punishment can be metered out to those with ‘unclean’ hearts, or failing to respect her rules regarding the environment or performing her rituals (see Chapter Five, Section 5.3). In Chapter Six I detail a dream I had which was interpreted as a calling to one of Inkosazana’s pools and describe how some of the diviners responded to this calling. It was quite evident from this event, and from the interviews I subsequently had with local diviners, that they regarded Inkosazana as being able to manifest as a mermaid, and that in this form she had fair skin and long hair. Like the abantu bomlambo

40 Although he notes that most scholars equate uMvelingqangi as the same entity as the Lord-of-the-Sky, Berglund argues that the term uMvelingqangi is linked to the concept of twins, and also implies that something is ‘brought forth’ or ‘comes into view’. As such it is the representation of the union of the male deity of heaven (sky) with the female deity of the earth/sky. Unfortunately his argument is not conclusive (Berglund, 1976:34-35). This union of male and female aspects may account for Mabe’s statement in the previous quote.
and the njuzu, my experience indicated that she is linked with the calling of diviners under water (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.3). Thus it is quite surprising that Inkosazana’s role in the calling and training of healers and the imparting of wisdom and knowledge, with the assistance of the powerful amakhosi (the snake), has not been mentioned by previous scholars. While this could be due to informant restraint in revealing certain aspects of her to the predominantly Christian missionary scholars, it could also be due to a lack of focus by scholars on the water-related aspects of the spiritual beliefs of their Zulu informants.

While reference to Inkosazana’s role in the calling of diviners has not been made explicit by other scholars there was a veiled reference to her made by Kahla, one of Chang’s informants, who he identified as a ‘whistle diviner’ (isangoma yemilozI). Regarding Kahla’s calling that occurred near Johannesburg he notes,

...one evening he [Kahla] got lost on his way to the nearby river, and as night fell he no longer recognized his surrounding environment. Suddenly in the middle of the river he saw a white woman spring up from the surface of the water. There was a snake around her neck which was carrying a flower in its mouth. The snake asked him: "Why don’t you greet me?" Kahla was scared: "I’m afraid of you." But he greeted the snake. "Makhosi." After the greeting, he left the place and after some distance he saw many coloured candles lighting the middle of the river. There he saw his maternal grandmother who was an umthandazo [faith healer] (Chang, 1998: 58).

It was after this experience that Kahla proceeded to become an isangoma.

I gained further corroboration that Inkosazana could appear as a mermaid from Lindiwe, who is an isangoma from Pietermaritzburg, and at the time of my obtaining her account she was approximately thirty years of age. She told me that she encountered Inkosazana when she was a child. This occurred at the age of 6 years, near Lidgerton in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands, after she had gone down to a pool at the river to try and drown herself because her stepfather was so cruel to both her and her mother. As she sat there trying to summon up the courage, a woman emerged out of the water and asked her what she was doing. Lindiwe explained that she had decided to end her life, which had been made so miserable by her stepfather. For a long while the woman spoke to her and eventually persuaded her not to drown herself as this would cause her mother further pain. Lindiwe told me how ‘The Lady’ (Inkosazana) reassured her that whenever she was in trouble again she must return to the pool and call her. Lindiwe
explained what happened next: “Then the lady dived under the water and only then did I
realise that she was not a person because as she dived she lifted her fish tail above the water.”

It seems evident from the ethnographic sources as well as from my own informants that
Inkosazana in her mermaid form is pale skinned and has long hair. She is believed to be
capable of transforming herself into many forms; she can manifest as a mermaid, a snake, a
rainbow, a small animal, a tree, rain and even as a human (usually as a beautiful young woman
or an old hag). As with the abantu bomlambo and njuzu she is not regarded as a spirit, but
rather an embodied being with supernatural and transformative or shape-shifting abilities, who
can bridge the divide between this world and that of spirit. A recurring story that we
encountered in the Mvoti Valley in KwaZulu-Natal that concurs with this tangible quality of
the mermaid was the purported shooting of one of Inkosazana’s children at a river in the
Msinga District\(^{41}\). Apparently some young Zulu men were swimming in the river when they
encountered a creature that was half woman and half fish. One of the boys had a gun with him
and he got such a shock at the sight of this creature that he shot and killed it. A short while
later Inkosazana appeared to someone (not clear who) lamenting the tragic death of her
daughter. As a result of this terrible travesty everyone in the neighbouring chiefdoms had to be
in mourning and this was symbolised by their having to wear a type of grass around their
necks, wrists and ankles. During this period the area suffered under a deluge of rain, and this
was seen as the expression of her anger and distress\(^{42}\).

The aforementioned account of the shooting of Inkosazana’s child raises a question. In the
next chapter I discuss the alleged appearance of Inkosazana in the Ikhamanzi River area where
she complained that people were no longer observing the days of rest (Saturday and Monday)
as these were special days for her children to wash in the river (see Chapter Five, Section
5.3.1). Thus if Inkosazana is regarded as a singular entity and a virgin, then why are these
references to her children? These statements suggest that she also has a mother (in the form of

\(^{41}\) There is no mention as to who the possible father to these children may be.

\(^{42}\) Recorded by Sibongiseni Kumalo 14.01.2002. Note that it is possible that this boy could have mistaken her for
a large fish, similar to the account given to me of an incident that occurred on the Doring River in the Western
Cape where the informant tried to shoot a waterbaas (mermaid) that he mistook for a large fish (see Chapter
Nine, Section 9.2.1). Pienaar (2009: 52) recounts many stories she was told about the devastating floods in the
Laingsberg region of South Africa in the 1980s being the result of a farmer shooting a mermaid.
Inkosikazi) aspect as well. So we have here a double anomaly: while the Cape Nguni tend to emphasise a multiple group of beings, they do often make explicit references to a single fish-tailed woman that they encounter in their dreams and, in Hirst’s informant’s account (see Appendix Six) there is a hint that she is regarded as the ancestress of all humans; while for the Zulu, although they emphasise their reverence towards a single fish-tailed goddess known as Nomkhubulwana or Inkosazana, implicit in some of their accounts are references to her children or a multiple group of fish-tailed beings. It is possible that these different emphases in the respective groups are due to the fact that they suit certain cultural interests, a point I develop in more detail in Section 4.7.1.

All of Berglund’s informants emphasised that she is good-hearted and kind and concerned for the wellbeing of humans and “this was the reason for her giving them good advice from time-to-time, introducing new customs and teaching people “the new ways of behaving in a proper way”...”She is the friend of all the people who behave properly”” (Berglund, 1976: 70-71). All the scholars mention her tendency to appear only to certain people (usually children, women or diviners) to whom she issues rules that must be relayed via the chief to the people. These rules, or the failure to adhere to them, all have implications for the production of crops, climate and fertility. It was, however, made clear to me by informants that she reveals herself only to those who have a ‘good heart’; i.e. people who do not harbour hatred, greed or jealousy, or who are izangoma or kings (a factor I consider in more detail in the next section), and she does this in a physically tangible way. Her associations with fertility are well illustrated through the sowing, first-fruits and harvest rituals that are dedicated to her. I discuss these rituals in more detail in Chapter Six.

Apart from her role in fertility and the cultivation of crops, which is largely the concern of Zulu women, she is strongly linked with women’s issues, and the rituals performed for her largely fall under the control of women. For instance, several scholars have been interested in the role she is regarded as playing in protecting and guiding young adolescent girls (virgins), in preparing them for womanhood and correct sexual relations (Krige, 1968), and more recently, in relation to the current context of HIV/AIDS (Kendall, 1998, 1999; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Scorgie, 2002). All these aspects fall under her area of jurisdiction, concerning which she issues edicts and laws. Respect and adherence to these rules, and the performance of
regular rituals for her, will bring bountiful crops, life-giving rain and water, fertility, health and peace. Should the people fail to respect or adhere to these injunctions, it is believed she will turn her back on them and they will be inflicted with natural disasters, in the form of drought, floods or tornadoes, starvation and disease. In fact, in Kendall’s paper her informants suggest that many of the current crises that face contemporary Zulu, such as HIV/AIDS, crime and rape are a result of people turning their backs on Nomkhubulwana and the ancestors, largely as a result of Christianity and westernization (Kendall, 1999). For instance, one informant from the Bulwer area told her “The violence goes on because we as Africans have lost our identity and the respect for our ancestors and Nomkhubulwane, and they have left us” (quoted in Kendall, 1999: 96). This statement indicates how the informant associates the performance of certain traditional religious rituals with his ethnic Zulu identity. The connection between identity and ritual will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

4.5.1 Inkosazana’s place in the Zulu cosmological scheme

While a great deal of similarity in both appearance and activity exists between the Zulu concepts of Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana and the abantu bomlambo of the Cape Nguni and njuzu of the Shona, there are some significant differences in the way she is perceived, her importance and her status as a single deity or goddess. These differences are accentuated in the rituals that are performed for her, which will be addressed in the next chapter. In Figure Eight below I construct a model which draws on the evidence provided as to her postulated position in the Zulu cosmological scheme.

As with the Karanga, although maybe not to the same degree, the Zulu acknowledge the presence of a Supreme Being, or Creator, who although removed from human day to day issues can be appealed to on matters of grave concern to the collective. Some evidence points to the idea that Inkosi yeZulu (or uNkulunkulu) has a female aspect, or a consort in the form of Inkozikazi. Of more interest to the Zulu is his daughter, Inkosazana, the Princess of Heaven, who is seen as the primary source of fertility to both women and the land. She is associated with moisture (rain and mist) and deep pools and she can take on the form of a mermaid among many of her guises. She is also held to play an integral part in the calling of certain izangoma underwater, where she operates in conjunction with the ancestors, who can manifest as the python, and the giant mystical Snake, which Berglund’s informant asserted was none
other than Inkosi yeZulu. Her main human intermediaries are the izangoma and the kings and chiefs. While the izangoma will perform their own special rituals for her if summoned in a dream (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.3 for my own experience of this), the kings and chiefs are responsible for the fertility rituals that are performed on behalf of their people, which I address below and in the next chapter.

Figure 8: Cosmological model for the Zulu

As to why the Zulu put more emphasis on a Supreme Being and his daughter, and have a more defined notion of his relationship with the water divinities, than do the closely related Cape Nguni, is unclear, but could again be a product of environmental and particular historical political-economic factors. As discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.1, the Natal Nguni groups, unlike the Cape Nguni, came under centralized control during the reign of King Shaka, who combined many different polities under Zulu monarchical hegemony, and the Zulu kingdom has existed since that time (Wilson & Thompson, 1969; Omer-Cooper, 1966, 1969; see also Hamilton, 1995). Like the Cape Nguni, the Zulu are strongly patrilineal and exogamous, and the patriline is dependent for its continuation on the fertility of the in-marrying woman. While their economy was centered on cattle, and was male dominated, the
moist and fertile environment of KwaZulu-Natal allowed for the cultivation of crops, a task that fell under the domain of women. Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana was regarded as not only the source of fertile young virgins necessary to continue the patriline, but also the source of abundant harvests, over which the agnatic line (and the kings and chiefs) sought ultimate control. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, ceremonies for Nomkhubulwana were (and in some regions still are) an integral part of the Zulu ritual calendar and although performed by women, who were the principal cultivators, these remained firmly under the control of the chiefs (see Chapter Five, Section 5.3). At the local level it is the chiefs who sanction and initiate the various annual rituals (e.g. the nomdede ceremonies) that are performed for her and these annual rituals are not normally performed in the absence of the chief. There is evidence that in the past the king controlled all aspects of agricultural fertility, rain-making and medicine (for healing and magical purposes) and these roles were enacted in the annual First Fruits Ceremonies – the Little and Great Umkhos 43 (Krige, 1936/1974: 233-260), which were not only aimed at securing good harvests and well-being for the nation, but in sanctifying the position of the king. As Krige states,

Not only is the king the great rain-maker of the tribe, but the fruitfulness of the crops is thought to depend upon him. The king is thus the leader in all agricultural operations, and at certain times, such as at the sowing of the seed and the eating of the first-fruits, he is strengthened with medicines so as to ensure a good harvest. Indeed, on no occasion is the king’s position as representative of the tribe as a whole, and as a person on whom the strength of the army and success of the crops depends, more clearly seen than at the national First-fruit Ceremonies (ibid: 248-249).

While no mention is made by Krige as to the role of the water divinities in these ceremonies, it is possible to infer from the river rituals performed during these rituals, and from the evidence I have presented regarding the water divinities connection with kings, that they were an intrinsic part of the underlying cosmology.

4.6 Khoekhoe and San ideas on the mermaid/s
While most of the literature sources on the Khoekhoe and San make little mention of mermaids, especially within a cosmological framework, there is some anecdotal evidence that

43 These bear striking resemblance to the Swazi Incwala Ceremonies as documented by Kuper (1947, 1965).
these were recognised. Leeuwenberg's material concerning the *watermeide* reputedly abducting the girl underwater is one example, while one of Lange's informants told a story of how her sister and her husband saw a mermaid at a river near Prieska. Her sister claimed she saw sitting on a rock in the river "a beautiful woman with very long black hair. Her lower half was that of a fish but it was a shiny blue" (Lange, 2007: 18), but she "disappeared under the water" after the sister called her husband to come and see it. Lange was told, "when she [the informant's sister] called her husband and told him, he said: "Man, lets get away from here, it's the Water Snake!"" (Lange *et al.*, 2007: 18). This account suggests that the mermaid and Water Snake were regarded as one and the same by the husband.

Apart from the Water Snake and the Water Bull, Hoff's (2007) /Xam informants also mention another category of water beings, which she refers to as Water People, but it is unclear as to the nature of these beings and whether they may have been mermaids. A number of San rock paintings in the southern Cape depict mermaid-like figures and these have attracted some scholarly attention and debate, which I examine in more detail in Chapter Nine, Section 9.2.4.

4.7 Discussion
The main purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate that the ideas found throughout southern Africa pertaining to the two key 'symbols', snakes and mermaids, share some remarkable correlations and consistencies, as well as some significant differences of emphasis, which have hitherto not been made explicit by scholars.

The evidence provided in this chapter demonstrates that all the groups believe that the ancestors can manifest through certain snakes, in various normal species, or as a more mystical Snake encountered while in a conscious state in the veld. There also seem to be common ideas regarding the existence of the large Snake, which has similar mystical abilities that certain people claim to confront, usually while in a trance state, in an underwater realm. This mystical Snake is generally associated with deities linked to the sky and water. The boundaries and distinctions between these various types of snake manifestations are by no means precise or clear, and this ambiguity could be attributed to their ascribed metamorphosing abilities. Closely associated with these snake manifestations are ideas regarding the existence of mermaids, as expressed in terms of a multiple group with the
abantu bomlambo for the Cape Nguni or the njuzu for the Shona, or as a single deified being for the Zulu, who they refer to as Inkosazana or Nomkhubulwana (the Heavenly Princess). I have suggested that environmental and historical socio-political and economic factors may be able to account for these variations and differences. The structural Marxist approach as applied by Friedman (1974, 1975) has the potential to explain these variations in social formation, as it recognises that the relationship between the superstructure (the juridico-political and ideological/religious categories) and the infrastructure (the forces and relations of productions) inform each other in a complex and intricate manner (see Chapter One, Section, 1.2.1.1), which the more simplistic determinist approaches, such as Harris’s cultural materialism, cannot. However, more detailed research in this area is required to test this postulate.

In all the groups examined the large mystical Snake or the Python, in conjunction with the mermaid/s, is associated with the great creative forces of this world. They are linked to the origin of humanity, or with the myths of origin of particular groups. It is also evident that they are linked with healing and play a significant part in the calling of diviners under the water. Although they have ambiguous attributes, in that they can punish as well as provide, the punishment normally arises when their rules of correct behaviour, adherence to traditions and morality are transgressed. It is asserted that those healers who are granted access to their powerful knowledge and medicines must use these for good purposes or such skills will be removed by their ancestors, and the healer could be destroyed. The link of water divinities to the fertility of the land and all its creatures, including humans, is clearly demonstrated in the rain making and fertility rites that are dedicated to them. These rituals will be examined in detail in the next chapter, and, especially in terms of rain-making, in Chapter Nine.

4.7.1 Reflection on the value of existing theory

Over the last two chapters I have documented the similarities and differences of the core features and symbols regarding the water divinities and the underwater experience that are found across the southern African region. I propose that there is sufficient evidence to argue for a continuity of belief across the various groups examined. A striking feature of most

44 For instance, according to Frobenius in the myths of the Wahungwe people in Zimbabwe “The dzivwa [pool] is the water of origin. In the same way as the rain comes from it, as does the knowledge of the arts and sciences, so the ancestors of the original inhabitants of the land are descended” (Frobenius, 1973: 200).
reports is the insistence by informants of the very real nature (for them) of the experience. However, it is apparent that these claimed experiences and their interpretations may differ between the groups in a number of important ways, which suggest that they are culturally mediated and possibly influenced by broader environmental and political-economic factors. It must be emphasized that within the relevant frame of reference, the experience of being called underwater, and the beings individuals claim to encounter there, are only apprehended in certain modes of consciousness which excludes other observers from the total experience. Thus, while some izangoma, as well as his kin, told me that Baba was indeed taken under the sea for three hours, and they witnessed his disappearance, only he could describe exactly what he experienced; only he could perceive the snake that wrapped around him, and describe the encounter with his ancestors underwater, who he claimed gave him gifts and verbal instructions. Like the dream, this experience is held to take place in another order of reality, and thus certain aspects of the experience elude the possibility of scientific verification. This lack of verification by external independent observers of what exactly is experienced, and its ephemeral nature, leaves more scope for individual interpretation, which may be informed by a body of cultural knowledge obtained from others who have had similar experiences during their own unique episodes, or from other dominant discourses of the time (e.g. the influence of Christian interpretation). As such this allows for a variety of interpretation and also in terms of what aspects are emphasised, and these can also be modified by group or individual agency and self-interest. Something that can be verified by external observers, as evident in the cross-cultural range of narratives presented, is that these people 'return' with otherwise inexplicable skills of extra-sensory perception, divinatory and healing ability.

An approach that adopts an open-minded attitude towards the possibility of the ontological reality of the experiences claimed, but, that sees it as occurring within a culturally mediated framework, does not rule out the usefulness or relevance of the existing theoretical approaches that have been advanced by other scholars (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3). In order to explain this more fully I refer back to the model I developed in Chapter One (Section 1.2.4) that takes cognisance of the various levels of analysis that these theoretical positions attempt to explain,

45 These roughly correspond with Holy & Stuchlik’s ‘domains of social reality’ (1983: 6).
as some may be more useful and relevant at certain levels (or phases) rather than others.

Figure 9: Application of levels of analysis model to the water divinity phenomenon

With reference to figure 9 above I propose that the four component parts or analytical levels (or phases) of the water divinity complex may be seen as:

1) The experience *e.g.* going underwater, dreams and their realization, animal visitations, mermaid and snake encounters.

2) The interpretation of the experience *e.g.* at the individual level and at the level of the kin or social support network, both of which are informed by the "modes of thought" or cosmology of the group. These are comprised of conceptions and normative rules.
(Jacobson, 1992) i.e. the ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ reality (Geertz, 1973: 93).

3) The activities or behaviours (praxis) that result from that interpretation. These are shaped by the normative rules and idealized structure with regard to the rituals performed, the behavioural observances and taboos.

4) The transmission of knowledge pertaining to such interpretation and praxis, and their transformation.

I have argued that agency penetrates all these levels, and might account for the variations that are found across region. While the psychological, structuralist and symbolic explanations attend more to the experience and the interpretation of the experience than to the praxis and the transmission, the sociological and processual analyses are more applicable at the level of interpretation of the experience and the praxis that results. While the diffusionist approach attends to transmission of the knowledge and practice, both the sociological and processual analyses may also be usefully applied at this level. It is important to emphasise that each level is not discrete and maintains a complex dialectic with the other levels, and omitting one level out may give us a somewhat skewed understanding of the phenomenon. From a slightly different perspective, I argue that even though these approaches may help us to understand various elements and manifestations of the complex they should not in themselves make assumptions about the nature of the experiences for the participants or the possibility of the ontological reality of the water divinities. The experience itself is what re-affirms the beliefs and provides the generating force for further ritual action.

Regarding experience (level 1) and its interpretation (level 2), there is definite worth in considering the value of a Jungian archetypal approach advanced by Buhrmann (1986) since the water divinities and the experiences of going underwater are mainly apprehended in altered states of consciousness, be they in dream or in trance. However, there are instances where the physical manifestations of the water divinities or of creatures regarded as spirit messengers, are claimed to occur. These are usually connected to localities in the natural world and are perceived during states of normal consciousness, and it is here that the archetypal explanation may falter. According to Jung, archetypes are deep seated primordial forms, images, thought processes or even patterns of behaviours that emerge in the realm of the collective

46 See Chapter One, Section 1.2.4.
unconscious - that part of the unconscious (as distinct from the personal unconscious) that is "not individual but universal" (Jung, 1959/1968: 3). This universal psychic substrate is of a "suprapersonal" nature that "has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals" (ibid: 4). Jung argues that although located in the unconscious, archetypes are capable of being brought to consciousness (usually in dreams) where they are often expressed, especially in the "primitive mind" in the form of complexes such as myths, fairy tales and esoteric teachings. By being made conscious and in being perceived the archetype "takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear" (ibid: 5), thus explaining the personal and cultural influences of its apprehension.

It should be pointed out that in his writings Jung's formulation of his notion of archetype changes over time and it is difficult to pin point with certainty exactly what he meant by it (Brooke, 1991: 136-137). For instance, in different instances Jung treats the archetype as a (primordial) image, an idea, a pattern of behaviour or "a form of perception and apprehension" (ibid: 137) and as Brooke points out, each of these require substantially different arguments. Over time Jung distinguished between the archetype and the archetypal image, emphasising that the archetype, rather than being an image, was more "a form of perception and apprehension...a structure which gives imaginal shape and direction to instinctual life" (Brooke, 1991: 137). Thus the archetype is never fully revealed but "is known only through its particular manifestations as these occur in individual and collective lives" (ibid: 141). The extent to which the images or ideas that result from these perceptions are reflections of real entities, or are merely manifestations of the unconscious mind, remains unclear. For example, Jung refers to dreams of water which feature an often thwarted descent to its depths, where a treasure lies in wait, to describe his notion of anima. He regards water as "a living symbol of the dark psyche" (Jung, 1959/1968: 17) and the "commonest symbol for the unconscious" (ibid). In elaborating this idea of anima he draws on the experience of gazing into a pool of water where one sees reflected, beyond one's own image, a nixie, "a female, half-human fish" (the siren or mermaid), which he describes as an entrancing, capricious, magical and morally  

47 Jung's unfortunate distinction and evolutionary emphasis on the "primitive mind" seems to detract from his general argument of the archetype being a universally shared feature of all humanity.
ambivalent being. This, he says, is ‘anima’ (or soul) that holds the deepest secrets of life. He argues that as a natural archetype, the anima,

...satisfactorily sums up all the statements of the unconscious, of the primitive mind, of the history of language and religion... It is something that lives of itself, that makes us live: it is life behind consciousness that cannot be completely integrated with it, but from which, on the contrary, consciousness arises... With the archetype of anima we enter the realm of the gods, or rather, the realm that metaphysics has reserved for itself. Everything the anima touches becomes numinous – unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical. She is the serpent in the paradise of the harmless man with good resolutions and still better intentions (Jung, 1959/1968: 27-28).

Apart from being a remarkably apt description for the water divinity representations already documented, Jung hints here that anima is more than mere symbol or archetype but a real living entity. It is anima that manifests as the mother, the goddess, the witch, the Queen of Heaven and has captivated the hearts and minds of men across time and space (see, for example, Robert Graves on The White Goddess). What this example also shows us is that the symbolic imagery Jung drew on to frame his concept of anima (as the ‘nixie’ or serpent woman) is indeed a widespread and possibly universal symbolic experience that inspires human imagination. Likewise, in the same volume concerning the archetypes and the collective unconscious he analyses a wide range of mandala representations most of which are dominated by serpent imagery. The fact that he selects the same two dominant symbols (mermaid and serpent) to illustrate the operations of the collective unconscious makes his theory, notwithstanding its inconsistencies, worthy of consideration in this thesis.

Like Jung, the religious historian Mircea Eliade has also identified certain “aquatic hierophanies” or manifestations of the sacred as being among the most powerful and recurring universal symbols (Eliade, 1952/1991: 151). Eliade refers to these “archetypal images” as “the common property of mankind” which the “soul finds immediately expressive and persuasive” (Eliade, 1952/1991: 159). As with all religious symbols they reveal “certain aspects of reality – the deepest aspects – which defy any other means of knowledge....They bring to light the most hidden modalities of being” (Eliade, 1952/1991: 12). Eliade does not negate the possible ontological reality behind the manifest form, the true apprehension of which is beyond the scope of human capabilities. In effect, Eliade and Jung fall under the symbolist school of thought, which although it had its roots in the Romantic Movement in art and literature studies
was later applied to symbolism in religion (Firth, 1973: 47-53). Firth explains that the symbolist approach was based on the central theme, "...that the essence of things escapes us and that we know only their outward manifestations in the form of figures, images, symbols. Hence no one can know what God is in himself; all that it is possible to know are the ideas we have of Him through our more or less anthropomorphized representations" (Firth, 1973:49). This insight has also been echoed in the various forms of transpersonal psychology and could be useful in our understanding of the experiential level of water divinity phenomenon (Grof, 1998; Schutz, 1967/1972; 1973/1974; Wilber, 1995).

Eliade (1952/1991, 1958) identifies many aspects of water symbolism found in various myths that resonate with those already identified in the preceding chapters. Amongst these are the themes of descent to the underworld; the encounter with snakes, sirens (mermaids) or dragons; death and re-birth; terrifying ordeals which test one's courage and bravery; being endowed with wisdom and knowledge on re-emergence. Regarding submersion in water he notes that,

The monsters of the abyss reappear in a number of traditions: the Heroes, the Initiates, go down into the depths of the abyss to confront marine monsters; this is a typical ordeal of initiation. Variants indeed abound: sometimes a dragon mounts guard over a "treasure" – a sensible image of the sacred, of absolute reality (Eliade, 1952/1991: 158).

Eliade is particularly concerned with how natural symbols are used in religious thought to represent divinity (1958). He uses the concept 'natural' symbol in much the same way Robertson Smith (1927) used the concept – that is, to refer to symbols drawn from the natural world external to the human body i.e. sky, moon, sun, water, stones, vegetation etc. It is indisputable that the water divinity complex is replete with these natural symbols and that these are used in similar ways across time and space (a theme I will return to in Chapter Ten).


49 As Firth points out, Mary Douglas (1970) used the concept of natural symbols in a slightly different way (Firth, 1973: 58-59); that is, to refer more to aspects of the human body that are useful to think with (flesh, blood, excreta, orifices etc). In effect Aschwanden’s (1989) symbolic interpretation sees a correspondence, or metaphorical association, between these two forms of natural symbols. That is, our perception and understanding of how the natural world functions is reflected in our perception and understanding of how our bodily systems function.
The use of water as a powerful religious symbol is unsurprising, since symbolically it offers in a spiritual sense that which it provides in physical reality: it gives life, it cleanses and purifies, it allows for transformation through dissolution (death) and re-emergence (rebirth). Eliade also emphasises that the original power of a symbol that emerges from a particular hierophany (or manifestation of the sacred) does not just arise spontaneously but is "embedded in historical fact" (1958: 2). The contexts in which these hierophanies manifest (in historical and cultural terms) shape their outward expression and interpretation. He uses the concept of "modalities of the sacred" to describe the different ways in which the manifestation of the sacred (as hierophanies or symbols) are experienced and interpreted (ibid).

Eliade’s argument fits more comfortably with the exegesis of those informants who claim to have been taken underwater. Both Berglund’s and Aschwanden’s informants agreed that the entities encountered underwater were symbolic in that they saw them as the outward manifestation of the great deities or ancestors whose true form cannot be apprehended. However, it is evident in other sections of these authors’ texts that, for the informants, this did not undermine the ontological reality of the underwater experience or the divine entities themselves.

While we can accept Firth’s argument that symbols can be analysed on many different levels, and that some levels are more amenable to anthropological purposes than others, this does not mean that in avoiding those levels of analysis that are beyond our scope we should negate their validity or existence. In identifying the instrumental value of symbols he argues they can be used, "as instrument of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control' (Firth, 1973: 77). Firth is of the opinion that “A proposition that symbols are instruments of knowledge raises epistemological issues which anthropologists are not trained to handle" (ibid: 82; my emphasis). Firth believes that we should concern ourselves more with the “knower than the known, with the social position of the claimant and claim rather than with the question of the objective reality of what is claimed” (ibid: 83). In other words he argues that as anthropologists we should confine our attention to symbols as instruments of expression, communication and social control. The latter aspect (symbols as instrument of social control), in effect, is what Hirst has concentrated on in arguing that the water divinities
are expressions of the patrilineal principle, and its symbols are merely used by diviners as strategies for achieving certain ends. This is essentially a Durkheimian approach, where he argues that the symbols serve to reify the social interests of the group (as reflected in the social structure) and consolidate them. I have already expressed my doubt as to the adequacy of such explanations, which could be construed as reductionist, and while I acknowledge that such arguments may be valid in some instances, I have reservations of their representivity. I argue that focusing only on these social and instrumental aspects of the water divinity complex we get a distorted and incomplete understanding of the phenomenon, and we might give the impression that the water divinity phenomenon is merely a delusional hoax that is either consciously or unconsciously used to achieve certain social and political ends. In so doing we are not only disrespectful of our informants' profound spiritual insights but we may be overlooking a primary motivating factor for the beliefs and actions that result, and their widespread persistence. It is mainly from this standpoint that I suggest that if anthropologists are able to corroborate their informant's insistence that the water spirit phenomenon may be based on an ontologically real experience, irrespective of how it is interpreted, then this will potentially add a significant new dimension to our understanding of it. I provide potential evidence for this assertion in Chapter Six. With reference to the above argument I do not wish to imply that all scholars using conventional approaches do not take their informant's realities seriously. As the analytical levels of interest associated with conventional approaches bypass the need to consider these realities as potentially valid evidence, they rarely make these points explicit.

Despite the reservations I have mentioned above, it is evident that the symbols of the water divinity complex can be subject to a certain amount of manipulation in terms of both interpretation and praxis. Individual agency or group interests do determine the way these powerful symbols may be used, and I have already suggested that different political-economic and socio-cultural interests may explain the differences that occur in the expression of the water divinity complex across the various groups in southern Africa. Further examples of these are to be found throughout the next few chapters (see especially Chapter Seven). I also argue that while the key symbols and certain codes of conduct may remain fairly consistent across the different groups, it is at the level of praxis, especially in ritual, where variation of its expression often occurs (see Chapter Five).
The fourth level of analysis addresses the question of transmission. The question of how these common systems of meaning and codes of conduct come to be found across a diverse range of groups in southern Africa requires further explanation. One possible reason may be found in the examination of the nature of diviner training, which is not only influenced by dreams (a key focus in the thesis) but is also characterised by a sharing and dissemination of knowledge among differing specialists, novices and families whenever the opportunity presents itself. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, diviners and novices frequently claim they have been shown other healers in their dreams who can assist them in securing more definite and reliable forms of communication from the spirit world. These healers may come from different ethnic groups and may live a far distance from the dreamer, and hence when they are found and consulted, insights are shared. Baba’s own training history demonstrates this process. His training ranged from a local Zulu diviner (isangoma) close to Pietermartizburg, to a Cape Nguni diviner (igqirha) in the Mount Fletcher area of the former Transkei (about 300km to the south) and another Zulu diviner in the Port Shepstone area (about 250km to the south east). He later spent time learning new skills from a healer located in Gazankulu, some 800km in the north.\footnote{The powdered medicine derived from a certain reddish coloured root, referred to as impande, that I was given with the Holy Water at the commencement of my training came from knowledge Baba had accessed in Gazankulu. It was emphasized to me by Zanele that this was not a normal ‘Zulu’ practice.}

Historical records reveal that many of the groups in the southern African region that existed prior to European colonization traversed vast areas of the subcontinent either due to wars, in search of grazing and vacant land, lineage segmentation or due to various environmental factors (Newman, 1995; Soga, 1930; Thompson, 1969; Wilson & Thompson, 1969). As a result of these long periods of migration and movement, intermarriage and assimilation, knowledge is shared and becomes incorporated, and to some extent modified into the local corpus of knowledge. In Chapter Nine I focus on how this process of knowledge sharing, especially through intermarriage and co-operative relations (such as rain-making), may have taken place between the San/KhoeKhoe and Nguni. Determining the extent to which ideas were shared in a historical context is a complex process and one has to largely rely on linguistic evidence and cultural records, which in the case of the San, includes their rock art.
In the last century the processes of knowledge sharing have been greatly enhanced by modernity, industrialization (that spawned a massive movement of migrant labour) and globalization. These have been important factors that have brought a wide array of different ethnic groups together, enabling assimilation of knowledge. In terms of the sharing of medicinal, ancestral and spiritual knowledge I have been a witness of these processes on numerous occasions. The passing on of knowledge between groups is augmented by the very uncertain nature of the process of becoming a diviner, as I have already discussed in Chapter One; when progress is slow or halted novices and diviners search for explanations from other specialists, frequently with those situated far from one's site of residence as they are less likely to have personal knowledge about the client. Frequently these individuals cross ethnic boundaries, thus allowing for diffusion of ideas among different ethnic groups. In Chapter Seven I describe my own experience of a dream, which I believe led me to a Xhosa speaking diviner in Grahamstown, who revealed during divination that Baba had apparently done certain transgressions during my training (see Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.3).

However, it is also in the process of its transmission, and the factors that facilitate it, that transformation of the knowledge can occur (Barth, 1966). Not only does this take place to ‘fit’ with existing ideas and social principles or interests, but its morally ambiguous nature can get heightened in certain contexts. This ambiguity is especially facilitated by the anomalous characteristics of the mermaid/s and the beliefs that she/they straddle not only different categories of being (mermaid, snake, rainbow, tree, animal, human etc) but also elements (water and air), and states of being (between life and death; or this reality and the ‘underworld’). It is this ambiguity in classification that provides for flexibility in interpretation, and probably its appeal. Christianity is one example; in some instances Christianity has demonised the water divinities, whereas in other instances it has embraced and accommodated them. In Chapter Eight I demonstrate how the diviner’s calling to the water has been accommodated with the prophet’s calling in the Zulu Zionist indigenous churches. Another important influence on the expression of the water divinity complex, especially regarding its moral ambiguity, is the changing political-economic sentiments that have accompanied capitalism, urbanization, democracy and the growth of the global economy. This major shift has seen an externally imposed value system based on individual
accumulation that is publicly endorsed at the state level, which overlays a more deeply entrenched normative system that prioritizes African communalism and sharing— the disjuncture that arises between these two value systems often finds expression in the conflicting moral ambiguity of the water divinities.

Central to understanding the postulated relationship that exists between various people/s and the water divinities is the concept of exchange and reciprocity. In return for the skills of healing and the safe return of the person called it is held that the kinsmen must offer a gift in return, most commonly a domesticated animal such as a cow or goat. There seems little doubt that the gifts imparted to the person chosen by the water divinities are highly valued, and serve to make such people highly gifted diviners. It is this notion of reciprocity and exchange that is central to many of the rituals performed for the water divinities that will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5
RITUAL ECOLOGY, FERTILITY AND MORALITY

5.1 Introduction
In Chapters Three and Four I presented the common themes and core elements of the water divinity complex found among certain selected groups in Southern Africa, and the experiences of people who claim to have been taken underwater by these divinities. I have argued that although there are remarkable similarities, some variations do exist. I have proposed that varying environmental, political-economic, historical, and socio-cultural factors may account for the differences reported. I have also argued that existing theoretical explanations for the phenomenon have tended to focus only at certain levels of analysis, and that, especially in the case of the sociological approaches of Hirst and Gluckman, these may offer some insights at the levels of interpretation (be it of the individual or group – level 2) and praxis (level 3). In this chapter I focus particularly at the level of praxis, especially relating to some of the rituals that are dedicated to the water divinities. I hope to show that it is at this level where variations between the groups become most prominent. This is not surprising since as ritual is ‘belief in action’ and often concerned with the social regulation of behaviour, it is here where one finds improvisation and issues of identity, agency and social control emerging. Across all the groups, however, it will be shown that the rituals address not only ecological issues, such as with rainfall and fertility of the land, but also social issues and political-economic interests. I have already presented the main ways in which anthropologists have sought to understand religious ritual in Chapter One, Section 1.2.1.1, and these will be reconsidered at the end of this chapter after outlining some of the main characteristics and variations of the rituals performed for the water divinities across southern Africa.

Although there are a range of rituals performed for the water divinities both within and between groups throughout southern Africa, for the purposes of this chapter I will examine the ones that have been predominantly addressed in the ethnographic literature. Of these, I will give more focussed attention to the intlhwayelo rituals of the Cape Nguni, and the Nomkhubulwana rituals of the Zulu, and my own encounters with them, as these two forms of ritual have been the most extensively documented. These rituals serve slightly different
purposes and are performed by different interest groups. These variations serve as expressions of cultural identity and reveal the priorities of the particular group’s interests and concerns.

It must be noted that past ritual analyses have largely been conducted from a western paradigm that sees a distinct separation between nature and culture, with nature generally relegated to a back seat by culture. The natural world either serves as backdrop to ritual action, or provides the objects that are used as symbols to represent something else. These have been seen to largely serve an underlying sociological or psychological function that is usually only discernible to the ‘objective viewpoint’ of the academic scholar involved in the analysis.

Further, inherent in many such studies, the spirit world is treated as the imaginative construct, an instrument, or the reflection, of culture (see Hirst, 1990). However, this thesis argues that we must take cognizance of what Victor Turner refers to the exegetic level of interpretation (Turner, 1967: 50), especially about what people have to say about nature and ‘the spirit in nature’, and humanity’s interrelationship with it. We need to incorporate an approach that seriously questions western assumptions of the nature/culture divide. In African ritual we have ample evidence that suggests that the boundaries between nature/culture/spirit are seen as fundamentally different to the western perspective, that is influenced by Cartesian philosophy, and nature is seen to provide not only the means to access and influence spirit, but that it may be both agent, and the manifestation, of spirit itself. This is not to dismiss all the valuable insights that previous ritual analyses and theoretical perspectives have to offer. Indeed, with respect to the various rituals directed towards the water divinities, many of these approaches can be accommodated and prove useful in aiding our understanding of the processes involved (Bell, 1997). What ritual has to say about the people’s ontological perceptions of non-human beings or phenomena (nature), and humanity’s engagement with the natural world, and how this influences both their social and spiritual relationships, is an important consideration in this thesis and will be demonstrated not only in this chapter but in the ones that follow. As Descola and Pálsson’s have noted, we must seriously consider,

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1 As both an intellectual construct and as it exists in physical form.

2 Turner argues that there are three different levels at which the “meaning” of a symbol or symbolic act can be determined: 1) the exegetic meaning - the indigenous interpretation of the symbols used 2) the operational meaning – observing what is done with the symbol and its social and emotional effects 3) the positional meaning – how the symbol fits in or articulates with the other symbols that are employed within the particular ritual context (Turner, 1967: 50-51).
the evidence offered by many societies where the realm of social relations encompasses a wider domain than the mere society of humans...humans and animals are social beings mutually engaged in each other’s world...Anthropology can no longer restrict itself to the conventional social analysis of its beginnings; it must rethink its domains and its tools to embrace not only the world of anthropos, but also that part of the world with which humans interact (Descola & Pálsson, 1996: 14).

Heeding such advice it is first necessary to contextualise the various natural sites where rituals for the divinities take place, and the behavioural taboos that are associated with them.

5.2 Ritual ecology - sacred pools and behavioural taboos

5.2.1 Preferred water sites of the water divinities

As the water divinities (especially the mermaid/s) are believed to reside in certain bodies of water, it is at these sites that rituals are most frequently performed. All groups tend to agree that these beings inhabit permanent deep pools in rivers, often below waterfalls, where the water is fast moving and ‘living’. Berglund’s ‘ventriloquist’ informant was quite clear on this quality. In response to Berglund’s question on the type of water body that one enters in submersion events, *i.e.* where one encounters the Snake, he was told, “It is as I said water that is living, running in the river. That is the living water. If the water had been in a dam as you asked (a while ago), then there would not be a snake in it. It is the living waters”, (Berglund, 1976: 146). ‘Living’ water is often associated with its ability to generate foam and in certain rituals that I have participated in foam appears to be symbolically important (Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1). Berglund also describes a place he was shown by an informant, which was one of many pools where Nomkhubulwana was reputed to reside,

It was in a deep valley. The water ran over solid rock and made its way to a larger river through dense indigenous forest. The air was cool and moist, although the day itself was hot. There was much moss growing on the rocks and the under-growth was at places so thick that it was impenetrable. Several small waterfalls caused the water to murmur continuously (Berglund, 1976: 72)

Among the Khoekhoe and /Xam groups Hoff’s informants state that the Water Snake is found in perennial pools and fountains where the waters, termed ‘kwaai waters’ (angry waters), are deep and turbulent (Hoff, 1997: 23-24). Latham records that the njuzu spirits, although preferring deep pools at the base of waterfalls, are also believed to reside in certain wells in Zimbabwe (1986: 78-79) especially in those areas where there is little surface water.

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The proximity of certain deep pools or waterfalls to a cave is regarded as especially indicative of the presence of water divinities, while the presence of rock art and certain tree species growing outside the cave are significant (Prins, 1996b: 219). In Zimbabwe, Aschwanden notes that “The njuzu also live especially in waters where there is a cave. Also caves containing water, and pools on mountains tops, are well-known habitats of water-sprites” (Aschwanden, 1989: 187).

In those areas where the topography does not allow for waterfalls, such as in certain areas of the Eastern Cape, the ideal pools are those which are deep, difficult to access, with steep banks, and surrounded by dense indigenous forest. For instance, in her Masters research, which examined the role of anthropogenic disturbance in the socio-ecological landscape of four village communities in the upper Kat River region, Fox described these pools as,

...typically large pools of still deep water, with water flowing above and below, they often have steep banks, are described as being ‘dignified’, in other words heavy with presence, and are surrounded by particular species of trees and plants. The two most important plants are Salix capensis (umNgcunube), a species of river willow which is regarded as the tree of the People of the River, and Typha capensis (Umkhanzzi). A number of informants stated that the presence of these two plants indicates the presence of the ancestors and the People of the River, and that traditions (i.e. rituals) are usually only performed in sacred pools where these two plants are found (Fox, 2005:125).

As indicated above the occurrence of certain plants near pools and river sources indicate the presence of the water divinities. In the area around Peddie, Palmer (1996: 22) has also recorded that the presence of the umkhanzze reed, Typha capensis, on the edge of pools is seen as sure sign of habitation by the water ‘spirits’.

For the /Xam the presence of reeds and water-buchu indicates the location of the Water Snake’s dwelling place (Hoff, 1997: 24). Buchu is often described by various San or Khoi informants as being the plant used to subdue the Water Snake (Hoff, 1997) and is also offered

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3 The reed is a key symbol in Zulu religion and in one origin myth people claim that they emerged from a bed of reeds (Berglund, 1976: 34; Callaway, 1970). The reed mat is an essential accoutrement of diviners and this is directly linked to its association with water, healing and creation. The reed, linked to the Lord-of-the Sky and creation, confers power to mankind (Berglund, 1976: 34).
to the Water Snake during female puberty rituals (Waldman, 1989: 38).

The sacred *ubulawu*, the foam generated from certain plants, used by the Zulu and Xhosa for washing and eating in order to purify and connect an individual to the ancestors and the water divinities through dreams, frequently comes from trees, bushes and vines that grow near water sources (Hirst, 1990: 178-179).

The Cape Nguni also regard the sea (*ulwandle*) as being a residence of the fish-tailed beings, as well as a collective repository of the ancestral spirits (Elliott, 1972). The places that are regarded as favoured spots are often where large rocks and cliffs jut out into the ocean, and/or where caves exist. Elliott makes extensive reference to Cove Rock near East London as being a very important site as it is the abode of the People of the Sea (these being the same creatures as the People of the River but merely residing in the sea). Elliott's informants claimed this is where the 'chiefs' of the underwater people reside (Elliott, 1972: 98-100). Broster also makes reference to rituals that are performed for the 'River' People on the Transkei coast (Broster, 1981: 54). As with other sites associated with the water divinities, the sea is often referred to with the respectful term 'Komkhulu' (The Great Place). Two of my Zulu informants who claimed to have been taken underwater had their experience at the sea, these being Baba and MaDuma, which suggests that the Zulu also regard this as a place where the water divinities reside. I am informed that rituals are frequently performed for *izangoma* at the sea at the completion of their training.

It must be noted that among the Cape Nguni groups some clan ancestors are believed to be more affiliated to forests than to rivers (Hirst, 1990: 169). Only indigenous forests, often on mountainsides or deep valleys, are seen as spirit abodes and some also have sacred pool sites located within them. Descendents of such clans, when called to be diviners will also have to perform rituals in these forests. Despite this a few may still complete their training by being called under the water. Broster gives an account of a Thembu initiate, Nombuso, who was called in a dream to a forest on the great Galandoda Mountain. This indicated that she was a 'forest doctor' rather than a 'river doctor'. However, while she was in the forest she headed for a sacred pool, at the base of a waterfall, surrounded by reeds. Here she claimed she went into a trance and submerged into the water, later to emerge painted in white clay (Broster, 1981: 46-50).
The Snake, as a manifest force, is not only associated with certain bodies of water but also with mountains. Throughout southern Africa sacred mountains which are protected by a snake are believed to occur (see de Beer, 1999). For instance, for the Rharabe Xhosa speakers, Janet Hodgson reports that they believe that there is a sacred mountain known as *Ntaba kaNdoda* in the Amatola mountain range, where there resided “a mythical snake who was said to live in a secret pool on the top of the mountain....Legend has it that the snake covered itself with the mist that often hangs around the mountain in certain seasons” (Hodgson, 1987: 19). It is often claimed that these mountains contain vast amounts of gold (e.g. *Inszwa* Mountain near Mt Ayliff in the Transkei), but no human has ever been successful in obtaining it because of the watchful eye of the Snake; they either cannot penetrate the rock to access the gold or disasters befall them. I also encountered similar stories relating to mountains while interviewing informants in Zimbabwe.

Finally, it must be noted that the active ancestral body is also associated with the domestic domain, particularly in the cattle kraal (*ubuhlanti* - Xhosa: *isibaya* - Zulu). This is probably true more for those ancestors from the descendants’ minimal lineage and who are regarded as being actively involved in their everyday activities - although their presence in the homestead is dependent on whether the appropriate incorporation rituals (e.g.*ukubuyisa*) have been performed.²

### 5.2.2 Pools as sacred sites - taboos and behavioural restrictions

In terms of the criteria and characteristics by which a place can be regarded as sacred (Carmichael *et al.*, 1994), certain pools where the water divinities are thought to reside definitely could be classified as such. That is, at these sites there are strict rules of admittance and taboos which constrain behaviour. They are regarded as sites that have intensified presence of the ancestors and the divine forces, and they are the portals through which certain

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² Those who have died within the previous two to three generations who are believed to be more actively involved with the living than those who died in earlier generations.

⁵ These rituals are of prime importance. They should be performed a year after the death of a person who has attained a reasonable old age. The purpose of the *ukubuyisa* ritual is to clean and empower the spirit of a person who attained important status and responsibility in life, and ‘bring them home’ to be united with the ancestral body in order to guide and protect the living.
individuals are able to transcend the boundaries between this world and that of spirit, particularly during their underwater sojourn experience.

In those areas where beliefs in the water divinities still hold strong, certain pools, rivers and expanses of water associated with them are regarded with a mixture of awe, fear and reverence. Common people are fearful to go near sacred pools where the snake, mermaids and ancestral spirits are known to exist. This injunction is re-enforced with the fear that uninvited people may be taken under the water, never to return, or that they may be inflicted with illness, rashes or blindness (Fox, 2005: 125 - 126). Among the Cape Nguni there are certain times of the day when it is believed that the *abantu bomlambo* are more active. Zweli was of the opinion that these peak times are at dusk, during the night, dawn and midday. Generally, people avoid the places during these times to avoid disturbing or angering the spirits, or being taken underwater by them. Only healers associated with the water approach such areas. Fox has noted that in the upper Kat River area,

There are numerous taboos associated with sacred pools, and many people adhere to these in fear of angering the ancestors and the People of the River. Firstly, due to their sacred nature, people are normally only allowed to go to sacred pools when being trained as a diviner or if a special ritual is going to be performed, to propitiate to the ancestors, to ask for help, or to combat a cultural illness. Secondly, resources, even dry wood, are not allowed to be harvested around sacred pools unless one is an *igqirha* (diviner), or if the species is needed for a ritual being performed there (Fox, 2005: 126).

As observed by Fox, taboos exist regarding the extraction or use of natural resources surrounding rivers, so as to avoid disturbing or angering the water divinities. This can only be done by healers who are allowed plants for medicinal or ritual use. Killing or injuring any of the messengers of the water (such as crabs, snakes, frogs or water birds) is also regarded as a great offence. Transgression of such taboos can result in the drying up of the water source, droughts or destructive storms. For instance, one of Fox’s informants told her, “People don’t just go and harvest near sacred pools because they could be punished by People of the River, maybe either as a drought, or you become blind or you become sick” (Fox, 2005: 126). In the Hogsback area not far from the upper Kat River region Wood (2000) has documented local perceptions of the ‘tornado spirit’ which is often depicted in clay models by local craftsmen as a dragon having a fish tail (*ibid.* 82), and is referred to as the *Inkanyamba*. This is regarded as
the angry and destructive manifestation of the water Snake, which interestingly one informant termed ‘Nkosazana’ (ibid: 89). The tornadoes are often regarded as manifesting as a result of human interference with water courses, such as dam building (ibid: 84), which causes the angry female Inkanyamba to go in search of her mate (ibid: 83). Similar stories of the tornado known as Inkanyamba are widespread in KwaZulu-Natal and it is believed that when angered it will cut a swathe of destruction from its abode in a mountain near Mpendle to another of its sites near Kamberg (Frans Prins, pers. comm.). One day while we were experiencing a very strong wind at Elandskop, not far from Mpendle, Zanele told me it was the Inkanyamba, and cautioned that it had a predilection for shiny zinc roofs as it ‘mistook’ these for bodies of water. Wood reported an identical response among her Cape Nguni informants in the Hogsback region when she states “People whose houses have unpainted zinc roofs are at risk, since the inkanyamba will think that the shining metal surface is water, then it will dive down and wreak havoc” (Wood, 2000: 83).

There is also a strong link between these divinities and the presence of water, to the extent that they are seen as the providers of the life-giving liquid. It is thus thought that breaching their rules can thus result in their abandonment of the site resulting in the drying up of such sources, the loss of their life-giving benefits and the occurrence of destructive climatic conditions. Fox, for instance, observed the following,

Ten of my informants, often without being asked directly, indicated that in comparison to the rest of the river, sacred pools never dry up. The reason for this is explained in the following informant’s quote: “Sacred pools will never become totally dry because those people living there [the People of the River] will never allow that. If the water is going down they will ask for rain”. Sacred pools consequently become important water sources during times of severe drought....The common perception is that if these pools are environmentally damaged, or disturbed by the presence of too many people who are not entitled to go there, then the water spirits will move to another location that is more suitable. Correspondingly, those pools that have been abandoned have no spiritual power that the local people can access. Droughts or other extreme climatic conditions may also result (Fox, 2005: 129).

Similarly in Zimbabwe it is believed that the njuzu live in pools and swamps that never dry out. It is said that their role is to protect water sources and keep them alive. They are the guardians of the river. Local opinion is that the white colonialists and subsequent settler populations bear much of the responsibility for the drying up of rivers. An informant of
Aschwanden observed that,

In the past - before the arrival of the white man - there are said to have been more pools and springs with water-snakes. The many noises that came with the Europeans made many njuzu leave their habitats for ever, which caused aridity. However, disobedience by many people is also said to have prompted the njuzu to retreat. When a njuzu-snake wants to leave its habitat it rolls itself up and propels itself off the ground. It flies over the land making a loud wind. Everything it flies over is destroyed, and the country dries up (Ashwanden, 1989: 189).

Latham notes that not all pools are associated with njuzu, although the pools (dziva) which they inhabit are always perennial (Latham, 1986: 76). In dry areas where there is little surface water they may also be associated with certain wells (tsime). Latham gives an account of a failed development project in the Chibi district where the health department attempted to clean up certain wells by lining them with a protective surface. This met with strong community resistance as they felt the njuzu would be offended, and this fear was confirmed to them when the well subsequently dried up (ibid: 79-80).

During the 1992 drought in Zimbabwe the pronouncements of Juliana (see Appendix Nineteen), who claimed she was an emissary of the njuzu, clearly indicated that one of the causes of the drought was due to the sinking of boreholes, the explosions for making dams and the cementing of wells (Mawere and Wilson, 1995: 255; Mafu, 1995: 297). She claimed that “the smell of cement drives the njuzi (sic) away, yet they were pivotal in the provision of drinking water for the people. The njuzi have the capacity to generate water from mountains, springs and underground rivers for drinking purposes, while rain water is for crops only” (Mafu, 1995: 297).

Many groups also limit the distance from which residential units should be erected near rivers and where cultivation takes place. Hoff noted that the /Xam would never live very close to a water source because of their belief that “Water Snakes wander in the immediate vicinity of their homes, making these areas particularly dangerous” (Hoff, 1997: 24).

The logical consequences of such taboos and behaviour restrictions are that such beliefs help preserve important areas of the landscape against damage and degradation and limit water pollution. Fox (2005) was able to demonstrate these positive effects in her thesis (see also Bernard & Kumalo, 2004).
It is important to note that diviners and novices frequently claim that they are shown particular pools, or areas near the sea, in their dreams, which they must find and perform certain rituals at. In the next chapter I detail how this process worked for me and how all the pool sites I believe I have been shown have been identified as sacred to the local people because the water divinities are believed to reside in them.

5.3 River rituals in KwaZulu-Natal

By far the best documented rituals that are performed in KwaZulu-Natal for the water divinities are those dedicated to Nomkhubulwana or Inkosazana. Berglund (1976), Bryant (1949), Krige (1936/1974, 1968) and Kendall (1999) give detailed descriptions of the various rituals and ceremonies performed for her, and note that although these may have been in decline, there had been sporadic revivals in many areas. The most commonly described rituals are those alternatively termed the nomdede ritual (Berglund, 1976: 63; Krige, 1936/1974: 197) or ukulimela inkosazana ritual (Krige, 1968: 181), which occurs when, on sighting the first mists of spring (regarded as Inkosazana’s manifestation), the women (both old and young) plant a special field for Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana, onto which they pour libations of beer, to ask for blessings on the crops for the forthcoming growing season. Sometimes included in this ritual, or held separate to it, is the ‘taking out of the cattle’ ritual (ukukhipha izinkomo) which is performed by virgins, where they don their brother’s or prospective lover’s clothes and herd the cattle up a mountain where they spend the day feasting, singing and praising Nomkhubulwana, and in particular asking for her blessings and guidance in the finding of good and loyal husbands (Berglund, 1976: 68-69; Gluckman, 1954). Men or boys who dare to trespass on their revelries are chased away with lewd verbal abuse. It is during the latter ritual where inversion of what is deemed proper behaviour for girls takes place, and it was this in particular that led Gluckman (1954) to use the Nomkhubulwana rituals to support his ‘rituals of rebellion’ hypothesis; the fact that in a patriarchal and patrilineal society like the Zulu, the Nomkhubulwana ritual was dominated by female virgins who acted in reverse of their normal

6 These accounts are of great interest since Bryant’s records date back to over one hundred years ago, Krige’s over seventy years ago and Berglund’s some forty years ago. However Gluckman (1954), who draws from Bryant’s and Krige’s accounts for his ‘rituals of rebellion’ hypothesis, notes he was not able to observe these women’s rituals because at the time of his research they were no longer performed. They have, however, been reintroduced in recent times.
expected gender roles (such as singing and acting in a lewd way, donning men’s clothes, and herding cattle) suggested to him a form of ritually sanctioned protest that allowed women to openly express social tensions within a controlled sacred context. These allowed for catharsis, a renewal of the unity of the system and the maintenance of the status quo. In fact Gluckman used the early descriptions of Nomkhubulwana to elaborate more on the gendered tensions in Zulu society. In particular he pointed to “her role in linking a patriarchal society, pressing heavily on the hard-working women, with its wooded, grass-grown, then scantily cultivated, environment” (Gluckman 1954:10).

Krige (1968) critiqued Gluckman’s interpretation of the data and argued that he overemphasized the lewd behaviour. She also cited many other non-ritual occasions where young virgins act in similar ways, including wearing men’s clothing and herding cattle (1968: 184-185). Furthermore, if the rituals were controlled expressions of protest against inferior status then it would not be the daughters of the patrilocal unit who would protest, but the in-marrying wives who have lower status and power. She argued, rather, that the girl’s puberty and Nomkhubulwana rituals were primarily addressing issues of sexual morality (particularly the importance of virginity), as well as rain and fertility, and these were clearly demonstrated in their songs. It is worth remembering that young virginal girls are (or were) an important source of cattle for the agnatic group as a result of bride wealth (lobola) exchange. It is also well known nowadays that a girl’s virginity will still attract a higher lobola from which her male agnates will gain direct benefits. Even though they do not participate in these rituals men would thus have direct interest in their performance. Krige describes the penalties imposed when a girl was seduced by a boy and her virginity broken (Krige, 1936/1974: 157-158), which included the boy’s family being expected to pay two atonement beasts to the offended family, one for the mother of the girl (the inGquthu beast) and one to the father (the imVimba beast). In addition both the girl and the boy would be subjected to a severe tongue-lashing and beating by the girls’ of her age-group in the district and, significantly, in the case of the girl, this would be done at the river. They would then demand a goat from the boy’s family for sullying the age-group as a whole, which they would slaughter, and remove its chyme (umswani) in order to wash with at the river for purification purposes (ibid: 158).

Although there are some variations in the way the various rituals were performed between
different areas, the *nomdede* rituals generally involved young virgins going round to all the households asking for donations of corn and millet with which to make beer as an offering, together with some seeds, to Nomkhubulwana. These seeds, once blessed by Nomkhubulwana, would be used for that year’s crops, hence the ritual was principally a cultivation ritual aimed at fertility of crops. Some scholars described the particular form of approach used by these girls who would pout their lips while keeping silent (*ukuphukula umlomo*), and this was the acknowledged strategy to request donations of seeds (Bryant, 1949: 665; Krige, 1936/1974: 198) – in other words, it seemed that the pouting of lips by the young virgins was a persuasive tactic of evincing sadness at non-cooperation, or possibly provocation, for people to willingly donate seed. Although this latter practice now seems to have been abandoned, it is still remembered by informants as being a significant part of the ritual.

Other rituals that are directed to Nomkhubulwana are to gain her help in averting blights of the crops (such as the maize grub) or even illness of children (Bryant, 1949; Krige 1968). For instance, Krige observed the *ukulahlwa kwesingane* rituals that were performed when there was an epidemic of naturally caused seasonal disease (*umkhuhlane*). At these rituals mothers dug shallow holes in a river bed, whilst crying, and buried their live infants in the sand up to their necks. They then pretended to run away and the cacophony of crying elicited by the infants and mothers was supposed to “melt the heart of Inkosazana” (*ibid*: 182) and so deter disease. Krige also described a similar ritual that was done when there was a drought (1936/1974: 199), as well as the *ukukhalela amabele* rituals that were performed to rid the corn of maize grub where the young girls pluck the afflicted corn and fling it into deep pools in the river appealing for Nomkhubulwana’s help.

What is significant with all these rituals for Nomkhubulwana is that they are always performed by women or virgins, and this is to be expected since they are concerned directly with the fertility and welfare of crops, and the welfare of women’s procreative potential and child-rearing. These are concerns that primarily affect women. In the past it seems that the emphasis was largely on the *nomdede* rituals which reflected the role of women with the hoe-cultivation of crops. In the agro-pastoralist mode of production of the Zulu, cultivation fell under the domain of females, the men being responsible for the cattle. Although these rituals have persisted in isolated rural pockets, many of them were dying out until recently. This was
mainly due to the fact that these modes of production have been largely displaced due to increasing restricted access to, and overcrowding of land, and the introduction of wage labour and the cash economy. The impact of Christianity has also taken its toll with many converts turning their backs on Nomkhubulwana (Kendall, 1999: 109; also see Section 5.3.1 of this chapter).

Although in some regions the cultivation rituals have been revived and performed (which I encountered and discuss in the next section) it is noteworthy that in recent years, since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, the shift in emphasis has moved to that of correct sexual behaviour of adolescent girls and the promotion of sexual abstinence and virginity, and this has assumed a more political dimension (as has the whole issue of HIV/AIDS). This comes through very clearly in Kendall’s paper that documents her own involvement in one of the earliest Nomkhubulwana ceremonies that were re-introduced from 1995 in the Bulwer region under the instigation of a particular isangoma. A school teacher, who also has a post-graduate degree, this isangoma claims she was told by her ancestors in a dream to revive the Nomkhubulwana festivities (Kendall, 1999: 95). According to Kendall many of her informants attributed the collective ills facing contemporary Zulu society as due to turning their backs on Nomkhubulwana,

Her absence can be read in drought, in great storms, terrible winds, and soil that lies exhausted and barren. When she turns her back on the people, horrible things can happen: beauty and civility go with her; her people can suffer domination by outsiders; her daughters have no protection from rape; violence erupts between brothers; and unheard of diseases strike people and animals (Kendall, 1999: 97).

It is clear from Kendall’s paper that HIV/AIDS is seen as one of the devastating diseases that has emerged as a result of failure to respect Nomkhubulwana’s rules, especially that of sexual abstinence prior to marriage, and thus the festivities that were introduced under Nomkhubulwana’s name have become primarily directed towards the promotion of girls’ virginity. Virginity testing (ukuhlolwa kwezintombi) thus became the focus point of many of the subsequent ceremonies, and this is what has caused some controversy in human rights debates (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Scorgie, 2002). Kendall was quite clear that “The idea of a

7 This relates particularly to sexual penetration. It was quite acceptable for virgins after the umula (initiation) rituals to have intimate relations, including intercultural sex (ukumetsha) with their lovers (see Krige, 1968).
mass gathering or “festival” at which many young people could perform was entirely Ngobese’s idea and was not based on (re)creating traditional rituals” (Kendall, 1999: 98-99). This was quite evident in her description of the first ceremony that she attended which was orchestrated mainly by izangoma (both male and female) and was definitely not a ritual performed in secret, or controlled by virgins. Instead it was a very public spectacle, attended by an estimated 7000 people, and was deliberately directed at the mass media with their presence of television cameras and foreign observers, both male and female. Moreover, whereas men are normally taboo in the nomdede rituals, at this one “a man with a megaphone” directed the events. Kendall uses Myerhoff’s concept of a ‘nonce’ ritual to describe this event, that is, “a ritual created to meet the needs of a certain situation” (1999: 105). This need was primarily to alert the consciousness of the Zulu participants about the consequences of forgetting their culture and traditions. Kendall is thus quite explicit when she states that “the ritual calling Nomkhubulwane home to Zulu culture and resuscitating Zulu belief in Nomkhubulwana must be seen as a political act, as well as a social and religious act” (ibid: 106). Kendall notes that the political interests of participants came especially into view at the ceremony held the following year (in 1997) when some politicians attempted “to co-opt the rituals for political gain...Zulu cultural identity has been used as a pawn by politicians eager to gain the votes of the majority Zulu population in the province” (ibid: 112). It was at this ceremony that virginity testing came to the forefront, but this was initiated not so much by the izangoma but by certain cultural interests groups of the Inkatha Freedom Party. Since these very public ceremonies held in the Bulwer region in honour of Nomkhubulwana, these have become annual events throughout the province, the principle aim being the promotion of abstinence through virginity testing. Now they are held at sports grounds in major cities and their surrounding townships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001:538). One gets the sense from Leclerc-Madlala’s and Scorgie’s observation of these mass virginity testing events, that the role of Nomkhubulwana has become subverted and muted in the process.

Despite these more mass organized and politicized expressions of Nomkhubulwana’s role in the well-being of women, or the control of their sexuality, nomdede rituals are still being practiced in certain areas of KwaZulu-Natal, an example of which I will describe in the next section. These are primarily rural based rituals dedicated to promoting fertility of the crops and the avoidance of catastrophic climatic conditions and environmental degradation. What is
important to note is that these rituals are performed primarily on the basis of territorial affiliation that falls under the jurisdiction of traditional governance in the form of chiefs. They are not, as far as I am aware, performed in urban areas or in those areas that do not fall under the control of chiefs. Nor do they appear to be performed by kinship-based or family units, unlike the intlwayalelo rituals found amongst the Cape Nguni (discussed below). This suggests that they may serve to affirm and express local collective interests, traditional systems of governance through the chiefs and in maintaining ethnic identity. While they are performed by women they are still firmly under the control of the chief. As little has been documented on the rituals performed by the more recent Zulu kings I am uncertain as to their role in the performance of such rituals.

5.3.1 The revival of the Nomkhubulwana nomdede rituals
In 2000 I had a dream that led me to one of the pools associated with Nomkhubulwana in the Bulwer region of KwaZulu-Natal (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.3), and this deepened my interest in the complex of ideas surrounding her. Zanele contacted me soon after our visit to the pool in Bulwer to inform me that the daughter of our old isangoma friend Mathonsi lived in the region in the Mvoti River valley, about two hundred kilometres north-west of Durban, where fertility rituals in spring were still being performed for Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana. She had also heard that there was a powerful diviner living in the valley, MaDuma (pseudonym), who had allegedly been taken under water, and who communicated with the amakhosi whistling spirits. Zanele was keen to go and consult her to determine why her (i.e. Zanele’s) progress as a diviner was not advancing as it should (see Chapter Seven for more details of this ‘problem’). Mathonsi’s daughter kindly offered us a place to stay at her homestead and we immediately accepted the offer. Soon after our arrival we were taken to speak to the local chief, since it was he who was responsible for instructing the people to start observing the rituals again. Unfortunately the chief was away at the time but we were able to interview the wife and mother of the local headman, and several elder women who knew about the practices, including MaDuma. Later that year I was able to send a post-graduate student, Sibongiseni Kumalo, to do follow-up interviews with various members of the community in the iKhamanzi valley where most of the observances were taking place. These had been revived after it was claimed that Inkosazana had appeared to an isangoma some years previously. With the permission of the chief we were able to interview a number of people
who lived in the river valley to get their accounts of the events that led to the revival of the rituals and the days of observance, as well as to gain an understanding of how they perceived Inkosazana.

Although there were some inconsistencies as to whether the ritual practices had recently been revived, or were in fact slowly dying out, most of the respondents knew about the rituals, although some confessed they did not participate in them. Many still linked Inkosazana to the fertility and well-being of crops and people and could recount the ‘story’ of Inkosazana’s manifestation in the valley, especially her request for there to be two days of rest a week, when no agricultural work or use of the river should take place. Her other important request was that the people plant a special garden for her at the beginning of spring. The account given below by Mrs. G, an old woman, who was the daughter-in-law to a deceased headman who still used to observe Inkosazana’s injunctions, is a representative example of what we were told.

There was a sangoma (isangoma) who had a house in a place called KwaHlunu. Apparently, Nomkhubulwana appeared to this sangoma. This sangoma was working in her garden and Nomkhubulwana appeared and talked to this sangoma. Nomkhubulwana asked why she brought sweet beer with her to the garden, and asked the sangoma to pour it out [on the soil]. She commanded that the sangoma had to go and tell the people that she wanted her field ploughed, and two days of the week to be respected. These are Saturday and Sunday which are the names of her children, and during Mondays and Tuesdays she is using the river for her family so the people must not throw any dirt in the river. The sangoma then went to Z, who was the sub-headman. After reporting to Z, Z took the issue to Headman G, who then took it to the chief. People respected these days for some time but [recently] they are dropping these taboos. The result is the lack of food in the fields.

MaDuma, the isangoma who allegedly went under water and communicates with the whistling amakhosi, provided us with further information about the restrictions on clothes washing in the river on the taboo days:

What came from the chief was that on Saturdays we must not wash our clothes in the river. I still observe that. I do it because I know that Nomkhubulwana has to be respected. When you do something she is not happy with, we were told that we will, in one way or another, come up against a problem. Washing right inside the river and pouring dirt there in the river, is what Nomkhubulwana does not like us to do. The reason she does not like it is because we are told that Saturday is the day when she washes for her children. She therefore expects water to be clean on that day. We are not sure of this, but we hear it from history. If we keep to the rules there will be lots of
food in our gardens. This I know, I have seen.

One lady gave an account of a neighbour who said that she experienced the miracle of Nomkhubulwana’s bountiful gifts. Of interest is that she describes her appearance as a mermaid:

When I was a grown up girl there was a woman who had nothing in her garden. One day in the morning she woke us up asking us to come and witness the miracle, her garden had all the vegetables just over night. She said she saw a person coming to her; this person was half-fish and half a person. After hearing this, people concluded that this may be Inkosazana and she was the one who planted those vegetables...Such beliefs as the one of Nomkhubulwana are very helpful because they instil trust and respect. I respect her days. In this family we still keep this tradition. Nothing will ever be right if we do not respect our culture.\(^8\)

Both of the above statements demonstrate the convictions informants have that adhering to Nomkhubulwana’s rules (and Zulu cultural practices) produces positive effects which they have witnessed themselves.

As a result of the claim that Nomkhubulwana had manifested in the iKhamanzi Valley the chief instructed that the ritual planting of a garden for Nomkhubulwana be revived. This had to be done by the women who could only use hand-held hoes to dig the garden, something only women in Zulu culture use (men being able to plough using oxen). These rituals are performed at the beginning of spring before anyone plants their own crops. In early spring the chief notifies the homesteads under his jurisdiction that they must all contribute a portion of their seeds for the ritual. Households that fail to contribute risk being fined. In the account we were given, the chief’s grandmother, as the eldest woman, is the one who sows the seeds, while all the women assist with the hoeing. Sorghum and sweet beer are consumed for refreshment, a portion of which is poured as a libation over the garden for Inkosazana. Special songs are sung after which all the women, who are clothed in garlands of umsenge\(^9\) leaves

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\(^8\) Note that in this narrative she uses the terms Inkosazana and Nomkhubulwana interchangeably

\(^9\) *Cussonia spicata* (*msenge*). This practice was also observed by both Krige (1968: 174, 181) and Kendall (1999: 103). The *msenge* is strongly associated with rain.
(Inkosazana’s special tree and associated with rain) retire to the river to wash. This signals the end of the ritual and everyone then returns home and are then permitted to begin hoeing their own gardens and planting their crops for the new season. Initially the field had been prepared right next to the river, but after a number of years it became damaged by livestock so as a result the field was more recently moved up into a dense forest on a nearby mountain. During the ritual, in order to connect Inkosazana to her more remote field in the mountain forest, a goat would be sacrificed at the river. Its gall would then be sprinkled in the water and then the garden.

5.3.2 Memories of Inkosazana

We were able to interview 37 people who fell under a certain chieftaincy in the iKhamanzi River Valley where the rituals had been re-introduced. Of these, twenty seven were females while ten were males. As memories of the Nomkhubulwana rituals were strongest in the older generations, the interviews were weighted towards adults and were more or less evenly spread according to age between the 30-60 year age group and the 60-80 plus year age group. Only three informants under the age of 30 years were interviewed. Twenty two (59%) of the informants claimed to have received no formal education whilst eight (21%) had up to a grade 3 education, four (two males and two females) had between grades 6-10 and two (females) had matriculated. From the interviews it was evident that many of the people were vague about whom Inkosazana or Nomkhubulwana was, and most of them admitted it was something they were told about by their parents when they were children. However, the rituals are still performed and the majority of informants (32 or 86%) expressed their willingness to participate in, or in the case of males, to support them, because, as one stated, these were “the ways of the ancestors and a part of our culture”. Many of those interviewed had, in their opinion, observed the benefits of the rituals as they had resulted in plentiful food in their gardens. Only one of the thirty seven informants was adamant that she did not participate in the rituals, while four (11%) were ambivalent. The one who refused to participate was a widowed female who had lived in the area between twenty to thirty years (her actual age was not recorded) and was a ‘born again’ Christian of the Sizabantu Church. Her decision seemed

10 Two of these said they do “what others do”, (one was male and the other female both over the age of sixty years), one gave no response to the question and the other female (20-30 yr old) of an urban background merely said Inkosazana was “not special” to her.
to be principally linked to her Christian faith and she insisted that “These things (rituals for Nomkhubulwana) are against God”. Ironically, she did admit that her sister was an isangoma. This particular individual elaborated further,

> Once we accepted Jesus we stopped this entire Nomkhubulwana thing. That garden [Nomkhubulwana’s] is still there even now. We used to sing going down to the Ikhamanzi River to bathe after ploughing the garden. By then we did not know Jesus. Once we accepted Jesus we stopped this.

However, many of the Christians who belonged to the African Indigenous Churches (such as the African Zionist Churches) appeared to have no problem accommodating Inkosazana into their rituals. Of the thirty seven informants there were only four (11%) who were not members of a church, and they claimed to practice only traditional religion. The rest either belonged to the Zion Christian Church (29%), the Apostolic Church (22%) and the Lutheran Church (11%), while the rest were scattered amongst the Nazarite Church of Isaiah Shembe, St John’s Church and the Pentacostal Church. Indeed MaDuma, the isangoma who was reputedly taken under water, was an active member of a local Zionist Church of Galilee (see Chapter Eight for more on the blending of Christian and traditional religious practices). It is of interest that formal education did not seem to influence the responses, with both of the individuals who had matriculated and three out of the four individuals with a grade 6-10 education saying they supported the rituals.

The consequences of the peoples’ neglect of Inkosazana are obviously a source of major concern for many, and these were expressed in many of the narratives we gathered. For instance, one informant claimed “if the ritual is not performed, that year the sun just gets very hot and destroys our crops”; while another observed that “Nomkhubulwana is very important. When people do not remember her day, it is a mistake. As a result we do not get food in our fields”. Another informant noted that “whenever someone works on the day of restriction, heavy winds, hail and snow come to destroy (the crops)”, while another noted that “when people pour dirt in the river Nomkhubulwana can be annoyed and cause drought”. Perhaps the most vivid description of Nomkhubulwana’s vexation for being neglected was the following account,
Nomkhubulwana is a Princess. She is the one who has power. She came to a certain girl who was a school mistress at Matimatolo and asked for a gift. It rained and there was hail after that day. That storm and hail destroyed our gardens. There was dirty water in the potholes on the road. This mistress saw a beautiful young woman coming out of that small pool of dirty water. She was so scared to see this happening in front of her eyes. The beautiful girl sounded very angry because she was yelling at the mistress. The young mistress did not know much about Nomkhubulwana. Nomkhubulwana went on to ask the mistress to go and tell the chief [about Nomkhubulwana’s distress] and no one else. The chief was to then call a meeting where he would tell everyone. What Nomkhubulwana requested was that she wanted her garden to be ploughed. The mistress did not take this seriously. She went to town the following day. She told her friends about what had happened the previous day. At night the mistress had a dream, where Nomkhubulwana was asking why she did not do as she was told. The first thing in the morning the mistress went to the chief. The chief called an urgent meeting. The mistress had to address the people telling them what actually had happened and what Nomkhubulwana wanted done. I was there at the meeting to hear what the mistress had to say. This was how the ritual was re-instated... After the re-institution of this there was no more destructive rainfall and people got enough food.

An important element, evident in the above account, is the role of the chief in initiating and orchestrating the observances and rituals. There was general consensus from all the interviews that it was the chief’s responsibility to initiate the spring rituals and to ensure that all adhere to the instructions – it cannot be done without his ritual sanction. In the interview with the headman’s wife, in response to the question as to why the observances for Nomkhubulwana were eroding she responded “In this case the chief is the one to blame. Without him nothing else can happen. He has to inspire people, telling them what to do and what not to do.” The implication of this is that in those areas where traditional governance has either been eroded or eradicated, it is unlikely that such ritual practices will be performed. As the system of traditional chieftaincy was severely eroded during the colonial and apartheid eras, it is probably for this reason that the belief in Nomkhubulwana is not as widespread among the Zulu today, but more confined to pockets of rural people involved in traditional agrarian

11 This was a divorced female, originally from the Msinga district of KwaZulu-Natal, between the age of 50-60 years, with no formal education and a member of the Shembe Church.

12 The deputy headman told Sibongiseni Khumalo that, “The chiefs are the custodians of our traditional practices” and failure to adhere to their responsibilities will result in their being removed from office.

13 For more on the importance of traditional governance relating to the ritual regulation of the environment and some of the contradictions and ambiguities that have arisen during the colonial and post colonial era see Bernard & Kumalo (2004).
methods, and diviners who heed her call.

All but two of the informants stated that they preferred traditional governance over civic governance and of those who gave reasons it was because it was part of their identity and it connected them to their cultural traditions. Thus, the findings from our interviews with informants in the Ikhamanzi River Valley region in 2002 reveal that in some rural communities still governed by traditional leadership the demands of subsistence survival and the desire to adhere to traditions are the motivators for the persistence of the nomdodede rituals dedicated to Nomkhubulwana. Unlike the improvised rituals observed by Kendall in Bulwer, the accounts that we were given in the Ikhamanzi River area reflect enduring continuities with the traditions of the past despite sustaining some disruption in certain intervening periods. For instance, the account by Bryant, who described the cultivation rituals performed for Nomkhubulwana nearly a century ago, shows striking similarities to the reasons why those practiced today in the Ikhamanzi River Valley have persisted,

She is attributed to giving man corn and teaching them how to brew it. Nomkhubulwana, ‘who moveth with the mist.’ From time to time she even herself appeared ‘mostly to women-folk, while hoeing in their fields, and dressed in white’, her purpose being to give them some new law or foretell them something that will happen. On one of these occasions she forbade the Zulu women to tend their grainfields on a Saturday. Then another year she came, and forbade them to work on a Monday. Hence it came about that in that district the more pious of women confined their work on Saturdays and Mondays solely to sweet-potatoes14 and such like (apparently outside her jurisdiction), and cultivated their cereals on (whiteman’s) Sunday (Bryant, 1949: 667-668).

Obviously, in the urban areas, where the options for cultivation are limited, these aspects attributed to Nomkhubulwana’s grace are no longer relevant in people’s lives. However, as is evident from the analyses of the Nomkhubulwana ceremonies by Kendall, Leclerc-Mdlala and Scorgie (discussed above), both urban and rural communities are utilising her symbolic capital to promote sexual morality in the context of HIV/AIDS, as well for more political

14 This omission of taboos on potato (including sweet-potato) is of interest. On interviewing the headman’s wife in the valley, she told us what they planted in Nomkhubulwana’s sacred garden at the beginning of spring, “We used to plant everything, sorghum, pumpkins, mielies [maize]. Everything that was there [i.e. ‘what we had’] we planted, except for potatoes. I never knew why the potato was not planted. People did not bring it along [to the planting ritual]."
ethnic interests. Interestingly, in our interviews (i.e. in a rural area) we asked our informants what, in their opinion, was the cause of the diseases that were currently afflicting communities in KwaZulu-Natal (January 2002), such as HIV and Cholera, and at the time, the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease among livestock. Unlike Kendall’s informants, none of our informants attributed these to people turning their backs on Nomkhubulwana’s rituals, although two said it was because people were forgetting their traditions. Neither was there any mention of the HIV/AIDS problem or the promotion of virginity being incorporated into these rituals. We did not encounter any descriptions of the virgin’s ukukhipha izinkomo ritual that were emphasised by Gluckman. Although we were not able to gather data on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the area, one of the daughters of our host succumbed to it while we were staying with them. Due to fears of stigma nobody was prepared to openly admit that she had died of AIDS, rather attributing it to witchcraft. Some members of the family, however, confided in us that they knew she had died of AIDS.

5.3.3 Khekhekhe’s Ukushwama/Nomkhubulwana rituals

In August 2000 Zanele had a dream in which she claims she was told that she had to consult with an old diviner by the name of Mthethwa who lived in a large homestead on a hill. We were to discover through another isangoma that it was the famous Khekhekhe who lived just north of the Tugela River (some 300 kms from Zanele). A few months later we visited him and he told us that Zanele’s ancestors had sent her to him because he knew the rituals that would help her retrieve the lost spirit of her five year old son who had been killed after being knocked down by a speeding taxi. Khekhekhe, who died in 2005, was a powerful isangoma and claimed to be a direct descendent of the Mthethwa clan’s King Dingiswayo, and was renowned throughout KwaZulu Natal for his ability to call mambas and puffadders to his

15 On our first visit to Khekhekhe he had immediately identified that we were isangoma despite the fact we were not wearing any parts of our uniform.

16 He is described by de la Harpe et al as “the most formidable and prominent isangoma in the northern KwaZulu-Natal region” (1998:153). Khekhekhe proudly told us that amongst his regular clients are Zulu royalty and politicians.

17 It was Dingiswayo that took Shaka under his care when the latter and his mother were cast out of the Zulu ‘tribe’. Shaka rose to power in Dingiswayo’s Mthethwa regiment, eventually to become King of the Zulu.

18 Mambas are regarded as one of the most deadly neurotoxic snake species in Africa.
home, which he then draped all over his body, or put their heads into his mouth (Appendix Five; see also Coan, 2005; de la Harpe et al, 1998). On our first visit to Khekhekhe he told us that he had spent three months and nine days under the water when he was thirteen years of age\(^{19}\) (this was approximately 1931). His emergence from the pool was heralded by a swarm of flies that hovered over the pool, which signalled to the family that they should get ready with a beast to sacrifice on his emergence (this occurred on 22\(^{nd}\) February); the actual day on which he emerged was the 23\(^{rd}\) of February (probably in the year 1932). Every year since then he celebrated the event with an *ukushwama* ritual (first fruits ceremony) on the 22-23 February. It was because of this purported underwater experience that this ritual has a strong connection to Nomkhubulwana. It is in effect a combined thanksgiving for her generosity in the fertility of the crops, demonstrated by the first fruits, and a thanksgiving for Khekhekhe’s return from the water to be a great and powerful healer. At the beginning of the ritual numerous cows (it was claimed that eight had been sacrificed in 2001) and goats are sacrificed and the first fruits of the season are ‘bitten’ and blessed. No-one in his homestead is allowed to eat any of the first fruits until this is done, failure of which may result in illness or even death. By all accounts (see de la Harpe et al, 1998) the focus of the event is on Khekhekhe himself, although as Khekhekhe was reputedly the direct descendant of King Dingiswayo (a point he repeatedly emphasized to us) his right to hold an *ukushwama* or first fruits ritual was probably linked more to his royal status than it was his underwater submersion\(^{20}\). As Gatti recorded, Khekhekhe’s own oral account states,

“My paternal grandfather was the late Chief Matshwili Mtetwa, killed during the Bambata Rebellion in 1906, and he in turn was a grandson of the celebrated Mtetwa King Dingiswayo, who laid the foundations upon which his general, the great Shaka, later built the Zulu nation. Thus, it will be seen that I am a lineal descendant of Dingiswayo’s” (Gatti, 1962: 195-196)

Of interest, in Gatti’s recording, Khekhekhe further elaborates that the Mtetwa people,

\[^{19}\] In an account given to Harry Lugg, the Native Affairs Commissioner, who recorded his life history (Appendix 7), Khekhekhe makes a veiled reference to his underwater experience, where he states, “I saw myself sitting, partly submerged in a pool of water like a duck, and I was seized with an urge to immerse myself in water – an urge with which I frequently complied” (Gatti, 1962: 196).

\[^{20}\] Krige discusses the role of the king and his chiefs in the performance of the annual rituals in more detail (Krige, 1936/1974: 249-260).
are of Tonga stock\textsuperscript{21}, and consequently do not belong to that branch of the Nguni family, which includes the Zulus and their kindred clans. As a tribe, the Mtetwa have always been famous for their Sangomas or amadalakonke (the creators of everything), as they are often referred to, whose assistance and advice is sought from far and wide (\textit{ibid}: 196).

Khekhekhe invited us to attend his \textit{ukushwama} ritual in February 2001. Unfortunately we had got our dates wrong and arrived late in the afternoon at the end of the main day's events which are open to the public (including overseas visitors, many who were leaving as we arrived), and where Khekhekhe entertains them with his amazing ability with his deadly snakes. On our arrival he came to greet us, greatly disappointed we had missed his 'snake show', but insisted we should stay for the feasting in the evening. We were ushered into a small room which was jam packed with \textit{izangoma} who had come to attend the celebrations from far and wide, as well as his many children\textsuperscript{22}, while platters full of meat were passed around. Some \textit{izangoma} were beating drums and we all danced and sang deep into the night. We slept the last few hours of the night in the homestead of Nomonde, his wife who was also an \textit{isangoma}. At 05h00 I was awoken by Khekhekhe looming over me dressed in all his finery, a black mamba draped over his body, telling me to get up and get dressed into my \textit{isangoma} uniform so we could have 'photoshoot' outside in the courtyard that was almost invisible in the dim morning light and swirling damp mist. The impressive gravestone of his illustrious ancestor, Dingiswayo, that occupies the centre of his homestead, loomed above us through the mist, and I did wonder if he was embodied in the black mamba that Khekhekhe had draped over his aged body.\textsuperscript{23}

5.3.4 Discussion

It is thus clear that the rituals for Nomkhubulwana are still active in KwaZulu-Natal and that these have been primarily concerned with the life-giving potential of the earth, in the form of cultivated crops, and the rain needed to sustain them, and the integrity of young maidens’

\textsuperscript{21} Khekhekhe also emphasised this point to me; that the Mtetwa are from the Tonga (Tsonga) group rather than the Nguni.

\textsuperscript{22} Of which I was told he had nearly two hundred (I had to conclude this figure must have included his grandchildren). At the time of meeting him, Khekhekhe had seven wives who were still alive, and a number who had already died.

\textsuperscript{23} Callaway’s informant told him that after death the Zulu kings return to this world in the form of mambas (Callaway, 1884/1970: 196).
virginal state to make them good potential wives. Permeating these themes is her role as the moral guardian of society where failing to acknowledge her and act according to her dictates is seen to result in catastrophic social and environmental effects. Significantly, these rituals are not organised on a local kinship basis but rather on loose *territorial affiliation* that cuts across clans, but which fall under the control of traditional leaders in the form of chiefs. To re-enforce this point of responsibility arising out of territorial affiliation it is of interest to note that when we asked our informants if they would be happy for the local white people in the Mvoti area to participate in the Nomkhubulwana *nomdede* rituals, and whether they thought their lack of observing the rituals was a problem, of the twenty seven who responded to the question only two said they did not think white people should be involved. Twenty Five (92%) said they would be happy with whites doing the rituals, with one middle-aged male saying “It would be beautiful if they observed these with us”. One informant suggested that while whites should do the rituals it would be better if they performed them by themselves, while two added the provisos that they could join in “on condition that they (the whites) do not change what we do” and “as long as they do not interfere”. Such responses suggest that these rituals are not a means to reify a particular patrilineal group or to emphasise racial or ethnic boundaries, but rather to demonstrate communal responsibility to the land based on co-sharing of territory.

However, it is clear that urbanization has had a marked impact on the way Nomkhubulwana is perceived and the nature of the rituals that have more recently been performed for her. This is evident in the revival of the virginity testing rituals where Nomkhubulwana is invoked. Those rituals performed in the more urban areas have consequently become detached from crop fertility and have assumed a more political, if not Zulu nationalist character.

Beyond these Nomkhubulwana rituals that are performed mainly by women, there are a number of rituals performed by the Zulu at pools during, or at the completion of, a diviner’s training. As these have not been documented for the Zulu, I will discuss my own experiences of them in the next chapter. However, rituals performed during a diviner’s training have been well documented by scholars of Cape Nguni ritual and it is to these that I now turn.

5.4 River rituals performed by the Cape Nguni
Whereas the heavenly princess as a singular entity, who is believed to reside in certain pools in the form of a mermaid, is a dominant focus of ritual expression among the Zulu groups, I have
not encountered any similar focus among my Cape Nguni informants or in the ethnographic literature. The Cape Nguni tend to rather focus on a variety of river rituals that are performed by kin groups, often in connection with a diviner’s training, or with certain crop fertility rituals dedicated to the *abantu bomlambo* and/or the ancestors. The three most common rituals reported are the *ukunikela* rituals, the *intlwayalelo* rituals and the *fukama* rituals. Of these, the *intlwayalelo* rituals have received the most attention. However, in her ethnography *Reaction to Conquest*, Hunter (1936/1961) dedicated eight pages to the *ukunikela emlanjeni* (to make offerings at the river) rituals performed by the various Pondo (Mpondo) clans in the former Transkei, and these offer us interesting insights to compare with those that are performed for Nomkhubulwana further north among the Zulu.

According to Hunter the *ukunikela emlanjeni* (lit. = to give to the river) rituals usually took place in spring and were under the direct control of the chief. Some clans would always send meat offerings to the river whenever they performed a sacrifice at their homestead (*umzi*), while others would drive cattle to the river, and after selecting one beast, they would sacrifice it at the edge of the water and leave the uncooked meat there. They would also take a small amount of all the seeds set aside for the next year’s crop to give as an offering. They would then retire a short distance away and wait to see if the water ‘heaved’ and accepted it. It is quite evident in Hunter’s descriptions that these offerings were made to the Snake that occupied the pool,

The beast is killed as for any ritual killing, and one man calls upon the ancestors. The meat is cut up and carefully piled with grains of the various crops on a new grass plate, brought for the purpose. ...Then they retire a hundred yards or so, the river heaves, and ‘sometimes’, the Khonjwayo say, ‘a big black snake (or perhaps two), twice as big as a six-foot log, comes out’ (Hunter, 1936/1961: 257).

Hunter was told that it was very important for the participants to stand fast and not run away or they would have to make another propitiatory offering for forgiveness. In some accounts the beast would only been sacrificed once the river (or the Snake) had showed signs of acceptance. A good omen would be when most of the meat was swept away by the river leaving behind some meat for the men to cook and eat at the riverside. A bad omen, which would indicate ancestral displeasure, was when a big black Snake appeared and lay on it back with its stomach facing the sky. Such a sign necessitated consultation with a diviner to
determine the cause of their ancestors' anger and to remedy it before the offering could be made (ibid: 257). In one case, when the meat was not taken by the river or the Snake, but was eaten by dogs, the clan concluded that they had offered the meat at the wrong pool and should have done the offering at a pool they had previously used (ibid: 259).

From Hunter's accounts it seems that only men went to the river to make the offerings while their wives stayed at the homestead brewing beer, which would be given to the chief and the men on their return from the river. Nobody was allowed to drink the beer before the men returned from the river (ibid: 258). The ukunikela rituals would be performed at least once every three years, and on occasion would be done when an important person, or the whole homestead, were ill (ibid: 258-259). It seems that the main intention of these rituals was to avert misfortune and illness afflicting the clan members and there is no mention made that these rituals were done to secure bountiful harvests, although the offering of seeds for planting in spring suggests this was a possibility, or a residual reason of such rituals being performed in the past.

Hunter noted that at the time of her research many of the clans had stopped doing the ukunikela rituals, but to counteract problems emerging from this neglect they would do protective 'pushing away' rituals²⁴ (ibid: 262). There is some suggestion from her informants' accounts that they stopped doing the ritual offerings when they noticed that these no longer produced positive effects on the homestead, and illness of European origin, such as tuberculosis, became prevalent (ibid: 263). This probably coincided with the marked impact of colonialism and subsequent labour migration that led to increasing poverty and the rapid spread of tuberculosis in the former Transkei (see Packard, 1990).

Unlike the nomdede rituals that are performed for the heavenly princess (or mermaid) Nomkhubulwana in rural KwaZulu-Natal, which are based on residential affiliation and not clan membership, Hunter was quite emphatic that the Mpondo river rituals were performed for the ancestors of each agnatic group or clan (e.g. Khonjwayo, amaTshezi, amaNdlovelane, Nyawuza, amaMose etc). Each clan had its own pool on a specific river where the ukunikela

²⁴ These were mainly magical, similar to those used to protect a homestead from evil influence.
offerings were given and these were usually the places where their chiefs were buried, either in the pool or on its banks. Furthermore, no commoner could give offerings at the river unless it was sent through the chief of their clan (Hunter, 1936/1961: 257). Hunter also noted that among the exogamous Pondo the wives had to observe respectful avoidance behaviour (*ukuhlonipha*) of any river which contained a pool where their husband’s clan made offerings. That is,

They *ukuhlonipha* the whole river, not only one pool. When crossing it they cannot lift their skirts as they do ordinarily, but must trail them through the water if it is deep, and they tie their head handkerchiefs low over their foreheads. They cannot draw water from, or wash in, that river, or eat food cooked with the water of it. And they do not gather the rushes for mats from its banks. The Tshezi women *ukuhlonipha* the name of the river Kukaphi, avoiding words like it. These taboos, as the avoidance of senior men of the family, apply to wives only (Hunter, 1936/1961: 260).

Hunter’s evidence from the 1930s suggests that the river rituals that were performed in Pondoland were used as a means of re-enforcing the ritual authority of the chiefs of the various agnatic based clans. Unlike the Zulu Nomkhubulwana rituals, which are performed only by women, Hunter emphasised that the *unikela* rituals among the Pondo were only performed by men, and women remained marginal to the process. There was also no apparent link with the promotion of female virginity, rather the emphasis was placed on the extreme respect and avoidance behaviour expected of married women towards the rituals associated with her husband’s clan and the rivers where they were performed. However, there was a paradox in Hunter’s findings: she admitted that despite all the evidence that these rituals were performed for the agnatic ancestors, only one or two of her informants ever corroborated this assumption. She explains,

The connexion of the pools to which the offerings are made with the graves of the chief, the calling upon the ancestors when a beast is killed on the bank, and the connexion of the snakes which are addressed by the clan name with the pool to which the offering is made, leave no doubt that the offering is to ancestral spirits. . . . But I have only once heard people speak of the offering to the river as for the *amathongo* (ancestors). The Khonjwayo spoke of it being for Nyewula, the snake; the Ndovelane spoke of it as being for the *itshologu*[^25]. An *itshologu* is always something harmful...I

[^25]: She elaborates that this is identified as the black snake in the pool that lies on its back when the omens are bad.
suggest that the *ishologu* is an evil manifestation of the ancestral spirits (Hunter, 1936/1961: 263).

While Hunter was clearly mystified as to what exactly the *ishologu* represented, and treated it as an evil representation of the ancestral spirit, I find this interpretation puzzling in the light of her observations that the offerings were primarily for the chiefs and ancestors of the clan.

It is worth considering whether these variations in the river rituals between the Zulu and Pondo may have been linked not only to the centralization or decentralization of power, but also to the gendered relations of production that may have been influenced by certain environmental factors. While in both groups cattle were of primary value, and male controlled, the cultivation of a variety of crops such as maize, millet, pumpkins, beans and gourds, were also practiced. The evidence provided by Krige (1939/1974) and Hunter (1936/1961), for the Zulu and Pondo respectively, was that prior to the introduction of the cattle drawn plough Zulu cultivation was strictly confined to women, while for the Pondo it was more flexibly shared between both men and women. For the Zulu, while the men may have been employed initially to help clear difficult virgin bush, the hoeing and planting of the seed were the preserve of women. For instance, Krige stated, “Though agriculture is the province of women, a Zulu man may, when he is quite old, have a garden of his own for the cultivation of tobacco for his own use, but *he never plants food crops*” (Krige, 1939/1974: 190; my emphasis). Hunter, on the other hand stated that among the Pondo, in addition to assisting with bush clearing and ploughing, “Planting was formerly done by men and women…many old men from whom I inquired stated definitely that men assisted the women in planting” (Hunter, 1936/1961: 74).

These gendered relations of production may have been influenced by the differing environmental and geographical conditions of the two areas. As KwaZulu-Natal is more uniformly well-watered (except perhaps in the north) and fertile, the contribution of crops to the household diet was in all likelihood significant, unlike further south where the fertility and rainfall was more variable, and the terrain more difficult for the cultivation of crops. The centralization of power and the control of food production were also reflected in the differences in the rain-making rites between the two groups. According to Krige, among the Zulu the king had the ultimate control over the making of rain, as “it was his duty to procure rain by asking his ancestors “to pray for rain to the Lord of Heaven”” (Krige, 1939/1974: 247).
Among the Pondo (Hunter, 1936/1961: 79-80) and Bhaca (Hammond-Tooke, 1962) this role fell on the shoulders of the chiefs. However, it is worth noting that among the neighboring Mpondomise rain-making was often solicited from the hunter-gatherer San (see Chapter Nine for more detail).

In the Grahamstown area of the Eastern Cape where the chief and corporate clan system has long been eroded, the river rituals such as the ukunikela emlanjeni are still occasionally performed, but these are done by family members of the minimal lineage (three generations deep) and chiefs are not involved in the process. According to my informants the main aim of these rituals are to appeal to the abantu bomlambo and family ancestors, in combination, for good crops in the approaching planting season. Although I have not participated in these I have observed possible evidence of them in the form of small baskets or tin lids containing mixture of seeds floating near reed beds at a number of recognised sacred pool sites in the area (i.e. at Bloukrans and Pennyshoek pools near Bathurst).

The other two rituals performed by various Cape Nguni groups, the intlwayalelo (sometimes spelt umhlawayelelo) and fukama rituals, are usually performed when a member of the family feels called to become a diviner and is still in the process of training. These rituals are largely the concern of the immediate family and the diviner training school to which the novice belongs. Invariably the novice will feel themselves shown in a dream that these rituals must be performed. Buhrmann (1986) refers to these two rituals as the first and second river ceremonies respectively. She also states that in the Keiskammahoek region the first river ceremony (intlwayalelo) is performed routinely at the beginning of training to introduce the novice and his/her ancestors to the River People. However, Zweli informed me that the intlwayelelo ritual would only be done if the ancestors are believed to have requested it in a dream. For Buhrmann, the second river ritual, fukama, is usually performed near the completion of the training of the novice and this involves his/her seclusion in a small hut where the ancestors ‘brood’ (fukamisa) over the initiate. Buhrmann gives little detail on the second ritual and does not mention where the seclusion hut is located (at the homestead or the river), but Zweli is very clear that this hut should ideally be built near the pool or river (out of the branches of certain shrubs and trees), and in the past the novice would spend a month in isolation at this hut, drinking ubulawu, and waiting for the izilo (ancestral animals) to
manifest, either in dreams or in their live form. In recent years, because of constraints of access to pools in the area (the land they are on being mainly privately owned) this period of seclusion has been reduced to one to three days (or occasionally to seven days). I observed such a ritual with Zweli when we visited the Inxu River (one of my dream sites) near Tsolo in the former Transkei. In this case the hut was built out of wattle branches and was located within ten metres of the river. The novice (umkwetha) spent one night alone in the hut (intondo) only drinking from a can of ubulawu.

In both de Jager & Gitywa’s (1963) and Hirst’s (1990: 139-147) descriptions of the river rituals they participated in near Grahamstown it appears that the two rituals were condensed into one, with the novice being placed in the seclusion hut (intondo) in the homestead while the family delegates proceeded to do the intlwayalelo ritual at the river. I have participated in four intlwayalelo rituals in the Makana and Ndlambe municipal areas and at none of these were the fukama ritual included (two of each being performed by different diviners). It should be noted that the intlwayalelo rituals have only been recorded among the Cape Nguni groups in the Eastern Cape region, such as the Mpondomise, Mpondo, the Xhosa (i.e. Gcaleka), and Mfengu groups. Although river rituals are performed (using ubulawu) during the final initiation of diviner-healers (izangoma), the performance of the intlwayalelo and fukama rituals, as described for the Cape Nguni, have not been recorded among the Zulu-speaking groups in KwaZulu Natal. When I asked Zanele if such rituals were ever performed by the Zulu her response was that it would only be done if the novice diviner was told to do it in a dream. Thus I cannot be certain that the Zulu do not perform them, or how they would go about them, as I never observed such rituals being performed. It is of interest to note, however, that Hoff was told by her !Xam informants about a very similar ritual that was performed by the !khwa-ka !gi:ten (water doctors) in the Northern Cape region.

The !khwa-ka !gi:xa trained one initiate at a time “to work with the water”. The teacher took the initiate to a fountain where the two of them stayed alone in the proximity of the fountain until the Water Snake was familiar with the initiate. Unfortunately, there is a great uncertainty concerning the length of the period. When the !gi:xa and initiate approached the water, the !gi:xa addressed the Water Snake with words such as: “the student wants to learn, do no harm to him/her”. There they stayed in a specially-made dwelling of poles covered with rushes (restios) or asbos (Psilicaulon absimile). A fire into which water-buchu was strewn was... made in the hut in order to prevent aggressiveness from the Water Snake. Jannetjie mentioned in connection with a female
Hoff proceeds to describe the regular ablutions and bodily treatments that the initiate had to undergo at the fountain in order for him or her to be recognised and not harmed by the Water Snake especially when the qualified initiate “attempted to retrieve persons caught by the Water Snake” (Hoff, 2007: 17). The evidence provided by Hoff’s informants is suggestive that the fukama ritual may have been transmitted to the Cape Nguni via the Khoekhoe or San groups with whom they shared large areas of territory.

5.4.1 The intlwayelelo river rituals

The main purpose of the intlwayelelo ritual is to connect the novice diviner, and his/her living kin, with their ancestors (from both the paternal and maternal sides) who are believed to reside in the pools and surrounding forests, in order to draw them together with the kin group and thus gain guidance and protection from them. As already mentioned it is believed that the novice will usually receive a dream indicating that this ritual should be performed, and he/she is often shown the exact pool where this should be done. It is very important that the novice and his/her kin group go to the particular site that they have been shown in dreams, failure to do so means a halt or a delay in the training process. Typically these sacred areas are relatively remote sites that are rarely frequented, and in the Grahamstown area, where the case studies below were recorded, these are often located on private or local government property. This makes accessing them quite a difficult task and permission to do the ritual has to be sought from the landowner or relevant authority (i.e. the municipality under which the land falls). Traditional leadership in the form of chiefs has long since disappeared in the area, with most of the Cape Nguni population working and/or residing on privately owned farms or in town.

From my interviews with various Cape Nguni informants and from evidence gleaned in the literature, the general characteristics of these rituals are as follows:

These rituals are often performed after a person in the family is held to receive a dream or the

26 As discussed in Section 5.2 of this chapter only certain areas in the landscape are regarded as being host to the powerful ancestral spirits and the abantu bomlambo. These places are usually held to be revealed to the novice in his/her dreams, but certain clans or kin groups have known regular sites where they conduct their propitiatory rituals, and that are directly associated with their ancestors.
family has an unusual visitation by a river animal to the homestead i.e. when a river animal (crab, frog etc) enters the house or is seen walking around the homestead. They may sometimes receive instructions from their ancestors to perform these rituals during a divination session. If such a ritual has not been performed for a long period and a member of the family has been ‘called’ to train as a diviner, it is imperative that the family performs the ritual in order to establish the connection with the river ancestors (hence it is nowadays associated with ‘callings’). Although the ritual is performed primarily to introduce the novice to the water divinities, and to indicate his/her willingness to accept the calling with the support of the family, the way the acceptance of propitiatory offerings are interpreted are seen as a useful gauge of the ancestors’ satisfaction with the broader kin group which, if good, bodes well for the novice’s eventual success. Should what are regarded as positive signs fail to be elicited the apparent source of ancestral anger is frequently interpreted as having to do with conflicts within the kin group, or lack of sufficient ritual respect shown towards their ancestors.

Normally, a few days prior to a river ritual, the officiating diviner and his attendant abakwetha, as well as some senior kinsmen of the novice, will have arrived at the novice’s home to organise the brewing of beer and to inform the family as to their obligations and expected protocol. The officiating diviner, along with the household head, will communicate with the ancestors of the home and they will make a preparatory journey to the river site to alert the ancestors of the pending ritual. This process is known as ukucela inkundla, which is to forewarn and request their attention and approval.

The intlwayelelo river rituals always take place at dawn. Ideally the supplicants should have completed their often fairly long and arduous journey to the pool site when it is still dark, and they usually maintain strict silence during their journey to the river. The ideal time to approach the pool is just at the time when the sky in the east is reddening prior to sunrise. However in the two rituals I attended the ritual party, due to delays, only arrived after sunrise.

The offerings usually include fermented sorghum beer, tobacco, matches, and more modern mass-produced alcoholic beverages, such as brandy or gin, and the officiating healer usually offers these on behalf of all the family members present. It is of interest that most of the gifts offered have a psychoactive effect (alcohol and tobacco) and are potentially addictive; the exegetic interpretation is that this is what the ancestors crave the most. White beads, that
symbolize not only purity, but are also seen as highly prized by the River People, are thrown into the water by each participant present, who calls on their own respective ancestors and gives their own name to identify themselves. In some instances seeds are also included, for instance de Jager & Gitywa (1963: 114) reported that offerings of sorghum, pumpkin and calabash seeds were included in the intlwayelelo rituals (which they termed umhlwayelelo) they observed. The supplicants then make individual requests of whatever they require (these usually include luck, health, jobs, peace and happiness). Those present keenly seek signs of acceptance of the gifts by the water divinities, as it indicates that their prayers have been heard and acknowledged, and the disposition of the ancestors towards them. The beer especially, which should have fermented, should not spread out as a film across the surface of the water, instead it should be sucked downwards in a funnel like motion.

The same process of ‘seeking signs of acceptance’ by the water divinities is evident during the stage of the forest offerings that normally follow the river offering. In this instance a small fire is lit in a wooded area or forest near the sacred pool. The participants stand around the fire and offerings of beer, brandy, tobacco and matches are made in a small depression in the soil surrounding the fire. As the fire burns the participants throw white beads towards it while calling on the forest spirits to hear their prayers and supplications. The signs of acceptance are interpreted in terms of the way the smoke rises. According to Zweli, it should not just go up straight and dissipate but should go upwards and then turn and follow a direct path, preferably towards the east. If it loops and does a circle around the people before going in a particular direction this is also seen as an auspicious sign.

Beyond these physical signs the most important omens are sought through the presence of birds and animals. The presence of fish jumping in the water, birds calling, ducks quacking, otters or leguaans (water monitors) splashing or swimming in the water or near the river bank are all seen as overwhelmingly positive signs. Birds calling in the forest, the sighting of an antelope nearby, or the inquisitive presence of monkeys, all indicate the acceptance of the

27 According to Zweli, during the ukunikela rituals when seeds are offered the container should dip in to the water, spilling its contents. Those that land up being pushed to the river bank are seen as being especially blessed with fertility giving powers and are taken back to be mixed into the rest of the seed crop for planting. This is seen as a good sign for an abundant harvest. This suggests that the containers with seeds that are sometimes spotted at sacred pools are those that have been rejected by the abantu bomlambo.
offering by the forest spirits. The same applies when offerings are made at the sea, although the primary signs are from the presence of sea birds in the vicinity of the ritual event. The passing of a pod of dolphins or the surfacing and splashing of a whale would also provide very favourable omens. Climatic changes are also seen as suitable signs. A mist that is already present or suddenly descends over the area, rainbows, light rain or a sudden chilling of the air, all indicate positive signs of ancestral presence. The signs do not necessarily always have to be natural in origin. In one of the case studies given below the presence of a security patrol at the beach just prior to when the party arrived to give the offerings at the sea, was seen as a positive sign. The ancestors were seen, through the security officers’ presence, to be securing the safety of the participants. The presence of visitors at the ritual may also be construed as a good sign, as our presence was when we attended the two intlwanelelo rituals described below.

After the river, forest and/or sea rituals have been performed the party returns to the homestead where reports by observers regarded as unbiased (i.e. non-kin) are made to those members of the kin group who did not participate (especially the very elderly who are unable to cope with the journey). It is clear in these post-ritual assessments that ancestral pleasure/displeasure is seen as graded and negotiable. Where there have been what may be interpreted as an abundance of signs this is greeted as a joyous confirmation of strong ancestral support, an indication that the family ‘is getting it right’. Where the signs are not so forthcoming, and there is room for disagreement in interpretation, then it is a sign that although there is some support from the ancestors, there are certain matters that need to be attended to. This may lead to confessions of wrongdoing within the kin group (usually surrounding disagreements and conflicts in the home) and appeals for forgiveness and a commitment to mend their ways. At the first river ritual documented for the Mabula family below (see Section 5.4.1.2), this was very evident, and the lack of positive signs elicited immediate confessions from some of the participants at the edge of the pool itself. When attempts to do the ritual are completely derailed, this is taken to indicate outright disapproval of the ancestors. Hitting an animal in the vehicle on route to the pool is regarded as very inauspicious, but an accident, or the car breaking down, or some other disaster that necessitates the cancellation of the ritual, is also seen as a sign of ancestral anger. Such events indicate that urgent corrective measures are required in the home before more disaster strikes. These signs of ancestral pleasure or displeasure are all taken as indicative of the moral
universe that these great powers occupy, and the rules they impose on the novice, the trainer and the kin group. The training process is dependent on the novice developing the moral fortitude required by the ancestors, the support of the kin group and the correct procedures being followed by the trainer. Furthermore it necessitates the novice being protected against the myriad of obstructive forces that may derail the process.  

5.4.1.1 Participants: the importance of the kin group

The intlwayelelo rituals involve the participation of a number of people, not just the novice and the trainer. When a novice has a dream indicating the need to perform one of the river rituals the family needs to be approached by the trainer and consensus for their cooperation and active participation needs to be secured. In some cases the novice experiences instructions in the dream from a particular deceased family member, be it on the mother’s or father’s side. The particular agnatic group to which the individual ancestor belonged is then approached to conduct the ritual i.e. if the dream comes from one’s deceased mother or maternal or paternal grandmother then that particular clan must be approached even though it is not the clan to which the novice belongs (being a patrilineal society he/she belongs to the father’s clan). It is the agnatic group of the particular ancestor the dream is held to be sent that is obliged to provide the financial support for the ritual requirements, including the beer (that they must brew), the food and other refreshments, the transport, the gifts for the offering and the beasts (if sacrificial offerings are required). The ritual must be performed in a number of important demarcated spaces, and these are approached in sequential order. These are the household of the immediate senior kinsmen (of the agnatic group of the ancestor from which the dream is held to be sent), the pool, forest and/or sea, and finally, at the cattle byre (ubuhlanti) of the senior kinsman. This support and active participation of the novice’s kin group in the many rituals that need to be performed for the ancestors are thus fundamental to the process of becoming a healer. Ultimately, the rituals that are done to strengthen and appease the ancestors are held to benefit not only the novice but the agnatically related kin group. Disharmony and conflict within the kin group are seen to be counterproductive and can seriously delay and

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28 During training the novice is in a vulnerable spiritual state and the problems of becoming a healer are numerous in the contemporary era. Novices must protect themselves from jealous competitors (and sometimes against unscrupulous trainers) that seek to steal or block their powers and they must be extremely careful not to engage with negative forces that enhance material accumulation, or to inflict harm on others through their powers.
inhibit the novice’s progress. This is because the ancestors are seen to be concerned with all their descendants, not only with the individual healer. Indeed the latter is sometimes seen as being ‘called’ in order to alert the living to their failures, and to bring respect and unity back for the whole group.

As can be imagined these rituals all demand a fair amount of time and monetary investment, something that is scarce among many in the region especially as they have only recently emerged from the apartheid system that fostered marked social, political and economic inequalities based on race, and led to pervasive poverty amongst many of the black communities in South Africa. Many people now live in urbanized settings far from the ritual sites in their natural settings, and many of these sites are difficult to access. Moreover, for the majority of people, the democratic era of South Africa has failed to bring the financial and social security promised by the liberation struggle (Ashforth 2000, Bond, 2000). Unemployment, crime, ill-health (especially with the escalation of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis) and general misfortune are still the order of the day for many (Erstad, 2007). These prevailing anxieties are frequently expressed and the tensions they evoke made manifest at river rituals. The case studies that follow were recorded in the region of Grahamstown in the present Makana and Ndlambe municipalities of the Eastern Cape, and these concerns are evident in the narratives of those involved. The Cape Nguni groups located south-west of the Fish River were dispossessed of their land in the region during the early 1800s, and private landownership by whites is still the dominant form of land tenure in the democratic era (Mostert, 1992; Peires, 1989/2003). More recently, large private game reserves have been established which have led to the displacement of former farm workers to the urban slums in nearby towns, such as Grahamstown (Luck 2003) and limited access to sacred sites.

Although local Cape Nguni people either work and/or reside on private farms or in the neighbouring towns, many are unemployed and poverty stricken residing in peri-urban shack settlements. Over the years there has been a continual rural-urban drift (and vice versa), although people in the towns maintain contact with relatives working on farms, and farm-workers maintain short or long term residence with relatives in urban areas (Manona 1988)²⁹.

²⁹ In recent years, the expansion of game farms has led to increasing eviction of former farm-workers who now swell the ranks in the urban shack settlements (see Luck, 2003; Connor, 2007).
Rituals frequently bring the rural and urban relatives together, and river rituals help to reconnect the urban relatives with the land of their ancestors. These natural wild places have a powerful mnemonic effect, on which the people inscribe their identity, and these places and their rituals provide the umbilical cord (and the sacred centre) that connects them to their origins (Werbner, 1989). Thus, despite their being alienated from much of the land it is probably not surprising how widely river rituals are still practiced by many Cape Nguni to this day.

In August 1999 Zweli invited me, along with a post-graduate student, Kelly Luck, to attend and observe an intlwaynelelo river ritual that was to be performed for a novice healer on a farm in Southwell. At this first ritual inadequate signs of approval were elicited, hence the ritual had to be repeated the following week, which we were also invited to attend. In the following accounts of these two rituals it is clear how important natural signs are held to be to the success of a ritual, and their failure to manifest is interpreted as ancestral anger at social disharmony and disrespect.

5.4.1.2 Intlwaynelelo case studies – the narratives of ritual

The Mabula (pseudonym) family are farm-workers who reside on a pineapple and stock farm in the Southwell area of the Ndlambe municipality in the Eastern Cape. Petrus, an umkwetha (novice diviner) of Mrs N, an igqirha (diviner-healer) based in Grahamstown, was born on the farm on which both of his parents had worked for many years. As is normally the case, a dream preceded the event that was taken as indicative that the family should hold a ritual at a pool on a nearby river. In this case, Petrus had a dream that was seen to come from his mother’s deceased paternal aunt, and thus the ritual was being directed to his mother’s agnates, the Mabula people. If a novice is held to receive a dream to perform a ritual from the mother’s side of the family, a ritual will then be performed by his/her mother’s kinsmen even though the novice belongs to the father’s agnatic group. As a prospective healer whose source

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30 An example of this would be the pool where Zweli reputedly encountered a mermaid sitting on a rock while he was a boy. It was the same pool where he claimed a bull emerged out of the water to fertilize his father’s cows (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.4.2).

31 Whose own mother had been a powerful diviner.
of guidance can come as much from the maternal side as from the paternal side, the normal rule of agnatic dominance is thus temporarily put aside. This precedence of attending to the novice’s mother’s ancestors, rather than the paternal ancestors who are normally approached in ritual in the otherwise strictly patrilineal Cape Nguni groups, reveals how important dreams are in determining which kin group is given precedence.

Apparently Petrus’s mother’s family, the Mabulas, had performed an intlwayelela ritual a month or two earlier but things had not gone right as the signs of ancestral approval had not been recognised as forthcoming. As we had not been present at that ritual we have little information regarding the events that took place, beyond what was said about it by the various family participants during the two rituals we subsequently attended. It was evident that the source of ancestral unhappiness was interpreted as due to the conflicts that existed within the homestead between the various family members at the time. It was significant that one of Petrus’s mother’s ‘brothers’ (this could have been a cousin) from nearby Kenton, who should have been present to assist (i.e. at the present rituals), had failed to come and as will be seen, the female members of the family (especially Petrus’s mother) took a more active role in addressing the ancestors. The first river ritual we were to attend on the weekend of the 7th August 1999 was for the family to make amends for the failure of the first, and to seek the ancestors’ forgiveness for their obvious displeasure manifested through the poor signs.

The night before the river ritual an intlombe (a night vigil of dance and singing) was held to activate the ancestral spirits and alert them to the fact that a ritual was soon to be performed. Mrs N, as Petrus’s trainer and the officiating diviner, had already been at the homestead organizing preparations from a few days previously and the ukucela inkundla ritual visit to the river had been performed. Normally, it is during this time that the trainer/officiating diviner can detect potential conflicts and problems that may exist within the kin group or that may serve to derail the ritual. Indeed, as it transpired, Mrs N, had already detected some problems besetting the family and these had (for her) been confirmed through dreams that she had while staying there (she never divulged these to us). We had arrived at the homestead before sunrise on the day of the ritual, as instructed, and found the healer and family members preparing themselves to approach the river. White clay was being smeared over all the participants’ faces...
(ours included) and white headscarves tucked in place. There was some urgency as it was important that the party set off to the river before sunrise since it is desirable that the offerings are made prior to the sun rising and while the dawn sky is still pink, and also a time of peak activity for the water divinities. All the necessary offerings were gathered together, including the beer that had been brewing for the previous few days. We were later to discover that there was some concern as the beer had failed to ferment and foam.

Just prior to the departure of the party to the river, which consisted of a variety of family members, ourselves, the officiating diviner and her female novice (umkwetha), the ancestors were invoked in the house by Petrus’s mother and then by Mrs N to inform them of the impending ritual. Emphasising the need for unity and peace in the household, Mrs N announced:

I greet you [Ndiyacamagusha] as we come at this time, as we collect these things [the offerings]. I will ask for the African beer [umqombothi], and a container, and tobacco and matches. I greet all the ancestors of this place, as we come into this house of Mabula...all I am asking for is unity and peace as we are about to leave. Be praised (Camagu!)

A number of other members of the household called out various clan and praise names of the relevant ancestors. One was interesting in that he specifically located the places where their ancestors were thought to reside:

32 It is very important among the Cape Nguni that, out of respect, when one approaches the pool on an ancestral errand one should have white clay smeared over the face and people should have their heads covered with a scarf – preferably white. This indicates that the supplicants identify and ‘agree’ (ukuvumisa) with the People of the River.

33 Although the reason for this was not explained to me it is in all likelihood based on similar ideas of colour symbolism observed for the Zulu by Ngubane (Ngubane, 1977: 116-117) and the cosmic cycle of night and day, darkness and light, and their attendant moral associations.

34 Buhrmann observed how in Keiskammaheoek on the first evening prior to the ritual a canister of beer is placed in the cattle kraal near the central pole (ixhanti) where it is left overnight, and should be left undisturbed by the cattle (as they are the conduit to the ancestors). If, by morning, the contents had fermented and frothed over onto the ground it was a sign that the ancestors were in agreement with the pending ritual (Buhrmann, 1986: 71).

35 This is a fairly strange event as usually the men do the invocation. We caught this invocation immediately on our arrival, whilst still in the dark hut, and as we had never been there prior to this it was difficult to determine who was speaking at the time. There was some concern at the time that one of the mother’s brothers whose house we were at, and who should have done the invocation, had gone to feed the calves. As he was a labourer on the farm, this was part of his duties. However, as Mrs N was anxious that the party depart and arrive at the river before sunrise she had the sister (the novice’s mother) invoke the ancestors, along with Petrus himself.
I greet the Z, [praise names recited], who do not stay where people stay [but] who stay in waterfalls and steep hills. I call upon the sea [ulwandle]. I call upon ‘The Great Place’ [ndiyalikhwaza koMkhulu]. I worship and pray to the ancestors, and all those I have not mentioned.

As in all African ritual, singing and drumming were an essential part of the process as such performance is deemed to keep the ancestors alert, and also to bring about collective unity. Repetitive verses were sung, such as “Hold on to hope” and “There are ancestors behind the house, let them in”, and with the Christian influence “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

As the party was about leave in the vehicle the people were instructed to sing the following song, linking it directly to the impending ritual at the river:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wadidiyela</td>
<td>uNonkala ngasemlanjeni – The crab by the river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>uNonkala ngasemlanjeni – The crab by the river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ndiyambona uphethe yeza - I see him carrying a medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>uNonkala ngasemlanjeni – The crab by the river</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although I was not able to obtain a direct interpretation of this song, its significance seems to lie in the fact that the crab is one of the messenger animals of the abantu bomlambo who are the providers of medicine. In singing it, the delegation was alerting the messengers of the river of their impending visit.

The party of 18 people, a mixture of genders (8 males and ten females) and ages, including the novice and ourselves, left in the transport, drumming and singing continually, and we

36 Buhrmann reports that in Keiskammahoek the number of participants is normally four, six or eight, and for reasons that she does not explain, “sexes must be represented in equal numbers” (Buhrmann, 1986: 72). De Jager & Gitywa were also told there had to be an even number of participants (1963: 112). In the case of the Mabulas there were six agnatic males and six agnatic females. This did not include Mrs N and her female ihwasa, Petrus, or the three in our party, as the visitors. It did not seem to be a problem that we were present as visitors as long as we wore the right clothing, had clay smeared on our faces, and behaved in a quiet and respectful way. It is possible that we were allowed to attend because Mrs N could vouch for the fact that both Zweli and I were umathwasa who were linked to the water divinities, but Zweli never divulged this to me, merely saying the family had agreed to let us attend. In a later statement Petrus’s uncle indicated he thought that our presence was a positive sign.

37 In Hirst’s and de Jager & Gitywa’s account the novice stayed in the seclusion hut at the homestead whilst the
travelled slowly down the farm roads to the closest point we could make to the river in the vehicles. Dawn had broken and a cold strong wind was blowing. Apart from the strong wind there was a complete absence of the normal sounds of birdcalls that usually emanate from the African bush at this time of day.

Following Mrs N 38 we descended the hill in silence and approached a deep pool along the river that was surrounded by bush. With the family standing at the edge of the river, Mrs N waded into the water up to her mid-calves, blowing her whistle to call the water divinities and ancestors. The offerings of brewed beer (umqombothi), tobacco, matches, and brandy were made and their movement on the surface of the water watched carefully. It was at this point that Mrs N expressed her concern about the lack of foam on the beer:

We are here today, coming from different homes, ancestors of Mabula. Be praised! Camagu! I am begging you not to be angry with us honourable people, Camagu! because you know all about this journey we are taking. Do the same as well at the house across there [Mabula’s]. The people of Mabula will talk for themselves at the great place [i.e. explain their problems that have aroused the anger of the ancestors]. I, honourable people, do not have any problems [denying any responsibility for the poor omens]. We brought you the beer that has not foamed and this is not because of us [i.e. the diviner delegation], but the Mabula people. They are going to explain it themselves. I am clean. I will hand this over to them.

Thus absolving herself, and the diviner delegation of any responsibility for the poor signs resulting from the lack of beer fermentation, she let the family speak at the river, ‘The Great Place’. Of interest, it was the mother of the novice (Petrus) who approached the river first:

Camagu my ancestors! I greet you..... We ask for your forgiveness, because the beer party went to the river. De Jager & Gitywa (1963) described that in their ritual (which they refer to as umhlwayelelo) the novice had to sleep in the seclusion hut the night before on bedding made from leaves of the willow tree (Umngcunubu) and reeds (Umkhanzi), and these were taken by the officiating diviner to the river in the morning. In the rituals Hirst (1990) observed the body dirt (intsila) washed off from the novice using ubulawu was taken to the river and placed in the water.

38 In Buhrmann’s (1986: 72), Hirst’s (1990: 144) and de Jager and Gitywa’s 1963 account the procession was strictly ordered and people had to go in single file. This did not seem to be the case in this instance.

39 I was told that the People of the River respond to whistles. This may connect with the idea of the whistling imilazi or oomnamathotholo associated with diviners that have gone underwater, discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.6.1.
was not brewed properly. Please do not be angry with us. We are finishing up this ritual [umsebenzi] today. We have come with this mother [Mrs N] and I ask you to forgive her, help her and support her ⁴⁰. We are asking for strength and money because we are far behind in [performing] rituals [that] we were supposed to do. Camagu!....I beg you to accept this [the beer] but before that please do not hold onto my conflict with my big sister. Aunt ⁴¹ we are sorry, because when people are doing a ritual there should be peace and harmony. But there was a reason why I was protecting my father's house. I again plead with you, accept this and let everything go well.

Next, the mother's brother, who had returned from feeding the calves, approached the river. While throwing in the white beads he made reference to the failed ritual of the previous month:

Camagu! We ask for blessings in this place. Last month we were here to remind you Aunt. All those things that happened at the Mabulas, please do not be troubled by them. The beer from Mabula did not foam because of the problem at home, but things are solved now, aunt. I am [he gives his name]... Aunt, we are asking for one thing, togetherness, so that when things happen in this house of Mabula, you intervene and stop it by saying "no children, let it not be like this!"

Thereafter each member of the party holding white beads in their hands waded into the shallow water at the edge of the pool and, while identifying who they were and their lineage connections threw the beads into the water and appealed for their own individual desires (these included good health, peace, prosperity/wealth, and success). The idea that active efforts were needed to overcome the tensions in the family was also implied in a number of appeals:

Camagu! We pray and we have hope to see change in this house, in all the things they do and are about to do. I pray even to you mother that we can be one. We pray for healing and that conflict in the Mabula family may come to an end. Camagu! To the old people, men and women who helped us in this issue, camagu! We hope brightness can replace darkness. We pray that the ancestors be with us wherever we go and whatever we do. We pray for your forgiveness in what happened in this house.

⁴⁰ This statement suggests that the mother was implying that Mrs N (i.e. the diviner) had some measure of responsibility for the failure of the beer to brew properly.

⁴¹ The use of the term 'aunt' in this and the following narrative/s refers to a deceased maternal aunt who had originally featured in the dream Petrus had to inform him of the need to conduct the river ritual.
Having appealed for forgiveness and blessings the family departed from the river to the parked vehicles. En route Mrs N chose a wooded spot where she indicated it was now time for the family to make offerings and appeals to the ancestral spirits who reside in the forest. A small fire was built and lit and together with a small quantity of beer, the brandy, tobacco, matches and beads offerings were sprinkled into the fire by each participant whilst appeals were made again. It was notable that at both the river and the forest there were only a few distant birdcalls and nothing manifested. One woman was heard to comment with concern in her voice “Do you see Aunt? It is quiet here.” Beyond the concern of the failure of the beer to foam this virtual absence of animal or bird sounds or their visible presence was also a cause for concern as it was a sign of ancestral displeasure.

After the forest ritual was complete it was time to return to the homestead where the remaining family members were waiting at the cattle byre (ubuhlanti). This was the stage of the ritual when the witnesses to the river ceremony give their analysis and feedback as to its success or failure. As Zweli was a visitor (and was presumably regarded as more neutral in his opinion) he was asked by the elder of the family to make his comments on the proceedings. After first explaining that his interpretation of the events may differ from other participants he stated,

We did go my old man, to the Great Place, going with the children of this house and the healer [Mrs N]. All of them did everything that they were sent by the Mabulas to do. Our arrival was good because if things are bad you see by signs. You are not even allowed to come close [to the river] and talk. I must say though that I did notice that the healer was dissatisfied with the signs … she wanted more. The first thing is she entered the Great Place [the river]. She stood at the water calling the ancestors of that place, combining them with the ancestors of Mabula. There at the river there was an echo of her voice and also behind us there was some noise. People must have heard it. On our side it was on the right and downside it was on the left. I am the kind of person who is observant. Another thing I noticed is that they were surprised to see the beer sinking down [i.e. a good sign]. They thought it would float on the water. That was a concrete sign that everything from this house [the conflict] has been forgiven and accepted. The tobacco took its own course. It went towards that noise down there. Maybe something was wrong because it did come back as the river was flowing downwards and the wind was pushing downwards as well. But it came back and

42 This role of witnesses, who ‘endorse and legitimise’ ritual proceedings, is a well established practice among Xhosa speakers. Ainslie has discussed the role of certain individuals in participating (ukuzimasa) and witnessing (ukungqina) rituals in the Eastern Cape. The process involved “listening to the host’s explanation of what event had given rise to this ritual and giving a formal response to this explanation. This response was given by the most senior man present who was not related to the host umzi (homestead)” (Ainslie, 2005: 226).
eventually went into the river again. That is all about the Great Place [the river]. At the forest as we started the fire [and] the smoke of the smoking pipe didn’t get blown by the wind, but it went up [straight]....That is all I saw. I don’t know if I saw everything. There are other people who also went there. Camagu!

After Zweli’s somewhat diplomatic response, Mrs N then asked Petrus’s mother’s brother, as the head of the Mabula house, to verify if Zweli’s assessment was correct,

*Camagu*, my people. I noticed that there was a lot of doubt in people but they are used to going to the river, but today you had doubts. But I was relieved here at Mabula’s house; I woke up relieved because the things I saw the last time we were there, were also there this time too. There is another sign; we didn’t have white people before [Kelly and me] but today we do. This shows that the ancestors are happy; even right now we are welcoming them. At the forest all the things that the old man [Zweli] said I agree with them, and also what he saw, I also agree because he describes them just the way I saw them. We left here with doubts and if there were things that we were holding in our hearts, set them free and be relieved. *Camagu!*

After this Mrs N thanked Mr Mabula for his contribution and reassured them to continue on their path of resolving their problems. It was then that the maternal aunt of the novice stood up to speak. She voiced the same cautious optimism that the signs were indeed better, in comparison to their previous efforts at the ritual the month before, however she did express some doubts as to its success. Making reference to a dream that Mrs N reported that she had had just prior to the ritual[43], she said:

I want to speak the truth. On top of what you dreamt, it is possible that the sinner is me. There was something that did not satisfy me here at home before the ceremony. I want that in front of my brothers and those who accompanied us to know that if I am the one wrong, and if so, my ancestors who sleep in eternal peace must forgive me. What hurt me [obviously referring to dissatisfaction concerning the problems that had been occurring in the homestead] was that this house would be a place of robbers and strangers. Someone just comes and does what he/she likes at the Mabula house. If then by [my] trying to correct some of the things like that was stopping the smooth proceedings of the Mabula ritual, I am sorry. I also want to apologise even to you, honourable mother [Mrs N], and also to these bones [ancestral graves], because maybe you had doubts because of what you dreamt. But if I am the one who has done wrong then I am sorry. I thought I was solving things and making them right........[apologizing continues]..... if it is me who is wrong honourable mother please free your heart, even my sister who I had conflict with came to ask for

[43] Mrs N never divulged the contents of the dream to us.
for anything against her.

In this confession Petrus's aunt was making reference to a source of conflict that she had been having with his mother (her younger sister), who had accused her of trying to take control of the previous ceremony and had been critical of some of the friends who had been visiting the home, hinting that they were criminals. What was striking was that although men were present, they did not assert themselves during the ritual, the reasons for which were unclear to us on the basis of our limited knowledge of the family and its pre-existing social dynamics. It is thus difficult for me to provide any detailed analysis of the social conflict itself.

After this confession, repentance and requests for forgiveness, Mrs N. stood up to reassure them. Referring to her dream she admitted it was difficult for her to tell them about it, but said:

I am the messenger, I must tell what I have been shown, camagu! Everything is solved now, there is peace. As I stand here in this place all I want is togetherness after my feet [have gone]. I don't want bloodshed after I am gone, even if there was going to be any bloodshed, my appearance in this place must make it stop, camagu! Now we are finished.

Following Mrs N's closing appeal to the family, Petrus approached the central pole (ixhanti) in the cattle byre and poured a libation of beer and then of brandy near the cattle post on the ground and then proceeded to give a tot to everyone present to drink, the joint consumption of which signified unity with all present including the ancestors. Umqombothi (brewed beer) was then served and the ritual ended soon after. As a result of the poor signs, albeit somewhat improved from the previous months failure, it was decided that the ritual would be repeated the next week, which we were again invited to attend. This time though, we were told that they would approach the sea first.

5.4.1.3 Events at the second ritual

As with the first week we arrived at the homestead at 05h00 while it was still dark. There was no wind this time but a damp mist was present, and this was regarded as an auspicious sign.

44 As we had been invited to the ritual on the basis of Zweli's friendship with Mrs N, it was difficult for us to pry into these personal conflicts, and Zweli did not feel it was his place to ask too many questions.
We all got dressed in the appropriate clothing (as in the first ritual) and had white clay smeared on our faces. Mrs N announced the plans for the rituals, as she had done the week before. This time we were going to go to the sea first and then we would go directly to the same pool we had visited the previous time. After that we would return to the house. This would be a round trip of about seventy kilometres. There was great optimism in the homestead that this time things would be better. Fortunately the beer had foamed, much to everyone’s relief. Again I will let the narrative speak for itself.

After Mrs N had greeted everyone present and informed them of the procedures for the morning she gave the floor to Petrus’s maternal uncle who had the following to say, while noting the positive sign of the mist being present:

Camagu!...[ancestral praise names]! We did plead with them [the ancestors] last week, but they say the ancestors will accept these things [the offerings] if we are together [i.e. in harmony]. They say that they hope today that everything shall go well. We will arrive at the sea, the Great Place; then we will see what to do. Then from there we will go home to where Grandfather is, where his bones are resting in peace [his grave]. Then we will say sorry to him too and [tell him] that we are back from where we have been and our journey was wonderful, [that] everything went well, darkness should go away, and your hearts be full of joy. You did see the mist today didn’t you? The Mabula [ancestors] arrive with the mist. It was like it was about to rain, so you must know that the ancestors of this house have come to visit.

This time there were twenty one of us in the party, which included were eight male and eight female agnates, and three of us visitors present. We had two vehicles to accommodate the extra family members who had come to show their strength and unity in numbers. We set off while it was still dark, and as noted in the narrative above, misty, and when we arrived at the designated beach there was great excitement from those travelling with the uncle in the leading vehicle, because a bird (a heron) had been flying in front of them. This, along with the mist, was seen by them as a very auspicious sign that the ancestors approved of what they were doing and were leading the way. Furthermore when the lead car arrived they had encountered a security patrol at the beach. As the narrative indicates below this was seen as a good sign. The ancestors were making sure that all was safe for us on the remote beach. The red sky over the sea was turning to pale pink in the morning light as we approached the crashing waves. Everyone was in a buoyant mood, holding buckets of brewed beer and the
other offerings. With the men rolling up their trouser legs and the women lifting their skirts, Mrs N led the way into the waves, with Petrus and his father close behind and the rest of us following. Blowing her whistle and calling the ancestors, she poured first the beer, and then the brandy, into the water, and sprinkled the tobacco and matches into the churning waves that sucked the offerings out to sea. Petrus then had to step forward and kneel in the waves whilst Mrs N took a red cord and drew it to and fro from the back to the front of his head. At this point some seagulls glided past in front of us and a tern flew in front of Petrus and then turned and flew back again. Along the receding water line to our right ran several little sandpipers, dashing in and out of the water in their eternal quest for food. Some people (note narrative below) also noted a small rainbow in the spray as the wave crashed towards us. Then each person was given a turn to call on the ancestors while throwing the white beads into the foamy sea, beseeching them for blessings. More birds flew past. There was great relief shown by all present and everyone was jubilant. We piled back into the vehicles laughing and relieved, our clothes slapping wet against our legs and set off back to the farm. As we were leaving the beach on the small access road, the Boubou Shrike (a bird) was sending out his piercing cry, and he hopped onto the road in front of the cars. A troop of monkeys swung down through the trees to observe our procession going past, and there, as the access road met with the main tar road, stood the heron, standing erect as a soldier pointing his head in the direction we had come, and completely untroubled by the two noisy vehicles that drove within metres of it. All these cumulative manifestations signified to the ritual participants the approval of the ancestors and led to another outburst of ecstasy and the singing and drumming vibrated in the cab. We now drove directly back to the river pool where we had performed the ritual the previous week. There was a cacophony of bird calls, the Boubou Shrike’s penetrating call piercing the still morning air. As we all approached the river there was a pair of Egyptian Geese cackling and splashing in the water. The same procedure was repeated as in the previous week. The offerings and appeals were made and the signs of approval were sought; of which there were many, each sign eliciting an exclamation of “Camagu!” from the participants. Birds called throughout and as we were throwing in the white beads into the river a blue kingfisher flashed past in front of us. Fish plopped and more ducks splashed. Bubbles rose from the depths, sending out concentric rings on the surface of the water. Signs of life were everywhere. The beer sank down into the water as it should, the tobacco flowed towards the middle of the river and the smoke from the forest fire ritual rose and circled us and headed
towards the east. All these signs, which were regarded as very positive, gave an added sense of buoyancy to the mood of the participants. On our return to the homestead Zweli was again asked to give his assessment of the proceedings and the omens elicited:

Firstly we took a car to Port Alfred [at the sea] and as we were arriving at the town a bird appeared and it led us, it seemed like it was saying ‘I can show you where you are going’. We passed [through] town and it disappeared then as if it was taking a short cut [to the beach]. When we got there we saw people who were walking up and down checking that there was nothing wrong [the security guards]. We felt welcomed and relaxed and comfortable. The one thing I liked though, when we were giving the offering, they [the ancestors] came and took it [the offerings – referring to the way the sea snatched and rolled back with the offerings]. There were colours we saw, cattle colours, the colours that appeared were white, green/blue, red and we can call this last one white, because it looked white [he later told me he was referring to a rainbow of light in the sea spray]. Usually when that is analysed it is said that you should wear those colours [as part of the novice’s uniform]. As we came back from the sea we were accompanied by birds as if they wanted to get into the car, but they went back to the trees, it seemed as if they were saying ‘goodbye’. On our way back we again saw that bird we initially saw as we were coming [the heron], and it was standing there...it was facing east. It looked wet, just like her[45] at the sea. She was wet as if she was accepting the offerings. By saying, “I thank you”, it is even for our safety and protection. I give thanks as it is clear they [the ancestors] want this child [Petrus] to be a healthy and good healer. We also went to the Great Place [river], it rained as we arrived. The gifts were accepted by the ancestors. That shows he is being permitted to heal. There were signs that we saw. The beer foamed and we saw and heard things [bird calls] to show that we were welcome. Even on the left we heard things, like the last time, but today there were also noises on the right. Even as we were leaving we went perfectly, as we left the sea coming back home, it became cold. That showed us that the ancestors were telling us to go now.

In response to Zweli’s assessment, Mrs N asked Petrus’s uncle to respond. He was clearly relieved at the success of the day’s events,

Camagu! I just need a thousand words of thanks and compliments...I loved what I saw. There was some mist, as if it was about to rain; we were so cold but it all quickly disappeared. We saw a lot of things, we saw visions that we have never seen before, some people[46] I have never even seen in my dreams [before], but as I came to this house [the sea], I saw them. The same at the forest...I just became speechless.

45 Referring to the lady one encounters underwater.

46 It is unclear what exactly he was referring to here. It may have been the security guards, or it could have been the birds and animals that he referred to as ‘people’, in that they are regarded as manifestation of ancestral spirits.
It is clear from this brief speech that the uncle was profoundly moved by the positive signs elicited during the ritual proceedings, almost to the point of disbelief. A few more speeches were then given by male relatives. One of these was by the son of Petrus’s mother’s aunt (the aunt who had come in Petrus’s dream and instructed him to do the ritual). He had not been present at the previous ritual and during the speech he affirmed the fact that his mother, as well as her mother (his grandmother) had both been powerful diviners. He also expressed his great satisfaction at the day’s events. We then had our refreshments (umqombothi) and Mrs N then officially closed the proceedings.

5.4.1.4 Discussion

The inclusion of the actors’ own voices and commentary during these two river rituals reveals the multidimensional aspect of ritual. In the narrative sequence given above we get a glimpse of the participants’ perceptions of the fluidity between natural phenomena, the world of spirit and social norms, praxis, and morality, and how they all work together. However, equally important is the emphasis on restoring correct social behaviour and obligations within the kinship group. The liminal space that the rituals offer, which removes the participants out of the realm of everyday social relations and provides the opportunity for reflection, allows for tensions, conflicts and confessions to be verbalized and made evident. In seeking forgiveness and joint consensus on the primacy of social cohesion, rituals help constitute and generate respect for cultural norms, the importance of the kin group, and the healing stability that ‘traditional’ values bring. Although scholars such as the Comaroffs are critical of the emphasis placed on ritual being a reflection of ‘transcendent traditions’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993: xvi), we cannot deny that traditions such as these, draw on a sense of continuity with the past, even though these may change under different social and political-economic circumstances (Ainslie, 2005; Bank, 2002; McAllister, 1985, 1997). In this regard, the river ritual recorded by de Jager and Gitywa (1963) in the former Ciskei over 45 years ago bears striking resemblance to the ones in which we participated in the Grahamstown area at the turn of the twenty first century. One answer to the question of how such continuity in the ritual process and its symbols could be maintained is that these are connected to a body of specialized knowledge held by select members of the community, the amagqirha or diviner-healers, who are seen as the custodians of tradition and claim to have direct contact with the ancestral past (see Barth, 1987).
While the ritual process itself may retain some consistency over time, it seems that other elements, such as the ritual functions of the various participants, particularly at the level of gender, may vary depending on a variety of factors. In the above case studies, the fact that the first ritual that was performed was largely led by women is a clear example of how these differences may emerge depending on various social constraints and individual interests. The unity of the agnatic group has been especially eroded among farm-workers in this area of the Eastern Cape, where the re-enforcing role of chieftainship in serving to maintain it has also largely disappeared, and this could have contributed to the greater role played by the women in the first ritual. Women have also assumed a greater socio-economic role in the functioning of homesteads, due to relative improvement in their employment opportunities and in gaining access to social welfare benefits, such as pensions and child support grants (Ainslie, 2005: 226-238; Bank, 2002: 244). Both Ainslie (2005) and Bank (2002) have noted the shift in gender roles in the formerly male-dominated rituals performed among certain Xhosa-speakers in the Eastern Cape, and both have attributed these shifts to the changing socio-economic power dynamics that have emerged between men and women in recent years. While both scholars noted the increasingly important roles of women in planning, organising and hosting rituals (particularly beer drinking rituals), they did observe that the women would usually defer to the senior male agnate for the clan in question to invoke the ancestors and inform them (both the ancestors and ritual participants) of their intentions for doing the ritual. Interpretations on the success or failure of rituals however, may serve to normalise the idealized gendered roles, and reassert male control over ritual. For instance, in the second intlwaynelelo ritual, which in contrast to the first ritual was deemed a great success on the basis of the natural signs elicited, the roles of the women (especially the mother) were less dominant. Hence, the importance of male control of ritual was reaffirmed.

The insistence by the Comaroffs that we should turn our ‘analytic gaze’ to “the role of ritual in African modernity – and, especially, in the efforts of people to empower themselves, thus to assert a measure of control over worlds often perceived to be rapidly changing” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993: xiv), is valid. In the intlwaynelelo rituals I have described, the pressures and

47 However, Bank gives one example where women dominated (and even excluded) men from participating in these invocation roles in ritual that were formerly reserved for them (Bank, 2002: 256).
constraints that ‘modernity’ has brought were expressed in the individuals’ plaintive requests for luck, jobs, freedom from poverty made during the offerings to the water divinities and the ancestors. Crime and disruption of moral values seem to have been behind the conflict that led to the failure of good omens in the first ritual. It appeared to be connected with a conflict between the novice’s mother and other relatives, such as her elder sister. The objection she voiced, to her brother’s house becoming a refuge for ‘robbers and strangers’, was related to the fact that some dubious people had been staying at the house. It was hinted to me later that their intentions were to steal from neighbouring farms, and this put the family in a difficult position as they were farm-workers with little security of tenure. Should they be fired for harbouring criminals they would not only lose their jobs but their homes. It was also clearly seen as an offence to the ancestors of the home, which threatened the success of the rituals.

In a country where tensions and conflicts relating to land are ongoing and far from resolved, these rituals also provide the umbilical cord that firmly connects the supplicants to land. Rituals that are situated in the natural landscape help structure identities and connect the people directly with what they experience as the spiritual power of the land, and this confirms their enduring connection with it. This identity is not necessarily verbalized or made into a conscious statement, but is inherent in the ritual acts themselves. The very act of being at these sites and appealing to the water divinities and the ancestors on both the paternal and maternal sides, and to be linked to those places through dreams, validates the sense of belonging that arises. These claims of belonging do not necessarily imply right of ownership in the western sense[^48], but rather rights to access, to protect and engage with these natural landscapes. Similarly these rituals can be viewed as sacred journeys connecting the supplicants to their ‘sacred centres’ and as Werbner rightly observes, they are the means by which “performers of the ritual passage find and resituate themselves in cosmological space” as well as providing them with the opportunity for engaging in “sacred exchange across community and across boundaries” (Werbner, 1989: 2).

[^48]: Note that the land (and its natural components) does not legally ‘belong’ to the supplicants, but that the supplicants see themselves as belonging to the land, which is personalized and spiritualised for the purpose of communication.
Conflict, rapid change, and post-modern visions of fragmented realities and indeterminate boundaries, have led to the contemporary cynicism of scholars towards the perspective that ritual serves to establish social balance in a demarcated group. Balance suggests harmony and homeostasis (stasis being the key root) and there is clearly little evidence of that in contemporary societies. Furthermore, clearly demarcated groups no longer exist; their boundaries are blurred and porous. However I argue that although balance may never be attained this does not reduce the fact that people may, through these rituals, be striving towards securing it, as well as striving to reconnect with their past, their origins and their identity. From participating in these rituals they demonstrated to me an inherent (and largely subconscious) awareness that to attain balance within ones social, spiritual and environmental relationships necessitates the harmonious working of all three of these elements together. One cannot achieve balance in one without acknowledging its interconnectedness with the other two\(^\text{49}\). While the emphasis has been put on the first of these components in ritual analysis, namely the social (including the psychological), from my own experiences I propose that inadequate attention has been paid to the spiritual and natural/environmental realities that appear to be of central concern for the participants themselves.

5.5 River rituals recorded among other groups

5.5.1 Shona rituals

Although no river rituals of a similar nature to the ones described in the previous section have been documented for the Karanga or Shona groups, there are a number of documented rainmaking and fertility rituals that are expressly connected with the high God Mwari/Mwali, whose central cult headquarters are based at a number of caves (associated with sacred pools) in the Matopos Hills in Zimbabwe (Aschwanden, 1989; Daneel, 1971; Ranger, 1999, 2003; Nthoi, 2006), and from where ‘he’ issues instructions to the people through an oracular ‘voice’. Lesley Nthoi, who is from the Kalanga group in Botswana, has spent a lengthy period of time at a number of these cave shrines. He gives an extensive review of the various local and scholarly perceptions of Mwari/Mwali (Nthoi, 2006: 15-22). He notes, however, that all of these support the notion that Mwali is associated with the provision of rain and fertility to the

\(^{49}\) One could argue that this is the basis of an ideal ecology.
land and people, and that these are evident in the propitiatory offerings to Mwali which consist of “cattle, beer, and other products and food” (Nthoi, 2006: 18). Mwali, he notes, “...is worshipped under various names such as Dzivaguru, Nyadenga, and Musikavanhu” (ibid) and is composed of a trinity of attributes; that of the Father, the Mother and the Son. In iKalanga these three manifestations of Mwali are referred to as Shologulu, Banyachaba and Lunji (shooting star) respectively, and it is the female Banyachaba who embodies the life giving aspects of rain and fertility. Furthermore it is her aspect that is referred to as “the big pool”, Dzivaguru (Nthoi, 2006: 22; see also Daneel, 1970: 16; Ranger, 2003). Ranger also argues that these cult centres were in the past heavily oriented towards a “feminine environmental religion” (Ranger, 2003), but that these have recently been overshadowed by male-dominated political interests (Ranger, 1999). Although there appears to be some correspondence with the male/female aspects of God as perceived by the Zulu, I have not come across any suggestion that the female aspect of Banyachaba can manifest in forms similar to Nomkhubulwana (such as in the form of a mermaid).

Although Aschwanden (1989), Mawere and Wilson (1995), Mafu (1995) and Ranger (2003) present material that links the central cult base of Mwari/Mwali in the Matopos with the njuzu (and the python), it is not made clear as to what the nature of the njuzu connection with the high God is, and whether the rituals performed there are directed towards both the njuzu and Mwari/Mwali. Ranger does note, however, that in the Matopos,

...the shrine caves and their pools are compared to the womb of a woman. In these pools there live female water spirits, Njuzu; Mwali adepts are said to go down into the pools for years on end, there to be taught by the Njuzu, learning among other things how the environment should be managed and protected. All the rivers and streams of Zimbabwe are said to be peopled with Njuzu, who originate from the shrines of the Matopos. They constitute an ‘underwater’ – rather than underground – female ecological army (Ranger, 2003: 84).

While there is some documentation of the various types of rituals performed at the cult centre, there is not much on river rituals per se. What is evident with all these accounts is that they are not only intimately associated with ritual respect for the natural world, including issues relating to fertility, rain and fecundity, but also to local and national political processes.
5.5.2 Khoekhoe rituals

Finally it is worth briefly considering a set of female adolescent rituals that are performed by a number of Khoekhoe groups which are directed specifically towards the Water Snake in its connection with fertility and sexual morality (Carstens, 1975; Waldman, 1989).

Waldman was witness to such a ritual performed by a Griqua group in the Kimberley region of South Africa. These rituals were performed on young Griqua girls at the onset of menarche. During the ritual the girl was placed in seclusion (usually a curtained off area within the house) at the onset of her first menstruation, and she was tended by the older women of the group for a two week period. The girl was smeared with red ochre and was subjected to various behavioural and food restrictions during the period. All these reflected her liminal status, common to rites of passage as observed by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). A female sheep, brushed with buchu (the herb favoured by the Snake), was sacrificed for the girl on the last morning of her seclusion by her kinsmen. The pelvis of the animal was then carefully removed, whole and intact, by the chief female initiator and subsequently boiled. The meat cooked on the pelvis was only consumed by women past childbearing age, while the rest of the meat was shared jointly by all the women (Waldman, 1989: 28). The cleaned pelvis bones were then smeared with red ochre and kept aside. The chyme was removed from the stomach of the sheep and mixed with milk and buchu, and the mixture was used to wash the red ochre off the girl's body (symbolising whiteness).

Early the next morning the young girl, dressed in special white clothes, and her face decorated with red and black clay, emerged from her seclusion (ibid: 33). She was referred to as the morning star, Venus, and at this stage she could be viewed by men. She was then wrapped in a sheet and taken to a spring, accompanied by the group of women. At the spring the girl threw the pelvis from the sheep, along with some other bones, and buchu leaves, into the water (ibid: 38). These were gifts for the Snake, and according to Waldman “The pelvis, the other bones

50 Red ochre is also extensively used by the Cape Nguni and KwaZulu-Natal Nguni groups, especially by diviners and abakwetha. The red clay symbolizes blood (see Berglund, 1976: 160, 356) and is often smeared on the body when the woman is in a spiritually vulnerable state, such as during menstruation or after childbirth. It serves to protect the woman.

51 Waldman does not clarify their relationship to the girl.
(of the sheep) and the buchu should sink, as a sign that the snake has accepted them” (ibid: 38). The girl then lashed the water with a stick, smeared with ochre, and the water was supposed to fly up and drench her. This was another important sign of the Snake’s acceptance of her and its recognition that she was still a virgin.

Waldman was told by her informants that if the girl “came into contact with young men (had sexual intercourse) before she was initiated...the snake will not accept the girl as a genuine virgin” (ibid: 39) and the splashing will not make her body wet. However, Waldman mentioned that one of the girls that accompanied the initiate as a handmaid also lashed the water. Despite the fact she also got drenched the verdict from the participants was that she remained dry, and this was based on their knowledge that she was not a virgin (ibid: 40). Clearly in this case physical evidence and signs were not sufficient to overcome moral interpretation; she had to continue lashing the water until there was eventual agreement that she had been forgiven by the Snake. The importance of the cleansing aspect of these initiations rituals were stressed to Waldman who was told that the rituals give some immunity to any further risk of being taken under water by the Snake: “Initiation protects you. Now you can go safely (to the river). If you are not cleansed and you come to rivers, the snake pulls you in...and the rainbow chases you” (Waldman, 1989: 43).

Following the ‘lashing of water’, a container was filled with water from the spring and the participants returned home “singing and dancing along the way” (ibid: 46), while the initiate cried. Once home everyone (men included) have to drink some of the buchu water from the container and this allows them to partake safely in the feast of the second sacrificed sheep which had been slaughtered during the women’s excursion to the spring. The feasting that followed signalled the final re-integration of the girl into the community as a marriageable woman. Beyond observing that these initiation rituals take place in a community where woman are still major contributors to subsistence survival (as with the Nomkhubulwana rituals of the Zulu) Waldman interprets these rituals as a means by which the Griqua “maintain and re-assert” their ethnic boundaries which have been threatened by urbanisation and modernization (ibid: 50). Like the Nomkhubulwana rituals they are also clearly associated with fertility and sexual morality.
The Water Snake was also linked to rain and rain-making, and the Khoekhoe and San have traditionally been well-known for their rain-making abilities (Hoff 1997; Prins, 1996). These rainmaking skills are a subject that I will return to in Chapter Nine.

5.6 Discussion
The various ways in which the beliefs in the water divinities are enacted through ritual, even within particular groups, demonstrate that there are a diversity of ways by which they can be called upon to appeal to public sentiment and need. Despite the variations and differing emphases within and between the groups under study, common themes prevail. These are primarily to do with the fertility of women and the earth, wise environmental practices, healing and morality (especially connected with female sexuality). They are also however utilised for various other ends: to achieve unity within the kin group, adherence to cultural traditions and forms of leadership, and as a means to express ethnic, local territorial, or gendered identity and belonging. They can also be used to express resistance to external political interests and processes, as well as the impacts of modernity. However, to reduce these rituals to the conscious or unconscious achievement of these more instrumental needs would result in a serious oversight of the ontologically real experience of these water divinities for members of the groups in question and of the intimate association for these groups with creatures of the natural world. Rituals are very often precipitated by dreams (also see Ainslie, 2005: 228) and the perceived visitation by messengers of this watery realm.

Of the most extensively documented rituals that I have presented here, that is, among the Zulu, Mpondoland (a north-eastern Cape Nguni sub-group) and the south-western Cape Nguni groups of the Grahamstown area, there are some significant differences in emphasis. These are mainly in terms of how the water divinities are perceived, their relationship with the ancestors and the regulation of ritual behaviour, especially at a gendered level. Among the Zulu the dominant focus is on Nomkhubulwana in her role as provider of abundant crops and fertility and the promotion of the interests of virgin girls. The extent to which these two main themes relating to the Nomkhubulwana rituals are emphasised seems to depend on the nature of the rural-urban divide and the distribution of traditional leadership in the form of chiefs. The majority of the rituals for Nomkhubulwana are performed by women, although all residents living within a territorially defined space are obligated to support, if not participate, in the rituals,
and these may cut across clan and even ethnic divisions. However, the ultimate sanction for
the rituals lies with the chiefs.

The material given by Hunter for the Mpondo, although quite dated, emphasises that the
*ukunikele umlanjeni* rituals are primarily clan-based rituals that are performed and controlled
by male agnates and the chiefs. Not much emphasis seemed to be placed on the fertility of
women or crops, but rather on averting illness and misfortune. No reference was made to fish-
tailed beings in Hunter’s data; rather the emphasis was put on placating the Snake in the river,
which was regarded as an emanation of the chiefly ancestors in some contexts, or of an evil
manifestation in others. To what extent this representation of the Mpondo material reflects the
current situation is difficult to determine due to a paucity of recent studies among the group.
Kuckertz (1984: 264), who did an extensive study on Mpondo homesteads and their authority
structure, made only very brief mention of the *abantu basehlathini* (forest people) and *abantu
basemlanjeni* (river people). He notes that his informants were vague on these categories of
‘spirit’ and as a result his information relating to them was scanty.

The case study I presented on the south-western Cape Nguni groups in the Grahamstown area,
where the institution of traditional leadership under the chiefs has long disappeared, reflects a
slightly different emphasis. In this area the *ukunikele* rituals are done to secure fertility of
crops only very occasionally. This is probably due to the fact that, as a result of lack of access
to arable land, cultivation has assumed a less significant role in subsistence livelihoods (see
Ainslie, 2005: 219-227). In this area the predominant form of river rituals are the
*intlawayelelo* and *fukama* rituals which are performed by minimal agnostic kinship segments on
behalf of their members who are regarded as having been called to become diviner-healers.
While these are usually under the control of the senior male agnates, females are also active
participants, occasionally taking dominant roles. I have suggested that possible reasons for
these different forms of ritual emphasis, and their performance, are the various political-
economic arrangements that characterise the areas, the nature of the environment and certain
socio-cultural interests. However, much more detailed research would be required to
determine the extent to which these factors play a role in shaping the expression of the various
rituals.
CHAPTER 6
DREAMING CROSS CULTURALLY – EXPERIENCING THE EXTRA-ORDINARY

6.1 Introduction
In the previous three chapters I have examined the core recurring elements, symbols and rituals that pertain to the water divinities among the Nguni-speaking groups located in KwaZulu-Natal (Zulu) and the Eastern Cape (Cape Nguni), as well as among the Khoekhoe and various San groups which have shared centuries of intermittent contact with them. I have also demonstrated how similar these ideas and claimed experiences are (especially of the underwater submersion) with those held amongst the Shona groups of Zimbabwe with whom there was little sustained contact in the previous few centuries. These claimed experiences of what is understood by both participant and researcher as an extra-ordinary dimension, vary in their representations and interpretations across the groups— and this is most evident in ritual. However, there is a broad shared understanding of the appropriate ways to manage these experiences, especially amongst diviners, which cuts across ethnic and spatial divisions.

In Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1 I suggest that it is the way in which the ancestral spirits are understood to guide those chosen to be diviners which allows for the sharing of this knowledge. Ancestral guidance is believed to be primarily through dreams, whereby the diviners and novices are understood to be shown different places and people they must go to visit or consult that are relevant and specific to their own individual histories, background or calling. Thus dreams may act as a mechanism through which novices and healers come into contact with different places, peoples and ideas. Although there is some consistency in beliefs and practices within or even across these groups, the outcomes for each individual healer may differ significantly depending on the perceived dictates of their own ancestors. Thus, the experience is not only culturally contingent, but it is also shaped by personal and family context.

In this chapter I return to the theme I introduced in Chapter One regarding the value of the radical participation method that may allow the researcher potentially to experience what we
understand to be the extra-ordinary, particularly in dreams and trance states, which may also concur with their informants’ reports, and that may have the potential to offer greater insights into the topic under consideration. I have argued that one needs to disentangle the various levels of analysis pertaining to the phenomenon of the water divinities: that is, the level of the experience itself, the interpretation of that experience (at the individual and group level), the praxis that emerges from the interpretation (including ritual) and the transmission of the knowledge. While I focussed at the level of praxis or ritual forms in the last chapter, this chapter is dedicated to the experience itself, particularly as it related to me, how the izangoma interpreted many of these experiences I have had, and how this may contribute to greater insight into the water divinity phenomenon.

It is at this level of experience, usually linked to dream states or other altered states of consciousness that are coloured and shaped by cultural and personal factors, where Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious and the manifestation of archetypes could be sought to illuminate the water divinity phenomenon. However, there are certain issues that go unanswered when applying the Jungian, or even the Eliadian, explanatory frameworks (see Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1). Jung tends to focus on the commonly experienced archetypal imagery in dreams as manifestations of deep primordial constitutive elements of the psyche found in all humankind, and he tends to focus his analysis on how these may manifest in the context of certain pathological states (Buhrmann, 1986; Jung, 1968, 1969); these archetypal experiences are not considered in terms of their capacity to unlock certain latent abilities in psychic perception, such as those that are held by believers to be found amongst the diviners who claim to have experienced submersions underwater, or even what Jung regards as the unconscious depths of their psychology. How then does one explain this (otherwise) unexplicable attainment of what are seen as psychic skills following claims of submersion? How does one explain the apparently remarkable ability of dreams to foresee events that are still to happen, or places that one has never seen or been to before, or the strange synchronicities that seem to attend to some such dream experiences? How does one explain the fact that certain animals or creatures, such as snakes, may seem to appear at crucial times, which would seem to go beyond the psyche or beyond our explanations of pure coincidence? The examples I give in this chapter of the appearances and behaviour of certain birds and the manifestation of pythons at critical times of my training would not seem to be explained away.
by pure co-incidence.

Although Eliade identifies journeys to the underworld as a common claim amongst different cross-cultural shamanic traditions (see Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1), it is implied that this is essentially a journey of the mind, a psychological experience, rather than an actual bodily or physical one. If, as my informants insist, this is not only a psychological experience, but a physical one as well, then the challenge remains as to how we can account for this in terms of our normal scientific understanding of the physical principles of this universe?

In this chapter I provide what I understand as my own personal experiences in relation to these water divinities to investigate the possibility that, although culturally mediated, the potential for these experiences is not limited only to those members born or socialised into the cultural groups in question. I want to suggest that there is a cross-cultural potential for the experience, which in the case of the southern African context, can be accessed by accepting, or at least suspending one’s disbelief in, the regional cultural framework in which it is embedded. This cross-cultural potential relates to the arguments and insights from scholars in the field of the anthropology of extraordinary experience who have observed that “An interesting aspect of extraordinary experiences is that they often take a form and content consistent with one’s host culture – even if the anthropologist is relatively new to that society” (Young & Goulet, 1994: 7). Young and Goulet admit that they do not have a definite answer for why this should be so and part of the reason for this is “due to the fact that the discipline (anthropology) has yet to develop an internally consistent body of concepts in terms of which to approach such experiences without dismissing them as unverifiable products of the imagination” (ibid: 309).

They note that Jungian psychologists may explain these experiences as a “result of the anthropologist sharing unconsciously in the subjective life of some significant other in the host culture” (ibid: 307), whereby “individuals can “pick up” images from the unconscious of others” (ibid: 308), presumably in a form of mental telepathy. Although this could be a possibility, I am doubtful that the telepathic ‘unconscious absorption’ or the archetype arguments are adequate to explain many of the dreams and experiences I have had. Many of my dreams, and what I have interpreted as their subsequent realization, were connected to

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1 Some scholars (among them physicists) have suggested that quantum physics may hold the answer to some of the questions I have posed above; especially those regarding dreams and synchronicity (e.g. see Mansfield, 1995).
specific places, people, and events. These were not necessarily part of my Zulu informant's life-worlds, nor were they primarily about universal archetypal imagery. In many instances I had no knowledge of these places, people or events until the subsequent apparent realization of the dream. Interestingly, Young and Goulet, even though they espouse suspending disbelief in their informant's worldview, are reluctant to admit that spirits may exist as they fear this would present a significant challenge to the anthropologist's integrity as a 'cultural broker' (ibid: 325). However, I have sympathy for scholars such as Edith Turner (1992), Goodman (1990) and Shweder (1991), who take seriously the possibility that spirits do exist. While some scholars may avoid dealing with the question of the existence of spirits by focussing on other, less problematic levels of analysis, others may deny their existence on the principle that it may compromise anthropological integrity or their own credibility in scholarly circles. I argue that such denial is probably more compromising than if an anthropologist, who has had what he/she regards as a genuine experience of them, admits as much. However, I do also recognize the need to be cautious of the uncritical acceptance of other's beliefs as this may also compromise a broader understanding of the social and psychological elements that guide all human action.

The question may arise as to why I have had dreams that have led me to places where I have no evident family or cultural connection. Most of these sites, which are all held by my izangoma colleagues to be connected in some way with the water divinities, are recognized by many of the local people as being sacred or special in some way. What is intriguing about a few of the places that featured in my dreams (the Nyamakati Pool in Zimbabwe, and the Inxu River pools in the Transkei) were that, although I was unaware of this at the time, they were places a few scholars had written about as being significant sites for their informants. Many skeptics will probably assume that I had read about these and they had crept into my consciousness and manifested in my dreams. However, I am convinced that this was not the case, as the sequence of events surrounding the dreams and my eventual discovery of the sites (about which I had no previous knowledge prior to the dreams) were far too complex for me to have manipulated it, either consciously or unconsciously (see Sections 6.3, 6.4.2 - 6.4.4 in this chapter). Moreover, not only did Baba confirm that in his understanding my dream instructions were correct, but he was able to elaborate on certain aspects that he would have been unaware were characteristic of the beliefs in the area i.e. the gift of gold granted to those
called to certain pools (e.g. the Nyamkati Pool) in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, certain aspects of the dreams contained elements that previous scholars had not mentioned, and yet these were confirmed as significant by local people living there. For instance, in the dream relating to the Inxu River I was led there by two small children. After this dream I managed to locate what I understood to be the correct river. My first effort to get there (with Zanele), with the help of a teenage boy as a guide, failed, when he got us thoroughly lost in the dense vegetation. It was only when we were supplied with two small children by the guardian of the pool that we succeeded in getting there (see Section 6.4.4). When I was later able to interview a local diviner who did rituals at the pool he confirmed that this was similar to his experience; he was told in a dream to go there being led by small children. The importance of going to the pool with small children was also affirmed by several other healers in the area, yet this aspect had never been mentioned by previous scholars in the area. It was these ‘coincidences’ that have led me to take seriously the veracity of my informants’ convictions that such information had come from a spiritual source.

Why I had dreams relating to these places is a difficult question for me to answer. Frankly I do not know, but Zanele and Baba’s simple explanation was because it was my ancestors (and, I assume, the water divinities) who wanted me to go there. I understood this to mean that they assume that the ancestors, and the water divinities with whom they work, are not only relevant to a particular group or culture, but that they have pan-cultural relevance. I must point out though that not all my dreams were cross-cultural. Many have been specific to my own cultural background and personal history. This also raises the question as to what extent I relied on cultural mediation to interpret my dreams and experiences, especially by Baba and Zanele. In accepting my calling, and suspending my disbelief, I required their mediation and input to navigate the unfamiliar realm that I had opened myself up to. This also provided me with useful ethnographic material, as well as guidance for my own personal journey. However, there were dreams, such as those that took me beyond the reach of Baba’s and Zanele’s cultural understanding (such as my Bavarian Feast dream documented in Section 6.2.2) where I had to rely on my own cultural sources of knowledge, including books and the internet, to make sense of it.
6.2 The dreaming process and interpretation

It is important to emphasize that it was only after I was ritually initiated into the izangoma cultural framework that my powerful dreams (i.e. white dreams) commenced. These dreams followed my taking of ubulawu, the foam from an assortment of herbs beaten in cold water (discussed in Chapter Two) in ritual context (see also Wreford, 2008), as well as at my home. Thus, one must consider the role of these ritual actions and plant agents when taking the cross-cultural nature of my dreams into consideration. It is also highly unlikely that I would have had any of these dreams had I not been initiated as a novice, since I had never experienced anything like these prior to meeting Baba.

I am aware that in recounting these experiences, with the benefit of hindsight, I may give the false impression that I was in control of how the process unfolded. This is not correct, since I was never quite sure where my dreams seemed to be taking me. Many of my dreams would take several years for the events to seem to happen, after certain events, beyond my control, had taken place. In some of the dreams I had, I did not initially perceive any significance to them, but as events transpired, what I understood to be their full meaning apparently became evident. I interpret this to mean that the dreams and the unfolding of events were not random, but were anticipated and foreseen by whoever or whatever (i.e. my ancestors) was guiding my dreams. This of course also raises issues on the nature of time and space since many of the dreams, in retrospect, appeared to be exceptionally predictive. It must be added though, that in some instances the dream itself raised my awareness to be on the lookout for connections and this would prompt me to take certain actions (such as finding a place I had dreamt of) – in other words in some of the cases I was partially instrumental in the creation of my own experiences and the understood significance of the dream would only be realized as a result of this. If I had chosen to ignore the dreams and remain passive, I believe that it is unlikely that anything of significance (in terms of issues related to the dreams) would have resulted. This idea of acting on certain dreams is well understood amongst the izangoma, since failure to do so is believed to hinder the training progress. This is especially the case when one dreams of a special place, which one will need to visit, or is shown certain plants, to be used as medicine,

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2 Baba would always make sure I had sufficient supplies to bring home with me whenever I visited him. He would make up the mixture and he did not divulge which plants were included.
or animals to be sacrificed.

It was my policy from the beginning to divulge particularly clear and strong dreams to my family, and/or academic colleagues as soon as I had them. This served as a form of verification should the prediction of a dream eventually be realized. Although my family and colleagues were understandably skeptical about what I was getting involved in, it was this policy of sharing dreams and having them as witness to the dream’s subsequent realization that offered some form of verification to my experiences, as well as challenging their skepticism and doubt.

I have already outlined in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3, how dreams are viewed by the izangoma and how they distinguish between the ordinary everyday or ‘small’ dreams (amaphupho nje), and those which are ‘big’ or ‘white’ dreams (amaphupho omhlophe) which are usually experienced in the waking or near-waking state, and tend to be sufficiently vivid to rouse one. In my own experience I found these were often accompanied with spoken words or instructions, and this would provide a clue to their importance. In some instances I was unsure whether they were of any significance, or whether they were ordinary dreams or ‘white’ dreams, but if I remembered them clearly enough I would usually jot them down in a dream diary, or just file them away in my memory (which, admittedly, ran the risk of future distortion). ‘White’ dreams have a sense of permanency – some that I had ten years ago are as vivid today as they were then. In addition, although the meanings of some of my dreams seemed direct and straightforward, some were oblique and metaphorical, often in a fairly clever or humorous way, and after some contemplation, their meaning would become evident to me. Initially, I felt that many of my dreams required interpretation by Baba or Zanele, but as I became accustomed to the codes of interpretation I was soon able to interpret most of my dreams myself. However, I would usually seek verification if I was in doubt. Some dreams would seem to reveal certain things but I would then need further clarification from Baba as to how to proceed. For instance, in the case of my hyssop dream documented below I was able to identify the plant, but required Baba to find out through divination as to what to do with it. In

3 These were not only some of the standard Zulu codes of interpretation but personal ones which I gradually became aware were specific to me. This means that individuals can develop their own system of interpretation based on previous dreams and their subsequent realization.
some instances clarity as to the meaning of the dream would emerge after I had read something that connected or had resonance with it – such as in the hyssop dream and in my dream that led me to the shrine of Dzivaguru in Zimbabwe (see Section 6.3.1, this Chapter). I also found, that apart from a few standard codes of interpretation there was tremendous flexibility in interpreting a dream according to one's own personal history and experience; there was no rigid system or set formulae of dream interpretation such as those described by some scholars in other societies. This does not mean that all dream interpretation is necessarily arbitrary but they are guided by certain symbolic patterns and meanings that are relevant, or make sense to the dreamer. For instance, a few examples of standard codes of interpretation according to my Zulu izangoma informants were for instance:

- If one dreams of a friendly snake, it symbolizes a benevolent ancestral power is attracting your attention.
- If one dreams of a dangerous snake that tries to strike or attack you it symbolizes someone is trying to harm you (possibly by witchcraft).
- If one dreams of flying it is a positive sign and linked to the ancestors. You have the potential to be a diviner.
- If one dreams of fire or tornados it is a sign that danger is approaching. One must take great care.

In order to clarify some of what I have claimed above I will give an example of the nature of two of my dreams, and how the process of interpretation developed. The first dream I recount was one of my first dreams I had after I was officially initiated into Baba’s isibaya, when I was dressed in my thwasa uniform.

6.2.1 Hyssop dream- 30 June 1997

In the dream I was in the grounds of the local Settlers Hospital where I had worked intermittently for over twelve years. I was attending a worker's meeting on the lawns outside the nurse’s home. I was sitting at the back of the crowd listening to a woman

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4 This consisted of a red skirt, white top and a red, black and white kanga with a lion image in the centre that was worn tied over the shoulders. Red and white beads, strung on a thread, were placed around the wrists and ankle, while two long strands are worn like a bandolier across the chest. The beads are strung together in a sequence of four white to one red.

5 I had still been giving lectures in primary health care to nurses at the hospital at the time of this dream.
who was addressing the crowd. She was speaking about some religious revival and I could sense the crowd’s disappointment as they thought it was a trade union meeting about poor working conditions. It felt like I was sitting in a garden of flowers and my view focused in on a particular plant. I could clearly see its size (about 30 cms high), and the size, shape and texture of its leaves. The flowers were blue and on spikes, almost like salvia but as the leaves were a lot smaller I knew it was not that. The flowers were surrounded by bees that seemed very attracted to the flowers. I had a strong urge to pull the plant out so I could put it in my garden, and I did so. As I did this a voice told me “It’s like marjoram. Look in your herb book”. I immediately woke up with a buzzing sound in my head.

When I was fully awake I immediately went to look in my herb book, but I was puzzled because, apart from the small leaves, I knew it was in no way like marjoram, which does not have blue flowers and tends to sprawl rather than stand upright. As I flipped through the book I came across an illustration of a plant that was remarkably similar to the one I saw in the dream; it was hyssop (hydricus officinalis). I read some of the detail, “Hyssop flowers grow in long spikes of either blue or a deep pink and have a heavy fragrant scent that makes it a popular bee plant. Hyssop is an ancient herb and was used in the Middle East many years before Christ” (Boxer and Back, 1980: 43). This description of the flowers and the fact that it was popular with bees suggested to me that it was a possible match; however I could not understand why I had been told it was like marjoram. That morning, when I got to work, I jokingly told my dream to Michael Whisson, my supervisor and then head of department. He gave me a bemused look, but did not say much and went into his office. Ten minutes later he appeared in my office carrying a Bible. “Read this” he told me “I know hyssop features in the Bible, so I have been checking through the different versions of the Bible I have in my office”. He showed me a section out of the Bible and instead of referring to hyssop this particular version called it marjoram. It had an asterisk near the word and the footnote said, ‘Hyssop.’ Hyssop was a plant used in numerous rituals (especially connected with animal sacrifice) in the times of the Old Testament and was used principally for cleansing and purifying purposes. There is uncertainty, however, whether this was the same as hydricus officinalis or another similar plant, since the latter did not grow in Palestine. For instance, Harrison is of the opinion that,

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6 There are numerous references in the Bible to hyssop (or marjoram) eg. Exodus 12: 22, Leviticus 14:4, 6, 52, Numbers 19:6, 18, Hebrews 9: 19, 1 Kings 4: 33, John 19:29. A search through the web reveals numerous associations between hyssop and marjoram; although debate exists as to which particular plant is being referred to in the Bible.
Most modern botanists both in and out of Palestine...think that the hyssop of old is the *Origanum maru* L., the little grayish-green marjoram plant or za'atar of Modern Palestine....At all events, it seems probable that the hyssop, whether it was the marjoram or some other plant, enjoyed its ritual popularity because it was of sufficiently small proportions to admit of its being used in a bunch to form an aromatic aspersgillum or sprinkler for the various ritual performances (Harrison, 1954: 219).

This coincidental discovery that linked marjoram with hyssop made me appreciate the potential significance of the dream; however, I had no idea what I should do about it especially when it became evident that hyssop is not a plant found growing naturally in the southern hemisphere; its most common distribution being around the Mediterranean regions of the Near East. I was only able to follow up the dream four months later when I visited Baba. However, what I interpret as another significant incident happened before this visit occurred. While I had been at the hospital giving some lectures I had been recounting some of my interesting experiences and dreams with a nursing colleague. We were standing in the garden exactly where I had felt myself to be in the dream. As I was recounting the dream a swarm of bees just appeared out of nowhere and we were surrounded by them. They were not aggressive and soon moved off, however we were both struck by the coincidence of my describing the presence of bees in my dream and the sudden appearance of them whilst discussing it; I felt that they were re-enforcing the importance of the dream and that I should not ignore it. I was to later discover that the Cape Nguni regard bees as a common form in which the ancestors manifest.

In early October that same year (1997) I went up to visit Baba as he was to be ordained as a minister of a branch of one of the many Zionist Churches that exist in the province, and all his trainees, both past and present, were being urged to ‘join’ his church (see Chapter Eight for more details); this event was also followed by the final *umgidi* (i.e. initiation ceremony) of one of his *ithwasa* trainees. At the end of all these ritual events I was able to have a divination session with him in his ancestral hut while he communicated with the *amakhosi*. I told him my dream of being shown a plant called hyssop, knowing well that he would have no idea what it was since it does not grow in South Africa. He did look unsure, but asked the *amakhosi* if they had heard my dream. The whistles replied and Baba said “Yes, they say you have identified the plant correctly”. I then asked what I was supposed to do with it, and again he directed the
question and the whistles replied; he said “They say you must put it in a cream and put it on your body. It will protect you from evil”. I was struck by this suggested mode of administration since using plants in creams is not a standard practice in Zulu herbalism; it suggested to me that Baba was not just making things up. He then added that because this plant was used in the Bible (I had told him), it meant that I had “the spirit for the Church” (the Holy Spirit) and he would need to come down to my home and consecrate a shrine for that purpose, where I could pray. Several weeks later he arrived in Grahamstown with an entourage of izangoma to install my shrine (see Chapter Eight, Section 8.5). I was not able to find any hyssop plants and eventually had to resort to purchasing the purified extract from overseas - I have used this every day ever since. My final surprise relating to this dream came nearly six years later when I was able to visit a site I had been shown in my dreams near Trikala in Greece, connected to the ancient Greek God of Healing, Asclepius. It was here that I found hyssop, very similar to that which I had been shown in my dream, growing profusely on the hill slopes near a spring to which I was later told in a dream to go.

This example of a dream, and its unfolding revelation and interpretation, is common to many of the other dreams I have had. What is evident in this dream was that although the izangoma claim that they are frequently shown plants in their dreams for purposes of protection, healing and/or training, this particular plant and the context in which it was shown was not linked in any way to a Zulu cultural context. I was shown the plant in the grounds of a hospital (a western place of healing at which my own experiences and history were embedded); the plant was not part of the Zulu pharmacopoeia and did not occur naturally in the southern hemisphere, nor had I ever encountered it before; it took both ancient texts (the Bible) and modern resources (the Internet Web) to unravel its potential significance; but it took Zulu methods of divination (the amakhosi) to further clarify it; and in recounting my dream to a skeptical colleague he provided me with additional input (the Bible), and acted as a more

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7 It is possible that I could have led Baba to this interpretation, as I had told him when recounting my dream that I had discovered it was mentioned in the Bible.

8 I cleansed myself with the herb for three days before I had the dream in which a voice told me where to go.

9 Over the years I have been shown a number of other plants, but all of these were local and known and used by the Zulu for various ritual purposes.
objective and unbiased verifier of my dream and its possible interpretation.

6.2.2 The Bavarian feast dream – November 1999

The hyssop dream was straightforward and did not require interpretation of its symbolism (beyond Baba’s interpretation that it was connected to the Holy Spirit and what to do with it). There have been dreams that were more symbolic. For instance in 1999 a film company from the USA approached me to be an advisor on a documentary they were planning on shamanism. I had initially agreed in the hope that it might provide me with funds to do more research. However the night after I had written to accept their invitation I had a vivid dream, I was sitting at a table having been invited to dinner by a group of foreign people, and in particular there was a group of Germans. There was a delicious looking platter full of a mixture of my favourite seafood being passed around, and in the dream I was feeling very hungry. The plate was passed to the group of Germans at the end of the table and I was stricken to see that they were eating all the contents of the platter amongst themselves. I was shocked at their rudeness as I could see they had no intention of leaving me any. When the platter finally came to me it was empty, save for a small scrap of lettuce.

It took a bit of contemplation to work out the significance of the dream, but when I reduced it to its key symbols I realized its potential meaning, “I had been invited by a group of foreigners, including Germans, to partake in a joint activity, a feast, but on joining them I had been snubbed and left with the morsels of the feast” – I felt it could only be a reference to my recent invitation to participate in the foreign documentary, although I was not sure as to the significance of the Germans. The dream had a definite psychological effect on me and I felt a strong physical reluctance (a ‘gut’ feel) that compelled me to write and pull out of the deal immediately. My dilemma was how I was going to account for my sudden change of heart in less than twenty four hours. I decided that the only way was to be honest, so I wrote an e-mail to the lady explaining to her my dream and my decision to pull out. She replied immediately, saying she understood and respected my decision. She only wished that I had been able to warn her about my dream the previous day as her agency had just had a meeting with their

10 The Zulu diviners recognize this fluttering feeling in the upper abdomen as a warning sign from the ancestors. They term it umbelini. I have noticed this physical effect with a number of dreams that I have had.
German co-producers which had been extremely disappointing. It seemed that they too (the USA group) were “on the wrong side of the Bavarian feast” and were also going to be denied an adequate share of the proceeds from the German co-producers.

As I felt this Bavarian Feast dream had no relevance to my training as an isangoma, I never considered reporting it to Baba. I was able to work it out for myself and deal with it, thankful that I had received what I interpreted to be an accurate and reliable warning.

Having outlined the nature of some of my dreams and the processes of their interpretation, it is now necessary for me to turn to my dreams that were distinctly cross-cultural and were framed within the context of the water divinity complex, which is the main focus of this study. However, I must emphasize that these dreams and the subsequent rituals that were performed can only be adequately understood within the context of my personal family history that is embedded in Zimbabwe. Although I have already given some background to this in the introduction, certain events that were transpiring at the time of my calling were highly relevant to not only my dreams and my training, but also to Baba and Zanele’s involvement with my family.

6.3 Crossing boundaries – dreams and the Zimbabwe crisis
In early 1997 just after I had been incorporated into Baba’s isibaya I had a strong dream that left me mystified as to its potential meaning and significance. In the dream I was in a car with several other people driving along the dirt road on my brother’s farm in Zimbabwe. As we were about to leave the farm gates I noticed a crowd of Zulu izangoma dressed up in traditional gear singing and ululating excitedly and waving to me in a very friendly manner. It felt like they were guarding the gates for me. I never reported this dream to Baba because I was not sure of its significance at the time, but with hindsight I understand it to be deeply prognostic of my and the izangoma’s future involvement in the crisis that was to engulf my family in Zimbabwe. In November 1997, under pressure from disgruntled war veterans, President Robert Mugabe launched his campaign for the appropriation of land from white Zimbabwean farmers, and my two brothers were amongst those who stood to lose their properties and livelihoods. However, just prior to their receiving the letters notifying them of impending appropriation I was to have another powerful dream. This one occurred when I was on the point of giving up my ‘calling’ to be a thwasa, as I felt it was becoming too difficult for
my family to cope with.

6.3.1 The shrine of Dzivaguru dream- November 1997

In the dream I was walking in the Zambezi Valley. Behind me I could hear a procession of musicians, playing drums, cymbals and trumpets. I was walking westwards and was aware that the Zambezi River was on my right hand side. I found myself walking through a forest of trees but it was very light and the trees appeared white. I then emerged from the forest onto a dry rocky outcrop and saw to my left a towering range of mountains rising high into the clouds. Suddenly I realized that I was underground (or underwater) and I was in a large cavernous chamber. I could see an enormous door in front of me but it was made up of the vast roots of an old tree. As I approached the door that rose high in front of me I saw a small man, wearing a cloak and a saffron yellow cap (like a Buddhist monk), creeping away from the door and into the shadows. He gave me a knowing smile and disappeared. I then found myself up close to the door and felt its knotted root texture with my hands. Suddenly a voice spoke to me and said “Behind this door lies the Book of Knowledge”.

This powerful statement woke me up and I knew immediately that on no account should I give up. However, it soon became apparent to me that there was more to the dream than this. This realization came about a week after the dream when I was given Jim Latham’s anthropology Master’s thesis (1986) to read by one of my colleagues. It was based on Latham’s experiences in the Zambezi Valley during the Zimbabwe War of Liberation. In his thesis Latham discusses the Cult of Dzivaguru that is found in the north-east region of Zimbabwe and makes frequent mention of the beliefs in the njuzu (mermaids) in the area. This thesis proved to be most enlightening not only because the Shona descriptions of the njuzu (see Chapters Three and Four) were remarkably similar to the stories told among the Xhosa and Zulu, but it was one particular section, however, that captured my attention and evoked the images that had occurred in my dream. It read,

The Mukumbura river rises in the upland “Kandeya Communal Land” – traditionally the land of the Dotito nyika [chieftdom], called Nyombwe. It flows east to skirt a huge buttress of the Mvuradonha [mountain range] and then drops down, northwards into the valley before swinging westwards in its quest for the Zambezi. For much of its westward course it forms the boundary between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Into the Mukumbura flow small tributary streams that rise in the Mvuradonha. There perennial pools along their courses provide water in the dry season. One such is the pool of Nyamakati, near a low gravelly hill called Nhenene. On Nhenene hill is a grove of trees – Mitimichena. Mitimichena means white trees, pale trees or even bright trees. In this
case the trees in question are Kirkia Acuminata or, in the local dialect, Mutuwa (pl. Mituwa). Beneath these grey barked trees on Nhenene hill is the dongo (deserted or abandoned village) of Kuruva. Karuva was the mythical son of Dzivaguru (Latham 1986: 133-134).

According to Latham “Dzivaguru is the Creator and the Muridzi we Pasi, the original one who owns the Earth” (ibid: 150). As his/her name\textsuperscript{11} suggests and as has already been discussed in Chapter Five, Dzivaguru (lit. The Great Pool) is intimately associated with rain, water and the fertility of the earth. Although Dzivaguru is a Godlike figure, Kuruva, the son, was a mortal who resided beneath the trees of Mitimichena, and when the country was invaded by the Korekore, Karuva and his people, with their livestock, submerged themselves into the Nyamakati Pool rather than becoming their vassals. As I read the above passage by Latham, I had the suspicion that it could well be the same place as in my dream. Although Karuva is described as a human, Latham’s description of Karuva’s continuing presence at the pool contains similar features to those described for the njuzu: “Karuva and his people live in a watery heaven with Dzivaguru, beneath the surface of the [Nyamakati] pool, where his herds graze on lush pastures and all is perfect. On clear nights when the moon is full one can hear them singing as they dance to their drums. They even emerge from the pool, but should you disturb them by coming too close, they instantly submerge” (Latham, 1986: 136-137; see also Bourdillon, 1979/99).

The time that I was reading this thesis coincided with the devastating news that my family had received the so-called ‘Section 8’ eviction notices to vacate their homes and farms. They had been told they would receive no remuneration for the land which they had purchased and a vague assurance that they would receive twenty five percent of improvements to the land\textsuperscript{12}. On the same day I heard this terrible news, Baba phoned me to ask me if everything was alright. I did not mention our bad news but found it strange he had phoned me (the only time he ever

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\textsuperscript{11} Although Latham refers to this deity as a ‘him’ there are passages where, like Nthoi (2006), he acknowledges the ambivalent gender status and suggests that Dzivaguru could indeed be a dual male/female or androgynous entity much like Mwari who is revered in the south east of Zimbabwe. Nthoi is of the opinion that Dzivaguru is a praise name of Mwari and refers to the God’s feminine aspect as the ‘great pool’ (ibid: 22).

\textsuperscript{12} In the end virtually no farmer who was evicted got anywhere near this amount of compensation. Most lost everything and were left with no compensation at all.
has) on that day and wondered if he could sense the distress I was in. I eventually decided to ask my siblings who lived in KwaZulu-Natal to pay him a visit to inform him of the news. His response was that he had been in communication with his ancestors and they had instructed him to go and help my family, and he insisted that this be done as soon as possible. Thus, I had to make rapid arrangements for travel documents and within two weeks, my young daughter and I, Baba, Zanele and another *isangoma* were on our 1500 km journey north. Within a few days of our arrival at the farm Baba had done a special protection ritual (called *ukubetela*) on both my brother’s farms and their houses. The places they specifically focused on for ritual protection were at the gates to both the houses and the farms. One night, as we were doing the ritual protection at the entrance gates to one of my brother’s farms, I sensed the significance of the dream I had received some months earlier, described at the beginning of this section. It was at this gate where the group of *izangoma* was waving enthusiastically to me in my dream.

It was on this first visit to my family with the *izangoma* that I was to discover that Timothy (pseudonym), a Shona gentleman who had long assumed the position in my mother and stepfather’s home as their caretaker and protector, was himself a diviner, a *svikiro*, whose own father, Robert, had reputedly been taken under water. Robert had worked for many years at a gold stamping mill that belonged to my step-father in the Kadoma region. According to Timothy, his father worked with the *njuzu*, and the python also featured strongly in his experiences. He claimed that Robert would regularly go to the river and visit the underwater realm and would return with medicines as well as having a python (*nshato*) wrapped around his shoulders and waist. He remembers his father showing him the plants he had to fetch for healing while under water. While under water he claimed his eyes were ‘cleared’ so that he was able ‘to see all things’, and as a result he was reputed to be a very powerful diviner. He remembers how he used to keep a skin from a sixteen foot python in the eves of his house. Timothy’s father came from the Mhondoro region of Zimbabwe, while his mother’s family was originally from the clan Muthimakhu in South Africa. Although Timothy has not been taken underwater, he told me he had inherited some of his father’s powers and he was often

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13 *Ukubetela* is a frequent service offered by *izangoma* in KwaZulu-Natal as its ability to supernaturally protect homesteads from the evil intentions of others is legendary. I never asked Baba to do this for my family; he insisted it had to be done on the instructions of his amakhosi. Although the technique varies widely between different healers it usually involves the use of the owner’s *intsila* (or body dirt) that is washed off using special herbs that have been heated in water, which is then sprinkled around the homestead.
shown plants for healing in his dreams. He described how he then collected the plants and put them under his pillow at night when he was shown in his dreams how they should be prepared and applied. He also claimed he had frequent dreams of the water and the njuzu.

Not only was Timothy to give me this fascinating account of his father’s claimed experiences and skills but he was to prove invaluable in breaching the language divide between the Shona and Zulu (he is fluent in Ndebele which is a Zulu dialect). It was Timothy who accompanied our party to visit the shrine of Dzivaguru and to plead on our behalf (see below). This remarkable coincidence of finding that the man who had taken care of my parents for many years was apparently connected to the water divinities was augmented by the discovery that the gardener who worked for one of my brothers had reputedly been taken under the water in Zambia. Unfortunately, as he was a very shy and self-effacing man, and I was never able to get his full story, save for his saying he had been underwater and him showing me a small bracelet of red, white and blue beads that he claimed he had received while underwater. According to my brother, he was renowned in the area as working with very powerful medicines and was regularly consulted by clients who came from far and wide. Both he and Timothy were to participate and assist in the later ritual sacrifice done on my behalf that was performed at my brother’s farm in 2002.

Prior to leaving for Zimbabwe I had told Baba during a consultation in his emakhoseni about my dream of the Zambezi Valley and my suspicions that it may have been related to the cult centre of Dzivaguru/Karuta. He had consulted with the amakhosi and they whistled back the response that I was correct. He then elaborated that they wished me to go there as they wanted to give me two pieces of gold. He agreed that he would accompany me to the place after he had assisted my family protecting the farm. What is striking about this message regarding the gift of gold that Baba relayed to me is its similarity to the accounts given by Jacobson-Widding entitled “The girl who got gold” (see Appendix Twelve), and Matowanyika and

14 I have not managed to trace any ethnographic texts that deal with this issue in Zambia, but this discovery suggests that it is also known about there as well.

15 These are the same coloured beads worn by Zulu izangoma, but Turner (1967) has noted that for the Ndembu they are important ritual colours.
Madondo (1994: 89, see also Chapter One, Section 1.3.2); I have never encountered any local Zulu accounts of people receiving gold from the water divinities, so Baba’s divination appeared to be in agreement with the cultural context (and the mineral wealth) of Zimbabwe, and this served to strengthen my conviction about the genuineness of his divination skills. After completing the protection rituals we then took a long and fairly hazardous journey (because of political tensions and numerous police roadblocks encountered on the way) to the Zambezi Valley, beyond Mt Darwin, where we were able to reach the village of the guardian of the Dzivaguru shrine, Chief Chigango. Sadly, the political tensions in the area became very evident and we were questioned deep into the night as to our intentions by local ZANU-PF operatives assigned to guard the area. After hours of negotiation we were not able to get to the pool, or even consult with the local spirit medium, as they were evidently both closely monitored and controlled by the government\(^{16}\). The only way the authorities would consider my claim that I had been sent there in my dream was if I became possessed by the spirit that directed me there, something which Baba argued a Zulu isangoma does not have to do, as their divinatory powers are not based purely on spirit possession. After four hours of intensive negotiations that went on under the full moon in front of a large audience in the centre of the village, and which also involved me having to drive to get police clearance at a remote station on the Mozambique border some distance away, Baba’s patience snapped. Amid protestations and apologies from the villagers who could sense his anger, he summoned up the amakhosi. Their whistles emanated from a tree in the centre of the village, and with Timothy acting as translator, he told the surprised villagers of the amakhosi’s deep sadness at the poor hospitality we received having traveled so far. It was midnight as we hurried for the vehicle parked up on the hill; the night was clear and I could clearly hear singing and drumming coming from the valley below us. I wondered if I may have heard Kuruva’s underwater festivities coming from the Nyamakati Pool (see Latham’s description above), as the conditions were perfect – it was midnight, full moon and a cloudless sky.

Several years later, in 2007, Timothy was to tell me that on the night after our aborted visit to

\(^{16}\) On our arrival at the village we had been pulled aside by a local man who had nervously told us that the last spirit medium had recently been murdered, after his hut had been set alight. We were also told that the present chief was not popular as he was perceived as being too ‘weak’ i.e. he was not able to resist control of the shrine by local ZANU-PF agents.
the Nyamakati Pool he had a dream where he was standing looking at a small pool and said that although it looked shallow it was actually very deep (although we never got to see it the Nyamakati Pool is reputedly quite small and deep). He could see many brightly coloured fishes swimming in it. They were jumping in the water and playing. Then he saw that I was swimming with the fishes and I was like a fish (i.e. a mermaid). “That is when I knew you were strong for the water” he told me (i.e. that I was in some way connected to the water divinities).

We returned to KwaZulu-Natal two days later, and on arrival at Baba’s homestead he instructed us to go immediately to his shrine room, where he spoke to the amakhosi telling them about our trip \(^{17}\) and the problems encountered at the shrine of Dzivaguru. He told me that although they seemed satisfied that the protection for my family had gone off well, they were aggrieved about the obstruction we had at Chief Chigango’s village as they still had something there that they wanted to give me (gold). I would have to go another time, but first I needed to undergo the *mpophoma* ritual in order to make my next attempt easier. *Mpophoma* refers to the foam that often emanates from turbulent water such as at a waterfall, and according to Zanele this is a special ritual that is not often performed; the main purpose, from what I could gather, is that it will help clear the way for something to happen. Early the next morning I was taken down to a small waterfall that poured over a weir on the stream below his house. Baba was ecstatic to see that there were lots of eddies of foam, especially near the waterfall and on the banks of the stream. There had been a heavy thundershower the previous night, and Baba was convinced it was because the ancestors were anticipating us to do the *Mpophoma* ritual and had thus ensured there was plenty of foam in the water. I had my Holy Spirit woollen cord put around my waist and Baba instructed me to go and stand under the waterfall and pray to my ancestors, telling them the problems we encountered while in Zimbabwe. He then approached me and taking my head and shoulder in his hands he thrust my head in and out of the waterfall seven times. I then had to go downstream to the river bank and continue to pray to the ancestors for their help in getting me back to the Nyamakati Pool at a later date. We then returned to his *emakhoseni*, lit *imphepho* and informed the ancestors that we had completed the ritual.

\(^{17}\) We had driven more than 7000kms on this trip.
After ten years I still have not attempted to go back to the Nyamakati Pool mainly because the political situation has continued to deteriorate. The protection rituals, however, did initially seem to have a positive effect and within a month of the rituals being performed my brother had a letter informing him that his farm had been taken off the acquisition list. However, they were not spared numerous invasion attempts, arrests for growing crops, regular court cases and other such stressful obstructive actions. By early 2008 they still remained on their properties, albeit on much smaller acreages, even though almost ninety five per cent of the white farmers in the country had been evicted from their farms. As a result of his help, even though I gave him some money in thanks, I have always felt deeply indebted to Baba for his kindness to my family that he had never even met before. Sadly, after the controversial May 2008 elections when the country descended into further chaos, they were eventually evicted and their farms taken over by the military elite.

This section demonstrates that while the political dimension to ritual may be very evident, it is not the primary motivating factor involved. If the ancestors are concerned for the physical and social welfare of their descendants, then the political context they find themselves in is a dimension that is as important as any other. It was to a large extent this generous assistance that Baba had given to my family, under dangerous and difficult conditions that helped them realize it was important to assist me in my own training. My sibling's skepticism of the effectiveness of African medicine and ritual had also been seriously challenged. It was to be challenged even more when the pythons started to visit their homes just before and after a ritual they helped me perform on the farm in December 2002. In the next section I turn to how the Snake of the water and the pythons became important features in my dreams and how I understand the beliefs and experiences relating to them have led the process of my training.

6.4 Experiencing the water divinities
As already outlined in the introduction, on my first consultation with Baba he had explained to

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18 Just before one of these invasion attempts my brother had a dream that Baba was warning him that the war veterans were about to invade his farm. They arrived at his gate the next day.
me that my talent came from the Snake in the river located on the farm where I grew up in Nyanga, Zimbabwe. It was not long after my induction into his isibaya in June 1997 that I was to get my first dream of snakes, and which he saw as confirmation of his pronouncement. This dream was very metaphorical and required interpretation from Baba. It also coincided with two snake dreams that my (then) six year old daughter had, which Baba regarded as most significant.

_Dolphin and ‘train’ dream, Sept 1997:_
I dreamed I was on the beach (where we regularly visit) and a group of dolphins came swimming towards me as I stood on the shoreline. The leader of the group beached itself right onto the sand near my feet and looked up at me, calling as if to tell me something. I then found my face was level with its face and I could feel we were rubbing our cheeks together. I could feel the damp texture of its skin and saw its eye looking into mine. It then cast its eye back to sea as if showing me something. I could see the other dolphins getting agitated and beginning to swim back to sea, and suddenly beyond them I saw a large red train rising out of the water.

My daughter’s dreams were also at the same beach, but they were of the cottage that we often stayed in. In her first dream she said I was sitting at the kitchen table with Baba and a group of izangoma. A big snake that was golden brown with red zigzags and spots slithered into the room and as she was scared it was after her, she had jumped onto the middle of the table we were sitting around. The snake started to climb up one of the chair legs where we were sitting, so she had jumped off the table, but the snake continued up and curled up on top of the table. A short while later she had another snake dream, again it was at the beach cottage and this time she described the snake as large, silvery white and ‘twinkling’, but she could not see its head. She said I was trying to pull it out of a fissure in the passage-way floor.

I had recounted these three dreams to Baba a few months later when he was driving a group of us to attend a ritual at Impendle. On hearing them he screeched with delight. In response to my dolphin and train dream he said, “That was your (ancestral) snake; the dolphin is the

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19 My daughter had accompanied me to Baba’s homestead on several occasions, and she had also been with us on our first journey to Zimbabwe in 1997.

20 This description of a shimmering snake that does not reveal its head is remarkably like those described in Section 4.3.2.1 of Chapter Four. I had never mentioned these ideas to my daughter and it is unlikely it was something she would have heard about.
messenger and he was bringing you to the snake. The train you saw was not a train but a snake. The train (stimela) is the same as (symbolic of) the snake because it goes zigzag like a snake; they showed you a train because you may be scared to see the snake." The response to my daughter's dream was that the snake she saw was the same colour (the red and gold one) as Baba's snake (i.e. his amakhosi). In his opinion the white Snake was very powerful, a representation of iNkosi yeZulu (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3). According to Baba and Zanele my young daughter dreamt about them because she was pure (i.e. she was a virgin), but the dream was actually intended as a message for me.

It was after this dream that Baba said he needed to take me to the sea, which he planned to do when he came down to my home to set up my shrine for the Holy Spirit (following the hyssop dream). However, although I took him down to the sea on that occasion he performed no rituals for me. He was even quite nervous to go near to the water's edge, even though on one occasion, in a very comical way, he had donned my son's wetsuit and had taken his surfboard off to the beach. He sat on top of the surfboard, about ten metres from the tide line, and nervously watched the sea21.

6.4.1 My first ritual initiation (umgidi)

After our return from Zimbabwe in December 1997, described above, Baba, obviously impressed at how he thought my dreams had progressed, had informed me in his emakhoseni that my ancestors wanted me to perform a sacrificial ritual which would lead me to become a fully fledged diviner, in February 1998. I was somewhat surprised at this insistence since I definitely did not feel ready for it, and knew I still had a lot to learn22. I also had not had any dreams to show me that this should be done. Zanele had also thought this decision a bit strange, but out of deference to Baba, did not want to question him. He had earlier indicated that I should ideally have it done at my elder brother's farm in Zimbabwe and he wanted to take a large bus load of izangoma up to attend the ritual. I had been extremely reluctant to do this, as my family were stressed with the political situation and one of my brothers, an elder in the church, had already indicated he would draw the line at sacrificing an animal. It would also

21 Zanele's explanation for this was that Baba is actually very nervous of going near the sea because if he has angered the ancestors by doing things wrong he may be taken under, never to return.
22 He had still not taught me the techniques of divination or anything on medicinal plants.
be a huge financial strain on my own and their resources to transport, obtain passports for, and host a large group of izangoma from South Africa. I was also still struggling to deal with the cultural shock myself. As a result of this reluctance Baba suggested that I do the ritual at his homestead, which I agreed to with some relief. Even though I understood the principle of why an animal sacrifice was necessary, the idea of it being done for me in front of family or friends who did not understand it was quite abhorrent. The umgidi (final initiation party) was thus scheduled to take place at Baba’s homestead for February 13\textsuperscript{th}-15\textsuperscript{th} 1998. Nearly three weeks before the ritual I had a strong dream which featured a brown cow, which was interpreted by Baba as the one chosen by my ancestors for the ritual, and which we subsequently obtained for the sacrifice. The dream again featured a train, but this time a reddish-brown cow had been sent to me by my brother in Zimbabwe via a train (= snake/ancestors). A week later I had another dream, which I did not think was relevant at the time, apart from it being quite delightful. In this dream I was in a vegetable garden picking tomatoes when I suddenly noticed a beautiful lilac fairy flying up and down in front of me, as if to attract my attention. Surprised, I watched her as she flew vertically up into the sky. A large opening appeared in the sky and I could hear a beautiful choir singing the song “Joy to the World”\textsuperscript{23}. The potential significance of this dream only occurred to me when we were preparing my final initiation skirt, which consisted of two layers of fabric both embroidered with beads. Baba had already sewn on the design on the lower red skirt, which was of a large snake eating a fish, and with a half moon and full moon. As I had not seen a similar design on any other izangoma’s skirts I asked him why he chose that design. He merely said it was what he was shown to do by the amakhosi. The top skirt made of black fabric, however, I was free to embroider with white beads in any design I wanted, but he said I had to include the words of a song my ancestors had given me in a dream. Although I had not told him about the fairy dream, I suspected that this must be what he was referring to, and so I had to stitch beads that spelt out “Joy to the World” (in English) onto my skirt. It was these two dreams that I took to reassure me that maybe Baba was right and that my ancestors were happy for me to be going ahead as planned.

The three day ritual, although very stressful and tiring for me, was performed with apparent

\textsuperscript{23} This is a popular Christmas carol celebrating the coming of the Saviour that was written by Isaac Watts and adapted into the musical score of Handel’s Messiah.
success, attended by well over fifty other izangoma, amathwasa, neighbours and Baba’s family. As it was very complex and long I do not have space to describe it in detail here (see Berglund [1976] for more details on such initiation rituals), except to explain that the idea behind the sacrifice (of which for me a number of chickens, two goats and a cow were sacrificed) is to feed, strengthen and clean the ancestors, and to set up a direct connection between the supplicants, the gifts (the chickens, goats and cow) and the supplicant’s ancestors. After the sacrifice the meat is carved up and divided in a specific way, and certain small portions, which are eaten raw, or lightly barbequed, is carefully distributed to various participants (especially the initiate and his/her family, and some fellow izangoma). The meat and carcass is left as an offering for the initiate’s ancestors to ‘eat’ at the ancestral shrine overnight. The next day the rest of the meat is consumed by all the guests. Although every part of the animal is regarded as being highly charged with ancestral presence, the liver, intsonyama (certain meat from the right foreleg) and bile are regarded as the most potent. The blood, as it pours from the severed neck of the beast, is regarded as containing the power (amandla) of the ancestors to whom it was consecrated, and a small amount should be drunk by the initiate, which I did with a fair degree of reluctance. At the culmination of the ritual the bile was smeared onto my body, dribbled into my mouth and head, and added to the two buckets of ubulawu: the foam of which I then had to drink, and the blown up gall bladders (the bodily containers of the bile) were blown up and placed on my white beaded headdress (umyeko). The goat’s skins were cut in strips and placed around my wrists (iziphandla) and in a bandolier fashion over my chest (iminqwamba), while the cow’s tail, the umshoba, was mounted on a special stick and placed in my hand. The ritual is also a typical rite of passage whereby the novice, who has been in a liminal state during training, is re-introduced to the

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24 The number of animals sacrificed depends on the dreams one gets from the ancestors. Some have as many as four head of cattle and ten goats. These are not necessarily all for the benefit of the individual’s agnatic group but may be for each of the novice’s four grandparents groups.

25 Because I did not have this performed for me at home Baba set up a temporary shrine for me in the hut where the three day ritual took place. It was marked off with two long strips of material, one white and one red, at the base of which reed mats, buckets of ubulawu and candles were placed. Some months later we had to do a ritual which would relocate the ancestrally empowered shrine to my home in Grahamstown (see Chapter Seven).

26 One bucket contained ubulawu for my male ancestors, while the other was for my female ancestors. Different plants were used for each of these.

27 For more details on the Zulu diviner initiation ritual and symbolism see Berglund (1976:154 -185).
community and family (mine were not present\textsuperscript{28}) in her new role as an isangoma, and this is symbolised when she is led out of the hut by her trainer, dressed in her new isangoma uniform, to the crowds of guests waiting outside. Music and dancing pervade the whole three day period, both in between and during the intermittent ritual activities.

Because of my alleged ancestral association with the river, an important part of my ritual involved being taken down to the river for the ukulanda mndawu (to fetch mndawu) ritual with two of Baba’s assistant ritual specialists, a woman called Matreki (pseudonym), and the young isangoma Thandi, who had reputedly gone underwater as a small child\textsuperscript{29}. This took place after the ritual sacrifice of the cow in the morning of the second day (the goats had been sacrificed in the hut during the previous evening). For the river ritual we were accompanied by a large group of mainly female izangoma and amalhwasa. Before leaving, all of us women had to strip down to our brassieres from the waist up, and had white veils placed over our heads. With Matreki leading us, singing strongly to the accompaniment of drumming, and with a large bucket of ubulawu on her head, we followed her down to the stream below Baba’s house. I had to carry a live brindled (black and white) mpangele chicken\textsuperscript{30}. At the river I had to give the chicken to another thwasa who went a short distance downstream and sat with the chicken’s feet dangling in the water. Some powdered red root (impande) was sprinkled upstream of the chicken so that it flowed down to the chicken. I was instructed to kneel next to the water (upstream of the chicken) and was given a handful of the impande, while Matreki beat the ubulawu into thick foam. I was then instructed to lick the red powder off my hands and drink it down with copious amounts of the ubulawu. I then had to go downstream and with my feet in the water, I had to pray to my ancestors to ‘come out’ of the river. Then all the other members of the group also partook of the impande and ubulawu. Following this we all sat in the grass by the edge of the river, while the tempo of the drumming increased. This was the sign we had to do the mndawu form of dance. The dance is done by women and described in English as “dancing on your bottom”, where one sits cross legged, and bounces up and

\textsuperscript{28} As will be seen in the next chapter this absence of my family members proved to be a problem.

\textsuperscript{29} Note that Berglund does not mention these river rituals in his analysis of diviner initiation rituals.

\textsuperscript{30} The mpangele (lit. the guinea fowl) chicken is the black and white coloured chicken specifically sacrificed for the female ancestors of the initiate.
down on one’s bottom in rhythm to a drum beat, while striking one’s shoulders with two sticks held in one’s hands with the arms crossed at the chest, and head thrown back.

According to Baba and Zanele mndawu is done specifically for the female component of the initiate’s ancestors (on both the mother’s and father’s side), and the aim is to attract their presence to the initiate, by bringing them up from the reproductive areas to the head. Many women go into fits of possession at this stage, which they did on this occasion. This dance completed the ritual and I was returned to the hut while still clutching the chicken, which was then taken and its throat was cut. The blood was sprinkled over me, and then it was included in the feast. Unfortunately I was unable to get anymore detail on some of the aspects of this ritual, like why everyone else also partook of the ubulawu and impande, when the ritual was supposedly for me to bring my ancestors out of the water. Zanele said she was unfamiliar with many of its elements since this was not a ‘true Zulu’ ritual, but one which Baba had acquired knowledge of while he was training in Gazankulu (linking with mndawu’s northern origins – see footnote 29, this Chapter); and Baba did not volunteer any further information for me. It was however quite clearly a ritual dominated by women, and which linked them with their female ancestors that were associated with water. I had not, however, been shown that river in a dream. The stream was associated with Baba’s amakhosi and we were situated just downstream from a deep pool where Baba’s ancestors were reputed to reside in the form of a snake.

Unfortunately at the time of this first umgidi (first initiation) I was unaware of the potential problems that can arise during a sacrifice or how important it was for other members of the

31 I am still unsure of these explanations, as Chang (1998) has noted that in Northern Zululand amandawu is specifically connected to alien spirits. Ngubane (1977) and Reis (2000) have also connected them to alien spirits, while Hammond-Tooke (1989) has interpreted them to be “troubling” ancestral spirits, presumably those for who appropriate mortuary rituals have not been performed. Zanele’s explanation supports Hammond-Tooke’s view and she denies the suggestion that they are alien spirits (see also Wreford, 2008). She is of the opinion that they relate to one’s own female antecedents (from both the mother’s and father’s side) who have not been incorporated into the ancestral body. Similarly, she saw the mndiki spirits as the male spirits from both the mother’s and father’s side who have not been incorporated into the ancestral body. She did indicate, however, that the ritual has its origins connected with some group that used to live north of Zululand (? Ndau), but she was vague on this matter. There is a link with ubulawu as it is divided into three different categories (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3).

32 These are deceased female spirits of the living who were affiliated with the water. These are not the same as the fish-tailed beings (mermaids).
family to be present, even though one of my brothers, my sister and mother had come to visit Baba at his *emakhoseni* just prior to the ritual being performed. Normally it is important for the beast to be offered to the ancestors by the eldest male in the agnatic line, prior to it being immolated. As I had no family members present in this first ritual, Baba introduced me to my ancestors and then I called them by name (my four grandparents and my father) and offered the beast to them. The actual immolation was done by a male *thwasa*, and the beast bellowed, which signified that my ancestors had accepted it. My lack of cultural sophistication, however, made me unaware of how risky it could be to do such rituals away from one’s own homestead, where devious people could interfere with the success of the ritual. It later emerged that there were suspicions and rumours of magical interference by jealous *izangoma* at this first ritual, and there were also some rumours amongst some of the diviners that not everything had been done correctly for me at the river. These suspicions were supported in a divination session I was to have several years later with a Xhosa diviner, Shorty (see Chapter, Section).

I had also been led to believe that at the end of the ritual I would be ‘taken up to the *amakhosi*’ by Baba in his shrine room. This is a secret procedure which few know about, but it would apparently give me the ability to communicate with the *amakhosi* (in the same manner as Baba) and be able to divine. For some reason Baba decided to abandon this part of the ritual, and neither Zanele nor I could persuade him to do it (he did not do it for Zanele either at her final *umgidi*). To be honest I was so exhausted and culturally shocked at this stage that I did not feel I had the physical or mental strength to handle it, and trusted that Baba would do the ‘taking up ritual’ when he felt the time was more appropriate. Despite these rumours of magical interference and things not having been done properly at the river, and this delay in being provided the culturally recognised means to have direct communication with the ancestors, I continued to have fairly strong and clear dreams.

### 6.4.2 More snake dreams

It was a few months after this first *umgidi* (final initiation) that I was to get a series of dreams, including ones involving snakes and pythons, which were interpreted by Baba that I needed to do yet another sacrifice, this time a black cow, at my brother’s home in Zimbabwe. Two of these dreams occurred in August 1998. The first one involving pythons swimming in a pool, came on my late father’s birthday.
Dream of pythons in the pool, 3rd August 1998

The dream started with me being in the back of my brother’s pick-up truck while he was reversing it into the garage at his farm in Zimbabwe. As I hopped off the back my brother gave an apple to me and his son who was also with us. The apples were sweet and delicious and I noticed he had a large container of them. As we walked out of the garage I got a good view of the Zimbabwean bush and rock covered hills (kopjes). Someone told us they had just seen elephant not far away and they were going to see them, and we could hear them trumpeting in the distance. I walked towards the swimming pool located on the lawn and as I approached it I was amazed to see two large pythons swimming fast around the perimeter of the pool, one following the other. Their skin was shimmering and multicoloured and had zigzag and diamond markings. The skin colour sparkled and changed colour as they swam, and every now and then their backs broke the surface of the water. I was aware that they were watching me as they swam. I rushed to tell my brother and his son, and warned them not to try and shoot them because they are a protected species. I knew the real reason was because they were our ancestors but reasoned they wouldn’t understand that. We got back to the pool and now the pythons were resting quietly, stretched out in the water, just looking at us. They were completely unthreatening. Suddenly it felt like I was underneath them at the bottom of the pool. There was a white goat and another animal with its mouth wide open standing on the bottom. A voice told me the animal was a hippopotamus. I then saw a small fox terrier dog sitting with them, seemingly very content. I was now out of the pool and was worried the pythons might try to strangle and eat the dog and I tried to call it out of the water. Suddenly another dog, my sister’s Staffordshire terrier that recently died, came bounding out of the pool to lick me and play. As we stood at the edge of the pool looking down at these beautiful creatures a big rumble of thunder broke out across the sky in my dream and I instantly woke up.

Dream of black cow, 15th August 1998

In the dream I was walking up the main street that runs between the main St Andrews College campuses, a boy’s private school in Grahamstown. I suddenly found myself amongst a flock of white goats and then a herd of cattle that were also walking up the road. I was so happy to be amongst these animals, especially the cattle, as they reminded me of my home in Zimbabwe. I started talking to them affectionately, telling them how beautiful they all were as they walked past me. Suddenly a large black cow came right up to me and confronted me head on. Its face was close to mine and I saw some patches of white on its forehead and noticed clearly that it had a right horn that was curved upwards but its left horn was either stunted, missing or pressed back. It seemed very fond of me and did not want to leave me.

I had phoned Zanele to tell her the first dream of the pythons and she had confirmed that it was very important and she would relay it on to Baba. Her interpretation was that it was extremely positive and important, starting with the apples which symbolise the gift (of knowledge) that my ancestors wanted to give me. It was definitely a dream visitation from my ancestors; one of the pythons symbolized my paternal ancestors while the other one symbolised my maternal
ancestors. To her the dream suggested that I may be taken under water and that was why they showed me the goat which would have to be sacrificed when I came out. The hippopotamus was one of my ‘family animals’ (i.e. an isilo). According to Zanele the thunder we heard was confirmation that my ancestors had come to visit me, as the thunder happens either when they arrive (like my first dream with my father’s visit – see Chapter One, Section 1.3.5), or when they leave (like it happened in this dream).

Zanele had relayed the dream to Baba, who had agreed with her interpretation and he urgently summoned me to visit him in relation to the python dream. At this stage I had still not told them about the black cow I had encountered in my dream near the school (see above). A month later I found myself in Baba’s emakhoseni listening to his consultation with the amakhosi regarding the significance of the python dream. I include extracts from the transcript below,

_divination transcript (1)_

Makhosi! I hear you great Makhosi, we hear you older men; we hear you handsome men of the royal house. We are asking from you great ancestors.....the sound of whistles.......they say hello. (1)

Makhosi! They say how are you? (2)

Makhosi! They say they hear and understand your dream. (3)

Makhosi! They say your brother has to buy you a plain white goat. (4)

Makhosi! They say when you are going to the river to meet them, the pot of ubulawu will be put on top of your head, when you are seated (in the water). (5)

Makhosi! They say the snake you dreamt about at the beginning, they were showing it to you in your dreams so that you will not be afraid of it, and you are not going to be afraid of it even now. (6)

Makhosi! They say when you come out (? of the water) the snake will come with you. It will be necessary that it must be killed and you wear its ‘umqombo’ (skin) which goes along with this goat (i.e. the goat skin - this is worn across the chest). (7)

Makhosi! They say even when you are dreaming, elder people/ancestors arrive and the shadow of the snake makes it like someone is pressing you down. When that happens the signs (nkomba) are in you. (8)

Makhosi! They say after the ‘umsebenzi’ (ritual sacrifice) has been finished, then your family will have to give thanks for you being saved after all this being in the snake (the water). They (i.e. my family) must give thanks by slaughtering the cow which they showed you (in the dream). (9)

Makhosi! They say they showed you a cow with one horn (right). (10)
They say there must be fish and pork\(^{33}\) for the braai (barbeque) outside. This will give thanks for the ritual. (11)

They say it does not matter where the thanksgiving is done because it is just thanks. (12)

They say they want a male goat; the one they showed without spots (plain white). They say the cow to give thanks by is black. (September 1999). (13)

This transcript would seem to suggest that my dream of the pythons in the pool in Zimbabwe that had led to my consultation with Baba also had something to do with a ritual sacrifice still being required in Zimbabwe at my family’s home, and that my dream of confronting the black cow with the one horn was an indication of this. I took this to suggest that the first initiation ritual (umgidi) I had performed at Baba’s homestead had not been adequate. Over the next three years, as I baulked at the idea of imposing this ritual on my family, I would get what I interpreted as repeated instructions that the sacrifice of the black cow in Zimbabwe was what was required. This was via Baba as well as a number of other diviners who Zanele and I had gone to consult. We had visited these other diviners because we were frustrated at our lack of progress in divination due to the fact that Baba had still not ‘taken us up’. We could not understand Baba’s reluctance and hoped that they might be able to suggest something that would help. The most common phrase I was told at all these consultations was “they (my ancestors) are crying to see the umshoba (cow’s tail)”. I understood from them that this meant I needed to do another sacrifice at my elder brother’s home in Zimbabwe; as the last one performed at Baba’s homestead had not been adequate.

In the Divination Transcript (1) above (in statements 5, 6, 7, & 9) it seemed that my ancestors were telling him that there was a good chance that I too might be taken underwater, and that I would come out with the snake around my neck which would have to be killed along with the sacrifice of the white male goat. At the time of this consultation with Baba I was still unclear about what he meant about me going to the river to have the ubulawu put on my head, or which river he was referring to. I had already had the one river ritual done for me at my first umgidi, although I had not been shown in a dream to do it. However, I was to get what I regarded as clarification in 1998 on which river I had to go to in the most powerful dream I

\(^{33}\)This is a surprising instruction, since both pork and fish are taboo to healers of the Nguni groups.
was to have to date. This was the ‘big’ or ‘white’ dream of confronting the large Snake of the water; the Snake identified by the Zulu as Inkosi yeZulu (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3).

Dream of large Snake in pool, 6th November 1998

I was being led downhill along a path in a mountainous grassland area (it felt like the Drakensberg/Ukhahlamba Mountains) by three small black children, who were chattering away together. I was aware there was a river on my right. As we approached a forested area along a river bank, we got to a shallow rocky pool which we had to jump across. I could hear a sharp squawking noise and the children told me it was the otters and they wanted us to throw silver money into the pool, which we then did. We then descended to a large pool which had a very distinctive wide curving rock face, which looked like it overhung the pool and had a deep cave under it. As we descended to the pool I could see the shape of a very large snake whose body stretched right across the pool. The children tripped ahead in front of me and sat down on a rock at the edge of the pool, near where the water exited. They were clearly happy to see the Snake which they laughed and spoke with. The Snake had now lifted half its body out of the water as it communed with the children. It had a longish horse shaped face with big eyes and something on its head that could have been tufts of hair or ears. I was able to focus in on its golden skin with its concentric patterns which on closer inspection I saw consisted of what looked like cuneiform type writing. My focus was then drawn to its tail which was a flat fishtail shape (much like a dolphin or whale). It had a gentle unthreatening look on its face. At this point the Snake became aware of me and as it turned to look at me its eyes turned large and red, and started emitting a blinding white light. I felt my head spinning and then blacked out, still in the dream. After what felt like a very short period I ‘awoke’ in my dream to find myself still sitting on the edge of the pool. However the children and Snake had gone. I saw a package in front of me on the rock and was aware that it had been left for me by the Snake. It was covered in a glistening membrane and was shaped like a baby in a womb. I gently prised the membranes open and looked into the face of a beautiful baby. I took it in my arms and looked into its laughing eyes which seemed full of wisdom. It felt like a divine child.

I first told Zanele about the dream and she said it was a very important one. The children were the angels and the Snake she knew well; it was Inkosi or Inkulunkulu. She reminded me that the bag of membranes was similar to the dream she had when she claims she was taken by the Snake34 (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3). She relayed the dream to Saba and he was ecstatic about it. His response was that this was the ‘big dream’, symbolic of the underwater calling, and it was imperative that I locate exactly where the pool was, as this was where my ancestors wished me to go to perform the water rituals indicated in the divination transcript (1) above.

34 Zanele told me that the Zulu believe that a child who is born with membranes over his/her face will one day be a diviner. She was born this way.
was warned that it was quite possible that I would be taken under the water at this pool. Baba then asked me if the exact location of the pool with the large waterfall had been revealed to me, which it had not. However, the dream gave me the sense that it was located in grassy upland mountains, possibly along the foothills of the Drakensberg/Ukhahlamba mountain range. I told him it could be somewhere near the source of the Pholela River\textsuperscript{35}, which has its source in the Ukhahlamba Range, as it had featured in an earlier dream. I had initially not realized this earlier dream might be of any significance, even though it had been quite clear and memorable, and as with many of my ‘white’ dreams, I had received verbal information in the dream.

\textit{Dream of the mountain near Pholela River, April 1998.}

I dreamt that I was in the back of a pick-up truck which had a canopy. A friend of mine, a doctor who had recently died, was lifting up the door for me to climb out. As I emerged I looked up to see that we were in a grassy valley and in front of me was a large rounded hill/mountain partially clad in forests. I could clearly see the shape of the forest as it covered the hillside and swept down into a valley. My focus was then taken up the other side of this valley where I saw a small abandoned house. My friend told me "You are near the Pholela River".

Although no pool featured in this dream I wondered if I had been given a verbal clue to its location, so I suggested to Baba that the pool may be located on the Pholela River. He agreed, as he knew there were some very powerful pools located along it where \textit{izangoma} often perform their river rituals. It was also not far from his homestead. We thus made plans that I would come up at a convenient time and go in search of it.

6.4.3 \textit{Discovering Inkosazana’s Pool – a dream calling}

Some months later, in early December 1998, I returned to Baba’s homestead in anticipation of our search for the pool in the Pholela River region. First I had to buy a white blemish free goat\textsuperscript{36} and the early hours of the morning before our departure was spent with the fellow \textit{izangoma} who sang and prayed for guidance and protection on our venture. In the mid-
afternoon Baba drove the group of us (consisting of a male isangoma, Zanele, MaThonsi and myself) to the Pholela River in KwaZulu-Natal province. Baba had not brought the goat with us, which surprised me as he had earlier told me that we should take it. For some reason he had changed his mind. As we were driving through a small village Baba suddenly brought the car to a halt near a small dirt road. "Which way must I go?" he asked me. I had no idea, but I thought there must have been a reason for him suddenly asking me at this point, so I suggested we turn down the side road. We descended into the valley and to my surprise I saw what appeared to be the exact forest clad mountain from my dream. "I have been shown this mountain in another dream", I told Baba. He seemed interested but did not slow down since there was no sign of a river or waterfall. Aware that I was totally unsure if we were on the right track, Baba soon stopped at another isangoma's house to inquire if there was any pool in the area which fitted my description. The isangoma, MaDlamini, who Baba had also trained, told us that the only waterfall that she knew was special was Inkosazana's pool. It was, however, a pool that very few Zulu dared to visit unless they had been called there in a dream. MaDlamini agreed to show us the way and we headed back up the hill. Much to my delight and disbelief we stopped at the place I had seen in my dream, and MaDlamini told us we would find the pool below, hidden deep in the forest. From our vantage point we could also see an abandoned house on the hill opposite, exactly as it had featured in the dream.

As I had already told Baba this was very similar to the mountain and forest from my dream, he suddenly realized its significance and became ecstatic, remarking on how accurate my dreams were. In great anticipation we changed into our izangoma regalia and descended the grassy hill towards the forest, with Baba singing praises as to the accuracy of my dreams. Enormous dark cumulus clouds were billowing over the edge of the mountain that towered above us and a light rain was beginning to fall, with a fine mist spreading over the forest across the valley. These were all regarded by the izangoma as very auspicious signs. As we approached the forest we could hear the sounds of the waterfall, still completely hidden under the canopy of trees. It was then that I had this strong thought, "If you see the rainbow you will know you are at the right place". Within seconds a rainbow arched out of the forest, and I was now sure that this was the place I was supposed to have come to. My companions appeared awestruck at the sudden appearance of the rainbow, and Zanele excitedly exclaimed, "You see Penny, that's Inkosazana. She is happy you are here!"
We slid down a precipitous slippery path partially obstructed by the dense vegetation, hearing the sound of the water pouring over a rock into a pool located far below, which was hardly visible beneath the dense overhanging trees that crowded in on the steep narrow river gorge. As it was impossible to access the lower pool, Baba directed me upstream to a small waterfall (about three metres high) that poured over another ledge of rock under which was a deep and turbulent pool. Baba instructed that I go to the edge of the pool and wash my face and arms in the water. I had to light a bunch of dried *imphepho* (*helychrysum odoratissimum*) and place it under my face by the water’s edge while it smouldered, giving off a strong aromatic smoke. I then had to light two yellow candles and while holding them I had to pray to Inkosazana and tell her I had come as instructed. The rest of the party stood some way back as they said they did not want to scare Inkosazana or she would not manifest. This was a precaution in case she picked up on someone amongst us with a ‘bad heart’ (i.e. with jealousy, greed or anger).

“There she is. I can see her head coming out of the water”, Zanele suddenly whispered, “I can smell fish. It is her Baba!” My head was bent low as I prayed, too nervous to look up except to take a quick sidelong glance. All I could see was the turbulent water at the base of waterfall. I could sense within myself an anxiety about whether I was ready to be taken under water. Suddenly Baba nervously exclaimed: “Hayi (No) Penny, it is no good. They (my ancestors) are not ready. Let’s go!” Gathering up my candles and *imphepho* I scrambled up the slippery and treacherous path following the retreating izangoma. Baba looked visibly shaken. “We should have brought the white goat. We must go back and get it.” Despite it being fairly late in the afternoon and with the threat of the gathering storm clouds, Baba instructed the four female izangoma to wait for him while he and the male isangoma drove back home to fetch the goat. We knew this would take several hours by which time it would be dark and possibly raining hard, but we humbly agreed.

As we waited I sat in the grass and listened to Zanele, MaThonsi and MaDlamini as they reviewed the events of the day and discussed the possible reasons why I had not been taken under water. They all agreed they had noticed the fish smell of Inkosazana and had seen what

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37 At this stage they thought this was the waterfall where I had seen the large Snake in my dream, but I knew that it did not have the same appearance as that. However I was comforted in the thought that it did tie in with the other dream I had, and we had such positive signs on our arrival.
they took to be the top of her head appearing above the water but it was at that point they noticed that Baba suddenly became very nervous, and had instructed us to beat a hasty retreat. They all agreed he had definitely erred in not bringing the goat. It was also possible that Inkosazana had detected a 'bad heart' amongst one of those present and that was why she did not show herself fully. After an hour of waiting under an increasingly darkening sky, the first forks of lightening started to strike close by, so we decided to hitch a lift back to MaDlamini’s homestead. A battered old canopied truck pulled up just as a heavy cloudburst started beating down.

The back of the truck was full of people getting a lift back to their homes who were amazed at the presence of a white woman bedecked in an isangoma outfit hitching a ride. The other izangoma told them why we were there. The rest of the journey was spent with spirited discussions. According to Zanele they were amazed that a white woman had been called to Inkosazana’s pool. The very fact that the rain was pouring down was enough evidence for them that Inkosazana was pleased with our presence. Of further significance was that it was in this area in 1995 that the Nomkhubulwana/Inkosazana fertility rituals had been re-instituted by Nomogugu Ngobese (see Chapter Four, Section 4.5 and Chapter Five, Section 5.3). A few hours later Baba and his companion found us tucked up in MaDlamini’s candle lit hut. On his arrival he was laughing hysterically with joy at the events of the day despite having climbed down the wet and treacherous slope in the pouring rain after dark, his companion carrying the reluctant goat, looking for us at the pool. We slept the night at MaDlamini’s and the next morning we all returned to the pool, goat in tow.

This time Baba instructed me to climb down to the pool by myself and pray to Inkosazana and my ancestors, telling them I was there and that I had brought the white goat. They all waited higher on the hill, out of sight, so as to not put Inkosazana off. Alas, even though I lit the candles and imphepho and knelt near the pool praying and holding onto the white goat, I was not taken under water, nor did I see her. I must confess I was quite nervous and somewhat skeptical that I would be taken under water. With a mixture of disappointment and relief that nothing happened, I was still satisfied that the events of the previous day had shown me quite categorically that the izangoma regarded Inkosazana as a very real entity, and that it was evident they regarded the experience of being taken underwater as an actual physical
experience. What is more, they showed me convincingly that this was not culturally specific as they believe it could even happen to a white woman of European origin. It was this experience that showed me that the izangoma regard the underwater experience that endows them with skills of divination and healing, as not only an encounter with one’s ancestors, but also with the great deities such as Inkosazana, both of which can manifest as a snake.

Some months later Zanele and I returned to visit MaDlamini at her home in Bulwer to ask her more about her insights into the nature of Inkosazana and why she may have called me to her pool. I discovered that she too claimed to have met Inkosazana and to have been taken underwater at the age of fifteen years. Most of my interview with MaDlamini however was conducted via an intermediary, a male isangoma (Mr T), who could speak English and who claimed he had also encountered Inkosazana when he was a child. The following extracts from the conversation I had with them provide some interesting insights into their understanding of Inkosazana, and these demonstrate how similar they are to many written accounts of her.

_Penny_: I want to understand why in my dream I was taken to that place. I’m trying to understand the whole thing about Inkosazana [Nomkhubulwana].

_MaDlamini to Mr T_: They showed her there because someone there is like her. Tell her.

_Mr T_: MaDlamini says that’s why your family [ancestors] said you [must] go there, because it’s got a person [that] looks like you in the river, a white person. That person in the water, her name is Inkosazana.

_Penny_: Which kind of people go there? Why?

_Mr T_: The people that go there are the fortune tellers and izangoma. There are only three [kinds] of people who must go there; the last people that must go there are the kings of the Zulu.

_Penny_: I’ve been trying to understand, they say Inkosazana is like a princess from God, from uNkulunkulu?

_Mr T_: [Yes] if you say uNkulunkulu is the same thing as God, Jesus, uThixo or Qamata [God for Xhosa people], Modimo [God for Sotho people].

_Penny_: Does she live in only one pool or does she move between pools?

_Mr T_: Ya, she is not staying in one place. She stays in a perfect place with water coming from an upper place to the pool [waterfall] where she stays and when she moves from one pool to another waterfall. You will never find her in [just] one place, and she stays near the forest, so that when she comes out in her own time, no one should see her. It is lucky when the rainbow comes in the rain. The river came with Inkosazana, there is no way you find her anywhere else. I think maybe there is a thing she wants you to do. You go there with a goat or chicken to talk with her. After that you listen to Inkosazana and do what she tells you. She does not trust other people whose hearts are changing. Maybe you trust that person but his heart is cruel. Inkosazana is disturbed by the heart of that person. Inkosazana cannot hear because [of the presence] of that person. She does not want to see people she does not trust. That is why Inkosazana stays in a secret place, in a
dangerous place. Nobody can come to play, stay or visit there without permission. If you
go there with your own mind [i.e. decide to go there on your own], you get your
punishment.

Penny: So the punishment can be quite hard?
Mr T: Of course, of course, they die.
Penny: So that is why people are a bit nervous about it?
Mr T: They know they will die, like it or not.

On reassuring me of her kindness to good people Mr T said:

So the basic point here, don’t be afraid with Inkosazana. Inkosazana is a beautiful
thing. She brings good luck. When you pray to Inkosazana you get what you want.
When you listen and go with their rules that they give you and you do not break any of
them, you get what you want.

I asked Mr T if there was any difference between Inkosazana and Nomkhubulwana and in his
opinion there was. It appeared to be connected to the different ritual intentions and the types of
people who participated in them. :

Mr T: Nomkhubulwana’s difference to Inkosazana is that she [Inkosazana] stays in the
rainbow. The kings will bring [offerings] to visit [her] there. Nomkhubulwana, she’s a
thing basic to the ladies; the young ladies. Other people they come [to her ritual]. The
old grandmothers and other ladies are choosing to do that job to check the girls
[virginity]. When you’re still a virgin you are called ‘intombi’ because you not do sex
with guys. After they do that [virginity check], they take the fruit and eat it and do their
culture [ritual ceremonies]. After that you go to the garden to ask her to make it grow
strong. After that the rain is coming. After that they go to talk with God to pray with
him. Then they tell [him] their needs to the soil to grow the fruit, the water [and babies
too]. After that they make the party. They do our culture [amasiko]. They dance, the
Zulu dance. They show poems, they do music. All of this is basic to our culture, is
basic to Nomkhubulwana. You go there to plant in the garden. After they do that they
come to the place to do the dancing.

In the above statement it is clear that Mr T linked Inkosazana’s identity with the rituals
performed by diviners and kings (a point that has already been discussed a number of times in
Chapters Four and Five), and Nomkhubulwana’s identity with rituals which emphasized her
control exercised over virgins’ sexual morality and their fertility; she is also clearly linked
with crops and the fertility of the earth, as well as the promotion of cultural traditions and
identity. It is quite possible that he could have been influenced in emphasizing this distinction
by the Nomkhubulwana ceremonies that had become prevalent in the area over the last five
years as a result of their re-introduction (see Chapter Five, Section 5.3). However, he was also
quite clear on Inkosazana’s insistence on the moral integrity of diviners. Several years later I was to get what I took to be confirmation on this insistence when I discovered that Baba, as my teacher, had overstepped the mark of moral integrity at this ritual. I was to learn that after I had returned home he had secretly sacrificed the white goat I had offered to Inkosazana at the pool for himself. It was suspected that he hoped to try and divert some of her favors he thought she would offer me as a result of my calling to her pool (I discuss this discovery in more detail in Chapter Seven and Eight). I take this discovery to confirm the assessment of those diviners who were of the opinion that the reason why I was not taken under water was due to the ‘darkness of the heart’ of one of the participants present.

6.4.4 Finding the Snake’s Pool

Despite the elation of unexpectedly finding Inkosazana’s Pool on a tributary of the Pholela River, the geography of the area did not have the same characteristics of the place I had seen in my dream with the large Snake. The waterfall was also quite different to that I had seen in my dream. However, two years later I was to find the Snake pool through a series of remarkable ‘coincidences’, which, in Zanele’s opinion, was clearly the work of the ancestors.

In January 2000 my children, sister and I had gone hiking in the Amathola mountains in the Eastern Cape. We had stopped off at the office to get our hiking permits and there was a delay in us being served. I had randomly picked up a fly fishing magazine to page through and the magazine fell open onto a page that had a photograph of a pool exactly like the one I had seen in the dream. I read the article and discovered that it was situated in the foothills of the southern Drakensberg in the North-East Cape, and that trout had recently been put in the pool for recreational fishing by local fly fishing enthusiasts. What I found intriguing was that they mentioned that fishermen who wanted to fish at the pool would have to be granted permission by the local chief via the ‘guardian’ of the pool. I found this a bit strange as the article itself was about a trout fishing resort on a white farmer’s land through which the Wildebees River flowed. It suggested that there may be something special about the pool to the local Xhosa people in the area. I had never been in this area but thought if an opportunity came I would try to get there. This opportunity came several weeks later when the head of the Water Research Institute at Rhodes University invited me to come and witness the Reserve Assessment process
along a number of rivers in the North-East Cape\textsuperscript{38}. The Wildebees River (which becomes the Inxu or Nxu River downstream) was one of the rivers they would be monitoring as it was being heavily impacted upon by upstream afforestation in Ugie and Maclear districts. I had accompanied the water research team to the area in February 2000, hoping that I might stumble across the pool. Unfortunately I had to leave a day earlier before they completed the Reserve Assessment and, as I had still not seen any sign of the pool, decided to stop off at the local tourism office in the town of Ugie before I left town. From the article I had the name of the farmer and his fly fishing resort, so I thought I would make discreet enquiries about potential fly fishing holidays there for my husband. The lady I spoke to was a rock art enthusiast and before long I had discovered that the pool in question was actually located in the former Transkei and the gorge which the river ran through and the pool itself was claimed to be the last known local residential site of the cave-dwelling San of the southern Drakensberg. As she was a rock art guide she agreed she would be able to take me there on my next visit with the help of the local farmer who knew how to get there.

It was soon after this meeting that Zanele and I went to consult another powerful isangoma in the Mvoti district of KwaZulu-Natal (who also communicated with the whistling amakhosi), MaDuma, as our progress with Baba had not been satisfactory due to what we understood to be his failure to ‘take us up’ to the amakhosi\textsuperscript{39} We had each also had a number of dreams which we took to indicate that there were problems with Baba and had been told by a number of other izangoma that Baba had failed to do some of our rituals correctly (see Chapter Seven). One of the questions I put to MaDuma was whether the pool I had seen in my dream and subsequently thought I may have found was the correct one (which is located over six hundred kilometres to the south of her homestead). On consulting the amakhosi her reply was in the affirmative. “Yes” she said “it is the pool with the big Snake. You must give money to the water when you go there.” These were definitely two of the important elements of my dream, which she would have had no prior knowledge of, as I did not describe my dream to her. She

\textsuperscript{38} He was particularly interested in my findings on the spiritual value of water and we had submitted a joint research proposal together to investigate how these could be integrated into water management structures.

\textsuperscript{39} I found during my research that taking such steps of consulting other izangoma, if problems are encountered during training and suspicions are raised about the trainer’s integrity, is common. It was not apparent that this was seen as unethical or problematic; rather it was regarded as a pragmatic response to either put one’s mind at rest, or confirm one’s suspicions and hence take evasive action.
said it was alright if I went there to visit the pool, but I had to take some gifts to the Snake so it would look favourably on me when I eventually went there to do the special ritual. I should take Zulu beer (*utshwala*), brandy, silver money, white beads and snuff.

Five months later, with Zanele as my companion, I was able to get back to the site. On the first day we went in search of the pool, we were accompanied by the rock art guide, the farmer and another farmer’s wife. We had eventually found the guardian of the pool who was busy attending a funeral across the valley, and he instructed his sixteen year old son to accompany us. As far as he was aware we were interested in checking out the rock art sites near the pool and the gorge. The son led us towards the pool but in the process we got horribly lost in the dense vegetation and forest surrounding the river course. We were eventually able to get fairly close to the pool from upstream above the waterfall but could find no way down to its base. However, it was the way I had originally approached the pool in my dream and I was able to confirm that it was indeed the place I had dreamt of. We were frustrated that we could not get down to the pool as it was getting late and we had to return back to where we were staying the night. Zanele had nudged me and told me not to worry. We would return on our own in the morning as we now knew how to get there.

At dawn we drove down the escarpment into the Transkei. As with our approach to Inkosazana’s Pool in KwaZulu Natal a rainbow arched over the sky in front of us, which delighted Zanele as she saw it as a positive sign by the water divinities that our visit was both anticipated and welcomed. We had with us the *tshwala* Zanele had been brewing for the previous three days (since our arrival at our hostess’s residence) and the other gifts, bar the chicken. We arrived at the guardian’s house and told him of our problems of getting to the pool the previous day. This time we were able to tell him the real reason for our visit and his response was very enthusiastic. “Why did you not tell me before?” he asked. He explained he would have sent us with his three small children (all under ten years) instead, as they were the ones who knew the right way to approach the pool (the small children also being an important element of the dream). Prior to us leaving with the children the guardian and his wife had given us tea and told us how important the pool was to all the local people. It was a very
A powerful place which one should approach with care and only if one had been called. Rituals are frequently performed at it by izangoma who come from far and wide. It was reputed to have a very large mystical Snake in it and it was known as the place at which the abantu bomlambo (mermaids) resided. They warned us to take great care because quite a few people had allegedly perished at the pool because they had not approached it properly. The most recent case had reputedly occurred in the previous month. She was a novice isangoma (umkwetha) who had been told in a dream to go to the pool. She had told her teacher and he had said it was not the right time to go. She had decided to go by herself with some family members and during the ritual she had got caught under water and drowned. Her body had only been recovered two days later.

This story caused Zanele some concern and, remembering what MaDuma from Mvoti had told us, she asked if we could purchase a chicken to take to the pool as a gift. The guardian’s wife kindly provided one and soon we were following the three small children (not more than ten years of age) up into the gorge, along paths that were so overgrown as to be almost imperceptible. After an hour’s walk, we approached the pool from downstream, and I heard a similar noise to the one I had heard in the dream and thus we stopped near the river and made an offering of silver money before we proceeded to the main pool where we lit imphepho and candles, and made our offerings of beer, white beads and orange juice. Zanele also sacrificed the chicken at the water’s edge by slitting its throat and letting the blood pour into the water. She kept the carcase for us to consume at home. Although there was no visible Snake present, when I started to explain to Zanele how big the Snake in my dream was and how it had spread out across the pool she gently admonished me and cautioned that I should never refer to it as a ‘Snake’ in its presence, as this was disrespectful; rather I should just refer to it as Makhosi.

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40 Of course this raises the question of why the farmers were permitted to put trout in the pool for strangers to come and fish. On subsequent interviews I was to learn that this was a very unpopular move, and many local people were resentful of it, especially after they had been informed that they would no longer be allowed to fish on that stretch of river.

41 In the sense that it cannot be seen with normal vision.

42 Zanele had been told in her dream the night before to take orange juice to offer to the children at the pool. This was specifically for the spirits of children that reside in the water, but she also offered the juice to the two small children who led the way for us.
Indeed, this respectful attitude towards the pool and its inhabitants was very evident in later interviews that my field assistant, David Wopula, carried out in 2002. He was able to interview over twenty local people about the significance of the pool and there was general consensus that one only goes there when one has been told to in a dream. For instance, the diviner Jola emphasised that people only go to the river when instructed by their ancestors in dreams or visions. They often have to go and perform a sacrificial offering at the pool, most usually of beer and a goat. Many of the accounts given mentioned that when raw meat and beer were offered to the water divinities a portion of the meat would frequently be returned to the propitiators to eat themselves. They claimed that it would be returned to them cooked.

Not only was the pool of great importance for diviners, but it was also an important rain-making site linked with the San who were living in the caves near the waterfall at the end of the nineteenth century (see Jolly 1992). Among their descendants are the Njuza clan who still reside in the vicinity of the pool. The pool itself was strongly associated with this clan and we were given an account by the wife of one of the men from the Njuza clan who claimed that when she went to perform rituals at the pool she always carried silver coins to offer and would light a white candle to apologise to the Njuza ancestors “for showing her body to them”. I will be examining the importance of the San descendants in this area in Chapter Nine. However, it was also regarded by some informants as the pool at which the ancestors of all nations (including Europeans) could be found.

I have made a number of return visits to this area. It seemed that many of the key features of my dream concurred with local experiences and perceptions of the pool. On one occasion I

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43 This name is strikingly similar to the name given to the fish-tailed beings in Zimbabwe (njuzu). I am uncertain if there is any distant connection between these names.

44 Note that this was what I had been shown to do in my dream.

45 I was fortunately able to secure funding from the National Research Foundation to investigate the possible impacts that afforestation upstream would have on the sacred pools. There are a number of them located in the gorge.

46 Although I was to later discover that quite a lot had been written about this pool site by rock art scholars such as Jolly (1986, 1998, 1999) and Prins (1990, 1996b, 1999), neither of them had ever mentioned these features. The fact that these aspects featured in my dreams, and were seen of significance to local diviners, suggests that this information was revealed to me from another intangible, possibly spiritual, source and could not have crept into my consciousness through reading texts. However, many elements found at other sites in the southern...
was able to meet and interview Mr Togu, a well known diviner who resided in the area who told me that he was also shown to go to the pool in his dreams and that he too had to be led by children. We were also told about one of Mr Togu’s amathwasa who had seen the light coming from the pool, referred to as “iLanga eLamjeni” (the light of the river). As with my own dream experience, the light from the Snake’s eyes had the same effect on her, although this occurred when she was awake. As a result she lost consciousness and she only recovered several hours later. Zweli was also able to accompany me on one of my visits and we were graciously hosted overnight by the guardian of the pool. After our visit Zweli told me he had seen a bright light coming from the direction of the waterfall when he had gone outside during the night. He was too fearful to tell me there in case it would draw the attention of the Snake to him, as he was nervous he would be drawn under the water.

Regarding the importance of going to the pool accompanied with children, Mr Wopula obtained the following narrative from Qana, a local rainmaker, which demonstrates how children also featured in his dreams,

It was during a dry period when an old woman came to me by dream. The woman told me to go to the sacred pool and ask for rain. I told my wife about this dream. My wife encouraged me to consider [act on] the dream. I woke up before dawn. Something suddenly entered my mind; I thought that when I go to the pool I should go with small children under sixteen years of age. I went from house to house asking neighbours to allow their children to go with me to the pool to ask for rain. All the parents agreed to my request. I went to the pool with the children. When we arrived at the pool I sung a traditional song called “Sphi isiyahlalu na?” [“Where is the trouble?”]. The children assisted me in backing up the song. After a while we stopped singing. I then asked the children to ask for rain. The children asked “Give us rain God, we are your angels”. After they had finished asking I ordered them to go to the water and spray the water up and sideways. When I asked for rain I asked both God and my ancestors. When we finished our request we returned home. The rain fell heavily that same day (Interview conducted with Qana by David Wopula, 4 April 2002).

As we have seen in the previous chapters rain and fertility are a central feature of the water divinity complex, and this area abounds with stories of San rain-makers’ abilities as well as

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African region concerning the water divinities were also to be found here.

47 Simpani Togu was a key informant to Frans Prins and Pieter Jolly when they were doing research in the area (see Prins 1996, 1999; Jolly 1998, and Chapter Nine).
the catastrophic weather effects that result when the water divinities are angered. I will return to this issue of rainmaking at certain Khoisan rock art sites and its association with the water divinities in more detail in Chapter Nine.

What struck me about my visit to this pool and our subsequent interviews was that although I am a white woman of European descent and my guides were Zulu, it did not seem to raise the slightest problem of doubt or disbelief about my dream call amongst the healers living in the area surrounding the sacred pool in predominantly Mpondomise territory. Their conceptual lexicon was essentially the same as that of the Zulu diviners. In fact our presence served to emphasise what a powerful site this pool was.

Although Zanele had accompanied me to find this pool, because of our uncertainty as to whether we could trust Baba, we did not tell him that we had discovered it. At this stage I had had what I interpreted as a number of warning dreams that were suggestive that Baba was ‘playing games’ with me (see Chapter Seven) and was not doing what my ancestors wished him to. It was on the basis of these dreams, as well as Zanele’s concern that he would be angry with her for going behind his back to assist me finding the place that we kept quiet about its discovery. I was just satisfied my dream seemed to have been so accurate and I had found the place, and that proceedings had confirmed its spiritual significance to local people. I had in my understanding also been able to do a ritual offering of thanks to the water divinities at the pool for bringing us there.

6.4.5 The second ritual umgidi in Zimbabwe - the pythons visit

Over the next two years, apart from a couple of visits, Zanele and I had avoided going to stay with Baba. This was mainly because of the consultation we had had with MaDuma in early 2000 as to our lack of progress in communicating with the amakhosi, despite having done our rituals. During her divination she had claimed that someone (she would not divulge who), possibly a diviner quite close to Baba, who lived at his homestead had targeted Zanele and I with bad magic (umeqo), as she was jealous of our friendship and wanted to ‘tie up our ancestors’ (ukugcinisa amadlozi). Although we had undergone a ritual that in Zulu cosmology

48 This diviner had also reputedly been under water, and she also communicated with the amakhosi.
would reverse this bad magic, we were still not sure if we could trust spending much time with Baba. As I give more detail on these events in the next chapter I will not explore them further at this point, save to add that she had not directly implicated Baba in this misdoing, but she had noted that he had failed to ‘take us up’ because according to her divination he was reluctant to reveal the secret of how this was done. I was quite happy to accept that explanation as I understood his concern in that he knew I was an academic who could possibly divulge it. Of course there are a number of other possible reasons for his reluctance, none of which there was any certainty about. Zanele was suspicious that he was concerned that if he gave us the power we may have ‘seen’ his errors and failures, with the risk that we would abandon him as a trainer. It was also possible that in giving us extra divination abilities he was fearful we might become his competitors; this was something that was often mentioned to me by other izangoma who had become suspicious that either Baba or other trainers were not completing their training of novices correctly. Another possible reason could be that the process, especially if it involved psychoactive plants, may have been potentially risky or life-threatening, and Baba was not prepared to take the risk of anything happening to me in case there were legal repercussions.

Before these doubts about Baba began I had a number of divination sessions with him. In these consultations he told me that my ancestors were worried to come to my home in the form of a snake because I would be too frightened if I saw it; they therefore chose to rather come as a bird (much like they did with my sister – see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3). Their visits were to alert me that I still needed to do the ritual sacrifice of the black cow in Zimbabwe, For instance in July 1999 Baba had told me the following,

Divination Transcript (2), July 1999

Makhosi! They say even at night they usually visit you. They say they come at 3am or 3.30 am; that means in the morning.

Makhosi! They say sometimes they visit you as a bird crying in the home. They say it’s them because they are scared to come as a snake.

Makhosi! They say the crying of the bird, it is their cry because they want to go home.

Makhosi! They say it cries and then goes back home (to Zimbabwe) because it needs that to be done for it (a sacrifice).

Makhosi! Because they do not see the family’s shoba (the tail of the cow to be sacrificed).

Makhosi! They say the one they showed her (the cow).
Makhosi! They say, did you clearly see the goats with human heads?⁴⁹
Makhosi! They say that’s a sign from your grandfathers at the water that they are still waiting for the bile to clean them so they can appear as themselves.
Makhosi! They say by doing that you will be cutting down the load/work by half.⁵⁰ You will go on, and there won’t be any complaints from them.
Makhosi! They say they’ve been crying out (as birds), but not being heard.

What is interesting in this transcript is that although the preferred physical manifestation of the ancestors was apparently in the form of a snake, Baba interprets that my ancestors could also manifest in bird form, and that form was chosen because of their alleged concern that they did not wish to frighten me. While the above transcript was making reference to the ordinary ‘shade snake’ (Berglund, 1976) it is clear in the divination transcript 3 below, that Baba was making reference to the great Snake, the one that emits a mesmerising light (like electricity) from its eyes, and it was intimately associated with water. It is evident in this transcript that the Snake was something different to my ancestors, which had allegedly come to my house as a bird (or possibly a puffadder) to alert me of something important,

Divination Transcript (3), March 2000

Makhosi! They say remember your dream which was related to the water? (The large mystical Snake dream)
Makhosi! They say they showed you the nature of the Snake. Your mother’s side is protecting you.
Makhosi! They say there was a bird that arrives at your home which sang constantly for two days. It was crying like it was singing. They say it wasn’t a snake, this time it was old people (ancestors).
Makhosi! They say when the Snake turns in the water you will feel a fright or lose your appetite, or stop eating, if you were.
Makhosi! They say in its eyes there is like a picture playing, just like a TV; that is its electricity⁵¹ drawing you to itself. They say that is the start of the signs that means it wants her.

In Baba’s interpretation there is a suggestion in this divination above that the Snake was

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⁴⁹ Baba said the amakhosi were asking me if I remembered seeing this therioanthropic image in my dreams, which I could not.

⁵⁰ I assumed that this meant that in doing the sacrifice I would give my ancestors strength to help my family in Zimbabwe.

⁵¹ I point out again how the isangoma frequently used the analogy of television and electricity to explain some of their experiences.
something potentially dangerous and that ‘it wanted me’ – his reference to my dream where I blacked out on seeing the light that emitted from its eyes being the sign of this. However, while the transcript suggested the Snake was potentially dangerous, Baba never gave me the impression that this was something I should evade or counteract, rather that I must be prepared for the underwater submersion event to happen; and that I was under the protection of my mother’s ancestors for this to happen. Unfortunately I never pursued the meaning of his cryptic reference to the Snake ‘turning’ in the water and having a physical effect on my body, but it has some hint of Aschwanden’s symbolic interpretation that much of the water divinity complex was deeply associated with, or could be seen as analogous to, bodily processes (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3).

Although I had my suspicions as to which birds Baba was referring to in Transcript 2, the apparent confirmation came with the following divination which took place some years later in August 2003,

*Divination Transcript (4)*

**Makhosi!** They say your ancestors are associated with a certain bird. Every now and then a bird comes to your house to sing and then leaves.

**Makhosi!** They say you should notice that if the bird has come and sometimes you should wake up in the morning and go to the sea, you will find it there and it will do the same thing at the sea.

**Makhosi!** They say they just come to visit.

I suspected from this information that he may have been referring to a pair of Southern Boubou Shrikes that had moved into our garden and neighbourhood just after my calling in 1997. I had always associated them with the sea as their penetrating calls are a frequently heard sound at the beach cottage we visit. I had never heard them in my garden in Grahamstown before this. I was finding that on many occasions whilst I was having a strong dream near dawn their sharp penetrating calls would rouse me into consciousness so I could recall my dreams with more clarity. This consultation strengthened my suspicions that this was the species of bird he was referring to.

Despite the divination messages such as those above, I was still reluctant to ask my family in Zimbabwe to do the ritual sacrifice of the black cow. The political crisis in Zimbabwe
continued to deepen with more and more farmers been driven off the land by President Mugabe's land invasion policies using disgruntled war veterans, and my brothers continued to be plagued with threats of eviction. I did not want to burden my brothers with my own problems.

In 2001 I had another dream of the black cow, which in Zanele's mind confirmed that my ancestors were reminding me that they needed this ritual to be performed. They were, it seemed, in need of sustenance from me in order that they could assist in the problems that were facing my family.

_Dream of black cow nuzzling me, November 8th 2001_

_In my dream I was standing in the kitchen of my brother's farmhouse in Zimbabwe. Suddenly I was aware of a commotion outside. I saw a black cow with one horn running berserk in the garden. There were people running after it to try and calm it down and tether it. The next moment it came crashing towards me and into the kitchen. As soon as it saw me it calmed down and came up and gently nuzzled my breast._

Despite this fairly graphic dream what I interpreted as the turning point came on the twenty ninth of October 2002 when I had been driving along the road that cuts through the St Andrews College campus in Grahamstown and had to stop for a herd of cattle being driven along the road — a very unusual sight in that part of town. This encounter with the cattle on the road exactly where I had seen them in an earlier dream struck me as potentially significant. That same day I heard from my brother in Zimbabwe that he had been given another Section 8 eviction order and he had to vacate his farm within two weeks. The occurrence of this news coinciding with my encounter with the cattle compelled me to book a flight up to Durban so that I could consult with Baba. I had phoned Zanele to tell her I was coming and she told me that she was already expecting me as her ancestors had informed her of my pending visit in a dream. Prior to our visit to Baba we resolved that we would tell him absolutely nothing in order to test whether he still had any powers and whether the _amakhosi_ would let him know the situation. It would appear that they did. The following are extracts from his divination that he performed on the 6th November 2002,

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52 Zanele had always assured me that in a divination session with the _amakhosi_ Baba could not lie, as he would be severely punished. There had been some suspicions that his _amakhosi_ were abandoning him in that on one occasion he had failed to elicit any response from them.
Divination Transcript (5)

Makhosi!  They say why are your brothers not doing anything to stop the person who is playing with their wealth that they received from their grandfathers? (1)  

Makhosi!  They say also that (you) must leave this to the old ones (i.e. ancestors). (2)  

Makhosi!  They say (this will happen) when the shoba (cow tail) appears. The one (shoba) that they (brothers) have to make for you. (3)  

Makhosi!  They say this cow has to be sacrificed at your home (in Zimbabwe). (4)  

Makhosi!  They say this is urgent. (5)  

Makhosi!  They say this will happen when the shoba appears. The one that you (brothers) have to make for you. (3)  

Makhosi!  They say this cow has to be sacrificed at your home (in Zimbabwe). (4)  

Makhosi!  They say this is urgent. (5)  

Makhosi!  They say it is better because you have been to this pool where you have to go via (on your return). They have seen you (at the pool) and you have seen the place. This means that they are right. It will be important for you to go about two (am) with the ubulawu which will be used at your home, yes. After that you will go straight home. (9)

It seemed evident to me from this divination that I needed to return to Zimbabwe, this time for my family to assist me in performing the sacrifice of the black cow that I had been shown in the dream. It was made clear to me that this was required in order to give strength to my ancestors to enable them to assist my brothers who were under threat of eviction from their farms. However, the purpose of the ritual appeared to be more than just to help assist my family in their time of need, but also as part of my diviner training; this was to enable me to proceed to the river which featured the Snake in my dream, and that I had subsequently located with Zanele’s assistance. I informed Baba that I had located what I believed was the correct river that had featured in my dream; this was on the Inxu River in the former Transkei. He did not appear to be concerned that I had managed to locate this river without his assistance, and merely agreed that it was the ‘right place’ and that we would have to go straight there after the Zimbabwe phase of the ritual was complete.

Fortunately I had already made plans to go to the Zimbabwe border that month to observe a rare total solar eclipse and Baba was quite willing to accompany me on such short notice; the plan being that we would stop and observe the eclipse en route to my brother’s farm. The next problem I faced was to get my brother’s consent to do the sacrifice on my behalf. On my
return home from visiting Baba I wrote my brother an e-mail explaining the situation. I had a phone call from him a week later agreeing to help me. He then told me that a strange event had happened just after he received my request. It was in the evening and he had called his wife to read my e-mail. They returned to their lounge and sat down and noticed that the first rains of the season were beginning to fall. Suddenly there was a commotion as the dogs inside the lounge started barking at something outside of the glass paned French doors. Reared up and facing them was a huge python on the other side of the glass. It was swaying slowly from side to side as if trying to attract their attention, completely untroubled by the barking dogs on the other side of the glass. My brother and his wife, who were aware of the fact that the Zulu diviners regarded the python as the manifestation of the ancestors, acknowledged its presence, and let it be. After a while it crawled into the flower pot next to the door, wrapped itself around the plant, and appeared to go to sleep. They left it like that when they retired to bed, and the next morning it had disappeared. When I heard this from my brother I suspected it was an auspicious sign and felt convinced that it was time for the ritual. I immediately phoned Zanele to tell her and she sounded quite awed, “Penny! Your Makhosi are strong. You see what I have told you. Your Makhosi, they come from the water. That is why they came with ihlwathi (i.e. the python) in the rain. This is wonderful!”

Elated with such news, Baba and Zanele, along with three other izangoma, accompanied me on the long journey back to Zimbabwe. My sister and her son also accompanied us. We were able to find the black cow with the one curved horn the day before the sacrifice (from the neighbouring farmer), and, as in the dream, it was extremely wild when the cowhands tried to secure it. However, when I approached it, it became completely docile. The ritual was similar to the one performed at Baba’s home, although only chickens but no goats were sacrificed prior to the cow sacrifice.

On the first evening of the ritual my family all gathered together in a small thatched rondavel in the garden that had been set aside for the ancestral shrine, which was located opposite the doorway of the hut, on which yellow candles were burning. Present were the five izangoma, my mother, two brothers, sister-in-law, two sisters, many of their children and some friends, as well as some of their domestic workers, the gardener who had reputedly been underwater in Zambia, and Timothy (see Section 6.3). After some drumming and singing Baba mixed
together the two buckets of *ubulawu* (for *mndiki* and *mndawu*), lit the imphepho and prayed fervently to both his and our ancestors, informing them that the ritual they had been calling for was about to be performed. He explained all the problems my brothers had been experiencing on their farms and prayed fervently for their help, with Zanele assisting in translation for my family’s benefit. Then two chickens, one white and one brown/red were sacrificed, and some of their blood and bile were dribbled into the *ubulawu* mixtures. Both Baba and I then had to beat the *ubulawu* into foam and pray to the ancestors. This part of the ritual is called *ukundlalela*, which is when the ancestors are first called (*uку́biza аmадлози*) to be present in anticipation of the cow sacrifice which is soon to follow. Zanele describes these phases in terms of the making of a bed (*-'ndlala = ‘to spread out mats for sleeping’*). The chicken (and/or goat) sacrifice, are like the sheets which always precede the more substantial warmth and energy provided by the blanket (which is the cow)*3.

The next day, the family were again called to congregate in the hut while more fervent praying and singing took place, and this time my brothers*4 also had to beat the *ubulawu* and pray. We were then led outside to the tree where the cow was passively tethered. We had already made an arrangement with the foreman of one of my brothers who was willing to do the actual immolation, and he was waiting with the cow. My elder brother*5 then addressed the crowd (the family, workers and many curious onlookers) informing them about my calling. He then prayed to our ancestors and dedicated the cow to them*6. The act of immolation was swift and clean and the cow bellowed as it fell*7, which led to much celebration and ululating from the *izangoma* as this was the most important sign of ancestral acceptance. The rest of the day was

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*3* The Xhosa call this prior goat ritual the *ukushayelela inkundla* or ‘to sweep clean the yard’.

*4* This included my brother who was a church elder. He had initially declined to attend the ritual as his wife was not happy with the idea. He had been asked by her to drive to Harare to meet her there. However, as he was leaving his farm the car engine fell out. He decided this was obviously a sign from our ancestors that he must be present at the ritual, so he phoned and asked us to come and collect him. He arrived just before the proceedings started.

*5* As my eldest brother lives in Australia and was unable to attend the ritual the task fell on my second eldest brother’s shoulders.

*6* This address and invocation was done in English as most of those present could understand the language, but whenever Baba addressed the crowd in isiZulu Timothy translated what he said into Shona for the benefit of those present.

*7* As with the first ritual I also had to drink some of its blood (see also Wreford, 2008).
spent dissecting the carcass and placing the meat in the shrine to stay overnight for the ancestors to savour. The special portions of the *insonyama* (taken from the right foreleg of the animal) and liver were lightly roasted over the fire and given to all my immediate family (i.e. brothers and sisters) to consume soon after the dissection was complete.

The next day was the feast, attended by over three hundred local members of the community, who were entertained later with a spectacular display of dancing by Baba and his colleagues. Timothy, who was dressed in his *svikiro* outfit, which consisted of two long strips of black and white fabric sewn together, and an ostrich feather head dress, acted as the ‘master of ceremonies’. After the impressive dancing performance, the crowds dispersed, but the family celebrations continued with the *izangoma* (and Timothy) in the ancestral hut with plentiful joint offerings of my ancestors’ favourite alcohol; these being brandy, whisky, wine, beer and port. However just before midnight Baba suddenly insisted he had to go to his small cottage at the bottom of the garden where they were staying. Within minutes there was a huge commotion as he had chanced upon a group of thieves rifling through his belongings. After much commotion one of the thieves were apprehended and he was taken to the police station. This man divulged all the names of his accomplices to the police, and admitted they had been involved in the previous thefts on my two brothers’ farms (including cattle and irrigation pipes). He also divulged the names of all the people to whom they had sold the previous stolen items (they had come from the nearby town and were obviously unaware of the ritual activities that had been going on). Within twenty four hours all but one of the gang had been arrested and within days of their arrest virtually all the stolen goods, including the cattle, with their new calves, were returned to my brother. For the *izangoma* this was ample evidence that my ancestors had been strengthened and were now helping my family. On the night after the dramatic events with the thieves, I had returned to the rondavel which had now been consecrated as the ancestral hut (*emakhoseni*). As I approached the door with my brother-in-

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58 We did not brew beer for my ancestors, unlike in all Zulu rituals, as Baba said as they never drank it while they were alive so they would not require in their spirit state. We did have an abundance of commercially brewed beer for all the members of the community who had attended to feast.

59 He said he had been urgently told by his ancestors to go and check something that was happening there.

60 The police even drove over three hundred kilometers to retrieve a cell phone re-charger that had been sold to a man near Binga after the earlier theft.
law he had casually warned me, “Careful Penny, there is a snake at your feet”. I jumped back startled, as a small snake (probably a small brown house snake) emerged out of the shadows by my feet. It seemed completely relaxed and unperturbed, acting as if it belonged there. It slithered in front of me into the room, as if leading me in, and disappeared under some furniture.

Six weeks later on the anniversary of my father’s death the pythons made their appearance at the homes of each of my siblings who had participated in the ritual and lived in Zimbabwe. My elder brother who had hosted and performed the ritual walked into his bedroom one evening to find a python curled up on his bed; my other brother was woken by his dogs barking at midnight and had discovered the python curled up on top of his television set, while my sister who lives some six hundred kilometres south had a python stretched out on the curtain rail in the room that Zanele and I had stayed in on our visit. The response of Baba and Zanele was again was one of great satisfaction. It was merely the amakhosi showing their presence to my siblings. They were being watched over. Over the next few months the pythons would return periodically; on one occasion curling in between the ornaments on the large mantelpiece above the fireplace, another time curled up in a spacious kitchen drawer. As this was the first time in over three generations that pythons had ever entered a family member’s home in Zimbabwe, the presence of these creatures gave my family a sense of hope that they were now under the watchful eye of the ancestors. It seemed far more than an arbitrary coincidence; our western notions of reality and the separation that exists between humans, nature and spirit, had been severely challenged.

6.4.5.1 The Inxu River ritual

Immediately following the completion of the ritual in Zimbabwe we started our two thousand kilometre journey back to the Inxu River in the Transkei, where I had been told to go during Baba’s earlier divination session (see divination transcript 5, statements 6 & 9). We had stopped overnight at Baba’s homestead before proceeding to the pools in the Eastern Cape, located nearly five hundred kilometres south. Accompanying me were Baba, Zanele and Bheki

61 Although I am not sure if they all appeared on the same day, my siblings told me of each of their visitations, independently of each other, within a week.
(who had accompanied us to Zimbabwe) and my old friend, the isangoma/faith healer Mathonsi. Frustratingly, Baba had instructed me to stop at a bottle store en route and he bought a couple of packs of cider which he and Bheki drank on the journey. I had noticed that Baba was beginning to show signs of a drinking problem on the earlier part of our trip and this was of concern to both Zanele and me, especially since he was now drinking just before taking me to such an important sacred river site, but we prudently decided to keep silent on the issue.

We arrived late in the night at the pool, and as we had pre-warned the guardian of the pool of our intentions to do the ritual, he had kindly agreed to host us for the evening. Although we understood that the amakhosi had instructed Baba to take me to the pool at 02h00 in the morning (see Divination Transcript 5, statement 9), Baba decided we should delay it until it was just getting light (probably because he was tired and drowsy from drinking cider on the journey). We arose at 04h00 and dressed ourselves into our izangoma finery. Carrying the two buckets of ubulawu that had been brought all the way from Zimbabwe, and which contained the bile of the sacrificed chickens and cow, we followed a young teenage male, who was provided as our guide, into the cool valley just as daybreak arrived. I was holding my newly acquired umshoba (cow's tail), which Baba said my ancestors had been 'crying' for, in my hand. As we approached the place where I had heard the otter sound on our previous visit, I indicated to Baba that we needed to stop and throw some silver money into the water, which we did. Mathonsi, who is powerful with prayer, stayed on the rock near the river praying fervently while we proceeded to the waterfall. The impressiveness of the pool, and the energy that seems to emanate from it, clearly seemed to unnerve Baba, as this was the first time he had been there. On arrival near the edge of the pool, Baba and Buthelezi proceeded to put on long flowing white gowns and woollen waist cords, which are what they normally wore when working with the Holy Spirit. I was given seven candles (six were yellow and one was white) to light and instructed to stand them at the edge of the pool into which the waterfall tumbled. The white candle had to be placed in the middle of the row of yellow candles. I then had to light imphepho and pray to my ancestors informing them I had completed the ritual in Zimbabwe and I was now at the pool they had directed me to go. I then had to wade out to a

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62 From what I understand this was because the pool was not only associated with the ancestors but also with the great Snake, which the Zulu regard as the manifestation of Inkosi yeZulu (see Chapter Eight for more on this association).
rock semi-submerged in the water and sit on it. With Baba and Buthelezi standing over me they placed the buckets of *ubulawu*, one at a time, on my head and both shoulders while singing and praying and beating it to foam. I then had to drink copious amounts of the foam and then they poured the rest of the contents over my head. They then proceeded to pour seven more buckets of water, taken from the river, over my head and body. This completed the ritual and I was allowed to climb out of the pool and change my soaked clothes for dry ones. The ritual thus completed, we headed back for breakfast at the guardian’s house and soon after drove to Umtata. After dropping off my escorts to catch a taxi back to KwaZulu-Natal, I continued home (as instructed in the transcript).

Baba never explained to me the rationale of doing this ritual and what purpose it served; it was part of the instructions he had apparently received during the divination session that led to the visit. The fact that he had brought both buckets of *ubulawu* which contained the bile of the sacrificed chickens and cow all the way from my brother’s home, and beat and poured it over me whilst I was sitting in the river, suggests that it served to connect me, my ancestors (for whom the two buckets of *ubulawu* had been dedicated) and the ritual bile offerings, with the water divinities in the pool. Apart from the shock of the cold water nothing miraculous seemed to happen to me, nor did I enter into any state of altered consciousness; it was not evident from the attending *izangoma* that this was anticipated. However, later Mathonsi did express her concern to me about how events at the pool had transpired. She said while she had been praying at the rock a voice told her that the water in the river was ‘dirty’

63. Mathonsi thought this related to the fact that Baba was ‘unclean’ when he did the ritual, and this was exacerbated by the fact he had been drinking alcohol on the evening before our visit there. She hinted to me that the absence of any transformative effect on my abilities or psyche were due to Baba’s failure to adhere to correct ritual procedure.

### 6.5 Discussion

At the end of this chapter it is appropriate to ask: Has the inclusion of (what I understand to

63 It was also physically dirty. In the previous year many respondents to our interviews were complaining about how polluted the river had become. They said they could no longer drink the water from the river. They blamed this mainly on the extensive agro-forestry that has been planted in the upper catchments of the river in the Ugie and Elliott districts.

64 In the sense of spiritual pollution (see Ngubane, 1977).
be) my own extraordinary experiences in the context of the radical participation method - and particularly izangoma responses to these experiences - helped to enhance our understanding of the water divinity phenomenon? Has this process of experience helped inform us on whether there might be a continuity of ideas across southern Africa relating to the water divinities? Moreover, does the inclusion of my extraordinary experiences help inform the model I have proposed in Chapter One (Section 1.2.4), and facilitate an appreciation of the dynamic nature of these beliefs and their related practices, and the different levels at which these might be analysed?

In describing how my own personal and (what I understand to be) extra-ordinary experiences of the water divinities came about (level 1) it is quite evident that my dreams were a key factor in how the izangoma interpreted my connection to these divinities and acted upon them. These dreams, which bore many of the symbolic hallmarks of the water divinities that I have described in Chapters Three and Four, both precipitated and helped prepare me for the subsequent rituals and experiences that followed, thus giving me insights into how the izangoma understood the phenomenon (levels 2 and 3). It must be emphasized, however, that these dreams and subsequent experiences relating to them were contextualized in ways that I could never have been able to foresee, or subconsciously create in my dream world, since I was unaware of any of the places shown to me prior to the dream experience. I have described in some detail the dreams and events that led to my finding the pool of Inkosazana in KwaZulu-Natal, the sacred pool on the Inxu River in the former Transkei, and the Nyamakati Pool in Zimbabwe, and have shown how circuitous and complex their discoveries were. I was to discover that these sites were well recognized by the local population as being the abodes of the water divinities, where diviners are often held to be called, and their stories shared similar symbolic features to my dreams. I am of the opinion that these dream led discoveries I had to different sites serve to demonstrate the interconnectedness of ideas regarding the water divinities in the region, yet at the same time they brought up their own unique array of histories, narratives and ritual activities.

It is also evident how deeply embedded my experiential process was within the unique context of my family history and the political events that were unfolding around us. According to Baba and Zanele this was because my ancestors were trying to protect my family and assist
them against the oncoming wave of violence and dispossession that was to occur in Zimbabwe. My apparent calling to be a diviner, and the animal sacrifices that would be necessary for my family to perform, were seen by my co-diviners, and experienced by myself, as the means by which the spiritual support from the ancestors could be strengthened, and allow my family some measure of resistance and protection. Thus, there was some degree of agency involved (levels 2 and 3), on my own, my family’s and the izangoma’s sides, and this agency needs to be considered within the particular political-economic and social context in which it emerged. While skeptics may argue that the protection ritual and second sacrifice were merely manipulative or instrumental strategies for us to cope with these political forces that were otherwise beyond our control, it must be emphasized that at no stage did I request Baba do any of the rituals; he was the one who insisted they needed to be done. In fact, despite my dreams, I was very reluctant to do the sacrificial rituals, as were my brothers, as they went against our own cultural sensibilities and boundaries. Thus the motives that drive agency may be nuanced and complex, and may include considerations of experience.

Although the dreams and the subsequent experiences I had regarding the water divinities and my training process were contingent on both my own personal context and culture, they were at the same time interpreted according to Zulu cultural forms of epistemology and understanding. However, these dreams took me and the izangoma beyond the cultural boundaries of Zulu beliefs into those of the Shona and Xhosa-speakers, demonstrating how the process of sharing and transmission of knowledge may take place. It was evident that the Zulu izangoma also shared common elements in their understanding regarding the divinities with these other two groups and this was demonstrated by a certain amount of cross-cultural conversation that took place. This cross-cultural applicability reveals the inherent limitation of those theoretical arguments that seek to explain a set of ideas and practices such as the water divinity complex as serving only to express and maintain the idealized social structure and norms characteristic of Nguni culture; for example, the agnatic principle (e.g. Hirst’s argument) or the classificatory structures of forest, river and homestead (e.g. Hammond-Tooke’s argument). It should also be pointed out that an explanatory approach based on the experience of unconscious archetypes (Aschwanden, 1989; Buhrmann, 1986) also fails to adequately accommodate the social processes that informed many of my experiences, or the fact that my dreams seemed to be revelatory of actual geographical sites where the water
divinities were believed to reside. I propose that the four phase/level model has the potential to accommodate these varying approaches and reveal the inherent richness and complexity of these beliefs.

Although I never experienced the actual physical underwater calling, on the basis of my dreams it was regarded as a distinct possibility by the isangoma, and they demonstrated this in the way they reacted and responded to the events at the pools. The rituals performed in Zimbabwe were followed with what they interpreted to be largely positive (if short-term) results and the Zulu claims of the visible manifestation of the ancestors, in the form of the pythons, were realized. It is, however, evident that while rituals are performed to produce positive outcomes, they are also believed to be hedged with risk. As my first ritual umgidi demonstrates, rituals can make one vulnerable to treachery by those with alternative agendas, and failure to do them properly, or take adequate precautions, can lead to failure or even more problems to develop. Regrettably, it seems that I was vulnerable to such risks, and I understand it was subsequently to have been revealed to me through divination that Baba had allegedly not performed the necessary two rituals for me at Inkosazana’s pool and the Inxu River with the utmost integrity, and that he had apparently failed to keep within the moral bounds expected of a teacher. These problems will be explored in the next two chapters.

65 As far as the izangoma were concerned the fact that the thieves had been apprehended and nearly all the stolen property had been returned (including irrigation pipes, cattle and their newborn calves) was ample evidence of this renewed strength of my ancestors. This conviction was boosted when my brother’s new eviction notice was withdrawn.
CHAPTER 7
IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

"You know these new economies. People use black medicine to be successful sangomas"
(Baba, 17/10/2000)

7.1 Introduction

In the previous four chapters I have detailed the widespread distribution of ideas of the water divinities in southern Africa, including my own experiences of them, and have shown that they are essentially regarded as positive forces, linked with the various groups’ notions of the creator God (sometimes being seen as God’s emanation), creation, the ancestors and the origin of humanity, fertility, rain, fecundity and abundance. They are also regarded as the source of much human knowledge (both technical and moral) including the art of healing and use of medicines, and these are especially seen as effective to counter the evils of witchcraft. They are also seen as guardians of morality, associated with certain cultural traditions, who impose severe sanctions on those that breach their strict moral codes of behaviour.

In this chapter I examine the more negative representations of the water divinities, particularly with regard to the ‘symbols’ of the snake and the mermaid, and how these are articulated in respect of local ideas on the moral economy, where instead of being seen as the guardians of morality they are sometimes represented as facilitating deviance away

1 I use the concept of ‘moral economy’ as it has been developed and expanded since the publication of James C. Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Scott used the concept as it applied to the particular context of the village peasantry in southeast Asia essentially using the term to describe the peasants’ “notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation” (Scott, 1976: 3) where “all are entitled to a living out of the resources within the village, and that living is attained often at the cost of a loss of status and autonomy. They (peasants) work, moreover, in large measure through the abrasive force of gossip and envy and the knowledge that the abandoned poor are likely to be a real and present danger to better-off villagers. These modest but critical redistributive mechanisms nonetheless do provide a minimal subsistence insurance for villagers’” (ibid: 5). Isichei, for example, has expanded on Scott’s concept of the moral economy by using the notion of ‘limited good’ (Foster, 1965), or the ‘zero-sum game’ (Harms, 1981), where in many subsistence based-economies it is commonly held that “One cannot acquire wealth by one’s own efforts, so an individual who becomes rich or powerful does so at the expense of others, and peasants tend to conceal prosperity, or dissipate it in institutionalized extravagance” (Isichei, 2002: 10)"
from it. I am thus focusing on the level of interpretation (see Figure 9, Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1), and will examine how the intersection of the local and global political-economy may influence moral commentaries relating to notions of production, consumption and exchange, particularly at the level of individual agency (level 3). In order to highlight how interpretation is negotiated and realized I will bring in my own experiences of the ambiguity of the key symbol that features in the water divinity beliefs, that of the snake. To a large extent this chapter echoes many similar themes that are to be found in the literature concerning the ‘occult economy’ across Africa. The ‘occult economy’, a phrase coined by Comaroff & Comaroff (1999) refers to the perceived flourishing of ‘witchcraft’ associated activities employed by certain individuals to gain ‘fast’ wealth through illicit means, especially in the context of the modern global economy. The predominant mode of acquisition of fast wealth is believed to be by means of medicine empowered with human body parts, which has led to the proliferation of ritual murders and other such heinous crimes (see also Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Ellis and Ter Haar, 2001; Geshiere, 1997; Geshiere & Fisiy, 1994; Isichel, 2002; Jordan Smith, 2001; Kiernan, 2006; Moore & Saunders, 2001; Sanders, 2003; Smith, 2005; Turrell, 2001). Typically, these suspicions and their commentaries are targeted towards the political elite who control much of the wealth in post-colonial Africa. Several of the scholars listed above (e.g. Ellis and Ter Haar, 2001, Shaw, 1996; Geshiere & Fisiy, 1994; Jordan-Smith, 2001) have demonstrated how power and religion are inextricably linked across Africa, and how this connection has been shrewdly understood and manipulated, albeit in sometimes grotesque forms, among many of the political elite who often make use of sorcerers (who might claim to be diviner/healers) to serve their interests.

It is important to emphasize that these interpretations and expressions operate principally at the level of discourse and rumour, and that these are fuelled by the ‘epistemic anxiety’

2 See Turrell (2001) for more on how human body parts were occasionally acquired through ritual killings or ‘muti murders’ to acquire ‘extraordinary power’ in cases of rivalry between contesting chiefs in KwaZulu-Natal at the beginning of the twentieth century.

3 Ellis & Ter Haar use the term radio trottoir or ‘pavement radio’ (derived from the street talk in Kinshasa) to describe such forms of gossip and rumour that permeate the popular discourse (including the media) in Africa. As they point out, “Rumours in Africa are generated in environments where the boundaries between
(Ashforth, 1998) that has arisen over the extremes of wealth and poverty that have become evident within and across communities in Africa over the last century. Isichei has employed the Foucauldian concept of “subjugated knowledge”, or ‘the truth from below’, to explain such commentary, which she argues emerges in response to these perceived inequalities and draws on existing symbolic repertoire in which to frame them (Isichei, 2002: 2). Isichei argues that certain symbols and metaphors, drawn from traditional sources (such as the concept of Mami Wata in West Africa), are used in ‘popular culture’ to speak out against inequitable disparities in both power and wealth that exist between people, who in the past conformed to more equitable principles of communal sharing in the products of the earth (Isichei, 2002: 7). Sanders argues much the same, and observes how these “moralizing metacommentaries” serve to construct, consider and contest local manifestations of modernity (or ‘modernities’) within the framework of “tradition”; “Tradition” he notes “is itself modernity’s shadowy companion” (Sanders, 2003: 338).

In this chapter I suggest that the beliefs and practices regarding the water divinities, which in the past were concerned principally with access to traditional forms of communal wealth through the fertility of crops and women, provide a significant component of the “traditional” matrix of symbols upon which such commentaries on the moral economy can be expressed. This moral economy is principally concerned with how wealth is obtained, and who benefits from it, and the nature of the exchange that is entered into between mortals and the spirit or divine beings, that are regarded as the ultimate source of power and wealth (Ellis & Ter Haar, 2001; Isichei, 2002).

In the pre-colonial and early colonial eras of southern Africa, prior to mass urbanization, industrialization, the increasing restrictions of people’s access to land, and the break-up of kin-based labour units due to forced migrant labour, fertility (in both children and crops), aided by the provision of rain, translated into wealth. However, especially amongst the Zulu, this search for abundance was organised on behalf of the communal

what is real and unreal, or true and false, are often unclear. But the essence of rumours...is that they are credible...and provide an important avenue for exploring commonly held ideas concerning the nature of reality” (Ellis & Ter Haar, 2001: 28).
group by the chief or King, and the gifts bestowed by the deities were seen as to be shared by all those who participated in the rituals (see Chapter Five: Section 5.3)\(^4\). I suggest that with the advent of modernity, the disruption of agricultural modes and relations of production, the demonizing of these beliefs by certain Christians, the emergence of individual accumulation of wealth, and the corresponding rise in the occult economy, the water divinities have become increasingly conflated in the minds of some people with the accumulation of illicit wealth. This negative aspect is evident in some recent ethnographic texts (e.g. Niehaus, 2001, 2006; Wood, 2005a & b; Badsteubner, 2003), although this might be because their informants failed to distinguish the good and evil emanations of the snake to the researcher in question. The informants may also have been influenced by the more negative interpretations of what the snake represents in the Christian perspective or from the discourses that have emerged as result of modernity. This Christian influence was especially evident in Basteubner’s (2003) paper on witchcraft confessions in a South African Pentecostal church.

In this chapter I will first examine what certain scholars have written about these negative aspects of the snake, particularly in the form of *mamlambo* or *uMamlambo*, the familiar snake associated with illicit wealth and sexual gratification, and will assess the claims that have been made regarding these. I will consider these especially with regard to how the associated symbols may be conflated with each other. I will then examine the ambivalent nature of spiritual power and how in Zulu cosmological terms, *izangoma* have to be particularly careful not to attract accusations of working with the forces of evil or darkness (*umynama*). This is achieved mainly through strict adherence to the correct moral codes of behaviour that *izangoma* should strive to achieve despite the pressures and the socio-economic and political contexts in which they find themselves, and how failure to abide by these may be seen to invoke the discourse of evil wealth generating snakes. To support my analysis I will focus on my own personal experiences, where certain individuals appeared to breach these codes, and how these distinctions became

\(^4\) Krige provides some evidence that among the Zulu the rituals that were performed to empower and fortify the king involved the practice of ritual murder of a victim and the use of the body parts to medicate the incumbent (Krige, 1936/1974: 241-242).
apparent to me in the course of my training.

7.2 Mamlambo in the context of modernity – illicit wealth and sexual gratification
At my first consultation with Baba he was careful to tell me that my ‘talent’ or power to become a diviner was from the Snake in the river and not from ‘the muti’ (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.4). Initially I was unaware of the significance or meaning of this statement but over time it became increasingly evident; he was making reference to the fact that among the contemporary Zulu the concept of a ‘snake’ holds a dual symbolic load; that of representing both good and evil. I have already outlined in the previous chapters the role and symbols of snakes in their positive form; their being representative of the life giving deities and the ancestors. Amongst many groups in contemporary South Africa the snake in its evil form has become part of the more dominant discourse. This is largely a result of the increasing anxiety surrounding the activities of those people suspected of operating within the occult economy (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999), as well as the negative interpretations of snakes that are found in Christianity. For the Zulu, the evil snake is commonly perceived as a witch’s familiar, and is understood to be manufactured with muti (plant or animal based medicine) for the purposes of bestowing sexual gratification and illicit wealth on the holder.

The most common form of muti snake used for these purposes, principally by men, is known as mamlambo or uMamlambo (lit. ‘the mother of the river’ in isiXhosa). Although there are slight variations in the description of the mamlambo, Hunter’s version obtained from the Mpondo in the 1930s is fairly representative,

Mamlambo is a familiar possessed by men. It is acquired from Europeans or from Indians. ‘A man buys an ikhubalo (charm) at the goldfields. It is made of hide but it will not burn. It cannot be cut with a knife. He puts it in his bag, and then he may open his bag and sees a snake. Then as he is walking along he sees a very beautiful girl, and he speaks to her, and she lets him make love to her, but he does not tell at home that he met that girl because it was Mamlambo.’ Some say that the girl always appears in European dress. ‘The wife and children of a man who has Mamlambo will die.’ ‘On the day the owner comes back from the mines with his ikhubalo sudden death comes to one of his parents.’ Some maintain that ichanti and Mamlambo are the same thing, but the best informants distinguish
clearly between them (Hunter, 1936/1961: 287).

Although this description, obtained in the 1930s, emphasises the more sexual associations of mamlambo, there appears to have been a progressive shift over the years from its role in providing sexual relief to men who are often characterised as being disinterested in ordinary women (Laubscher, 1937: 32), to it providing material riches in the form of success with business or in achieving wealth from an inexplicable source (Niehaus, 2001: 56-58; Wood, 2005a, 2005b). It is clear in Hunter’s description that this form of muti snake can be purchased from various herbal stores, which are often owned by whites or Indians that are usually located in major cities, these being the key symbols of monetary wealth. For instance all of Niehaus’s informants “believed that witches keep the mamlambo to satisfy their greed and desire for wealth...Informants suggested that the mamlambo predisposes its owners to luck in financial matters or steals the possessions and money of others for them” (Niehaus, 2001: 56).

In a series of papers Wood (2005a, 2005b) has described how one particular infamous individual, millionaire Khotso Sethuntsa, who lived in the region bordering KwaZulu-Natal and the former Transkei (between Kokstad and Lusikisiki), was reputed to have the mamlambo, which made him fabulously wealthy (he died in 1972). Although he came from a very poor and underprivileged background in Lesotho, he attained enormous wealth which he displayed conspicuously to all those around him who lived in a sea of poverty and deprivation. Wood also reports that he was reputed to deal in uthwala, a particularly bad form of gaining wealth, and she associates this with his ownership of the

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5 McAllister’s informants in the Transkei claimed that migrant workers also purchased such charms from the amaislamisi (Mohammedans) (McAllister, 1985: 126).

6 According to Wood, during the mid-60s at the height of the apartheid regime, Khotso owned thirty eight properties, eighteen palatial houses, drove around in a new Cadillac purchased with cash every year. He was reputed to have sacks filled with money stowed in these houses (Wood, 2005a: 70).

7 The word ‘thwala’ is used in a number of contexts in isiZulu (Dent & Nyembezi, 1969). It literally means ‘to carry’ (i.e. a heavy load), but it is also used with various adverbs to describe someone who is conceited (e.g. thwala umkhwenza, thwala ishoba, thwala umsiya), haughty (thwala ikhanda) or proud (thwala ihunda) – these being negative qualities that are often attributed to people who use such forms of medicine.
mamlambo snake. According to my Zulu izangoma informants, uthwala, in its more colloquial sense, is a very negative form of self-enrichment associated with the use of medicines based on human body parts and it is believed to be the force behind the alarming number of ritual killings, particularly of children. The sole aim of uthwala is to become instantly rich and very powerful. Like mamlambo the wealth a man derives from uthwala cannot be passed on to his descendants, who are usually left in poverty when the owner dies. Baba gave me one particularly ghoulish account of a case where a wealthy man who allegedly used uthwala in the Bulwer district died (they are often reputed to die at a relatively young age). The children of this man, desperate to keep their deceased father’s ill-gotten wealth, allowed his corpse to rot and then resorted to eating the maggots that fed off it. In this way it was believed that they were able to retain the wealth in the family.

Although they both have the common feature of attracting wealth to the owner, with the consequential death of close kin, mamlambo is not necessarily synonymous with uthwala, as a person can deal in uthwala but not necessarily have a mamlambo. In the opinion of the Zulu izangoma, uthwala is specifically associated with the use of self-enrichment medicines based on human body parts (it can also give one political power – thus some politicians are suspected of using it), where mamlambo is based on medicines manufactured from either a root or twig, or a piece of sinew/skin from the mystical snake iChanti (see below). According to my informants the mamlambo is also used by the owner for sexual gratification, and more importantly, is sent out at night to have sexual intercourse with those he desires. The clue to this activity is through the victim experiencing dreams of someone having sexual intercourse with them.

It is evident that these conceptions of the evil wealth generating snake seem to be a recent phenomenon, emerging in response to the great political and economic upheavals experienced by the indigenous peoples in South Africa, in the early to mid-twentieth

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8 This idea of using medicines from human body parts for self-enrichment permeates the discourse of the occult economy and is found among many groups in sub-Saharan Africa (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Jordan Smith, 2001; Meyer, 2006; Sanders, 2001; Shaw, 1996).
century. Niehaus noted that according to his Tsonga and northern Sotho informants in the village of Green Valley in the Bushbuckridge district of Mpumalanga Province, the *mamlambo* was a relatively recent acquisition in witches' arsenal of familiars (Niehaus, 2001: 56), arriving in the area around the mid 1950s. He notes that “this familiar also seems to have been incorporated into the lowveld from Nguni-speakers via migrant labourers” (*ibid*). This association of its spread with migrant labour, increased industrialization and in particular, with the gold mines is supported by other scholars (Hunter, 1936/1961; McAllister, 1985). The rapid growth of greater inequality between members of the black communities since 1994 (HSRC Fact Sheet No 1, 26 July 2004) has probably given added impetus to such beliefs and practices.

Although Niehaus’s informants linked the origin of *mamlambo* with the Nguni speakers in general, I suggest that the concept originated more specifically with the Cape Nguni. The word itself is from the Xhosa language*, and one of the earliest records of the word *mamlambo* is by J.H. Soga in his book *The AmaXhosa* (1931). Significantly he uses the word *U-Mamlambo* as the alternative of *I-Canti* (also spelt *ichanti* or *ixhanti*), the mystical river snake that I have described in Chapter Four, Section 4.3) (Soga, 1931: 193). Drawing mainly on her metamorphosing and shape-shifting abilities, he describes her as a “Fabulous water-sprite” (*ibid*: 193). He notes her appearance can change at will from a chain, to a goat-skin bag, a piece of tin, a hoe, a feather, a pipe, a honeycomb, or “a snake of unusual appearance, which has the power to mesmerise people” (*ibid*: 193). He describes this mesmerising effect as similar to that of a kaleidoscope and commented how “Those Natives who have seen the optical instrument….and note the quick changes of colours and form at once shout out "i-canti". They associate the rapid change of pattern with their impressions of *i-canti*” (*ibid*). This description is remarkably consistent to those I have already discussed regarding the mystical snake in Chapter Four (Section

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9 Intriguingly Kropf defines *unlamambo* as “A snake which is said to eat the intestines of people, but which leaves those who are hollow” (Kropf, 1915: 226). The word *unlamambo* means a river.

10 J.H. Soga (1860-1941) was the son of the first black ordained minister, Tiyo Soga. J.H. Soga became a well respected historian of the Xhosa. He was also an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church.
4.3), and it is relevant to note that nowhere does he suggest this creature can be made from muti. There is also no mention that it is regarded as a witch’s familiar, or was associated with illicit wealth and unorthodox sexual relations with humans. Probably because of his own Christian conversion, he did describe those people who have encountered i-canti or U-Mamlambo at the river as ‘unfortunate’ or ‘bewitched’.

Although he makes no mention of people being taken underwater by this creature to become diviners, his descriptions fit more with the water divinities than with the contemporary imagery of the muti snake. I thus think it is erroneous to assume that the contemporary ideas of the mamlambo correspond with U-Mamlambo described by Soga.

Apart from Hunter’s records of the mamlambo beliefs amongst the Mpondo and Cape Nguni groups in the Keiskammahoek region, the other scholars who have discussed the Cape Nguni concepts of mamlambo in its form as a witch familiar are Laubscher (1937), Hammond-Tooke (1962; 1974) and McAllister (1985). It is instructive that Laubscher, who did extensive enquiries on this phenomenon amongst ‘mentally ill’ patients from the mental hospital where he worked as a psychiatrist in the 1930s, emphasised the sexual pathologies that men who were held to possess mamlambo were associated with; although he also mentioned that such men were usually regarded as successful in their agricultural ventures. The belief in mamlambo was one of a number of snake familiars (izinyoka) he encountered amongst his Cape Nguni patients. He identified two others, usually associated with women, called ukatya (or charmed snake) and the other ingumbane (an evil snake). It was believed that some women harboured the ukatya snake in their vaginas, and these provided them with sexual pleasure, hence making men dispensable. The ingumbane was alleged to be a snake familiar that worked with the

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11 He proceeds to describe a reported incident where two women claimed to have encountered the i-canti, in the form of a shiny copper ring, at the river. The relatives of one of the girls immediately called a herbalist to treat her, and she survived, while the other girl’s relatives failed to call a herbalist and merely comforted her. This girl died within a day. Soga adds that although many would rationalise such claims as superstition, or a result of hallucination or an “excessively nervous temperament”, to the Xhosa “they are very real experiences” (Soga, 1931: 195).

12 I apostrophise this as I suspect many of his patients were suffering from a calling by the ancestors to become amathwasa, rather than suffering from mental illness in the western sense. Such patients were usually classified as schizophrenic.
Tikoloshe, on behalf of the witch, to attack and destroy its victims. The mamlambo was associated specifically with men, and as observed by Hunter (1936/1961) was often termed inyoka yamadoda (the snake of men). Wood also encountered the association of mamlambo with inyoka yamadoda (Wood, 2005a: 82). Its converse, ‘the snake of women’ (inyoka yabafadzi), was a snake familiar sent out by certain vindictive women to attack small children and infants (Hammond-Tooke, 1974b; Hunter, 1936/1961: 285; Wilson et al, 1952: 190), but did not seem to be associated with sexual gratification or wealth.

Of mamlambo Laubscher noted the following,

She is reputed to be a woman of great beauty and sexual attractiveness, and possesses the power to change herself into animals, insects and medicines. A man who is the partner of a Mamlambo rarely cares for women, although some have been known to marry. He who has an intrigue with the Mamlambo is usually lucky and wealthy; his crops are always good, and his cattle of the best. Yet, the Mamlambo demands a sacrifice before she bestows her favours on a man, and this penalty or sacrifice takes the form of someone dying in his family. The member of the family selected by the Mamlambo to die is usually the father, or, in case he is deceased, the eldest brother (Laubscher, 1937: 32).

This description picks up on similar themes and symbolic imagery as Hunter’s description (see above). Hunter also encountered similar ideas in the Keiskamma region (Wilson et al, 1952). It is commonly held that Mamlambo can transform herself into the ideal beautiful woman and enters into a pact with the beholder. She provides him with sexual pleasure and personal wealth and he provides her with blood, if not in sacrificial animals then the life of those closest and dearest to him. Niehaus’s informants confirmed these same themes and noted that the cost of owning such a familiar is high since she is greedy, jealous, possessive and dangerous. If the owner fails to keep her satisfied, mamlambo will kill his close relatives and may even ultimately kill him (Niehaus, 2001:

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13 A Tikoloshe is a notorious trickster and witch’s familiar found originally amongst the Cape Nguni and the Khoisan. He is believed to also come from the river but is manipulated by witches to cause trouble for their victims. According to Hunter he is “a small hairy being, having the form of a man, but so small that he only reaches to a man’s knee. He has hair all over his face and coming out of his ears, and his face is squashed up like a baboon. The penis of the male is so long that he carries it over his shoulder, and he has only one buttock” (Hunter, 1936/1961: 175-176).
Wood has observed similar ideas recurring in her interviews regarding Khotso Sethuntsa (Wood, 2005a: 83-85).

One cannot help wondering whether the conditions of deprivation, especially of female company, excessive overcrowding, and the increased incidence of male homosexuality (Moodie, 1991, 2001; Niehaus, 2002, 2006) that characterised the mine compounds, where many migrant rural men sought work, may have precipitated such ideas relating to mamlambo’s sexual services. McAllister noted how the normal practice of performing an animal sacrifice to give thanks for the safe return of a migrant worker posed certain dilemmas for the family in the Willowvale district of the Transkei. He argues that suspicions were raised that these men were likely to have purchased mamlambo while they were in the city, especially in the light of their relative wealth vis-à-vis their rural compatriots. If the family performed the normal sacrificial thanksgiving for the safe return of the migrant, neighbours might become suspicious that they were sacrificing for the migrant’s mamlambo rather than their ancestors. It was partly for this reason that families started to shift the thanksgiving rituals from the traditional ritual slaughter (ukuhlinzeka) to that of a large beer drink (umsindleko). McAllister rightly notes that this conceived fear probably offered a convenient justification for the family to avoid sacrificing their precious and dwindling herds of livestock (McAllister, 1985: 129-133). It also provided them with a useful conceptual tool to speak out about the social transformations that were following in the wake of the migrant labour system (ibid).

All reports concur that mamlambo is bought from herbalists in the form of a root, a twig or, in Hunter’s example, a piece of hide. Niehaus’s informants claimed that “something like a fish” contained in a bottle” could be also be bought (2001: 56). Some reports indicate that purchasing this item is all that needs to be done to gain the mamlambo’s presence, while others assert that certain actions need to be done to activate it (see below). The power to remove mamlambo is seen to rest with herbalists (Laubscher, 1937: 63), or in some cases with Christian healers (Niehaus, 2001: 57; Badsteubner, 2003), but this task is reputedly very difficult. It seems that sometimes a man may inadvertently buy mamlambo, but this usually happens when he consults a herbalist to assist him with
gaining wealth or love (Laubscher, 1937: 63-64; McAllister, 1985: 126; Niehaus, 2006: 95; Wilson et al, 1952: 189). According to Laubscher it was believed that if a man seeking wealth or love magic did not wish to be given mamlambo there were certain tests he could perform on the root or medicines given to make sure he had not been tricked into buying one. It is quite clear in this next statement that owning a mamlambo had very negative connotations amongst the Cape Nguni,

When a native buys medicine from an ixhwele [herbalist], and this medicine is in the shape of a root, the native behaves in a very suspicious manner. He will take a small piece and throw it in the fire or put a match to it to see whether it will burn, for if it does not burn or slips out of his hand he is sure it is the Mamlambo in disguise. Or he may prick the root with a pin and if it jumps out of his hand it is considered convincing that the root medicine is the Mamlambo itself. The native is just as afraid of being associated with the Mamlambo as we are of being considered perverts (Laubscher, 1937: 64).

As its name suggests many informants associate the mamlambo in some way with the river. While some claim that a man who has one will usually keep it locked up in a trunk in his house, others claim that it lives in a nearby river (Laubscher, 1937: 64; Niehaus, 2001: 56; Wood 2005a & b). There is some contradiction in these two claims, in that if mamlambo is kept locked up in a trunk, the implication is that a man ‘owns’ or possesses it, possibly against its will. However, such restraint is not implied if it merely lives in the river. Again, these conflicting reports may be a result of a conflation between the two categories of snake (i.e. the Snake as deity, as against the muti snake, or mamlambo). This conflation also seems to be carried through into some of the descriptions of its appearance. For instance, Niehaus’s informants claimed,

The root glows at night and casts a mysterious light throughout the home. After some time the root grows into a large snake which is slippery and hairy, has awesome fangs and eyes that shine like diamonds...The mamlambo is also believed to metamorphose into human form (Niehaus, 2001: 56).

This description clearly picks up on some of the characteristics attributed to the mystical
Snake in the river (Niehaus, 2001: 58).14

Beyond the tendency for humans to seek binary opposites (e.g. good and evil) (Levi-Strauss, 1955), the question is how does one explain and resolve the discrepancy between the mystical Snake as divinity, with its life-giving and morally abiding functions, and its isomorphic opposite (or negative mirror image) which is associated with witchcraft, human sacrifice, greed and wanton sexual desire? In fact one of Wood’s informants, James Lunika, a close colleague and supporter of Khotso Sethuntsa when he was alive, referred to mamlambo as ‘Nkosazana’ (Wood, 2005a: 85). As Lunika occupied the border zone between the Zulu and Cape Nguni it is quite possible that he drew on Zulu concepts of Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana to validate, or put some respectability on the source of Khotso’s power. This is despite the fact that Khotso’s behaviour was clearly out of keeping with the social and moral norms expected by Inkosazana devotees.

It must be pointed out that light emitting features of the mamlambo medicine in the above description by Niehaus are not found amongst the Cape Nguni where the idea of the medicine in all likelihood originated. This suggests that in the Bushbuckridge area, where its use was relatively new, it has become a hybrid combination of ideas taken from various narratives of the mamlambo familiar used by witches, and the mystical river Snake encountered by diviners.15

Another important consideration is that the concept of Inkosazana and the community rituals performed to gain her grace and generosity are not found among the Cape Nguni (see Chapter Five), whereas the concept of mamlambo, as an evil witch familiar, was until recently not found amongst the Zulu groups. It is significant that mamlambo does

14 Zanele did mention a belief in a bad or dangerous snake that lives in certain rivers and casts a glow of light around it. She termed it the uVimbeli snake, and did not associate it with either Inkosi ye Zulu or Inkosazana.

15 Niehaus, in fact, mentions that among these groups the Nconzo is a well-known “water serpent that abducts people and trains them as powerful denga [healers]” (Niehaus, 2001: 58), while Mmamokebe, “the dangerous guardian of the water, is half-woman, half-snake” (ibid) who, although normally peaceful, will when angered cause destructive storms and tornadoes.
not appear in any of the early ethnographic records for the Zulu (such as by Bryant, Callaway, and Krige), or in the more recent authoritative texts on Zulu izangoma beliefs and practices, such as by Berglund (1976) and Ngubane (1977). The most common familiars known to the Zulu were the impaka (a wild cat), umkhovu (a zombie), and imfene (a baboon). Krige notes that certain witches (umthakathi) were known to take control of a common bush snake known as umHlangwe\(^{16}\), which would be doctored “with medicine and insila (dirt) of the person to whom he wishes to send evil...he sends the snake to the village in which his enemy lives. As soon as the snake enters his house, that person will become ill” (Krige, 324; see also Berglund, 1976: 281). However, this snake was associated with vindictive magic rather than magic for personal desire. Although they make no mention of the mamlambo, both Berglund (1976: 278-281) and Ngubane (1977: 34-35) note that the more recent ideas of the thikoloshe (sometimes spelt tikoloshe) and impundulu\(^{17}\) (also referred to as izulu or inyoni), were not traditionally found among the Zulu of central KwaZulu-Natal, but were regarded as “Xhosa familiars which have been brought to Natal and Zululand either by Xhosa themselves or by Zulu migrant labourers who learn about them from Xhosa people in the town centres” (Ngubane, 1977: 34).\(^{18}\) In all probability it is this same process that led to the emergence of the use of mamlambo medicine among present day Zulu groups. From the 1890s, Zulu and Cape Nguni (including Pondo) migrants worked together on the mines in Johaanesberg, as well as the sugar fields in southern KwaZulu-Natal – so diffusion of such cultural ideas was inevitable, especially since they address common issues of concern found among many miners, such as jealousy, greed and sexual frustration (Moodie, 1991, 2001; Niehaus, 2006).

One earlier text on the Zulu that makes brief mention of the manufacture of a muti snake

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\(^{16}\) This snake reputedly has no intestine (Berglund, 1976: 282; Krige, 1936/1974; 324).

\(^{17}\) According to Hunter the impundulu bird was a female witch’s familiar who could appear as a European man, and who came from the goldfields (1936/1961: 282). The bird is now more associated with attacking its victims on their chest or head causing symptoms of tuberculosis or stroke.

\(^{18}\) Samuelson, however, seemed to have come across ideas relating to the ‘water-bogey’ intokoloshe in northern Zululand (Samuelson, 1974).
is by Köhler (1941), whose description seems to fit the Cape Nguni\(^{19}\) concept of the woman’s snake (*inyoka yabafazi*) and yet it seems to have some characteristics similar to *mamlambo*, apart from the fact that the owner is a woman rather than a man. His informant does not associate it with wealth, but although it has sexual intercourse with its female owner, it is usually sent to cause harm and sickness on its victims.\(^{20}\) His informant Sikhumbana, who was obviously a herbalist involved in providing this familiar for clients, details the mode of its manufacture,

If a woman comes to me and wants me to make her a women’s snake (*inyoka yabafazi*), I take a string of sinew of the *ichanti* and twist it into twine, and then I smear it with fat of *ichanti* and with medicine. Then I tell her to dig a hole, to place the sinew in it, and to cover it with a stone. I give her an emetic. Next morning she drinks this and goes to vomit on the bundle of sinew; when she has finished she again covers it up with a stone. She thus vomits in the hole regularly. At the end of the first week she finds a small creature running about on the vomit, the creature is the string of sinew which is now growing. She continues in this way, and when the creature is big she takes it in a dish to the river and puts it, together with the dish, in the river. There it grows until it is very big. From now on she regularly goes there with the blood of a goat or a beast for it to eat, and she also gives it sour milk. Sometimes this snake kills the husband of the woman who bred it, because it also wants to cohabit with the woman. If the husband is not at home, the woman sleeps with the snake as with her husband. It does not however cause her to conceive. It goes by night, sent by its owner, and enters huts at night (where it places bad medicines and ‘licks’ its victims) (Köhler, 1941:40)\(^{21}\).

This description suggests that this snake familiar is made by manipulating the flesh or sinew of the mystical water snake, *ichanti* and then replacing it in the river. Quite where he obtained the sinew of *ichanti* from Sikhumbana does not elaborate, but many herbal stores claim to stock the flesh of a range of mystical creatures.

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19 It should be noted that Köhler did his research in an area of KwaZulu-Natal that shared its border, and had close contact with the Xhosa-speaking groups of the former Transkei and Mzimkhulu area.

20 Berglund also mentions the snake familiar termed *inyoka yosinga* which is sent to a victim by a jealous enemy to cause gynaecological problems and infertility.

21 According to Zanele, *mamlambo*, which she associates more with a love charm, is made in a similar way.
Thus, although there are some recurring symbolic elements between the Cape Nguni umMamlambo and the mystical water Snake, which, because of its shape-shifting ability, could also be a transformation of the Zulu entity Inkosazana, there are also significantly marked differences. In the following table I attempt to tease these out to highlight these discrepancies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zulu concepts of Inkosazana</th>
<th>Cape Nguni concepts of Mamlambo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides guidance and protection to women, especially virgins.</td>
<td>Provides services to men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A deity, the daughter of God, a pre-eminent being</td>
<td>A witch's familiar, manufactured from muti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls those chosen to her in dreams. Manifests in pool as a mermaid.</td>
<td>Purchased in the market place as a root or twig--a commodity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes virginity and socially acceptable forms of sexual relationship</td>
<td>Associated with those who pursue illicit sexual gratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with communal fertility, abundance of crops and general welfare</td>
<td>Associated with enormous individual wealth which others cannot benefit from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes healthy infants born of acceptable marriage unions</td>
<td>No offspring result and children may be destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with structural stability, ritual and cultural traditions</td>
<td>More inclined to anti-structure and individualistic pursuits. May be associated with whites, Indians and 'Mohammedans', i.e., non-African cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resides in certain river pools -- difficult to access. Also connected to the sky and revealed as the rainbow and soft life-giving rains</td>
<td>Lives in the owner's bag or trunk, or may live in a nearby river. May manifest as destructive tornado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has remarkable transformative powers, but usually manifests in guise of natural phenomenon or as a beautiful woman or old hag</td>
<td>Has remarkable transformative abilities but most commonly appears in form of human manufactured goods or a beautiful woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires occasional animal sacrifice at time of planting to ensure healthy crops. Failure to observe may result in bad weather conditions and environmental degradation.</td>
<td>Demands regular animal sacrifice and blood, or will start to kill close relatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals are performed at a communal level and sanctioned by the chief.</td>
<td>Rituals are done in private, kept secret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with traditional rural lifestyles and Zulu cultural identity</td>
<td>Associated with modernity and its symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a strict moral code. Offended with 'bad heart' (greed, hatred and jealousy). May kill such offenders.</td>
<td>Serves and controls those people with 'bad hearts'. Provides those greedy for wealth and illicit sex with their desires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with diviners, healing and knowledge. Gives skills to healers to combat witchcraft.</td>
<td>Associated with herbalists who magically manipulate substances. Used as a witch's familiar to cause harm to others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences between these two snake manifesting entities, although bearing a few superficial similarities, are clearly quite different, and to some extent their symbolic
associations are the inverse of each other. One is seen as a natural emanation of God concerned with communal well-being and health, and the other, while having supra-human power and allegedly making excessive demands on its ‘owner’, is a human manipulated creation (or transformation) that is traded as a commodity in the market and oriented to individualistic success at the expense of others. These pivotal distinctions, however, are based on moral principles, and this is revealed in the behaviour of those who are associated with them. A person who is greedy and does not share his wealth raises suspicions that he may have entered into a pact with the mambyambo. It is also evident that there is a distinction, and a tension, that exists between herbalists, some of whom are believed to deal in mambyambo and other bad medicines, and izangoma, who claim to be guided by the benevolent ancestors and the water divinities. I must point out that I have never encountered any suggestions among the izangoma that Inkosazana, as the mermaid, or the great mystical Snake sometimes referred to as Inkosi yeZulu, are in any way connected to the evil muti snake, mambyambo.

This difficulty in differentiating between the good and evil representations of the S/snake has also been encountered by anthropologist Adam Ashforth (1998, 64). In an article on spiritual insecurity in an urban township, he describes the response of various members of a shack settlement on the outskirts of Soweto\textsuperscript{22}, known as Doornkop/Snake Park, to a series of warning dreams one of its members claimed to have received from the Snake, termed Inkosi ya Manzi (Lord of the Waters). From the evidence provided in this article, one can conclude that Inkosi ya Manzi is a transformation of the Zulu concept of Inkosi ye Zulu. According to the man (Mr Nkonyana), who had the dreams, these were messages from Inkosi signalling his anger at the settlement being built close to a nearby river, where Inkosi resided. The Snake (Inkosi) was angered not only at the noise, but the fact that children were throwing stones at the ducks. The community was warned to move away from the area or they would face Inkosi’s wrath in the form of a tornado which would pick up and move the shacks to the border of Swaziland. As has already been explained in Chapter Five (Section 5.2.2), these fears of trespassing on the natural spaces

\textsuperscript{22} A sprawling former African township on the outskirts of Johannesburg.
held to be the abode of the water divinities, and their consequences, are recurrent themes encountered in many rural communities across southern Africa. It is probable that Ashforth was not familiar with these recurring themes (which are rarely openly discussed with outsiders), as he struggled to make sense of the impact these seemingly bizarre claims had on the community. The interesting thing about this paper is how these ideas were expressed and negotiated in an urban context. Ashforth, who points out in his book (2000) how he struggled with, and sought to entertain, the world view of his informants, was quite clearly incredulous of these ideas. In his 1998 paper he details the responses of the community to Mr Nkonyana’s pronouncements, and the subsequent interviews he had with numerous individuals, including healers and church officials, regarding the source of such ideas. He was assisted in this endeavour by his two friends and informants, both who were young men in their twenties and were urban born and bred and who, to his surprise, took such ideas very seriously. Ashforth notes that even in this urban setting,

...there was widespread consensus that Inkosi ya manzi exists, that he is powerful, and that he takes the form of a snake, a big snake, some say a gigantic snake...there is profound disagreement about the physical and moral nature of this beast and the extent of his powers (Ashforth, 1998: 43).

As would be expected in the light of what has been discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, the diviners and Zionist prophets (one being a Zulu inyanga) that he interviewed were of the opinion that this was indeed the divinity which is associated with the calling of diviners, and was essentially a positive force (except when angered by the activities of humans). However a few informants, notably an Anglican priest who drew his inspiration from the representation of the serpent in the Biblical “Garden of Eden”, regarded it as “an embodiment of the spirit of evil in the world” (ibid: 44).

In trying to make sense of how to mediate these two polarities in opinion, Ashforth considers that they demonstrate an ‘epistemic anxiety’ that is caused by fear that arises from “doubt about knowledge of the nature and purposes of invisible forces capable of

23 One of the students was completing his law degree at a local university.
causing harm" (ibid: 64), be it God’s anger at our sins, at the one pole, or the mischief of the devil or of witches at the other. There is little doubt for Ashforth that the influence of migrant labour oscillating between the rural hinterland and the inter-ethnic melting pots of urban life, with its attendant economic, spiritual and physical insecurities, has led to a flourishing of this ‘epistemic anxiety’ regarding peoples’ negotiation and interpretation of misfortune and spiritual threat.

However, what was revealing in his interviews with his many urban informants on whether this Snake was essentially good or bad, was that there seemed to be consensus that Inkosi ya Manzi was definitely not the same as mamlambo. They strongly associated the latter with witchcraft for self-enrichment sold by herbalists, and claimed that humans can exert power over it (although this may be at the expense of their loved ones’ lives). However, Inkosi ya Manzi exists independent of humans and, as one informant put it, is “one of the greatest creatures that God has created and has enormous power” (ibid: 51), which humans cannot control. There seemed to be consensus that the Snake can communicate with certain people through dreams and can be placated through the offering of a cow in ritual sacrifice. Furthermore they seem to indicate that the African Indigenous Churches, such as the Zionist and Apostolic Churches, take adherents to the water for baptism in order to be purified by Inkosi ya Manzi, which suggests they regard him as God’s emanation. I will return to this issue in Chapter Eight.

There is some evidence that the symbolic weight of mamlambo may have had its origins in the more benevolent water deities that prevailed with agro-pastoralism. A number of scholars were told that men with mamlambo had productive fertile fields and large herds of cattle (Laubscher, 1937: 32; Niehaus, 2001: 56; Wilson et al, 1952: 190), which could connect with fertility-generating aspects of the water divinities. Indeed it is also possible that in the case of Khotso Sethuntsa he may have originally had a calling to be a healer or a heaven-herd24 when he was a young man. Certainly his fame rested on the fact that the

24 Heaven-herds were certain individuals selected amongst the Zulu to control the weather and steer away any violent storms with their ritual actions. They were usually selected on the basis that they had escaped near-death from lightning (Berglund, 1976: 46-51).
source of his mystical powers emanated from his alleged ability to control the *Inkanyamba* tornado snake. Prior to his sudden attainment of wealth, when he was still young, he is reputed to have sent a devastating tornado\(^{25}\) to destroy the home of a farmer for whom he had worked as a cattle-minder for in the Kokstad region, who he felt had unfairly dismissed him from his job (Wood, 2005b: 349). His source of power was believed to come from a snake that resided in the Mzintlava River. Although this tornado event and Khotso’s grievance could have been a mere coincidence, it is significant that Khotso was happy to use it to endorse his reputation in being able to control mystical power. There is, however, no claim that he was ever a healer or experienced underwater submersion, but according to Wood it suited his agenda, as it did for his ‘prime minister’ James Lunika, to be associated with Inkosazana\(^{26}\). This was possibly a means by which they could justify the source of Khotso’s wealth and power in a socially acceptable way\(^{27}\). I doubt if they would have made these claims if Inkosazana was regarded in an evil light, just as much as one would never find anyone boasting about having a *mamlambo*.

### 7.2.1 Summary

Notions of the various *muti* snakes seem to have shifted and transformed over space and time, and these seem to be heavily influenced by the broader socio-economic contexts in which they are found. There is abundant evidence that the impact of industrialization, migrant labour, and urbanization have had a profound influence in the spread of these ideas which thrive on rumour and fester in conditions of marked social inequalities (Niehaus, 2001; McAllister, 1985). Niehaus has noted that in its wealth generating

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\(^{25}\) Using such powers to attack one’s enemies would be morally wrong for a heaven-herd to do and would be regarded as a sign of witchcraft. I have come across this view in the Inxu River area, where certain rain-makers have been accused of witchcraft after members of a homestead were killed by lightning. The rain-maker was subsequently killed for her ‘sins’ by members of the community.

\(^{26}\) Wood describes how Khotso made Lunika a special walking stick which became his most prized possession, “On the top is Lunika’s face, taken from his ID book and just below, is an image of a mermaid. The sides, front and back are adorned with snakes” (Wood, 2005b: 351).

\(^{27}\) Of interest, Peter Bekker, a well known author who had met and interviewed Khotso on a number of occasions, made no mention of Khotso’s alleged association with Inkosazana (Bekker, 1975: 137-145).
aspects “The snake-like mamlambo objectifies the desire for money in a context of social and economic deprivation, and highlights the destructive social effects brought about by the unrestrained quest for wealth” (Niehaus, 2001: 47). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa where the government has increasingly pursued a strategy of neo-liberal macro-economics, this has led to an increasingly skewed distribution of wealth, and a corresponding rise in the black middle class, and the small, but powerful, upper class black elite (Bond, 2000; Schneider, 2003; Weeks, 1999). This may have fuelled suspicions that the mamlambo trade is on the increase and could explain why the discourse of mamlambo’s wealth-generating aspects is on the rise, rather than its sexual gratification aspects. During the apartheid era migrant labourers were forced to spend long periods of time away from their families and wives in the rural areas, leading to sexual deprivation on the part of the male migrant workers. Wives would naturally be anxious and suspicious of what sexual release their husbands would find while away for such long periods (as men were of their women), and feared they would be captivated by beautiful women, dressed in western clothes, in the cities – the epitome of mamlambo. However, because of the apartheid legislation, which deliberately suppressed the rise of the black middle and upper classes, they were all more or less on an equal footing economically – being poor and deprived. Hence the focus on mamlambo’s sexual allure during that period predominated over that of rapid financial wealth (Niehaus, 2001: 61-62).

28 This was especially the case after 1996 when the ANC government abandoned the more redistributionist oriented Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to pursue the neoliberal agenda of the Growth Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR) promoted by the World Bank (see Bond, 2000; Narsiah, 2002; Schneider, 2003; Weeks, 1999). For instance, Schneider asserts that “Despite the promises of neoliberal economists, GEAR and other neoliberal policies have done little to improve the performance of the South African economy, especially as far as the blacks are concerned... in general, neoliberal policies promoted by the World Bank and adopted by the ANC have helped black elites but have done little for the black majority while largely preserving the status quo” (Schneider, 2003: 44-45).

29 According to an HSRC survey the Gini co-efficient increased from 0.62 in 1991 to 0.72 in 2001, and while the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa did not change significantly between 1996 and 2001 “those households living in poverty have sunk deeper into poverty and the gap between the rich and poor has widened” (HSRC Fact Sheet No: 1, 26 July 2004; their emphasis).

30 An exception was the beneficiaries of the ‘homeland’ governance system set up during the apartheid era. Many of the homeland leaders were regarded as apartheid ‘stooges’ and they prospered materially from their leadership positions (Bank, 2002; Hammond-Tooke, 1975a).
To a large extent these discourses on the *mamlambo* reflect similar anxieties found across the post-colonial states in Africa regarding the occult economy that have arisen as a result of Africa's increasing participation in the global economic arena and the corresponding pursuit of individual wealth and power. These varying moral expressions suggest the water divinities as morally neutral beings; their moral ambiguity seems to arise from the values that are imposed at a social or cultural level regarding their gifts, who benefits from their gifts, and the principles of exchange that are entered into. The evidence provided on the nature of *mamlambo* seems to point towards it being the product of manipulative magic, secured by certain greedy individuals, rather than a natural entity which can provide benefits based on the principles of reciprocity. What is striking about the symbolic content regarding the allegedly evil attributes of *mamlambo* in relation to the allegedly positive attributes of the water divinities is that they display a typical inversion of qualities commonly found in many symbolic systems of classification. As Needham has observed,

symbolic inversion or reversal is resorted to constantly in order to ascribe to an event, a boundary of time or space, a status, a quality, etc., some special, abnormal, or perturbing significance. The symbolic classification is given an intensified application by reversing the signs, as it were, on the values of the categories (Needham, 1979: 41).

I suggest that the factor of "perturbing significance" relates particularly to the transgressions of the moral economy that have come in the wake of colonialism and capitalism.

Significantly, in recent years, the capitalist ethic of individual accumulation and competition for resources is increasingly penetrating the professional space occupied by diviners, and they are becoming more vulnerable to accusations of harbouring a *mamlambo* or even dealing in *uthwala*. In my own experience the diviners were very averse to being associated with these evil snake familiars and most went out of their way not to attract suspicion and gossip by flaunting their success and wealth, or being seen to advise clients on how to achieve rapid financial success. When I first arrived at Baba's
homestead the *izangoma* were emphatic that Baba would chase away any client who came to ask for success and wealth; making such a request, would imply that Baba dealt with *uthwala* or had a *mamlambo*. His alleged association with a snake, deemed to be his *amakhosi*, which reputedly resided in the river below his house was openly discussed amongst the *izangoma* and deemed quite acceptable. The measure of his moral worth was thus demonstrated in the type of services he provided. However, over time Baba fell short on his ability to control the flaunting of his power, popularity and relative wealth, and doubts and suspicions began to emerge. It was also increasingly suspected that he was failing to properly complete the training of certain *izangoma* who he felt were a threat to his power. Subsequently over the years his powers and popularity have been on the decline, further exacerbating people’s suspicions, to the point where many began to claim his ancestors had deserted him because he had transgressed the moral codes set by them. It was not only his perceived flouting of the moral codes that led to these doubts, but also the dreams that some *izangoma* (including myself) had that were interpreted as warning us about Baba. As a result of these, and the subsequent perceived loss of his powers and his popularity, it was suspected that by 2007 he had resorted to owning a *mamlambo* himself. While the suspicions of his acquisition of *mamlambo* arose only after 2006, one could question what powers he was operating with at my ritual in Zimbabwe, as this was after he had allegedly deceived me at Inkosazana’s pool, albeit unbeknown to me at the time. The point should be made that the ritual had been prompted by my own dreams, and I was satisfied that its meaning had been already been verified by other diviners independently of Baba. Moreover, it was my family who had performed the ritual in Zimbabwe on behalf of our ancestors and not him; hence its effectiveness or otherwise would need to be interpreted in terms of their input, not necessarily his. It was, however, at the pool at the Inxu River where potential problems as a consequence of his failings arose, since the effectiveness of the ritual could be held to have been compromised not only by his previous misdemeanours but also by his transgression of drinking alcohol on the night prior to the ritual.

In the next sections I examine the narrow line along which *izangoma* have to walk, and the possible forces that may make some of them step over into ‘the dark side’, resulting
in suspicions and rumour. In the process I trace the steady downfall of Baba’s reputation and how it reflects, and what are seen in Zulu cosmological terms as, the ambivalent nature of the spiritual healer’s power and its source.

7.3 Ambivalent power in the context of socio-economic and political upheaval
The extension of the spiritual healer’s influence beyond the realms of healing and religion, and into the political and economic arena of the community has been well recognized by many anthropologists (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Ellis & Ter Haar, 2001; Fisiy & Geshiere, 1996; Geschiere & Fisiy, 1994; Masquelier, 1999; Parish, 2000; Shaw, 1996; Smith, 2005; Strathern, 1994). Andrew Strathern (1994: 288) argues that the origin of such political influence may be attributed to the ambivalent nature of the spiritual medium/healer’s role. It is believed that the healer’s potential to protect a community can, if he/she so wishes, be used for attack by certain members of the community. It is this very ambivalence of their roles that enables them to access political power. In reviewing Kelly’s (1993) analysis of Etoro shamans, Strathern concludes that the mediums were essentially politicians acting within the framework of religious practices. Strathern’s argument suggests that the primary motive to become a healer is to gain access to political power through spiritual forces, be they for good or evil purposes, under the guise of healing. From my own experience with Zulu diviners, I dispute such a generalization. Although this deduction may apply to a few self-interested individuals, it is by no means representative of the majority. It is much the same in allopathic medicine, where medical practitioners vary in competency, commitment, knowledge or moral principles. Similarly, not all spiritual healers have the same abilities, be it in performance, morality and knowledge. Indeed, it is often this perceived variation in ability that leads to jealousies and rivalries among the izangoma, especially towards those who are seen to demonstrate an inordinate amount of popularity and power. Healers who have apparent power tread a very fine line to maintain their credibility against rivals, as the source of their spiritual power is seen to be potentially ambiguous. Not only can they be targeted for attack, but if they are thought to transgress the moral codes, the source of their powers can be thrown into doubt. In the case of Baba, what I interpret as the loss of support of his beneficent ancestors seemed to result in a change in the source of his power. Although
Baba’s original beneficent source of power was not questioned, and this had been emphasized to me by many izangoma, he was believed to have lost it as a result of certain misdemeanours. As a result, by 2007, it was suspected that he had resorted to an alternative, and more morally negative, form of power.

Another area of potential conflict arises during the process of becoming a diviner, which is arduous and difficult. Progress is held to be dependent not only on the integrity and honesty of the trainer, but also on the individual’s moral commitment, as well as the support he/she gains from the kin network. In order to try and contain the potential that izangoma and novices have to engage in negative activities there are a number of institutionalised rules and codes of conduct that are promoted during their training.

7.3.1 The moral constraints on becoming an isangoma

One of the most important constraints against the abuse of spiritual power is to be found in the fact that no-one can just choose to become an isangoma; it is a task that is placed on one as a result of being called by the ancestors either through dreams or illness, and this calling should be identified and confirmed by a fully initiated diviner (see also Berglund, 1976: 136; Ngubane, 1977: 102). It is only through accepting the call and becoming a diviner, that one can be cured (i.e. of the ‘calling illness’). Those that refuse get increasingly ill and do not respond to any forms of conventional treatment. A corollary aspect to this calling is that it is believed that if the isangoma transgresses the moral codes expected by the ancestors, the latter can withdraw their power and assistance and the individual loses his/her abilities to divine. As Berglund has noted, no true diviner would ever lay claim to his/her powers alone. They always acknowledge that the source of their powers comes from the ancestors (Berglund, 1976: 37). For instance, when I asked Baba why the izangoma who have been called underwater by the Snake are so strong, he laughed and said “I can say that what makes him strong is not that he is the one that is strong, but it is his makhosi who are strong, who fight for him for lots of things”.

Becoming an isangoma is a process of great sacrifice and hardship, both physically and economically. It can be argued that it is this hardship that gives the isangoma role its
respectability. The training is physically arduous, with long periods being spent away from home, and long hours of interrupted sleep. The novices that resided at Baba’s homestead were only allowed to bathe in cold water from the river and this was done before sunrise each morning. This rule applied throughout the harsh winters as well. Strict food taboos are imposed whilst one is in training and alcohol is strictly forbidden. If you transgress these rules the ancestors can make you ill. There are also strict constraints on sexual intercourse during training, especially for those who are unmarried. The aim of the training is to overcome these base desires and to become ritually pure and clean in order to be taken to the ancestors. Perhaps the best way to put across this awareness that one has to overcome the weakness of the flesh and abide by a morality that will make the trainees pure and clean, and hence acceptable as disciples of the ancestors, is to analyze the content of some of the daily prayers that I recorded in Baba’s isibaya in 1997, which were accompanied with singing and dancing. These were made with such conviction, pleading and heartrending appeal that one could not question their sincerity. Prayers, directed to both the ancestors and the higher spiritual world (including Jesus), often emphasise the need for humility and respect for people and the earth:

“I am pleading with uNkulunkhulu [God] and my ancestors to come together and light the way for me. I am asking God to give me peace in my heart all the time. I am asking uNkulunkhulu to give me a deep and pure heart. I am asking him to teach me to humble myself. I am asking uNkulunkhulu to give me respect for people I am living with on this earth and to give me peace and respect for the earth he has placed and kept me on.”

“May uNkulunkhulu help us respect this place which Baba has brought us to. But we must remember that we are no longer doing it for Baba, but we are all preparing for the day that will come at different times to all of us [i.e. the day of our death]. We should not do it for beauty. We should not take these healing clothes in order to be seen by the world, we should look deep inside ourselves and see whether these clothes won’t burn us [let us down] and turn into coal. May we be born again by believing in uNkulunkhulu. May uNkulunkhulu forgive us our sins. Amen.”

Most izangoma I interviewed were adamant that their role is to offer help and guidance to the living through the assistance of the positive ancestral forces or even God. Their task is to convey the cause of their clients’ misfortunes and to reveal the ways in which these
may be countered or prevented.

As has been extensively documented for the Zulu by scholars such as Berglund (1976) and Ngubane (1977), the source of most misfortune is seen to emanate from mainly two sources. The first is from ancestral anger towards, and/or the withdrawal of their protection for the living. This arises when the living have neglected to acknowledge the ancestors and perform the required rituals to clean and strengthen them. It may also arise when there are unresolved conflicts in present and/or past generations. The second major source emanates from the evil activities of those people driven by jealousy (umona), greed, arrogance, and malice. In isiZulu this is termed ubuthakathi (witchcraft or sorcery) and is done mainly through the manipulation of medicines and animal familiars, which attack the victims. Ngubane has identified a number of different types of ubuthakathi recognised by her Zulu informants, namely night sorcery, day sorcery and lineage sorcery (see Ngubane, 1977: 30-46), and I will not deal with these in detail here except to point out that such activities are more closely akin to Evans-Pritchard’s classification of sorcery rather than witchcraft among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976). In other words the Zulu put more emphasis on misfortune arising from manipulative magic rather than an inherent substance within a person that is capable of causing harm on its own.

What is important to point out is that although the izangoma training lodge (isibaya) itself is not immune from the activities of the sorcerer (umthakathi), it is countered by a pervasive moral ethic that all izangoma and novices should adhere to.

7.3.2 The moral community of the isibaya

The isibaya31 (lit. the cattle byre) is the most important structural unit of izangoma relationships. In classificatory kin terms, all diviners who train under the same healer are regarded as ‘siblings’, the trainer being addressed as father (Baba) or mother (Mama). Once a novice has graduated and become a full ranking isangoma, she/he is free to take on the training of new novices. The apical trainer (i.e. the original trainer) is referred by these new novices as grandmother/grandfather (Gogo/Khokho) and should always be

31 This is referred to as an isiphehlo by some of the Cape Nguni (Luck, 2000).
acknowledged as the honorary teacher. The novices are regarded as their grandchildren, or in some cases, their great grandchildren, and it is expected that the most apical living trainer should always be introduced to the new novices, and be invited to attend any rituals. It is this area where Baba fell short, and a significant amount of tension apparently existed between him and one of his trainers, who apparently took him to the sea and helped him gain the power of his amakhosi. I only met this particular trainer once, very briefly, several years after I had become affiliated to Baba’s isibaya, and I was struck by the tension that existed between the two of them. The other izangoma told me that she was extremely offended because after Baba’s alleged underwater experience he had become a very powerful and strong isangoma and was reluctant to consult with her anymore or to refer any of his own students to her. “He wanted to be on top and in charge” I was told.

The incremental expansion of the isibaya can be vast and members can live great distances apart. Despite this they should try to regularly come together at izangoma rituals. Once one is a member of the isibaya there is a shared code of conduct and an expectation to attend and participate in ceremonies and rituals for individual members or to assist those who may suffer misfortune. It is a community whose members’ actions are morally accountable to the whole group. All novices are regarded as being in a liminal state and as such must behave in the uniform submissive and humble way that characterises the spirit of communitas (Turner, 1969). However, as with all kinship or quasi-kinship groups there is potential for underlying tensions to emerge and threaten the stability of the whole group. These may be due to moral misconduct (theft, gossip, greed, laziness, pride, boastfulness, breaking of taboos, sexual misdemeanors), or for reasons of jealousy. Differing powers and skills of healing and competition for clients and novices, as well as favouritism shown to certain novices by the trainer, provide rich potential, although only verbalized in extreme cases, for allegations of witchcraft against other members or for use of muti for negative and self-interested purposes. Novices that stay with their trainer are expected to do everyday chores for the trainer’s family around the homestead, but still have to support themselves with their own food. In some instances
novices are expected to pay their trainer a rental for staying at the homestead, despite also paying for their lodging in labour (Berglund, 1976: 150). This availability of free labour, and in some cases rent, can lead to suspicions that the trainer may try to deliberately delay the progress of a novice’s training (ibid). Another potential problem that I encountered is that if the novice reveals exceptional talent as a diviner, demonstrated either through the accuracy of his/her dreams or divinatory ability, it is alleged that some trainers deliberately try to sabotage their power, or take it for themselves, by manipulating the products of the animal sacrifices performed. I encountered all these suspicions and anxieties at Baba’s isibaya (see Section 7.4), and on numerous occasions I was told by other unrelated healers that this is a pervasive blight experienced by novices throughout South Africa. Geschiere’s observation that, “In many respects, witchcraft is indeed the dark side of kinship: it reflects the frightening notion that there is hidden aggression and violence where there should be only trust and solidarity” (Geschiere, 1994: 325), is thus quite applicable to the isibaya. It is well appreciated that all humans, including those seen as called to be diviners, are subject to the desires and vices of selfishness, and must battle against these weaknesses continuously. To a large extent these jealousies are exacerbated by the economic pressures that many novices find themselves in.

7.3.3 The economic constraints of becoming a diviner

The economic costs of becoming an isangoma are enormous. Often it necessitates the individual having to cease employment. During the training goats, cattle and chickens have to be periodically sacrificed for the ancestors to help heal them. The final graduation or coming out ceremony (umgidi ozomphothula) costs anything in the region of R15 000 to R30 000, depending on how many cattle and goats have to be sacrificed. Although the major costs for the umgidi are the livestock, other expenses include the buying of food and liquor to feed all the guests who attend the ceremony over the three day period. The graduate is also expected to cover the costs of transporting the novices and izangoma.

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32 This was not the case in Baba’s isibaya as far as I am aware.

33 These instructions are given to the novices by the ancestors in their dreams.
to his/her homestead. The bus and taxi companies charge exorbitant rates for this. This is also the time that Baba gets paid for his training services\(^{34}\). In addition gifts of blankets, reed mats and other items are given to him by the initiate. These costs are accentuated by the fact that the majority of novices are poor, and their kin-support group severely eroded. One novice explained to me how it can take years to accumulate the money required to pay for an umgidi.

“I haven’t got what the ancestors want. They want four cattle and eleven goats because I’ve got ancestors [guiding me] from my mother’s side and my father’s side, both of them. Those on my mother’s side, they want their own [cattle and goats] and those from my father’s side, they want their own too. They will then come together. Now this makes things hard because I have not got somebody to give those things. My father died at an early age. I’ve got my younger brothers. They are now working. They are going to help me. My mother and my brothers they can’t just get those cattle and goats. That is why I stay so long at Baba’s. If it wasn’t for that I could have already gone [i.e. he is spiritually ready]”
(pers.comm; Mkhize, 1997)

It took Mkhize another year before he had sufficient money for his umgidi. As is evident in his statement, a novice relies heavily on kinship networks to help complete the training. If this is lacking then they are more or less stuck. Zanele was in a particularly invidious position as, apart from a mentally disabled brother, she had no other living male relatives to assist her. Her four sisters were also not in a position to help. It was only through my assistance that she was able to graduate immediately after my first initiation. However, it was this assistance that led to jealousy from other izangoma and what Zanele interpreted as subsequent spiritual attack on us both (discussed later in this chapter). My own presence in Baba’s isibaya also threatened the state of equality and communitas as Baba insisted that as a white woman, I had to sleep in a room at his house, with Zanele for company, rather than in the amathwasa hut. Zanele admitted that some of the other novices and izangoma were jealous of the special privileges she got as a result of her friendship with me. One of Zanele’s greatest grievances is that her success as a diviner seemed to deteriorate after she had become incorporated into Baba’s isibaya, and this led her to speculate that someone may have interfered with her ancestral powers.

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\(^{34}\) Baba’s standard fee for this at the time of my first umgidi in 1998 was R1 000.00 (approx. US$160.00).
With such expenses it is no wonder that most people are extremely anxious on learning that a kin member has been ‘called’ to become a healer. Spouses and lovers are also very antagonistic to the ‘calling’ since sexual intercourse is prohibited during the period of training. It was reported to me by a number of informants that many marriages cannot withstand the strain and result in break-up. The only comfort is the expectation of bringing in an income once qualified. However, even the final graduation ceremony (umgidi ozomphothula) is by no means the signal of having great powers of healing with the aid of the ancestors, or a guarantee that one will now receive clients. The umgidi itself is the official public recognition of office and incorporation into the community of izangoma. It will bring the ancestors closer but it may take some time before they are deemed to manifest directly and skills of divination are perfected.

The means by which an individual healer will divine will vary according to the perceived wishes of his/her ancestors. Some healers are recognized as having psychic abilities (such as receiving visions or hearing voices) from early on in their training and can use these whilst they wait for more direct contact with the spirit world. This is referred to as ‘head-divination’, and the diviner who uses such methods is referred to as an isangoma sekhanda (Ngubane, 1977: 102; see also Peek, 1991), which they perfect during their training. This form of divination is regarded as less accurate than direct communication with the imilozi whistling ancestors. It is believed that some diviners will be told by their ancestors in dreams that they must use the more mechanical forms of divination such as divining with the use of bones and/or shells. Such individuals are referred to as isangoma esichitha amathambo (Ngubane, 1977: 102). Although this is a mechanical form of divination the isangoma will have to perform a special sacrifice of a goat to activate the power of his/her ancestors who direct the fall of the ‘bones’, and in some instances he/she is aided with head divination as well. Both of these forms of divination are held to require the assistance of the consulting clients to steer the divination in the

35 According to Zanele one has to be told by one’s ancestors in a dream to use the ‘bones’. You do not just choose to use them.
right direction by assenting (*ukuvuma*) or disagreeing with the progress of diagnosis.

In the case of the *imilozi* or *amakhosi amakhulu* (or *abalozi*) whistling spirits, which are believed to confer the most reliable form of divination, one has to wait for the ‘spirit’ to manifest. When this happens they usually forewarn with dreams. The trainer, who must be someone who is already regarded as being able to communicate with the *imilozi*, should then assist the process with a ritual (the details of which are held in secret by those who have been initiated in such a way), which appears to be associated with the taking of certain special medicines. This final step is termed *ukukhupuia* (lit: to raise or lift up) and confers on the diviner the ability to communicate with the *imilozi*\(^\text{36}\). A number of diviners who were in Baba’s *isibaya* had been trained by other diviners elsewhere, but had come to Baba to help them gain the use of the *imilozi*. Very few were actually regarded as successful and this raised a lot of suspicions about Baba’s motives and abilities, which I discuss in more detail in Section 7.4.

Trying to determine the reason behind a lack of acknowledged progress in becoming an effective healer is a tricky exercise, full of uncertainty, as it can be attributed to a number of factors. Many trainers complain that it is not they who can give the power of healing to an *ithwasa* as that can only come from his/her ancestors. It is held that either the graduate has behaved in a way that angers his/her ancestors, or that the relevant rituals have not been correctly carried out thus leaving their ancestors ‘weak’ (which could be attributed to inadequate knowledge of the trainer). Depending on their rank and the purity of their behaviour when alive on earth certain people’s ancestors are regarded as stronger than others and as being higher up on the ‘ladder’ in the spiritual world. However, the most common explanation for poor progress is that someone who is jealous of the graduate and has evil intent can either neutralize the power of the graduate’s ancestors or can actually wrest that power away from them to use it for themselves. These accusations can be targeted at anyone in the *isibaya*, including the trainer. It should also be pointed out that some diviners, in desperation, commence healing without the full process of training

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\(^{36}\) A diviner who is selected to work with the *imilozi* should also have had a dream experience or an actual physical experience of being taken under water (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.6.1).

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being completed (either in divinatory ability or in the sacrifice of the cow), usually because of economic and family pressures to start ‘producing the goods’. However, they usually operate with limited success and fail to attract clients or novices due to poor reputation.

It is believed that some ‘healers’ whose ancestors have failed to adequately manifest, or have abandoned him/her for breaching the moral codes, may resort to the use of lesser spirits or even use muti (uthwala and/or mamlambo) to bring them clients and luck. Although one’s ability to divine is seen to come from one’s own beneficent ancestral forces there seem to be alternative sources of somewhat more limited power that one can access. It is believed that some human spirits, that still possess their corporeal identity and character, may linger in the environment for a period of time, especially if they harbour any grudges, had unfinished business to complete, or were too grasping of the material riches in this life. It is believed that the more malevolent spirits, particularly those who exhibited a vindictiveness or lack of control of desires while alive, or those who were aggrieved by a violence done to them, and for whom no rituals have been performed to pacify them, can also be employed by the living to assist them. These spirits are thought to linger around graveyards or the environs that they frequented during their lifetime. They are believed to be able to give people a certain amount of foresight and advanced knowledge, but they are capricious and demanding, and like mamlambo and uthwala, can be dangerous to work with. I was told by Zanele that some izangoma may resort to engaging the power of these spirits, especially if they have failed to establish or maintain contact with their own ancestors. Engaging the power of these lesser spirits is called izizwe nezizwana, (engaging the evil spirits of a people/nation) and such powers are evidently gathered by working with medicines in the graveyard, which entrap these ‘lost’ and evil spirits and get them to work for their captors. All the representations

37 Graveyards are more a feature of urban living and burying a kin member in a public place evokes a great deal of anxiety among some of the Zulu izangoma, mainly for the reason that such places are freely accessible to unscrupulous individuals who may use grave-soil for magical purposes, such as for izizwe nezizwana. This was one of Zanele’s main concerns for living in the city. She often told me that it is far better to live in the rural area where the body can be interred in graves dug within the boundaries of the homestead.
associated with this form of empowerment are negative. Unlike the very public rituals that are performed for the ancestors at the final umgidi, this form of empowerment is done in secret and in the dark, and the spirits are not from the body of ancestral kin. All these activities are deemed to threaten the requirements for the need for sociality and healing.

7.3.4 Tensions between herbalists (izinyanga) and izangoma in KwaZulu-Natal

There is an uneasy alliance between the izangoma and the herbalists (izinyanga), the dealers of muti, who are not necessarily bound to moral codes for their source of power. It has been observed that there is a 'trend towards herbalism' in southern Africa, the reason being that it “fits nicely the pharmaceutical character of western medicine and frees people from the religious and social entanglements of village life” (Last and Chavunduka, 1986: 262; see also Jolles & Jolles, 2000). It is precisely for this reason that the izangoma are emphatic in their distinction between themselves and herbalists. As an isangoma, you get your powers of healing through communication with the ancestors, and along with this go certain social obligations. I was warned that,

As a sangoma you are only allowed to have muti for healing. When you take the muti and you use them to do harm - you make someone die or you use some magic muti - your ancestors will run away. They [one’s ancestors] want someone with a good heart. When they find you most of the time making mistakes they don’t like it- they leave you- they run away from you- they don’t like it (pers. comm. Mkhize, 30 June, 1997).

The term inyanga was often used by the izangoma in a loaded and derisory way. If there was any suspicion that the novice or isangoma might be working with bad medicine they were referred to as an inyanga, in a pejorative sense. For instance, a young male ithwasa to whom Baba had given preferential attention, to the extent that it had led to a rift in a very special existing friendship he had with another isangoma, was accused of being an inyanga who had become an ithwasa by trickery. He had been seen putting muti in his

38 Jolles & Jolles discuss the tensions that have arisen between herbalists and izangoma regarding the effect western legislation and value systems have had on upsetting the power balance between these two groups (2000).
eyes which he confessed was to make himself ‘look nice’ for Baba.

Certain corrupt *inyanga* are seen as being responsible for the bad reputation all healers have suffered from recently especially with respect to the media coverage of alleged *muti* murders (Beukman, 2008; Turrell, 2001), which is related to *uthwala* (see Section 7.2). The *izangoma* say they are often accused of killing people for this purpose, but this is a false accusation by which they are greatly offended. As herbalists are not constrained by having to rely on ancestral guidance in their work it is believed by the *izangoma* that they may be more tempted to work with bad medicine and promote sorcery. It must be emphasised however that not all herbalists are believed to work with evil forces, and there appear to be moral codes of practice to which they should also adhere. Many also report getting guidance in their dreams. One of Köhler’s informants, for instance, who was the son of a herbalist, reported a discussion he had with his mother regarding a certain dream that his father (who had since died) had received regarding the moral responsibility of his skills,

> I [her son] said to her, “You are right mother, for the old man, my father, was given this work of healing yonder above [i.e. from God]. And do you not remember”, I added, “how in his dreams he dreamed about God who had the shining eye*, and saw all the medicine-men standing before God, and how some bowed their heads whilst others held up their hands that were clean. And how it was said that those that bowed their heads were ashamed because they had done evil with their medicines and even committed murder with them. Those whose hands were clean praised God because it was said that they had done good with their medicines and had not used them for evil....after he had seen those doctors, he himself was addressed [by God]: “You, So-and-So, look at these doctors who held up clean hands and have done no evil with their medicines. Now go you also and do likewise, kill no man with medicine, for if you do that, your medicines will become worthless and you will no longer be able to heal anybody you are treating!” (Köhler, 1941: 43).

For those that do succumb to working with or selling bad medicines their motives are usually seen as arising from greed for power and wealth. These motives have been

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39 It is possible that he is referring to *Inkosi ye Zulu*, who manifests as the Snake with the bright shining light on his forehead.
encouraged by the forces of modernity and the promotion of individual enrichment associated with the capitalist enterprise. In addition, the commoditization of plant medicines, and the recognition of the value of herbalists' plant knowledge by modern multinational drug companies offers huge potential for wealth, and corruption, for these healers. For those izinyanga that work with the negative forces, their actions are usually seen as covert and sinister, and as Ngubane notes, they tend to be very arrogant and do not share in their wealth. Wealthy izinyanga are usually regarded with great suspicion as working with ukuthwala or having a mamlambo. It is instructive that Ngubane found that the category of people most commonly accused of night sorcery in the Nyuswa district, were herbalists (Ngubane, 1977: 33-34). However, as I have pointed out in the last few sections the izangoma are not immune from such accusations, and as they increasingly encroach into the area of herbalism to augment their scope of business\(^{40}\), they may also be tempted to deal in darkness (umnyama).

7.4 Negotiating the authenticity of 'healers'

When I was first introduced to Baba, I was struck by his popularity. His homestead was always abuzz with not only the amathwasa, and izangoma (many of whom he had trained\(^{41}\) but many other visitors, either seeking his help with divination or merely just coming to show their respects. Every day, there were queues of people waiting for a consultation with him. In addition to these, he also took care of many members of his extended family, who were frequently present at his homestead. This popularity was linked to his reputation of having had the experience of going under the sea and his

\(^{40}\) In the past diviners avoided the dispensing of medicines, rather referring their clients to herbalists for treatment. Diviners limited their use of medicines to those required for training and divination. One of the major constraints of working with medicines is that they can be polluted by menstruating women. Although herbalists were predominantly men, the majority of diviners are women and this avoidance of working with medicines helped to avoid this risk. However, due to various legislative and economic constraints and incentives, more diviners (including females) engage in herbalism today (see Berglund, 1976: 345-350; Jolles & Jolles, 2000).

\(^{41}\) He had boasted to me how he had trained over one thousand four hundred izangoma, which I suspect was an exaggerated figure given to impress me. However, based on the number of amathwasa he would have at any one time, which would be between ten and twenty, I suspect the figure could have been more in the region of four hundred.
ability to communicate with the whistling *amakhosi amakhulu* or *imilozi*. Berglund has noted that "nearly all diviners of standing appear to be popular with trainees...Zulu say that a diviner’s prestige and reputation grows with the number of novices he/she has" (Berglund, 1976: 151). This indeed reflects the case of Baba. Not only did he have many *amathwasa* but many diviners would come and consult with him. Whenever his *amathwasa* or the *izangoma* he had trained addressed him they would fall on their knees humbly clapping in obeisance. Despite this extreme sign of respect, their enthusiasm and devotion to him would sometimes get the better of them and on occasion I observed them flinging their arms around him in great affection. His awesome abilities were tempered with a very amiable disposition and a ready sense of humour. He was also a consummate performer in dance, singing and oration.

It was quite clear, however, that he delighted in his prestige and relative wealth, especially at the expense of his competitors. My own presence at his *isibaya*, as a white woman, was an obvious source of social capital for him, and I would frequently be paraded to those who he regarded as holding social prestige (such as teachers, church ministers, administrators *etc*) in order to gain their approval and respect. Although his wealth was not immense by European standards, the fact that, even at his relatively young age, he had a comfortable and large homestead, and was able to feed and support many of his family and visitors, was a sign of his success. Apart from some home comforts, such as comfortable furnishings and a television set and music centre, he was not materially ostentatious. When I first arrived he had one fairly dilapidated car but that broke down completely within the year and he never replaced it. His one attempt to adopt a more modern lifestyle ended in failure as it apparently displeased his *amakhosi*. In 1997 he purchased a modern three bedroom home with swimming pool and large garden in the Pietermaritzburg suburbs. He and his family lived there for three months, but they soon returned to live in his modest traditional rural homestead. Zanele reported that the reason for his return to his rural homestead was because he had found his divinatory powers were weakening and he was concerned that the *amakhosi* were unhappy with his new lifestyle.
This relative wealth and his powerful abilities as an isangoma attracted resentment from some quarters, and on my regular visits to him I was always made aware that in his opinion Baba and his family were either under threat of attack by jealous competitors (some from within his extended family) or from various criminal elements who resented his ability to expose their deeds. As the following case describes, he also had problems with resentments that certain of his amathwasa allegedly had towards him, especially with regard to the effectiveness of his training.

7.4.1 The case of the dissatisfied healer

In September 1998, one of Baba’s graduates, Mrs N, who resided in northern KwaZulu-Natal and who had completed her training two years previously under Baba’s tutelage, had invited Zanele and me to her home to warn us not to trust Baba. Since her graduation, business had been slow and her amakhosi had not manifested to assist with her divination. It was only through the concern of her husband, a wealthy taxi owner, that she had recently been led to believe that the cause of her troubles might be Baba. It must be noted that the husband was very critical of the isangoma institution in general, and had been very angered by the restrictions of normal marital relationships that were imposed on them during her period as a novice. He also resented the money he had to provide for his wife to complete her training. Baba had to intervene during this period to prevent them from divorcing and although the marriage had been maintained it was not a happy one. The husband was a well known philanderer with many lovers. When I met the husband he was obviously very antagonistic towards Baba and told me how he had also been approached by Baba to lend him a substantial sum of money for a taxi business he was hoping to establish, which he had done. He claimed that Baba failed to repay the loan and was now continually evading him.

Some time after Mrs N’s final umgidi, when her powers of divination had still not materialized, her husband had brought a ‘priest’ (who was also an inyanga) to the house to determine why his wife was not a successful isangoma. This individual revealed that

42 Mrs N, his wife, discussed this marital strain very openly with me.
he had been shown in a dream that Baba, along with several of the izangoma who officiated at her umgidi, had effectively ‘tied up’ her ancestors in order to prevent her from competing with him. The ‘priest’ claimed that he discovered the means by which this had been done when he was shown in his dream a bottle that had been placed under a rock in a deep pool not far from her house. The inyanga and Mrs N had gone to the river and had reputedly retrieved it. They discovered a strip of red fabric from an ithwasa skirt, a strand of beads from an umyeko (beaded head-dress), several gall bladders, chicken feathers and ‘muti’. It was claimed that these must have been obtained and magically manipulated by either Baba and/or his accomplices during the initiation ceremony. They were convinced that this black magic had directly rendered her ancestors powerless. She had ostensibly called Zanele and me to her homestead to tell us of this discovery and also to warn us of other rumours that she had picked up from certain members of Baba’s isibaya. These were that some izangoma in Baba’s isibaya, including a high ranking female isangoma, Matreki, who assisted Baba in the training of the amalhwasa, who was the chief officiate of the mndawu river rituals, had allegedly interfered in my rituals as well. According to the rumours circulating in the isibaya, during my first umgidi while we were doing the mndawu ritual at the river (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1) when I had to ask my ancestors to come out of the water, Mavis, another isangoma had reputedly been possessed and had seen my ancestors at the river, who had spoken to her. This indicated to them that something had not been done correctly, as it should have been me who had seen and spoken to them. Mrs N claimed that Matreki had deliberately not given me the right medicine to enable me to talk to my ancestors. Her motive was to either block my ancestors from connecting with me or to try and take their power for herself. I was fairly shaken by these allegations as it seemed true that I had made no progress in my ability to communicate with my amakhosi through divination since that ritual.

Mrs N’s condemnation of Baba left me confused, as there was some inconsistency in her vitriolic attack against him. She had vacillated between accusing Baba of being a genuine healer who did not want rivals and who was scared that if I was to be able to divine I would see all that bad mischief he had been involved in; to being a fake who had no knowledge of training izangoma properly; to being an evil impostor - a sorcerer who had
tricked everybody into believing that he had been called under the water by the ancestors or the benevolent Snake. She also accused him of being a bad *inyanga* who had in his possession the *muti* snake, the *mamlambo*. Her ‘proof’ of the latter claim was that she had had a number of dreams in which she had sexual intercourse with Baba. In a somewhat contradictory statement, she reminded us that Baba was a homosexual who preferred liaisons with some of the young male *amathwasa* and had not even impregnated his wife (leaving that task to his brother). It was true that I had heard both of these rumours on many occasions before.

In order to convince me of Baba’s lack of true skills in communicating with the whistling *amakhosi* she then produced a small black whistle which she proceeded to place in her nostril to make the whistling sounds. She claimed that this is what Baba used to fool us of his skills. Despite all the ‘evidence’ we were given against Baba by Mrs N we soon became suspicious of her motives and were alerted by the inconsistencies in the accusations as mentioned above. I admit I was reluctant to accept such a terrible indictment on Baba, especially since he had gone out of his way to assist my family in Zimbabwe. Another of my concerns was that Mrs N had introduced us to the herbalist - come - ‘priest’ who was the person who claimed that black magic had been performed on her at the river. Both Zanele and I were struck by his dark and oppressive presence. He was very unfriendly, never smiled and his eyes were dull and lifeless, and he was very quick to anger. We had noticed how Mrs N was visibly nervous of him. It had been evident during our visit that Mrs N was very keen that I move from Baba’s *isibaya* and join hers. Mrs N. claimed her powers were now restored after she had received corrective treatment and cleansing against the black magic from a Swazi diviner who worked with the *femba* technique. She was very reluctant to give Zanele the contact details of the Swazi diviner, insisting rather that we had to go through her. This lack of cooperation,

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43 This tendency towards homosexuality, especially amongst male diviners has been noted by other scholars (e.g. Lee, 1958; Ngubane, 1977; Nkabinde, 2008).

44 According to Zanele this is a type of treatment done to rid one of ‘darkness’ caused by sorcery, by placing the victims in a river, cutting small incisions in their body and washing them with the blood of two sacrificed chickens.
and canvassing for business, worried Zanele, who was unaware at the time that Mrs N was very jealous of Zanele’s friendship with me.

After considering the facts on our return home, Zanele and I were hesitant to believe Mrs N’s allegations about Baba, but we were more circumspect about the claims about Matreki and possibly some other members of the isibaya. It was after Zanele discovered that her umyeko (beaded headdress) that she had taken with her to Nqutu was missing, that we felt our doubts were correct. Repeated phone calls were made to Mrs N who emphatically denied she had it and insisted she had searched her property for it. Ten days after our visit to Mrs N, Zanele had a dream in which she saw her umyeko and chest beads in a plastic bag in a dustbin. She noticed that the beads were broken. Soon after this I had a dream that Zanele and I were walking along a street and a woman in a double story room had leant out of the window and poured smelly sewage over Zanele’s head. In the dream Zanele had been wearing her umyeko, and it was now spoilt. These dreams and her inability to find her umyeko worried Zanele deeply. In the meantime Mrs N. had persisted in phoning Zanele trying to persuade us to return and train with her. On the day Zanele told her that we had decided to stay with Baba, Mrs N had burst out in an angry tirade at her and proceeded to tell her that she had stolen Zanele’s umyeko. She threatened that as she now had the power of Zanele’s ancestors, through the gall anointed umyeko, she would break up my friendship with Zanele, and would entice me to become apprenticed to her instead. According to Zanele, Mrs N and her herbalist accomplice believed my ancestors were very powerful and if they could gain control over them, they too could access that power.\footnote{I was later shocked to find out that my isangoma friend, Mathonsi, had what she interpreted as a warning dream whilst Zanele and I were in Nqutu that I was in great danger. The dream indicated that there was a sorcerer (umthakathi) who wanted to use my flesh for uthwala.}

After this confession by Mrs N, Zanele returned to report the events surrounding our visit to Baba who claimed that the ancestors had already informed him that Mrs N had stolen her umyeko. Baba was shocked and angered at the allegations Mrs N had made against him and Mrs N was thenceforth banished from Baba’s isibaya. Regarding the stolen
umyeko Zanele confessed that she had protected herself against Mrs N’s evil intent by performing ‘boomerang’ magic, termed ukucupha. This would ensure that any harmful effects would be returned to the sender. She was satisfied her magic had worked when she learnt some time later that Mrs N had been thrown out of her house by her husband.

This case, although shrouded in uncertainty, suspicion and rumour, is an example of how we had to negotiate what seemed to be uncertainties about the trustworthiness of certain members of the isibaya, including Baba. Although I was still unsettled by a number of the moral contradictions surrounding Baba, I was relieved that we had managed to escape what we understood as further treachery at the hands of Mrs N and her herbalist accomplice. However, I was troubled by the fact that neither Zanele nor I had made any progress in being ‘taken up’ by Baba in order to divine with the amakhosi, and we understood our dreams to continue to show us that there were reasons to be cautious about Baba.

In August 1999 I had two dreams that seemed to be connected. This is an extract of these dreams from my diary:

My dream entailed my being on a sports field. Some boys (including my son) were playing rugby and alongside them a netball match was being played. I saw that Baba and his retinue of amathwasa had arrived, decked out in their izangoma attire. They first stood watching the players and then they decided to also take part in the netball game. In the dream I was concerned that this might antagonize the other players but they seemed unperturbed. I sensed in this dream that Baba had come to collect me, in order for us to perform a ritual, but now he was distracted with the game. I next found myself inside a house with Zanele. Baba was not with us but there was an elderly female isangoma present who was about to place some small dry leaves into our mouths. Zanele, who was kneeling, was given the leaves first and she was being tested on whether she could identify certain images and words the isangoma was thinking. Then I felt the leaves being placed in my mouth and immediately began to feel my head reeling. I remember falling sideways onto the floor whilst singing “Joy to the World”\textsuperscript{46}. I then felt I was kneeling and trying to recall the word I was supposed to identify, but I was in

\textsuperscript{46} This was the same song that I had allegedly been given by my ancestors just prior to my first umgidi ceremony (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1).
a panic that I would fail the test. Suddenly I remember saying “rope”, but then heard a voice coming from over my shoulder saying “pork”. I said “pork” and it was evident I had passed the test. I then fell onto the couch and felt myself falling asleep.

When I told Zane about this dream she was very excited, but she did not want to relay it to Baba for me. She insisted that I had to tell the dream to Baba myself, and this must be in his sacred hut, the *emakhosini*, because in her opinion whilst he was in the presence of the *amakhosi* he would be compelled to tell me the truth. She was fearful that if she told him first he would have time to conjure up a response that would suit him; the reason for her concern was that she interpreted the dream as a warning that Baba was playing games with me and my ancestors wanted me to go to another trainer, a female *isangoma*. Zanele was of the opinion that this *isangoma* would not only be able to help me but also her. While it is possible that Zanele’s advice might have been driven by her own self-interests, which were undoubtedly a factor, especially since my dream indicated to her that she might stand to benefit from it as well, I was willing to go with her advice on the basis of the doubts and uncertainties that had been accumulating from previous events surrounding Baba.

When we did get to visit Baba, I only told him about the plant aspect of the dream and chose not to mention the ‘netball match’ aspect of it. Baba reacted ecstatically to the plant dream. His response was that this meant my ancestors were now ready for me to be ‘taken up’ and my skills completed (*ukukhuphula*); in other words this would allow me to communicate with the whistling *imilozi*. He informed us that he would have to consult one of his trainers, Gogo Mkhulu, who lived near the coast to ask her to assist. I assumed this was his interpretation of who the old woman was who did the ritual for me in the dream, and noted that his interpretation did seem to differ slightly from Zanele’s.

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47 This suggests that she recognized that dream interpretations by *isangoma* may sometimes be subject to manipulation and have varying interpretations depending on the interpreter’s motives. However, she seemed to rule this possibility out when dreams were interpreted in the sacred hut whilst Baba communicated with the *amakhosi*.

48 This was the trainer of his trainer, the latter (Gogo) with whom he had a very strained relationship because he had cut her out of any involvement with his *isibaya*. 
Soon after recounting this dream, Baba, Bheki, Zanele, Mathonsi and I drove to visit Gogo Mkhulu at Gamalakhe to find out that as her husband had just died she was in a spiritually polluted state, and thus she would not be able to assist. She had taken Baba into her consulting room for a private consultation and it was evident when they emerged that she was not prepared to do the ritual. She also explained that the special plant was very difficult to obtain and did not grow in the KwaZulu-Natal area, but further south in the Transkei. Baba had then taken me back to his homestead and proceeded to give me some ubulawu which he said was used as an alternative for ‘taking up’. He claimed this would complete the process. However, apart from the ubulawu failing to foam, a sign of ancestral disapproval, when Zanele examined the roots more carefully she recognised that Baba had merely given me one of the standard ubulawu species used regularly in training. We had to conclude that Baba was indeed playing games with me. As we had realised that Baba was either reluctant to do the ritual, or didn’t know how, Zanele and I had later gone to visit Gogo (who had been trained by Gogo Mkhulu), Baba’s trainer with whom he was estranged. This was the first time in my two years of being with Baba that I had met her, despite her living not more than fifteen minutes drive from Baba’s homestead. On hearing my dream she agreed it was showing me that I must be taken up and said that she would be able to do it for me, if I so wished. She also confirmed the strained relations that existed between her and Baba, and how offended she had been at Baba’s lack of appreciation for her having taken him to the sea to get the power of his amakhosi. Since attaining his power he had cut her off completely, and he would not introduce any of his amathwasa to her, or invite her to their ceremonies (imigidi). She confirmed with us that he definitely had gone under water, and had got the power, but that it had gone to his head and his self-inflated ego had led him astray. He was definitely not a fake as Mrs N had suggested, in fact Gogo seemed quite nervous of his awesome abilities. I had arranged to return to her within the month to do the ritual, but after a short period she phoned Zanele to inform her that she had decided she could not assist us as she was too scared of Baba and what he may do to her if he discovered we had gone above him. Zanele had also had a dream where five chameleons came to her (she interpreted them as the amakhosi) and told her that they did not want Gogo to do the
ritual for us, as it would be dangerous for her. I never pressed her to do the ritual after that and Baba never suggested we go back to Gogo Mkhulu to try taking me up at the end of her pollution period. Mathonsi, my old faith healer and isangoma friend told me that she had experienced the same problems I had. Even though the amakhosi came to her house and whistled in the eves, she still cannot translate what they are saying. She had already paid Baba over R2500.00 to ‘take her up’ and still nothing had happened. So, while we are regarded as isangoma, on the strength of having done the sacrifice of the cow at the final umgidi, we are still not able to communicate directly with the amakhosi.

A short time after this episode an opportunity arose for Mathonsi, Zanele and I to visit MaDuma in the Mvoti district, the isangoma who claimed to have been taken under water, and who was reputedly very accurate with divination. Our aim was to see if her amakhosi could enlighten us as to why our progress with Baba had been unsatisfactory.

7.4.2 MaDuma’s divination and treatment

On our first visit to MaDuma in December 1999, in order to test her abilities, we decided to go ‘incognito’ and not wear any of our izangoma regalia. On our arrival we had greeted her and indicated that we wanted to see if her amakhosi had any messages for us. We had entered her hut, sat down and waited for her to tell us why we were there, and gave her absolutely no clues as to our concerns. Her first information was directed at me. In effect she said that my most immediate problem was that I was suffering from an affliction, known as umegqo, which took the form of an ‘animal’ (isilwane, or what Zanele described as a ‘noo-noo’) that had entered my body. According to Ngubane (1977: 32) this is a form of sorcery attack where certain medicines (umbhulelo) that are mixed with the body products of the victim (such as hair, nails or even soil dampened with urine) are left in the victim’s path and when walked over the ‘animal’ will jump into the person’s body and start to cause ailments, including mental distraction, itchiness and skin rashes. I needed to be cleaned from this affliction and she asked me if I was troubled with a rash,

49 This visit coincided with our research on the revival of Nomkhubulwana’s rituals (see Chapter Five).

50 This is regarded by the izangoma as a useful way of testing another isangoma’s claimed divinatory abilities.
which I denied. I must admit I was very sceptical as to whether she was a genuine diviner, as this diagnosis had not been what I was anticipating. Zanele and Mathonsi then started directing questions towards our problem of Baba's training and his failure to take me up, as my dream had indicated. She addressed these questions to the *amakhosi* and translated the whistled response, "They say he (Baba) is afraid to give you the secret medicine. That is all." Even though we had not told her of my dream of the ritual where plant leaves were put on my tongue, she added that this ritual should be done at the sea, as this is where Baba collected his *amakhosi*. At the sea I should be given *ubulawu* and "the medicine that you put under your tongue", and this would help connect me to the *amakhosi*. After a few more discussions we thanked her and bid farewell. She had indicated she could help us more with the cleansing rituals if we decided we needed it. I had not noticed any rash and was doubtful that such a cleansing was required.

I returned home soon after this consultation, but it was not long after that when I was with my sister who asked me if I was aware that I had a rash on my lower back. In shock, I looked in the mirror and sure enough saw my back was covered in an extensive rash of papules. For the next few months I self medicated with a wide range of different topical cream, but to no avail; the rash persisted. I was now concerned that MaDuma's diagnosis was correct, so I phoned Zanele and asked her to arrange for us to make a return visit to MaDuma to undergo ritual treatment for the affliction. One of my quandaries was if Baba was as powerful as he claimed, why had he not identified this alleged *umeqo* attack? Was he losing his powers, or was he part of the problem itself? Zanele was of the opinion that it was not only she and I who had this affliction but many of the members of Baba's *isibaya*. She had also heard from fellow members of the *isibaya* that Baba's powers were weakening and many of his *amathwasa* and *izangoma* had encountered problems and were abandoning him.

We returned to MaDuma at the end of March 2000, and she agreed to do the cleansing.

51 Although she did not report having a rash she was of the opinion that her dreams had been negatively affected.
ritual. In her divination she told me that there was someone who was jealous of my ancestral power (because of the accuracy of my dreams) and wanted to suppress my ability to become an isangoma. I had asked her if she could tell me who it was, so I could take evasive action, but she declined merely saying the amakhosi were saying such knowledge “will not cure you”\textsuperscript{52}. However they would provide the remedy and send the evil back from whence it came. She started the treatment by giving us some protective inteleti medicine and some black ‘stuff’ (a thick oil based medicine used to cast out evil). Over the next two days we had to put the medicine into boiling water, retain a small amount to drink which we would then phalaza (vomit), and then use the remainder to steam in, followed by a bath in the same liquid. We were then to return three days later, early in the morning before the sun rose. The ritual cleansing was typical of the type described by Ngubane, where colour and hot/cold symbolism are an important component of treatment (see Ngubane, 1977: 113-139).

For the second phase of our cleansing we had to bring a black chicken, two red candles and two needles. On arrival at her hut she took the black chicken into the emakhoseni, where it was decapitated and a few drops of its blood were added to a container holding a thick black (hot) liquid mixture of protective medicine, ash and water. We then had to drink at least two cupfuls of the thick, foul tasting black medicine, and hold it in our stomachs without vomiting. She then led us outside into the veldt where she had dug a hole. We had to place the red candles with the needles pierced through them, with the chicken carcass in the bottom of the hole and light the candles. We were then instructed to vomit the black medicine we had drunk over the chicken in the hole. MaDuma then poured soil back into the hole and instructed us to turn and walk back to her hut, emphasising that on no account must we turn and look back, or the evil would come back to us. According to Zanele, the symbolic meaning of the ritual was that the black hot medicine, with which the chicken blood was mixed, was used for expelling the darkness (umnyama) or ‘noo-noo’ from our bodies. Vomiting the black substance over the black

\textsuperscript{52} This is normal practice of isangoma who are loathe to actually pin-point the actual evil doer as it may increase conflict in the community. This could also be a response to the Witchcraft Suppression legislation which prohibits isangoma from identifying individuals as witches or sorcerers (see Jolles & Jolles, 2000).
chicken meant that as our essence or ‘body dirt’ (*insila*) was now mixed with that of the chicken, the ‘noo-noo’ would get confused as to where it must attack and instead of coming to our bodies would go to the chicken carcass in the hole, which acted as a decoy. The needle in the red candle was to send the evil back from whence it came (*ukucupha*) and the sorcerer would experience some form of punishment in return for what he/she was trying to inflict on the victim. Zanele explained to me that this was quite morally acceptable to do as it was defensive magic, rather than offensive.

After our return to the hut MaDuma communicated with her *amakhosi* and informed them that we had completed the rituals. She told us they were pleased this had been done as they had been trying for some time to attract my attention to this problem. The evil doer would be punished and his/her power would be removed. It was during this consultation that she informed me that my ancestors still wished me to perform the sacrifice of the black cow in Zimbabwe, and she confirmed that the pool I had discovered on the Inxu River was the correct one and that I should give an offering at it (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.4). On completion of this phase of the cleansing ritual Zanele and I were then given some packets of white *ubulawu* which we had to take home with us and use to complete the treatment. This would bring our bodies back to coolness and whiteness. For this we also had to sacrifice a white chicken and add its bile to the *ubulawu*, which would then be beaten into foam in cold water, which we would then drink and wash our bodies in. This cool/white medicine would in effect restore the equilibrium (Ngubane, 1977).

During this treatment period we had gone to visit Baba at his homestead as I had not been to see him for quite some time, and felt that as MaDuma had not directly implicated him in any wrongdoing, I should at least still visit him as well. I fully appreciated MaDuma’s diagnosis that he was reluctant to ‘take me up’ in order to protect the secret (of how to be ‘taken up’). I had decided I was quite content to abandon that ritual, especially if it was potentially dangerous, and just rely on my dreams to guide me. Zanele however was also keen to confront Baba in his *emakhoseni* about the problems we had been encountering. On our arrival at Baba’s homestead we were struck by how quiet it was, with few people or *amathwasa* to be seen. There was an air of decay and despondency about the place and
we noticed that the amathwasa training hut (where his chief officiate, Matreki, lived with the amathwasa) had completely collapsed in the recent heavy downpours of rain. Thinking of Mrs N’s accusations against her, we did wonder whether the collapsed hut was the effect of our ukucupha ritual.

Baba was not at his homestead so we waited until he arrived and after greeting him we asked if he would communicate with the amakhosi for us. In his hut he called the amakhosi and there was what we interpreted as a brief weak response and he was told to wait. We waited for five minutes before any whistles returned. It was during this consultation when Zanele confronted Baba about fooling us by using the wrong medicine to ‘take us up’. Baba tacitly admitted he had, but added that he had found it difficult to work with a white person’s ancestors. He suggested that, because he felt that we were pressuring him, he ‘could take the ancestors down’, indicating that he could install the spirits in a calabash, with which I could then communicate. Zanele had nudged me firmly and whispered “No Penny. Don’t let him. This is bad”. She seemed quite shocked at his suggestion. I declined the offer, not understanding what on earth he was offering me. Afterwards Zanele explained that Baba had offered to harness the lesser spirits from the graveyards for me by using izizwe nezizwana (she explained these are not the good ancestral spirits of the izangoma, but evil spirits).

It was after this consultation, and the realization that there were people in Baba’s homestead who I should be extremely careful of, and the fact that Baba’s moral integrity had again been put into question with his offer of giving me izizwe nezizwana, that I decided to avoid visiting Baba at his homestead, unless it was just to pay my respects and monitor his progress. There seemed to be clear signs that his ancestral powers were weakening, which suggested that he had overstepped the moral codes set by the amakhosi. I was relieved to note on my return home that my rash had completely vanished.

53 For accounts by other anthropologists/diviners who have found themselves victims to, or embroiled in, the machinations of witchcraft in their host communities see Favret-Saada, 1988; Knab, 1995, 2004; Owen, 1981; Stoller and Olkes, 1987; Van Binsbergen, 1991, 2003; Willis, 1999.
7.4.3 Dream directions to divinatory help

Over the next few years, although I visited Baba for brief periods, I was very cautious of him. His fortunes and popularity seemed to fluctuate but he never attained the same degree of popularity that he had when I first visited him. Rumours still circulated around the isibaya, some about Baba, while others were about other izangoma who had gone off the rails and fallen onto the dark side. The gossip surrounding these various individuals often dominated discussions between izangoma, which Baba would also participate in with relish, but always with a morally condemnatory note. It was during one of these discussions that he made the perceptive statement that I have put as an epigraph at the beginning of this chapter regarding the increase of the use of black medicine by izangoma in these ‘new economies’.

Throughout the years Zanele and I vacillated between whether we could trust Baba’s motives or not, and these doubts were usually exacerbated by what we interpreted as warning dreams, which persisted. It was, however, an unlikely dream that I was to get on the 7th February 2004 that was to eventually lead me to a more definite decision on the matter.

**Ballroom dancing dream – 7 February 2004**

I was in the main street of Grahamstown just outside the Frontier Arms Hotel. It felt like it was the Annual National Arts Festival and there were street performers, musicians, and dancers all milling around me. I found myself trying to get into the slow rhythm of the dancers, but felt quite self-conscious at my poor efforts. Suddenly the music changed to a waltz and everyone turned to take a partner, and again I felt self-conscious because I did not have a partner. Suddenly I saw a short round-faced black man pushing his way through the dancers, coming directly towards me. He had a huge smile on his face and his eyes were twinkling with light. I was struck by his short round stature and friendliness, and noticed his skin on his cheeks was slightly blemished or had small tufts of facial hair. He asked me to dance, and before I could answer he took me in his arms and it felt like we were doing a flying waltz, flowing in perfect time with the rest of the...

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54 These included some izangoma who had allegedly been caught with human body parts, including human heads, on their property to gain wealth and power through ukuthwala.
dancers. I had never been able to waltz with such ease before. As the dance ended and I tried to catch my breath and balance, I was aware my partner was about to leave. I could see his face clearly and realized he was like a Xhosa diviner (igqirha). He beamed a huge smile at me and said “Meet me at the forest after midnight on Thursday. I will be collecting medicines (plants).”.

The power of this dream had left me in a state of deep contemplation as to its potential significance. I could not place who the man was, and, although he bore some similarity to a few local amagqirha, I knew it was none of them. A few days after the dream I had read an advert in the local newspaper that ballroom dancing lessons were about to commence at the very hotel I had been at in the dream. The organiser was a local Xhosa man. I even went to the hotel to register in the hope I might see the man in the dream, but the organisers failed to turn up and so I abandoned the idea. I soon pushed the dream from my thoughts and told my ancestors that if they wanted me to meet him they must arrange it. It took another three years before I was to meet Shorty.

During this time Baba’s reputation and power continued to decline. By the middle of 2004 I had heard that his wife had abandoned him because she was fed up with all his male liaisons (his homosexuality, mainly with young male amathwasa, was now common knowledge) and he had been arrested and imprisoned for a short period for cattle theft. I had gone to visit him briefly in June 2004 and been struck by how his homestead had degenerated. His sacred hut (emakhoseni) was collapsing and Baba had lost his vibrancy and energy. His body and face were now bloated and he showed signs of alcoholism. Strangely, despite his loss of amathwasa and clients, he was now enlarging his house, and had already built on an extra four large rooms. While he boastfully showed us around his new extensions, Zanele and I were quite puzzled as to where he was getting the money to do this expensive expansion of his house.

As with many of my experiences, my eventual meeting of the igqirha/ballroom dancing partner was circuitous and complex and I do not have space to explain in full. Briefly, I believe it came about through another dream which required me to assist a married student, Mrs R, who was experiencing some ancestral problems. It was through assisting her in a special ritual for her estranged deceased mother (in April 1997), that I was to
meet her domestic employee who had just been called to become a diviner. The husband of this domestic employee was also an igqirha, whose nickname was Shorty (because of his short stature), and on the night that I had performed the ritual for Mrs R he had a dream visit from Mrs R’s deceased mother, telling him how pleased she was about the ritual I had performed. However, even though we had never met, Shorty indicated to Mrs R that he wanted to speak to me, as he mentioned that her mother had asked I complete the ritual for her at the sea, something which I had already suggested to Mrs R that we should do. Mrs R. invited me to her home to meet Shorty to get more details on his dream and when I met him I recognised him as the same man I had danced with in my dream. I was to discover that Shorty was exceptionally powerful and accurate with divination and dreams, and he had much information to give me concerning my training with Baba.

Even though I had given him no information (nor had I to Mrs R), Shorty could tell me many things about Baba’s and my situation. He told me that Baba had erred on many aspects of my training, especially the first ritual which should never have been performed at his homestead and Shorty was shown that two female izangoma in Baba’s isibaya had interfered with my ancestors during that ritual. His description could be seen perfectly to fit Matreki and another old isangoma who had worked with the gall bladders, the most potent part of the sacrificed cow. The latter had always been overfriendly with me, which had made me somewhat uncomfortable. Shorty emphasised that Baba was not a fake, and had been a very powerful diviner who had been under water (he was able to describe Baba’s homestead and his many amathwasa to perfection), but he had not done things right subsequently. Shorty liked to speak in metaphor and his main concern for me was that “Baba has given you the motor car but not the key. You cannot do anything with a motor car without the key”. He said my ancestors were very unhappy at Baba’s misdemeanours and stressed that by now “Penny should be out in the field working as a diviner and helping people; but she can’t until Baba gives her the key”. He stressed that it was imperative that I go back and confront Baba and urge him to complete my training. I agreed to do this in November 2007, but just prior to this visit he was to get more information which cautioned me as to what to expect on my return to Baba’s homestead. He said he could see that Baba had now lost most of his power and everybody had ‘run
away’ from him. He also saw that Baba was surrounded with ‘jail bars’—he was in
trouble with the law. More disturbingly he said he could see a large ‘funny’ (as in
strange) snake that Baba kept in one of his huts in the top corner of his property, hinting
that it was not a good snake. However, despite these bad signs he insisted I had to go
back and confront Baba, in order to see things for myself.

I did this in early November 2007 with a great deal of trepidation, but just before my
departure I had another dream that I believe was to assist me on this dangerous journey; it
was a dream that was to connect me with a powerful Zionist prophet who lived near Baba
and worked with both the amakhosi and the Holy Spirit. It was he who would provide me
with what I experienced as spiritual protection to confront Baba (I discuss this in more
detail in the next chapter). All of Shorty’s insights on Baba’s current situation proved
correct. Zanele and I arrived to find a homestead that was virtually deserted (most of his
amathwasa had left). Baba, who was looking quite unwell and bloated, was out on bail
after a male ithwasa had charged him with sexual misconduct and assault. Although there
were no family members living in his house, nor any food in his kitchen, he had now
decorated it ostentatiously with expensive furnishings. On our first night staying at his
homestead both Zanele and I had very disturbing sexual dreams which was confirmation
enough for her that Baba now indeed had a mamlambo. Moreover in her dream, Zanele
said her mother had beaten her on her head and shouted at her for sleeping at Baba’s
house. Disturbingly, I had noticed that he had now moved his ancestral hut to the top
corner of his property, exactly where Shorty told me he saw the ‘funny snake’ in his
vision. It was also while we were on this visit that I was to find out that Baba had stolen
and sacrificed the white goat that I had offered to Inkosazana at the pool in December
1998, in order to try and attain her gifts for himself.

7.5 Discussion
In this chapter I have outlined some of the competing discourses that circulate in South
Africa relating to the symbolic imagery of the snake and its ambivalent moral
associations with healing and witchcraft. The evil snake is represented most often in the
form referred to as mamlambo, and the evidence presented in Section 7.2 suggests that
this is seen as a product of manipulative magic, a snake familiar that is believed to be made from muti (plant based medicine). While some reports indicate that it is made from plant based medicines, other reports claim that it is made from obtaining the flesh of the mystical Snake that is found in certain river pools. However, details on how exactly such flesh is obtained is never provided. Despite this, such claims suggest that it is believed that the beneficial activities of the water divinities, as well as the ancestors (through blocking or misdirecting their benefits), can be sabotaged and manipulated by those with evil intent, using certain medicines and magical procedures. While both the good and evil representations of the S/snake are linked to issues of wealth, in the form of fertility of crops and women (which also relates to sexual activity), the moral worth of these gifts is measured upon who benefits from such gifts and the nature of the exchanges that are entered into.

It is also evident that the various elements of these two symbolic categories may often be conflated in some people’s minds, and this is possibly partly a result of the Christian interpretation of the snake as a representation of evil, and the concomitant restriction converts have in their understanding of traditional beliefs. The momentous transformations in political, economic and social institutions in South Africa over the last two centuries, and especially since 1994, have also had a profound effect on how these dual symbolic categories are interpreted and reflect the broader anxieties regarding the occult economy found across Africa. Those people (including ‘healers’) who are seen to be accumulating immense wealth and power are often believed to be achieving this at the expense of others, and in such circumstances rumours flourish regarding suspected pacts such people have made with evil wealth-generating snakes that demand payment in human flesh. It is evident that for many people in southern Africa the method of determining whether a person is working with the life-giving Snake and water divinities, or with the dangerous muti snake, is assessed on the basis of their moral worth, their social behaviour and communal responsibility, as measured against the idealized structures and norms inherent in the society. This is especially true for the izangoma, whose behaviour and moralities are judged according to strict codes of conduct that they claim have been laid down by the ancestors. Those that transgress these rules may not
only lose their powers, but raise suspicions and doubts among their colleagues and clients, thus putting themselves at risk of being accused of working with black medicine and the dark forces. However, these doubts, suspicions, and rumours, which may be driven by the agency of individuals for purposes of self-interest (such as the case of Khotso Sethuntsa), are by no means precise or accurate. For izangoma the most reliable clues and guidance comes from dreams and/or divination.

In the second half of this chapter I have detailed how the authenticity and moral integrity of my own teacher, Baba, and some members of his isibaya became suspect. Overall there seemed to be consensus that he started off on a genuine footing, and did indeed get taken under water and worked with the benevolent amakhosi. His popularity and power attested to this, but it also made him vulnerable. As his desire for glamour, power and wealth permeated his moral space he started to breach the moral codes expected of a teacher, as well as at a secular level, with the law. As a result his abilities were perceived to weaken and it was then suspected that he sought to compensate for this loss of ability and its attendant rewards by engaging in alternative and negative forms of spiritual empowerment. While these could all be seen as the ultimate expression regarding transgression against the idealized norms of society, the very real nature of the experience for those involved cannot be overlooked. The process of negotiating whether I could trust Baba was at times subtle, difficult and a dangerous process and demonstrates how careful one must be when entering into such cross-cultural spiritual encounters without some understanding of the moral codes embedded in the culture, a trustworthy assistant (who for me was Zanele) and one’s own spiritual guidance. These conflicting discourses also threw me into a moral dilemma as to my continued participation in Baba’s isibaya. Ultimately, my guidance came through my dreams and the assistance of those diviners who abide by the required moral principles.
CHAPTER 8
IN THE SACRED WATERS OF THE SNAKE:
BAPTISM AND PURIFICATION RITUALS AMONG ZULU
DIVINERS AND ZULU ZIONISTS

"Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known." (Psalms 77: 19)

8.1 Introduction: Incorporating the Holy Spirit

Interspersed throughout my own personal accounts in this thesis there have been brief references to the Holy Spirit and the fact that this Christian notion, as a part of the Holy Trinity, was accommodated without too much problem into the spiritual universe and ritual repertoire of Baba’s izangoma group. From the start of my association with Baba’s isibaya I had noticed that some of his amathwasa wore plaited cords of different coloured wool around their waists and was informed that these were for the Holy Spirit. The amathwasa and izangoma who wore them had dreams that indicated they were not only connected with the ancestors but also with the Holy Spirit. My own dreams, such as my hyssop dream (discussed in Chapter Six, Section 6.2.1), which had Biblical connections, prompted Baba to install a shrine for the Holy Spirit at my home and to make a similar woollen cord for me (see Section 8.5, this chapter).

I was also aware that in Baba’s isibaya there were a number of amathwasa and izangoma who were prophets in the African Indigenous/Independent Churches (discussed in the

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1 According to Biblical sources the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost) is “The third person of the Holy Trinity, and the unseen but ever-present and all-powerful divine spirit of God, present at the Creation (Gen.1.2; Ps.104: 30), and given by God (Is 42: 1-5). He is poured upon us (Is. 44.3); is a source of instruction (Neh. 9.20), of wisdom (Job 32:8), and sound judgment (Num. 11:17).” (The Holy Bible, King James Version, 1960: Scriptural Directory pg.18. Chicago, Illinois: Good Counsel Publishing Company). Note that while the Holy Trinity is regarded as being comprised of God (the Father), Jesus Christ (the Son) and the Holy Spirit, this term does not appear in the Bible (ibid: 44).

2 When the izangoma refer to the ‘Holy Spirit’ or umoya, they appear to be making reference to the amalgamated Trinity, with special reference to Jesus. However not all people may conceive of it this way. Sundklkr has pointed out the tremendous variation in interpretation of what exactly umoya means to Zionists (Sundklkr, 1961: 242-247).
next section) who claimed they had been instructed in their dreams to attend Baba’s *isibaya* in order to develop their skills of communication with the ancestors. Mathonsi, for instance, was a popular and powerful faith healer before she joined Baba’s *isibaya*. I first met her after her initiation as an *isangoma* (for which she had sacrificed three cows) when she was still waiting for Baba to complete (*ukukhuphula*) her training in order that she could communicate with the whistling *amakhosi* that she claimed were already present in her house. Although Baba failed to help her in the latter task (much to her chagrin), she still combined her practice as a faith healer and *isangoma*. It was Mathonsi who accompanied me to the pool on the Inxu River following my second ritual sacrifice in Zimbabwe, and had the vision while praying at the water’s edge that the ‘water was unclean’, and hinted that it was due to Baba breaching the taboo on drinking alcohol the night before a sacred river ritual (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.5.1).

It was apparent, even before I joined Baba’s *isibaya*, that he had included Jesus into his repertoire of spiritual empowerment. Just prior to my meeting Baba, Zanele had told me of her participation in a river ritual that he had performed, which involved the drinking of copious amounts of ‘*impande*’ (the foam from a mixture of certain roots) where members of the *isibaya* appealed for help from Jesus as well as the ancestors. This ritual followed a five-day fast (from food and drink) where they were instructed to sing and pray to Jesus and the ancestors to fill them up with spirit when they felt the pangs of hunger and thirst. My sister had kept me abreast of Zanele’s fast, noting how her house was filled with Zanele’s singing during this period and how she had been quite amazed at her resilience and resolution. Many of the African Zionist Churches adopt this method of fasting (for 3-4 days), often on mountaintops, prior to water purification rituals in the sea or river (Sundkler, 1976). Water rituals, as I discuss below, are a central feature of their faith. However, as they usually spurn the use of herbal medicines (*umithi*), they would not normally make use of *ubulawu* or *impande*, as in the above example with Baba’s *isibaya*.

In this chapter I examine the ease with which diviners, such as Baba, assimilate the Christian concepts of the Holy Spirit into their overall spiritual activities, especially those linked with water. The analysis focuses particularly at the levels of interpretation and
praxis (levels two and three of the model I presented in Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1), especially examining how the externally imposed, and previously hegemonic\(^3\), Christian theology not only runs parallel with, but has to some extent become assimilated into the traditional beliefs of the water divinities and the ancestors. I argue that it is at the intersection of these different religious traditions that the role of agency in both interpretation and practice becomes most evident. While the Christian churches provided the avenue of access to institutional or secular power (as formally recognised by the state and its various institutions), it is the ‘mythologized’ or ascribed sacred power of the water divinities that captures the sentiments of many African people, and which explains its persistence.

In the first part of the chapter I examine the main themes that have been identified by various scholars who have sought to reveal the similarities and differences that exist between the traditional religious beliefs and African Zionist churches. Of particular interest are the similarities that exist between diviners and prophets, and the various symbols that are employed by them. I then examine how these two categories were combined in Baba’s training school and how ultimately their unity was disrupted by conflicts over power and authority. I argue that based on the evidence gleaned from the existing literature, and the data I gathered while participating in the various ‘traditional’ and Zionist rituals, the Zulu concepts of Inkosi yeZulu (in its form of the Snake that resides in the water) and the Zionist concepts of the Holy Spirit (uMoya), are sometimes regarded as synonymous. The question that arises then is, “If the Holy Spirit, uMoya, and Inkosi yeZulu are regarded as one in the same, and can be accessed in similar ways, then what advantage exists in the minds of adherents in keeping them conceptually separate?”

There could be a number of reasons for this. One reason could be to deflect any suspicion that one may be working with plant medicines or muti for negative purposes (see Chapter Seven), and the fact that it is this aspect of traditional healing that is spurned in many of the African Zionist churches provides some evidence for this.

\(^3\) Prior to democracy Christianity was recognised as the official religion of South Africa and its political and symbolic hegemony pervaded all the state institutions. Since democratic rule in 1994 with the establishment of the Bill of Rights where religious freedom is guaranteed it has lost its dominant position, even though it still remains very influential as a de facto official religion.
Another reason could be to harness some of the institutionalised and secular power that affiliation with the Christian churches provides within the modern context. More explicitly, the assimilation of the traditional sources of power, via the ancestors and the water divinities, with the structures of some of the African Independent Churches, provides the avenue by which ritual adepts, such as diviners, can perform legally recognised life transition rituals, such as burials and marriages, which not only offers a possible source of income and prestige to the adepts, but provides a much needed service to those members of the community who are more traditionally oriented in their religious beliefs. These are functions which adherents to purely traditional religious structures cannot provide, since they are not legally sanctioned to offer them in the modern context.

While strategic reasons may exist for the co-existence of these two fundamentally similar, yet conceptually different religious institutions, they both draw on a range of common religious experiences, which are embedded in an overlapping matrix of ideas that may be reinforced through culturally based traditions of revelation (especially dreams), spiritual transformation and healing. However, these common experiences may be interpreted through the different theological idioms and symbols that the various religious frameworks provide.

8.2 'New wine in old wineskins' or 'old wine in new wineskins'?
Comparative studies of religion in the southern African region have focussed a considerable amount of attention on the manner and extent to which traditional African religion has been incorporated or synthesised into the Christian churches (Anderson, 1993; Comaroff 1985; Kiernan, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1990, 1992, 1997; Oosthuizen, 1992, 1996; Oosthuizen et al, 1994; Pauw, 1960; Sundkler, 1961, 1976; Turner, 1970; West 1975a & b). This is especially true for the African Indigenous Churches such as the various African Zionist denominations and the large prophet-inspired churches such as

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4 Although becoming a minister does not automatically confer authority to sanction marriage vows. This can only be performed by a state licensed marriage officer who has passed an exam.
the Nazarite Church of Isaiah Shembe. However, there has not been much focus on the degree to which elements of the Christian faith have been incorporated into traditional African religious institutions, such as in diviner training. Some scholars, who were either Christian missionaries or members of the faith, have used the concept of syncretism to describe the degree to which Christianity was tainted (or domesticated) by symbols and practices of the pagan host society to whom the evangelical message was being spread (e.g. Sundkler, 1961). To a large extent it was because of such normative and value laden assessments, with their inherent power differentials, that the use of the term ‘syncretism’ has been largely discarded. As MacGaffey notes, the use of the term syncretism “has become a pejorative term, applicable only to situations of which one disapproves” (MacGaffey, 1994: 241). Other critics have argued that syncretism, as in the blending, confrontation or assimilating of beliefs and practices, are present in all religions and thus the concept lacks any explanatory power (Peel, 1990: 338). Hence, although there have been some efforts to ‘recast syncretism’ (Greenfield, 1998; Shaw & Stewart, 1994), I will avoid using the term in this chapter, and rather resort to terms such as blending and assimilation.

There is no doubt that Christianity has had a huge impact on African beliefs and practices, as have African beliefs and practices on the various Christian institutions. The exponential growth in the so-called African Independent or Indigenous Churches (AICs) over the last century has been commented on by many scholars, with Oosthuizen (1996) observing that the percentage of adherents in AICs, as against mainline churches, having increased from approximately 13% in the 1950s to over 35% in the 1990s. Although many scholars tend to use the term ‘independent’ interchangeably with ‘indigenous’, as if they are synonymous, Oosthuizen has sought to distinguish them along the following lines,

...a distinction needs to be made between independent and indigenous churches. Some AICs were formed when congregations split off from mission churches: these are usually referred to as the “independent” churches, whereas churches that were indigenously initiated are categorized as “indigenous” (Oosthuizen, 1996: 309).
In other words, those churches that originated in local indigenous structures, often through prophet-inspired visions, but cast them in the mould of the Christian faith, especially based on Old Testament texts, are regarded as indigenous. However, while such distinctions may be of relevance to the founding of the church, they are not very meaningful in practice.

Oosthuizen identifies that the AICs can be divided into three broad categories of church, these being the Ethiopian, Apostolic, and Zionist Churches. However, he notes that these are not exclusive categories and there is a great deal of overlap between them. Both Sundkler and West tend to include the Apostolic Churches with the Zionist and identify only two broad categories, these being Ethiopian and Zionist (Sundkler, 1961: 38-59; West, 1975: 190). My main interest is with the latter category, the Zionist or “Spirit” Churches, as it is in churches that fall under this category where one finds the most prominent attempts to include and accommodate African spirituality and religious institutions, particularly those relating to the ancestors and healing. It is also within the Zionist churches where emphasis is placed on the importance of water rituals, the divinatory power of prophets and the central importance of dreams (Kiernan, 1990, 1992; Sundkler, 1961, 1976; West, 1975a & b). It is thus logical that these are the churches to which diviners tend to gravitate.

The most revered and well-known authority of the Zionist Churches is Bengt Sundkler (a Swedish missionary bishop and anthropologist), whose published work *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1961) is regarded as the foundation of all the subsequent studies on the Zionist Church (Kiernan, 1975). As his expertise and experience was embedded in Zulu Zionism (in particular amongst the rural Zulu), the association of Zionism with ‘Zuluness’ has tended to dominate ideas regarding the nature and degree to which traditional beliefs and practices have become incorporated into the churches. West, for instance, argues that some of Sundkler’s analysis was not necessarily applicable to the Zionist Churches he studied in the ethnic melting pot of Soweto (West, 1975a: 173).

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5 Although see Comaroff (1985) for Zionist churches among the Tswana.
Despite, this he did concur on many issues raised by Sundkler.

The Zionist Churches are a multitude of mainly small churches (most with congregations of less than one hundred, each led by a prophet or bishop6), which identify with the original Zionist principles of healing and baptism7. Sundkler identified nearly 850 independent Zionist affiliated churches in South Africa in 1961, while Johnson estimated there were over 4000 by 1985, representing over eight and a half million members (Johnson, 1994: 171). Johnson also observed that over 80% of these churches incorporated the word Zion into their titles (ibid). According to Sundkler the Zionists claim that ideologically “they emanate from the Mount of Zion in Jerusalem” (Sundkler, 1961: 54-550). Sundkler also suggests that the identification with the term Zion is linked to “the central figure of the Zionist’s Bible, John the Baptist” (Sundkler, 1961: 59). The popularity of John the Baptist emanates from the principle activity he is associated with, that is, baptism and purification rituals, and his power to work with water.

8.2.1 Zionist water rituals

According to Sundkler, Zulu Zionism

...is a well–knit system in which myths and rites fit of necessity together, and where beliefs and liturgical actions are organised around a single centre. That centre is the pool [my emphasis] – the Bethesda or the Jordan. The Zionist Church is a syncretistic movement of baptisers. Baptism and purification are their main rites, of which other activities are more or less dependent corollaries (Sundkler, 1961: 202).

He argued that a Zionist baptismal ritual, which favoured threefold (triune) baptism with

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6 There are a few exceptions to these, among them being the prophet Isaiah Shembe’s Isonto LumaNazaretha (the Church of the Nazarites), which has a current membership of over a million (Pers. Comm. Mazi Dlomo – May 2007). The other well-known church is the Zion Christian Church that was founded by the Pedi prophet Ignatius Lekganyane, which also has millions of adherents. Both of the latter prophets established church centres (Ekhuphakameni and Moria respectively) that remain the focal point of their activities to this day.

7 The African Zionist Churches had their origins in the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church at Zion City near Chicago, Illinois, USA. Its appeal was largely as a result of the emphasis its founder, John Alexander Dowie, placed on healing (Sundkler, 1976: 13-67).
full immersion (three times) of adults, and required the prior confession of sins, was a purification rite that could be repeated at intervals in order to cleanse (ukuhlambulula) one of mystical pollution and sin. West, however, argues that Zionists in Soweto made a distinction between baptism, which only occurred once, and the more regular form of purification rituals. He also added that “the two forms of immersion were different: baptism was by triune immersion and laying on of hands whilst purification usually involved repeated immersions, shaking, driving out of evil spirits, and so on” (West, 1975: 187).

Sundkler was obviously intrigued at the centrality of the pool in rural Zulu Zionist thought, and the immersion and purification that took place in it. He saw the Zulu Zionist fascination with pools as stemming from prior beliefs concerning the water and observed that, “the propensity of the Zulu Zionist to total immersion is intimately linked up with traditional Zulu ritual practices in streams and pools” (Sundkler, 1961: 201). These rituals and practices were related in some way to the conviction that monsters and snakes lurked underneath the water. Although a number of his Zionist informants referred to these monsters as Satan, who had to be overcome, one has to bear in mind that as Sundkler was a dedicated Christian missionary, for whom the serpent symbolised evil, there would be potentially a reticence amongst his informants to claim that the Snake of the water could be regarded in a positive light. Describing the activities of a certain prophet in the “Water-Church” he states,

A striking feature of these rites is the view held by all those present that the water teams with mysterious monsters which the prophet – another St. George in shining armour – has to defeat in order to be able to do his work. This is one of the fundamental elements of baptismal theology in the Bethesda Church. Johannes Mlangeni, Shembe’s right-hand man, told me of his experiences at one baptism where thirty-seven people were baptized; the pool was very deep and the water appeared at times extremely cold, at other times almost unbearably hot; “The two last baptizees slipped out of my hands, drawn into the depths by tremendous snakes. But with God’s help I overcame those snakes.” In the same way, he said, Shembe himself had had to struggle with river monsters on the occasion of a baptism at Nhlangakazi. Nor is this belief restricted to the backward areas of the reserves. In 1943 it happened in Orlando (Johannesburg) that a Zionist bishop, after having prayed for and blessed the pool, threw himself into
the water lifting his pastoral staff as a spear, resolved to kill Satan who hid deep in the baptismal pool in the appearance of a fearful monster. His followers now tell that their bishop fought valiantly with Satan but was caught under a rock in the pool and was drowned – overcome by the snake. It is characteristic that the entering of the pool is always supposed to be a dangerous and awe-inspiring act. The prophet’s struggle with the monster can be seen to be related to the diviner’s search for white earth which he finds under the inhlwati-snake in the pool (Sundkler, 1961: 2006).

In the light of what has already been discussed in this thesis it is clear that Sundkler’s informants were making reference to the water divinities, albeit in their terrifying and life-threatening form. Some Christian converts may indeed see these divinities as dangerous monsters (or as Satan) lurking in the depths ready to seize them, and that must be overcome. This is especially if they enter into a pool known to have such entities, and to which they have not been invited in a dream. However, one cannot assume that this is always the case, as my example of Zuma’s baptism demonstrates in Section 8.3 of this chapter. I also draw attention to the paper written by Ashforth (1998) on the crisis caused by Inkosi ya Manzi’s anger at the disturbance the housing settlements in Soweto were allegedly having on his residence in the river, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Ashforth (1998) records a fascinating conversation he had with two of his informants, Madumo and Mpho, who speculated that the dream message that Mr Nkonyana claimed to have received from Inkosi ya Manzi (the Lord of the Water) was linked to the fact that Mr Nkonyana was hoping to establish his own church in the area. Madumo speculated,

Maybe he’s up to something. Like setting up a church. Because most of these church founders, they’ve had similar dreams, either Inkosi ya Manzi or a dream from their ancestors to open up a church to heal people. They need something to convince people, to make them believe that the particular person is having the powers to do miracles. So maybe that guy is going to run a church (Ashforth, 1998: 49-50).

This statement by Madumo is extremely interesting because it points to the fact that the

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8 The Judaeo-Christian tradition (from Genesis to Revelation) sees snakes/serpents/dragons as being evil for the most part.
‘Lord (Snake) of the waters’ is regarded by many people in Soweto as a very positive force associated with churches, miracles and healing. The discussion continued as Ashforth’s informants tried to figure out the motives behind Nkonyana’s and his ‘disciples’ announcements, and the distinction between the various types of mystical snake. Ashforth then asked for more clarification,

Adam (Ashforth)  
Madumo  
Mpho  
Madumo  
Mpho  
Madumo

But nobody ever sees this thing, do they?  
If you see it you die.  
I’ve heard people say they could see it when it’s there. So when they see it in a certain place, that’s where they go to baptize. These Zions do that.  
But only those few who are spiritually inclined can see it.  
Sure.  
Not everybody can see it and talk with it. Not everybody. Those ones who are spiritually inclined will just pass a message that Inkosi ya Manzi’s there and waiting to call you with that spirit to become baptized. So when they put you inside the water Inkosi ya Manzi will be blowing air to you, trying to bring you some purification.  
But if you are up to doing anything that is evil they say that it sucks you down and you are dead (ibid: 52).

This conversation clearly associates the activities of certain Zionist groups and their baptismal practices with those pools or rivers that are known to be the residence of the great Snake they term Inkosi ya Manzi. Furthermore they indicate that such baptismal practices operate within a moral framework, which dissuades those who are not ‘spiritual’ or pure in their intentions from entering such waters. However, people who go there for baptismal purification are still at risk (because presumably they have sins that require purification) and this may explain why Sundkler’s informants, cited earlier, hinted that one requires the power of a morally strong prophet or baptising minister to protect them.

Sundkler provides further evidence, which corroborates Ashforth’s informants’ claim that

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9 Note how similar some elements of this conversation are with the one I had with Dlamini and Mr T near Bulwer regarding my dream that I interpreted as calling me to Inkosazana’s pool (see Chapter Four, Section 6.4.3).
the pools in which the Zionists do their baptising are those where the Snake is known to reside. Sundkler was emphatic that the ideal pool for Zionist baptism must

....be in a river, with rapidly flowing water [Sundkler’s emphasis], preferably below a waterfall. In this way one is assured that the water is efficacious in washing and rapidly removing sin, sickness and pollution. The stagnant, dead water in the font or the dish (endishini) of the Mission Church is not efficacious\(^{10}\). The “living water” gives the Spirit” (Sundkler, 1961: 207).

This description fits perfectly with the type of pool in which Berglund’s informants told him the water divinities (Inkosi ye Zulu and Inkosazana) prefer to reside (see Chapter Five, Section 5.2.1). Both Kiernan (1978: 29) and Dube (1994: 109) also mention the importance of such living waters for baptismal and purification purposes\(^{11}\), and include among the range of options the breakers on the seashore. Sundkler makes reference to the frequency with which the baptising ministers or prophets implore the “Angel of the Waters” to help protect them against the monsters in the pool. He adds, “I should infer that the water-angel in this case is the Christianized version of the ancestor-spirit in its function as a guardian of the pool” (Sundkler, 1961: 206). Ironically, and I am not sure if Sundkler was aware of this, according to traditional beliefs the ancestral amalgamation that he suggests is the water angel, to me, is none other than the Snake (see Chapter Four, Sections 4.2 & 4.3). Sundkler also makes allusion to the possible connection between the Zionist “Angel of the water” and Nomkhubulwana when he states,

As in pagan dreams, Nomkhubulwana – the goddess of fertility – appeared dressed in white, which is also the colour of the possessed-diviner’s robe, so in the Zionist prophet’s dream the angel or the Christ mostly appears in white. Sometimes other colours such as green, yellow, or the buff of sackcloth\(^{12}\) are revealed, and will invariably be worn by the one who is initiated (Sundkler, 1961: 213).

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10 His informants, in fact, likened font baptism to the ‘mark of the beast’ in Revelations (Sundkler, 1961: 207).
11 Baptism in ‘living waters’ was also an important element in Jesus’s ministry of healing.
12 The sackcloth is directly linked to John the Baptist who wore a cloak of camel hair.
The association of Nomkhubulwana with the Zionist Church also features in a dream recounted to Sundkler by a certain Lazarus, who had initially been a member of the Methodist Church. It was this dream, which I transcribe below, that led him to join the Zionist Church.

I came to a beautiful place with green grass. I first passed a small stream, and then came to a wide river. I saw many people on this side of the river, and another group on the other side. When those people saw me coming they laughed and said: 'We would like to see how that one is going to cross the river.' But when I arrived at the river, I suddenly saw myself already on the other side. There I saw a very steep mountain (which is called Zion) and people climbing the mountain. At the foot of the mountain I saw an old woman praying. When I started to climb people laughed saying: 'We would like to see how that one is going to climb that steep mountain.' When I tried the second time I was quite surprised that—whip!—I was on the top of the mountain. There I saw a big city, so big that one could not see where it ended, and right through the city passed a road. Over the city were morning mists and rays of the dawn. When I came near, there arose three men in white clothes. Two of them were half-hidden, but the third spoke to me and said: 'It is not permitted to enter here without repenting.' I heard a fine choir singing, and they were all in lovely white robes (but I don't remember what song it was). Then the man in white said: 'I will send you to evangelist Makhaye, you must ask him why he has turned the day of the Lord into a working day. If they do not repent and honour the Sabbath [Saturday], the Lord will send cold winds and hail and storm, to destroy all that they have planted.'"

He awoke.

The following Sunday, when he came to the mission (Methodist) church, he remembered the dream and the choir whose song he had listened to. He started to cry on remembering this. People were startled and asked what was the matter. When he narrated the dream some people made a laughing stock of him, saying: "Why do you see Nomkhubulwana's veils of mist in your dreams and why do you point to her day as the day for the church service?" And they did not care for what he said. Lazarus then began to pray for himself in the bush. One day a Zionist came along, saying that he had in a dream been shown to come and pray with Lazarus. When Lazarus was brought to the Zionist church, he at once recognised the white garments and the song from the dream he had (Sundkler, 1961: 269).

I have written this dream and its subsequent events in its entirety to demonstrate the key symbols of the dream that share elements with the traditional ideas associated with Nomkhubulwana, such as the river, green grass and growth, mountains, mist, the need for
repentance, and even the observing of the Sabbath day, which according to my informants in the Mvoti Valley is one of her days of rest. Similar to the narratives obtained in the Mvoti Valley, there was even the threat that failure to observe the day of rest might result in poor weather conditions and the failure of crops (See Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1). The significance of the symbols did not evade members of Lazarus’ former mission church either, who ridiculed him for having dreams that suggested a link with the goddess, and thus spurned, he eventually found his refuge in the Zionist church.

Perhaps the most well-known and referenced account written by Sundkler is his dramatic description of the dawn encounter between a Zulu diviner, Dlakude, and a Zionist prophet, Butelezi, and their followers, on the banks of the Ihlekazi Stream. In his book Bantu Prophets in South Africa (1961: 238-240) he commenced his celebrated chapter “New Wine in Old Wineskins” with this encounter that he witnessed, and it has served as the basis for many subsequent analyses exploring “the remarkable congruity” between Zulu diviners and Zionist prophets and their symbolic rituals and paraphernalia (e.g. Kiernan, 1978, 1992; Turner, 1970). During this encounter that he witnessed, Sundkler notes how similar the rituals were that they shared, and yet he also noted the tensions that existed between the two parties, with some of Zionist members regarding the activities of the diviners as defiling and vile, and under the control of demons, that needed to be overcome with the power of the Holy Spirit (Sundkler, 1961: 239-242). While the diviners’ lustrations involved the use of purgative herbal medicines in the form of the ubulawu foam, the Zionists use water and prayer. Instead of using white clay (associated with the Snake) as a protective and holy substance on their bodies, the Zionists use ash. Indeed, it was these similarities in symbolic practices, albeit with slight variation in substances and their meanings, that led to Victor Turner’s analysis of Sundkler’s ‘dawn encounter’ (Turner, 1970). In particular he was interested in the recurring symbolism of whiteness and water and their bodily referents. Turner’s comparison between the Zulu diviner and Zulu Zionist was extended to a comparison of similar symbols used in the ancient religions of the Near East, including those Israel and Greece. Sadly, his conclusions were not definitive and did not shed more light on the Zulu situation. However, a number of other scholars have examined the relationship between diviners
and prophets in more detail and it is to these that I now turn.

8.2.2 Diviners and prophets in the Zionist Church

Whereas Sundkler emphasised the tensions that exist between the prophets and diviners, despite their similarities, other scholars have indicated that such tensions do not always exist, and sometimes individuals will combine a calling to become both diviner and a Zionist prophet (West, 1975a & b; Johnson, 1994). Where the scholars all concur are the similarities in the calling of diviners and Zionist prophets and the close associations between their ritual water ablutions and symbols. For instance, among the Soweto Zionists, West found that all the prophets he interviewed claimed they had suffered from illnesses not amenable to western therapy at the time of, or prior to the acceptance of the calling. He also adds that they,

...underwent certain rituals, including purification by vomiting and bathing in a river. They made offerings, usually to their shades\(^{13}\), asking them to assist them in their work. Training usually takes some time and involves regular offerings, purification and interpretation of dreams. At the end the prophet emerges as a fully fledged practitioner who is able to predict, divine and heal (West, 1975a: 184).

West, quite rightly, notes how similar the descriptions of a prophet’s calling and the healing process are to those of diviners. Furthermore, the prophets and diviners themselves admit to the fact that their calling has similar origins, with the ancestors often being instigators for both types of calling and many have family histories that include both prophets and diviners alike\(^{14}\) (West, 1975b: 194). One isangoma in Soweto went as far as suggesting to West that 99% of Zionist Apostolic healers were actually called to be isangoma, and the reason that many of them opted for becoming prophets was to avoid

\(^{13}\)West, following Monica Wilson, uses the term ‘shades’ to refer to “dead people who are believed to affect the living directly” (West, 1975b: 185), rather than to a particular individual’s lineal ancestors.

\(^{14}\)For instance after Baba’s grandmother reputedly encountered the Snake (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.3) she became a prophet and faith healer. Her eldest daughter also became a powerful prophet, her second son who claimed to have seen the Snake near Mooi River became a prophet/diviner and her youngest son became an isangoma. Her grandson (Baba) became an isangoma.
the expenses, as well as the discomforts and length of training (ibid).

Johnson also encountered the cost factor as an important determinant in a person’s choice as to whether to become an isangoma or prophet (Johnson, 1994: 178). In a study conducted in KwaMashu Township near Durban his research team found marked similarities between Zulu Zionist prophets and Zulu isangoma. The results of interviews they had with fifteen isangoma and nineteen prophets revealed little difference between them and led them to conclude, “it is clear that isangomas (sic) and prophets are nothing like the two discrete groups or categories that we had hypothesised them to be” (ibid: 173). Johnson observed that most of those interviewed were isangoma/prophets combined (much like Mathonsi) and there was a tendency for an individual to be called by the ancestors first and then later by the Holy Spirit (i.e. such as Baba’s ‘ascent up the ladder’ documented below). According to West,

The power of the diviner comes from his guiding shades; the power of the prophet comes from the Holy Spirit, but in some cases it comes via the shades (most Zionist prophets in Soweto were women), who have particular knowledge of the prophet and are specially concerned. In these cases the relationship of the prophet to the shades is important to the whole church, as the prophet is central to the healing activities which are vital to the existence and continued success of the church (West, 1975b: 193).

Although many prophets and Zionists told West that they recognised the role of their ancestors in their calling, and saw them as intermediaries between the prophet and the Holy Spirit15, most were adamant that their actual power came from the Holy Spirit. Kiernan found a similar response regarding the source of power being from the Holy Spirit, but some of his informants denied that their ancestors exercised any “influence over the therapeutic process” (Kiernan, 1992: 237). However, in the same paper, Kiernan admits that there is, “…enough evidence available to establish the currency of a belief

15 For instance, in trying to explain how Jesus is perceived in relation to the ancestors, Zanele told me that “Jesus is like President Mandela of Heaven, and the ancestors are his deputies and ministers.” The chain of communication from the living to God goes through the ancestors, while the instructions and messages from God come to the living via the ancestors. This mirrors Baba’s assertion that Jesus is one of the amakhosi and as such can manifest as a snake.
among some Zionists that God and the ancestors are mutually supportive and work in tandem and that to invoke one is to invoke the other as a source of mystical empowerment.” (Kiernan, 1992: 236).

West’s informants saw their working with the Holy Spirit as a step up the ladder in terms of spiritual access and empowerment, but said that the diviner’s ancestors should approve this move (West, 1975b: 194). West suggests,

".....the power of the shades only is not, so to speak, working at full potential. If he were to accept the power of the Holy Spirit, which can be channelled through the shades, his power will be greater – in fact all he will need to be able to heal is prayer and holy water; the herbs and potions of the diviner will not be necessary (West, 1975a: 185-186).

Despite this claim, it is not only a one-way process from diviner to prophet, and I have met a number of prophets or faith healers who were told in their dreams to become diviners through traditional means (such as Mathonsi), and this does not seem to be regarded as a step backwards. The last sentence in the above quote by West is significant, because herein lies the main point of distinction between the diviner and the Zionist prophet. The latter, who claim that their main task is to fight the work of evil doers, have a marked aversion to the use of herbs, which they associate with the activities of sorcerers and as subject to interference by Satan. Sorcerers (abathakathi) who employ umuthi to attack innocent victims in their communities are regarded as the scourge of contemporary society (Kiernan, 1978, 1992) and, as I have already elaborated in Chapter Seven, diviners are not immune from such suspicions should their moral behaviour be suspect. Although diviners also claim to fight the evils of witchcraft and sorcery, they still make use of herbal remedies to counteract such activities. However, it is because one can never be quite sure about the intentions and moral fortitude of a diviner who works with umuthi that most Zionists spurn the use of plants altogether, relying on prayer, holy water and ash alone (Kiernan, 1978, 1992; Sundkler, 1961: 210). Kiernan regards this as one of the key differences between prophets and diviners noting, “prophets eschew the curative properties of vegetable matter, employed by diviners, in favour of non-vegetable media.
such as water, salt and ashes (Kiernan, 1992: 238). The use of water alone, however, is not regarded as sufficient but it must be accompanied with prayer and blessing, and is very often mixed with special coloured salts and wood ash (umlotha). This mixture is referred to as isiwasho and is used to expel evil and pollution from the body by washing in it, and using it as a purgative or an enema (Dube, 1994: 108-109; Kiernan, 1978: 29-31; Sundkler, 1961: 211-212). Sea water can also be used for similar purposes.

As with diviners, colour symbolism is also important. This is especially in the use of candles (all colours except black, which represents evil) and cloth, either for their uniforms or their banners. The use of candles is essential in Zionist ritual as they symbolise the power of light over darkness. Similarly symbols of universal light sources such as the sun, moon and stars are often used on banners and vestments. Candles that are prayed over and blessed by a prophet or minister are empowered to be able to attract the presence of Spirit once lit and will help dispel evil (Kiernan, 1972: 211; Dube, 1994: 110). The most popular colours are white (associated with purity), green and blue (associated with life), yellow (associated with potential), but they also include maroon (purple), pink and lilac. According to Dube “The uniforms, office vestments, flags and weapons (staves) are all colourful. These colours are not arbitrarily chosen, but are revealed in dreams, in visions and during services” (Dube, 1994: 114). In section 8.5 of this chapter I describe how I had a dream in which my mother had lifted up a cloth of particular colours to show me and this was to lead me to a Zionist prophet who used those colours in his church. An interesting aspect of their colour use is that although they rarely make use of red in their vestments (which Zulu izangoma use as a predominant colour, intermixed with white and black), they make heavy use of red candles, which are believed to be able to deflect danger, and to send any evil back to its origin (much the same way as izangoma use herbal medicines to ukucupha or deflect evil back to the sender)16. The white staff or isikhali is also used for the purposes of defence, as well as a mark of office and “is seen as a weapon, a reed and a herding-stick” (Dube, 1994: 111). It should also be pointed out that diviners employ the use of special forked sticks and spears

16 Note my description in Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.2 of an ukucupha ritual Zanele and I had to perform with the izangoma MaDuma, where a red candle was also used.
for protection and empowerment, as part of their traditional regalia.

On the matter of dreams and visions it is clear that these play a principal role not only in the identification and rise of prophets, but also in their divinatory activities of the church. Kiernan rightly emphasises the need to distinguish between dreams and visions, but I disagree with his fairly rigid distinction that visions are only the preserve of prophets or aspirant prophets-to-be, and that the Holy Spirit is the author of visions alone, while dreams come from the ancestors and are seen as a lesser form of revelation (Kiernan, 1990: 189).

From my experiences it is profoundly difficult to determine if dreams are seen as coming from the Holy Spirit or from the ancestors. It is the content of the dream that provides the clue and izangoma informants initially tend to regard them as emanating from an amalgamated spiritual source, particularly if the dream is not connected to a specific ancestor. For instance, in my hyssop dream documented in Chapter Six, Section 6.2.1, I initially saw the dream as coming from a general spiritual source, but after I told Baba that the plant was frequently mentioned in the Bible, he interpreted it as having come from the Holy Spirit. It was for this reason that he set up a shrine to the Holy Spirit at my house. In Section 8.5 of this chapter I describe the ‘Cathedral Dream’ that I had, which led me to a Zionist prophet who was able to assist in providing me with what I saw as protection against Baba. Although the dream featured a cathedral, what I understood as the full significance of the dream and the link with the Holy Spirit only became evident after I came to interpret what the scarf with different colours might symbolise; i.e. these might well be the colours of the prophet’s church.

I also question the argument that visions are believed to be only the preserve of prophets, or visions are believed to arise only from the Holy Spirit. Many diviners, even among those who claim no link to the Holy Spirit, claim to use visions as their principle means of divination, comparing them to what one can see on a television set. Shorty, for instance, claims he receives very precise visions, accompanied with the spoken word,
when he divines\(^\text{17}\). He credits such information merely to his spiritual ‘assistant’, who ‘talks’ in Shorty’s ears\(^\text{18}\) and gives him visions. Furthermore, visions do not only occur during states of ritual euphoria or ecstasy, but also often seem to occur on waking up or even during mundane activities.

While acknowledging that, “the preponderance of informed opinion is that the prophet is the mirror image of the diviner (isangoma)” (Kiernan, 1992: 231), Kiernan has cautioned against too simplistic an analogy between the prophet and diviner. He points to the above-mentioned differences as being significant enough to conclude that, “prophets are only superficially comparable to diviners” (Kiernan, 1992: 238). However, even these differences appear to be breached occasionally by both diviners and prophets alike, with many diviners making use of candles, colour symbols, ash, and even prayers to the Holy Spirit in their practices. Conversely West noted that even among prophets the taboo on plant materials was sometimes overlooked or breached. He found that “While most prophets did not use the traditional medicines of the diviners, there were some who did” (West, 1975a: 186).

The emphasis on the concept of uMoya (wind/air/breath) to describe the Holy Spirit does not depart too much from traditional ideas that regard spiritual power as being conveyed in air or wind, and is a fairly universal concept. Sundkler notes how many prophets claim to be called to their vocation after having suffered a near-death experience with lightning (Sundkler, 1961: 115). Isaiah Shembe, for instance, had several near misses with lightning and these proved to be turning points in his spiritual life (ibid). As Berglund has observed, traditional Zulu ideas associate the great Snake of the waters as being one and the same as the great God of Heaven (The Lord-of-the-Sky), known as Inkosi ye Zulu, who can also manifest in lightning (Berglund, 1976: 37-38). Thus, the distinction between prophet and diviner, and their source of power, seems to become even less precise.

\(^{17}\) He has an uncanny ability to identify events in one’s past life with great accuracy \textit{i.e.} events that he could not possibly have found out about through common-sense, mundane means.

\(^{18}\) He likens these to the imilozi although, unlike the latter, other people are unable to hear them.
The significance of this analogy between the traditional notions of *Inkosi ye Zulu* and the Zionist notions of *uMoya*, brings us back to the question of the manner in which different interpretations and experiences relating to a commonly shared set of beliefs and practices may take place. While political-economic and socio-cultural factors that change across time and space may influence the manner in which beliefs and practices concerning the water divinities are interpreted (as discussed in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Seven) so too does an externally imposed religion influence its interpretation, even though many of its symbols may be reworked and/or assimilated into existing ideas.

However, before making any conclusions on the degree to which prophet and diviner are analogous, one must be cautioned that a marked variation exists between different Zionist Churches as to the degree in which they accept beliefs and practices relating to the ancestors into the church (West, 1975b: 189-192). These range from no or little tolerance of the ancestors or shades, as recorded by Daneel for some of the Zionist churches in Zimbabwe (Daneel, 1971), to their active involvement and inclusion in rituals. While the different historical, cultural and political-economic trajectories in Zimbabwe and KwaZulu-Natal have undoubtedly influenced the degree to which assimilation of traditional and Christian faiths have taken place, it is also evident that people tend to gravitate to those churches that provide the most suitable answers for their own particular needs and interpretations. West notes that in many Zionist churches in South Africa, ritual practices for the ancestors range from being condoned to being actively encouraged. However, he cautions that, “Belief in the shades in the independent churches does not supplant Christian beliefs” (West, 1975: 184). It is also generally accepted that the Ethiopian Churches and some of the Pentecostal Churches are reluctant to accept the ancestors, and evidence of their endorsement can result in expulsion from the church (West, 1975b: 191: Anderson, 1993:30).

Before completing this section it is worthwhile to briefly consider some issues surrounding leadership in the Zionist church since this will provide insight into the success and subsequent failure of Baba’s involvement in the church (discussed in Section
One of the defining features of many of the Zionist Churches is their tendency to split as a result of internal disputes. While Sundkler’s typology (Sundkler, 1961: 106) of chief-type leaders (found in the Ethiopian Churches) and prophet-type leaders (found in the Zionist Churches) has been largely discarded (Kiernan, 1975, 1990: West, 1975a), there seems to be acceptance that within a Zionist church there is a dynamic interplay and even tension that arises between the charismatic and enthusiastic prophet leader and the more legally restraining influences of the nominated ministers (Kiernan, 1990: 171; West, 1975a: 49). For instance, West has observed that tensions may arise when “a prophet leader might resent control of bureaucratic subordinates, and conversely subordinates who are prophets might resent the control of a bureaucratic leader without their charismatic gifts” (ibid). Such tensions are exaggerated in the Zionist Churches, which depend on their prophet’s charismatic qualities to attract new adherents (West, 1975a: 51), and Kiernan notes that the person who is able to attract new members is the one who holds authority and power. Kiernan has also noted how the Zionists Churches with which he was involved allowed virtually every married man19 some official role in the church hierarchy (1990: 186). This is quite different from the type of leadership that is exercised in diviner training schools or isibaya, where the diviner, be it a male or female, has ultimate say and control over his/her flock and is not managed by a more bureaucratic leadership. The only controlling influence may come from previous trainers of the teacher.

In the next section I document Baba’s incorporation of his isibaya into a branch of the Zionist church, and how he blended the two institutions, their symbols and their sources of power without too much contradiction. However, despite his initial success and popularity, largely due to his perceived divinatory ability and spiritual power that was connected to the water, his plans to establish a church eventually failed. Ironically this was mainly due to the contradictions that emerged between his more charismatic prophet-type leadership and his desire to gain more bureaucratic control by becoming a bishop. His loss of moral integrity in both his secular life, and isangoma practice, and his waning

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19 While the women rarely assumed positions of leadership they did however hold a significant amount of influence.
abilities as a healer (as discussed in Chapter Seven), did not help matters either.

8.3 Ascending the ladder: Baba’s ordination and Zuma’s baptism

In October 1997 I was summoned by Baba to attend the ‘joining’ of his isibaya with a particular Zionist church group, which had its headquarters in the Mooi River/Estcourt district. He had apparently been told by his ancestors that they wanted him to ‘join’ this particular Zionist church and be made a ‘reverend’ 20, which the church had agreed to do. The Zionist ordination ritual was to be combined with the final umgidi for one of Baba’s amathwasa, Mr Z., who claimed to have had dreams that also connected him with the Holy Spirit. This combination of two rituals was to provide me with insights as to how some izangoma blend the two sources of spiritual empowerment without any apparent contradictions.

When I arrived at Baba’s homestead a few days after being summoned, it was a hive of activity, with numerous amathwasa and izangoma busily making their uniforms for all the members of Baba’s isibaya who were expected to join the Zionist Church in recognition of Baba’s calling. The uniforms for the women were made of blue and white fabric and were heavily starched and rigid, while those for the men were of green and white fabric. It was apparent that all izangoma members of the isibaya were expected to ‘join’ the church in support of Baba, without any option being given to decline; this applied to me as well, and they had already started making my uniform. Although there seemed to be great enthusiasm for this inclusion amongst some members, I sensed that others were not quite so keen to get involved, but were going through the motions to keep Baba happy. Zanele was one of the latter and she had commented to me that her ancestors always made her feel heavy and dull in church services, which suggested to her that they were reluctant about her getting involved in the church. Personally, I shared her reluctance, and I did not feel that Baba should allow his own ‘calling’ to the church to be imposed on all his current and previous trainees, some of whom might find the

20 This was the actual title he claimed, even though it would probably be more appropriate to be called a minister.
compulsory membership contradictory to their ancestral calling; it seemed evident to me that Baba was delighting in being able to show the ministers of the receiving church how many 'converts' he was bringing to their establishment.

On our arrival Baba had immediately invited us into his sacred hut (emakhoseni) to show us his new shrine for the Holy Spirit. He had assembled this shrine on the right hand side of his ancestral shrine (umsamo). However, the symbolic paraphernalia was quite different. Whereas the umsamo shrine was dominated with the skins and omenta of the sacrificed animals he had dedicated over the years to his amakhosi, the church shrine consisted of fabric backdrop consisting of two parts, which was mounted on the wall. The lower portion consisted of strips of blue, red and yellow fabric sewn together vertically, and above this was a long strip of maroon fabric overlaid with a smaller strip of white fabric. This fabric backdrop represented the symbolic 'ladder' that signified Baba's ascent in the spirit world. A Zulu Bible, candles and enamel cups of water were placed on a reed mat in the front of the fabric backdrop. Somewhat ironically, considering the repulsion the Zionist church has for herbal medicines, right next to the church shrine, lay piles of sacks containing various types of chopped bark and roots, and pots full of medicinal powders and mixtures. These were the medicines he continued to use for his isangoma practice.

The night before the official joining ceremony (termed ijoin) was to take place, an ox was slaughtered (provided by Baba) to feed the guests for the next day. I had been fairly surprised that the slaughtering had not been accompanied by any invocation and blessing of the beast, and Baba had not participated in the proceedings. Instead, he had delegated the job of slaughtering the beast to several male amathwasa, which was done in the normal fashion. The spinal cord was severed at the neck with a short stabbing spear and the animal fell quickly. However, it was silent and no bellow was emitted, normally considered a bad sign, but this did not seem to evoke any concern amongst the onlookers. Its throat was then cut and the meat cut up for consumption, with no ritual portions being given to various key members of his family. In answer to my query regarding the lack of bellow and Baba’s absence during the proceedings, Zanele said the lack of bellow was
not a problem because the animal had merely been slaughtered for meat to feed the church congregation, and it was not for Baba’s ancestors.

The evening proceeded with all the izangoma and amathwasa singing and dancing in the main dancing hut. However, the nature of the dancing was significantly different from the normal intlombe form of dancing for the ancestors, where the ancestors are ‘awoken’ through the regular foot stomping rhythm to the accompaniment of drum beats and ankle rattles. Baba had, as usual, taken centre stage in the dancing and was dressed in a long white pinafore and black and white ‘leopard’ print cloak. He led the dancers in a knee high bounding step counter-clockwise around the central hearth, opposite to the normal direction danced for the ancestors, and after several circuits they would all dance backwards in the reverse direction. The dancers shook their arms above their heads as they danced, while some of the women beat a ‘tune’ on small inflated plastic ‘drums’, that produced a dull resonant sound, and the dancing was accompanied by church songs and lyrics. This was quite different to the normal style of singing and dancing that the izangoma and amathwasa would usually perform for the ancestors in the same hut, which served to awaken the amadlozi. In the latter case the loud, rhythmic and resonant drum beat would be beaten on the large ox-hide drum (igubo), bare feet would pound the earth, and the singing style would be initiated by the dancers who would call out the key lyrics of their chosen song, which would be followed by the response chorus from those others present. However, as in the izangoma style of dance, a number of individuals were overcome with possession during the energetic dancing in the circle and these would be given space to allow the apparent bodily manifestations of spirit possession to take place, with a number of supporters ensuring they did not injure themselves in the process. Nobody seemed to be particularly interested in whether the possessing spirits were those of the ancestral spirits or of the Holy Spirit, and there was no effort to converse with them. However, these possession episodes were seen as a sign that uMoya, the spiritual power of God, was present. There was also an abundance of the characteristic burping,

21 The amadlozi are also referred to as the abaphantsi (those from below), which the pounding of the earth in dance serves to awaken.
sighing and yelps that signified that the spirits were being 'heated up' and making their presence felt\(^22\). During this period of dance Baba would stop and address \(uNkulunkulu\) (the Zulu God), Jesus and the ancestors, appealing for their presence and guidance. Two elderly ladies, one of whom was Baba's grandmother, who were suffering from a number of ailments, were brought into the centre of the circle and seated on two chairs. Then Thandi (the young \(isangoma\) who had reputedly gone under water as a child) and Baba took turns with 'the laying on of hands' and prayed fervently for them to be healed. The fact that the healing prayer was done by the two diviners who had claimed to have gone under water was significant, in that even the very senior and elderly faith-healers, such as Mathonsi, were not chosen for the task. However, they were supported by the throngs of \(izangoma\) who pressed in around them singing and praying to Jesus to show his miracles of healing\(^23\). After several hours of dancing and praying the session ended at midnight.

The next morning visiting church groups from other Zionist congregations arrived, much to the excitement of all present, since the number of other visiting church groups who come to witness such events is used as an important gauge of the prestige, popularity and respect of the individual who is about to be ordained (see also West, 1975a: 55). There was quite a good turnout at this particular event with at least eight groups visiting, led by their ministers and a selection of their congregations. As this was a sign of their respect and approval, and hence of Baba's prestige, he was quite clearly overjoyed at such support, especially as his hut was filled to capacity with the numerous church groups who spent most of the time singing and praying. At midday the formal procession of the members of Baba's \(isibaya\) (well over fifty individuals with me included) were led into the hut by Baba and danced a circuit around the central hearth to the accompaniment of vigorous singing by the congregation. We all carried our newly completed uniforms that were folded neatly in our hands, and were then welcomed by the various church officials.

\(^{22}\) These are signs that Sundkler noted were used as evidence for the presence of \(uMoya\) (Sundkler, 1961: 246-247).

\(^{23}\) There was no obvious change in their condition following this laying on of hands session.
such as the ministers and prayer women (*abathandazeli*), who ushered us to our seats. Baba and two other senior male *izangoma* were summoned to sit in front of the ministers who were standing at the ‘altar’, which was a table containing holy water, candles and some Bibles. With his white painted reed staff in his hand (*isikhali*) the leading minister expressed his pleasure of the occasion, and then proceeded to preach and pray. After fifteen minutes of this he then approached Baba and his senior *izangoma* and placed each individual’s folded clothes on their heads, starting with Baba, and prayed to the Holy Spirit to clean and guide them. They were then sprayed with holy water on their heads, faces and body, and then led outside to another hut where they had to dress into their new uniforms. An assistant minister then led them back into the hut to the joyous singing of the congregation. Baba, who now carried a white *isikhali* stick in his hand, was led to the altar to sign the church admission book. He was now regarded as an ordained ‘reverend’ of his own local congregation of diviners. The procedure was repeated for the rest of the members of the *isibaya*, and some of Baba’s family members who had also chosen to join his church. The procedure was done in groups that were strictly ordered on the basis of gender and seniority (men, unmarried women and finally, the married women), until everyone was dressed in their new uniforms. The rest of the day was spent in the hut, with joyous singing interspersed with praying and preaching. At 18h00 the service was broken for the congregants to have dinner, and soon after we returned to the hut to partake in the Eucharist (performed by the leader of the church, with Baba assisting), which consisted of wafers and wine, after having first made a small donation of money, to cover the costs (between 50 cents to R2.00). The singing and praying then continued right through the night.

At 08h00 the next morning (Sunday) the tired congregants assembled outside the hut, still singing, and were led by Baba and the other ministers down to the river. We had to cross the river and were led up onto the hill slope on the other side. This elevated area was regarded as the symbolic Mount Zion. There we had to form a large circle, whilst still

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24 Baba had arranged for enough plastic stacking chairs to be placed in the hut for the various congregations. This is quite different to the normal rituals that are performed by the *izangoma* for the ancestors, where everyone present sits on the floor on reed mats.
singing, and five ministers entered the circle and stood together in a smaller inner circle and prayed vigorously, each seeming to try and outdo the other in their efforts. For some reason Baba insisted I join this group of praying ministers, which I suspected was to emphasise his prestige of having a white woman in his church. They were then replaced by Baba and five senior *izangoma* who continued the fervent praying. After this the procession wended its way back to Baba’s homestead. Final prayers and thanks were said and this signified the end of the proceedings. There was a sprinkling of water on the congregants, but no full immersion baptism took place.

With the departure of the ministers we all changed back into our *izangoma* uniforms again. Unlike West’s account of the process of conversion of an *izangoma* to a prophet in the Zionist churches of Soweto, who had to throw away all his ceremonial regalia and insignia into the river\(^{25}\) (West, 1975a: 186), there was no suggestion that our new membership of the Zion Church meant that we had to destroy any vestige of our *izangoma* identity. In becoming a ‘reverend’ of his own church branch, Baba had merely increased his scope of practice to officially include not only the healing power and authority of the ancestors, but also that of the Holy Spirit.

The ease with which Baba and the *izangoma* slipped back into their original roles of serving the ancestors was evident in the events that immediately followed this church ordination. This was Zuma’s final *umgidi* to become a fully-fledged *izangoma* that was to take place at his homestead at Mpendle, about one hundred kilometres away from Baba’s homestead. The bus that was scheduled to pick up all the members of the *isibaya* at 14h00 failed to materialise. This did not appear to concern anyone and many took the opportunity to catch up on some well-needed sleep. At 22h00 we were all summoned to prepare for Zuma’s baptism, which was to now take place down at the river below Baba’s house. According to Zanele, Zuma’s ancestors in a dream had told him that he was to

\(^{25}\) West states, “Finally the former diviner returns to the river and ritually throws away into it the skins, beads, bones, etc. which he used as a diviner, and then enters the water for a final purification. On emerging he is clothed in a gown with a cross, and after a final feast is accepted as a prophet” (West, 1975a: 186).
incorporate the Holy Spirit into his new healing practice, and Baba had decided to take
the opportunity to baptise him whilst waiting for the transport to arrive. This was to
happen at the pool below Baba’s house where Baba’s ‘snake’ (*amakhosi*) reputedly
resided. This would be Baba’s first official assignment in his new role as a ‘reverend’ of
the Zionist church. With drums beating and Baba leading the way singing, we soon found
ourselves following the same path we had trod less than fourteen hours earlier to pray at
the symbolic Mount Zion. This time we went upstream and congregated on the side of the
depth pool, which was located a short distance below the waterfall where I was to later
perform the *Mphophoma* ritual (see Chapter Six, Section 6.3.1). As we gathered around
the pool, an old female *isangoma* descended to the water’s edge near the inflow of the
pool and lit four yellow candles. Here she prayed and beseeched the snake to show
itself and assist in the proceedings. Apart from some moonlight and the dim light of
candles it was quite dark, and as the drumming and singing continued everyone strained
their eyes looking into the pool in the hopes of seeing Baba’s ‘snake’. Suddenly there was
a gasp of excitement and Zanele nudged me excitedly “Do you see the snake?” she
whispered. I must confess I could not, but she assured me that she could see a slow dark
moving shadow in the water. In the meantime Baba was supervising from the water’s
edge. Zuma had been taken down to the point where the water left the pool by four
*izangoma* where he was instructed to sit submerged in the water and a white chicken was
placed on his head. Baba then entered the pool from the opposite side, and again there
was a gasp of excitement, as I was told that this is when Baba sometimes disappeared
under water to commune with the ‘snake’ (*amakhosi*). However, this time he did not
disappear, but as he moved through the water he splashed and ‘troubled’ the water whilst
talking to the ‘snake’ that apparently lurked in the pool. When he reached Zuma, he took
hold of his shoulders, and with the chicken still perched on top of Zuma’s head, plunged
him under water seven times. At each full immersion the chicken flew off Zuma’s head.

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26 Note that according to Oosthuizen he was told by a Zionist prophet that, “we use candles...if a big snake
comes from the sea, such a person will return – we burn candles before we enter the sea to ask the King of
the sea to let us in safely” (Oosthuizen, 1992: 167).

27 As the number seven is mentioned in many forms in the Old Testament this is regarded as a significant
sacred number connected to the Holy Spirit.
to be replaced as he emerged from the water. From what I gathered this was a symbolic representation of the flight of the spirit that occurs at the time of ‘death’ (submersion). The baptism itself being the symbolic death of the old self, with the re-emergence of the new self united with the Holy Spirit on emergence from the water. After the baptism they all climbed out of the pool. By now a thick mist had quietly settled around us (the sky had been quite clear up until then). Zanele nudged me again “You see the mist – it is good, the amakhosi are with us”. Although the chicken was later sacrificed it was emphasised to me that this ritual was a baptism that had been done in order for Zuma to be cleansed and united with the Holy Spirit. It was not done for his ancestors, but he had received these instructions from his ancestral family. It was also just downstream from this pool where I had the mndeuwu ritual performed for me to bring my ancestors out of the water three months later (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1). The fact that both Zuma and I had rituals performed in the river in which Baba’s amakhosi were believed to reside in the form of the snake, and from where we called my ancestors and connected Zondi with the Holy Spirit, suggests that ‘living’ water sources are seen as having the potential to carry a diversity of spiritual power i.e. it was not just limited to Baba’s ancestral power.

Following Zuma’s baptism we all returned to Baba’s homestead to await the arrival of the bus to take us to Zuma’s homestead, which eventually appeared at 02h00 (bearing in mind most of us had not slept for over three days). We eventually arrived after four o’clock in the morning and immediately the ritual umgidi for Zuma’s final initiation commenced in the normal manner. Although the dancing was of the izangoma style, accompanied by the rapid rhythmic drum beats, I noticed that some of the songs now incorporated Jesus, Jehovah, or the Lord, into their lyrics. On the second day of the ritual, immediately after the sacrifice of the cows, Baba suddenly became withdrawn and sullen, and requested that I drive him back to his homestead. Zanele explained that a rival

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28 It was also inspired by the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, where it is said, “And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him” (Matthew, Chapter Four, Verse Sixteen).

29 Three beasts were sacrificed by Zuma’s agnatic kin after being offered to the ancestors by the eldest male agnate.
isangoma had just arrived to observe the proceedings and because of previous conflicts he had with this man, Baba wanted to leave immediately. Baba was also complaining of a painful swollen leg. On our arrival at his homestead Baba disappeared into his emakhoseni with his isangoma friend and confidante, and stayed there for most of the day. A great sadness descended over the homestead and heartrending prayers were dedicated to Jesus and the amakhosi to heal Baba. There was also considerable speculation as to why he had suddenly become afflicted. There was concern that the food may have been poisoned as many people in the isibaya had been complaining of gastrointestinal complaints. Some of the isangoma were suspicious that jealous members of his family had sabotaged the celebrations of the previous few days to bring harm on Baba because they could not tolerate his popularity and success.

After twelve hours Baba emerged from his hut looking somewhat stronger and asked me to take him to the local clinic to get some medicines. By the time we left the clinic, armed with antibiotics and an anti-inflammatory, he was almost like his old self, and he now asked me to take him back to Mpendle to complete Zuma’s umgidi. Zuma’s final initiation was thus salvaged as we watched Baba ceremonially dress him in his official clothes as a fully-fledged diviner, over which he then proceeded to place the robes he would wear to work with the Holy Spirit. This layering of spiritual power exemplified in his outer garments was deeply symbolic of the union of spiritual powers he had sought, which seemed to have been so clearly symbolised during his baptism in the pool in the presence of the Snake (in the form of both the amakhosi and the Holy Spirit).

I was later told by the group of izangoma who were present at Baba’s homestead during this time that Baba had determined, through divination, that the affliction was caused by his ancestors who were upset that he had been too hasty in organising his ordination into the church, and had failed to allow for the necessary period required (tshwele) to notify all the necessary family members to attend. The ancestors were also offended that Baba had not performed a proper ritual sacrifice of an ox but had merely instructed some men to kill it for meat. Rather, Baba should have officiated at the ritual sacrifice, and informed his ancestors of the proceedings that were about to take place. Thus, because of this
omission, it was determined that the ancestors had made the meat go bad and this is why all the guests and members of the *isibaya* had suffered from gastro-intestinal complaints. This diagnosis of the problems was interesting from a psychological and sociological perspective, in that although Baba had an easy opportunity to blame jealous family members, or the jealous rival *isangoma* who appeared unexpectedly at Zuma’s *umgidi*, he accepted the blame himself. In these matters Baba had proved himself genuine.

### 8.3.1 Discussion

While much of the ethnography in the above section adds support to the foregoing literature review on the connection between diviners and the Zionist churches, there are some interesting elements that should be considered. At no time was there any suggestion that Baba or those in his *isibaya* were expected to renounce their activities as diviners. The different forms of spiritual access and their symbols were kept largely separate and ran parallel to each other. This was evident even in the spatial arrangement of Baba’s sacred hut, where the shrines existed side by side without any apparent contradictions, despite the presence of herbal medicines. However, I noticed over the years that when consulting with Baba for a divination session with his *amakhosi*, he would always address them at the *umsamo* (*i.e.*, the ancestral shrine) and not the church shrine. In fact I never witnessed any prayers or divination session being directed to the church shrine alone. The separation of symbols was also evident in the wearing of uniforms and the dancing and music styles, which were kept distinctly separate and used only on the appropriate occasion. Similarly with the style of healing: with the laying on of hands during the church service to the use of medicines (including western medicines) when back in the *izangoma* mode. Likewise, Zuma’s baptism for the Holy Spirit was then overlaid with his final ritual *umgidi* where the cattle were sacrificed for the ancestors, and these two symbolic events were mirrored in the layering of his vestments on the completion of his ritual. However, despite this separation of symbolic paraphernalia and activities, it is evident that the ideas were in practice mixed and intertwined.

The fears of sorcery that pervaded Baba’s homestead during both his Zionist ritual and Zuma’s *umgidi*, and the perceived revelation that it was due to ancestral anger at his
failure to include his extended family in the proceedings of his ordination as a minister, and at his isibaya’s affiliation with the Zionist Church, added the final ironic twist in showing that it is believed that the ancestors can still sanction the living even when the rituals are directed more towards the Holy Spirit than to themselves (i.e. the ancestors).

The most striking blending of ideas, however, took place during the baptism at the pool, where the presence of the Baba’s ancestral snake was actively beseeched and sought for. It was this ritual that suggested that the izangoma regarded Baba’s ancestral snake (i.e. of his amakhosi) as being very closely linked to the ‘Holy Spirit’. I am uncertain however, to what extent the Snake of the pool, iNkosi yezulu, was seen as synonymous with the amakhosi snake, as the amakhosi and iNkosi yezulu (or the Holy Spirit), while associated with each other, are also seen as being different and separate.

8.4 The rise and fall of Baba’s church

I participated in the ritual documented in the previous section in the first year of my membership in Baba’s isibaya, when his power and popularity were at an all time high. In retrospect, however, even at this time, there were signs that problems were emerging around him, and over the next few years these became evident in a number of other church ceremonies I attended. These tensions were again linked to what I interpret as Baba’s desire to display his power and prestige, and his concomitant anxiety that jealous people were trying to destroy him. It was not long before his suspicions were to be directed to the ministers of the church who he believed were jealous of what he saw as his enormous powers and popularity.

Although I was not able to be present at many of Baba’s church activities, I made the effort to attend several of the larger events such as the important annual church ceremonies performed over the Easter period. In 1998 Baba’s church group (which corresponded largely with his isibaya of several hundred) was invited to attend the Zionist Easter Ceremonies in Nongoma in Northern KwaZulu Natal. Unfortunately I did not attend as I had fallen ill with flu just before their departure and decided to stay at Baba’s homestead to recover. On their return there was great excitement at the honour
that had been bestowed on Baba by the other Zionist church groups and their ministers, when they had requested that Baba perform the closing prayers of the ceremony. It had also been announced that the following year’s Easter celebrations (in 1999) would be held at Baba’s homestead. I was able to attend the Easter celebrations that were held the following year at his homestead, but by this time the general anxieties about Baba’s safety from jealous rivals were on the increase and there was some doubt as to whether the event would be held because of this. It was eventually decided that the event would continue.

Despite the rumours regarding his safety there was a great turnout of different Zionist church groups and choirs. The event proved to be a vigorous and spirited performance, with numerous participants allegedly becoming possessed, including many of the officiating ministers and Baba. West, like Sundkler (1961: 246-247), has observed that spirit possession in Zionist churches “is strongly approved of, and taken to be evidence of the Holy Spirit among the congregation” (West, 1975: 177), and such signs at Baba’s Easter Mass were regarded as a clear indication of the presence of divine grace. New recruits are also an important gauge of the success and popularity of the church and during this ceremony eight new izangoma and amathwasa were officially incorporated into Baba’s church and their uniforms donned, as had been done in the initial ceremony. A unique aspect of this three day ceremony occurred in the early hours of the morning on the 3rd day (Easter Sunday), when after hours of spirited dancing all the women suddenly exited the hut and went running and shouting down to the front gate. There by the gate stood two young girls at each end of a reed mat that had been placed on the ground and was covered with a white cloth. As we all arrived, the two girls lifted the white cloth aloft and shook it in the air. I was told by some of the participants that, as women, we were the representation of Mary Magdalene who witnessed the rising of Christ’s spirit. We all then had to collapse on our knees around the reed mat and pray fervently for guidance and blessings as the moon shone down on us and the cocks started to crow. It was the most

30 I am not certain who had choreographed this ritual; i.e. whether it was Baba or the prayer women who were orchestrating our performance.
dramatic Christian service I had ever attended. It is little wonder that such perceived
demonstrations of spiritual presence and power, coupled with Baba’s enigmatic
personality and divinatory ability, was able to attract a large number of new adherents to
Baba’s church. These members soon extended beyond those of his *isibaya* to include
other members of the community, in particular young women.*

The first evidence of tensions I was to witness between Baba and various ministers of his
church occurred at a service that I was invited to attend in Shongweni in November 1999.
It was hosted by one of Baba’s trained *isangoma* who had now become an active member
of his church. Zanele, Mathonsi and I had arrived in the late evening, all feeling very
reluctant to face a long and tiring two days of church singing. There was a large
congregation already present, mostly consisting of Baba’s *isibaya*, who were all dressed
up in their church uniforms. Baba however only arrived some hours later, looking
subdued and serious. At this stage none of the other ministers had arrived, so Baba took
over the proceedings. The ministers eventually arrived at midnight and the tempo of
singing and dancing increased. Sometime in the early hours of the morning Baba
suddenly became ‘possessed’ and started shouting out that there were ministers present
who were jealous of his powers and were scheming to kill him. I was not certain whether
this was a genuine possession episode, but nobody suggested to me that it was not, and as
it was the ‘Spirit’ talking, the ministers had to sit quietly, listening to his impassioned
accusations. They made no effort, however, to refute or contradict his claims. A number
of ministers then gathered around to pray over him, in order to calm the ‘Spirit’ that had
manifested, and they placed their hands on his head. I was given a glowing candle to hold
and with three other women, we were told to surround Baba with light and pray for him.
Suddenly paroxysms of ‘possession’ took hold of him again and he slumped over onto
the floor into what appeared to be a deep trance. After he gained consciousness several
people had to assist him out of the room since he was unable to walk. A short while later
I had gone to see if he was all right and he complained that he had a severe headache. I
gave him two pain tablets and within a short while he had recovered significantly and

31 As I was unable to interview any of these new adherents I cannot be certain why there was this gendered
disparity.
was asking me to take him home. As he was fairly uncommunicative on the way home I
did not ask him for his explanation of the events, but I later found out from Zanele that he
had told her that the church ministers were jealous of his power.

I did not attend any more of Baba’s church services for a number of years after that, but it
was soon after this confrontation that Baba established his own separate Zionist church,
which subsequently grew to include a number of branches. Obviously, the tensions and
resulting accusations that had manifested during Baba’s ‘possession’ episode had led to
fission with the original church to which he was affiliated.

In August 2003 I was invited to attend an important ceremony that Baba had been
planning for at least two months before, where he claimed that he was to be consecrated
as the bishop of his church by various bishops of the affiliated churches. Zanele and I
arrived on the Friday evening when the service had already started and were ushered into
a large tent that Baba had hired for the occasion to house all the visitors he was
anticipating. There was a fairly large group present (approximately forty people),
including many of his izangoma and amathwasa, but there were very few men present,
the tent being dominated by young girls. The singing, dancing and preaching progressed
through the night and the sermons, conducted mainly by Baba, concentrated on moral
issues, such as the evil of gossip, and the aversion of the church to women wearing
trousers. There was also a choir competition and a very entertaining sketch performed by
a local group of young dramatists about the dangers of promiscuity in the era of
HIV/AIDS.

However, apart from members of a few of his branches there were very few other church
groups present and no other ministers. This was obviously of great concern for Baba, as
the recognition of becoming a bishop and the social affirmation that comes with it, can
only be sanctified by the presence of other bishops, as well as the archbishop, from the
various different Zionist churches. According to West “Most churches are led by bishops,
who are consecrated by other bishops through laying on of hands in apostolic succession”
(West, 1975: 177). Throughout the night and the next day they awaited the arrival of the
other bishops, as well as the archbishop who was expected to come from Durban and consecrate Baba. Nobody arrived and by the Saturday evening the ceremony had largely fizzled out. There had been very little energy amongst the congregants and no episodes of apparent spirit possession, although a number of new recruits were incorporated into the church. It must have been an extremely embarrassing event for Baba not to be recognised by his church peers, especially in front of his church members. I had a chance to discuss the no-show of the archbishop and bishops with him the next day and this is how he explained the turn of events to me,

Presently, I have 1308 members and 27 branches, and there is jealousy because of this...Jealousy is terrible. Yes, I have power and luck because even as an isangoma people often get jealous...actually, the word was not passed. There has been a communication breakdown. When they [the ministers from the other branches] called they were told that the mass has been postponed. However, them coming here was just formality, so that they can introduce me to the congregation as the ordained [bishop], but that has been done already. I have been given the attire and the tent, so I am ordained. Didn’t you see me offering communion? Not everyone does that; you have to be ordained first. Even the church site has been earmarked. It is still to be built. I have the stamp and I make certificates. I am authorized to conduct marriage ceremonies. I am a commissioner of oaths so to speak."

While I suspect the numbers of members and branches of his church that he claimed to have been exaggerated, Baba did not admit in this interview that the lack of peer support or recognition of his desired status amongst his fellow bishops was necessarily a problem to attaining his new position. I argue that the above statement also reveals a key facet of agency that operates at the intersection of church and traditional religious institutions. His claim that he now had the authority to offer communion and perform ‘legal’ life transition rituals, such as marriage, provided evidence of what was motivating him to achieve this new status. This was an authority that was denied him in his role as an isangoma.

It could be argued that Baba’s strength and vulnerability lay in his main identity as a

32 Ironically, one of the biggest grievances many isangoma had with Baba was his failure to officiate (i.e. as a priest) or be present at the deaths of members of their family.
diviner, one who had reputedly been taken under the sea by the Snake, *Inkosi ya Manzi* (or ye Zulu). The sudden rise of his church was to a large extent because he co-opted all the diviners and *amathwasa* in his *isibaya* to join, but thereafter it was also due largely to his charismatic personality, as was evident at the various Easter Masses. However, as Kiernan has clearly demonstrated, the Zionist churches have to keep a precarious balance between “the sober pastor (minister) and the wayward impetuous prophet” (Kiernan, 1990: 144). Kiernan goes on to say “Prophets are deemed to be irresponsible (“they are like children”) and their performances must be controlled by the minister” (*ibid*), and, “In practice, a precarious balance is negotiated between the two and it is the preservation of this balanced contribution of the partners which is essential to the smooth functioning of the Zionist band” (*ibid*: 157). Baba’s vulnerability was that he tried to combine the two functions together in himself, and in converting his whole *isibaya* into a church, he was in effect presiding over a church of ‘prophets’. Ironically, I never actually witnessed him or any of the other *izangoma* acting in a prophet’s role during church services (as described by West and Kiernan). Baba kept his divinatory and healing activities confined largely with the *amakhosi* and I never heard anyone refer to him as being a prophet (*umprofeta*) in the church. Yet this is what his status, as a charismatic diviner, rested on. He preferred to be called a ‘reverend’, to which he later hoped to upgrade to bishop. I noticed that during church activities he tended to preach rather than prophesy. In addition, the relationship between him and the other ministers in the broader church did seem to be hedged with tension, and they sometimes exhibited signs of fear of his powers and abilities as an *isangoma*. Ultimately, as his powers were seen to decline as a diviner, largely as a result of his own misdemeanours, so his grasp on authority and recognition by his church peers also declined.

At the end of the disastrous weekend of Baba’s efforts to become a bishop, as Zanele and I sat in his *emakhoseni*, we had asked for a divination session with the *amakhosi*. It was then that he ruefully brought our attention to the fact that his *emakhoseni* was very old and was about to fall down. He also commented that rats had eaten his *isangoma* staff of office, his *umshoba* (the cow tail), as well as his *izidwaba*, the traditional bead decorated leather skirt that he wore when officiating at the completion of the final *umgidi* of a
student. It seemed that not only had the authorities of the church abandoned him, but so had his ancestors. The next time I visited Baba after this event I noticed that his church shrine in his new emakhoseni had not been erected, which suggested he had abandoned his efforts at being a church leader.

Despite my own reservations about Christianity, I was to experience dreams that seemed connect me with the ‘Holy Spirit’. It was ultimately a dream that was to lead me to Johannes (pseudonym), a powerful Zionist prophet/healer, who would give me the courage and protection to confront Baba regarding his apparent misdemeanours in my training, which had been suggested to me in divination by Shorty, the powerful diviner who I was also led to in a dream (see Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.3).

8.5 Experiencing the Holy Spirit

When I recounted my hyssop dream to Baba in 1997 (see Chapter Six, Section 6.2.1) I had mentioned to him that the use of this plant was to be found in the Bible, and it was on the basis of this dream and the information I provided that he said that I was connected to the Holy Spirit. It was this dream that led him to come to my home in Grahamstown and set up a shrine. As he had just been made the minister (‘reverend’) of a branch of the Zionist Church, this consecration of my shrine was to be part of his newly acquired extended scope of practice. The shrine was comprised of two three metre long strips of maroon (crimson) and white fabric that were hung from the wall, at the base of which was placed a strip of dark blue fabric on which was placed a container for holding imphepho, an assortment of sea-shells and a collection of seven different coloured candles (no black candles were permitted). He also made me a cord of blue, maroon and white wool that I could wear around my waist to signify my connection with the Holy Spirit, which would also offer me protection from evil. During the consecration of the shrine Baba gave the candles to each of his four izangoma assistants to hold and pray over. He then lit the imphepho and placed a white veil and the woollen cord over my head. While holding my head with his hands, he prayed vigorously for the Holy Spirit to descend on me. I then had to light the candles and place them upright on the blue fabric. Baba then placed a pot of ubulawu in front of me, which I had to churn to produce foam,
while all the time praying to the Holy Spirit and my ancestors to enter me. I then had to ingest copious amounts of the foam. This incorporation of the herbal-based *ubulawu* into the ritual indicated to me that Baba had no qualms in combining *izangoma* methods of attaining spiritual power and assistance (through plants) with those of the Christian faith. There was never any suggestion that as I had apparently received a ‘calling’ from the Holy Spirit then the avenue of accessing the *amakhosi* was now closed to me; it was merely an additional element to the range of my spiritual armoury. To be quite honest, despite my dream, I was a somewhat reluctant disciple because of my scepticism of certain aspects of the Christian church, preferring rather to explore my connection with the ancestors and *amakhosi*.

I did have two other dreams that I understand to suggest I had a link with the Christian faith. One was the song I heard just prior to my first *umgidi*, which was ‘Joy to the World’ (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1), and it was these words that I had to incorporate into the beaded design of my dress (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1 for more details of the dream and the ritual). The other was a dream in February 1999 in which my maternal grandparents visited me at my house and gave me an old fashioned radio, which I could tune and get spoken messages from them. The dream ended with them reciting the Lord’s Prayer to me. Zanele had interpreted the latter dream as indicating that they wished me to communicate with the *amakhosi* (the radio), and that the Lord’s Prayer was again confirming my link with the Holy Spirit. She suggested I should recite it whenever I prayed. However, it was a dream that I was to have a few days before going up to confront Baba about giving me ‘the key’, as I had been instructed to do by Shorty, that was to cause me to wonder if the Holy Spirit was maybe involved.

*The cathedral dream – 30 October 2007*

*In the dream I was standing at the four way-stop street immediately outside the

33 This is mainly due to the Christian Church’s history of oppression against, and suppression of other religions. Although I was an active Christian in my youth, and still support many of its moral principles, I have never achieved any form of spiritual satisfaction within its institutional structures. Rather, I was always left feeling cynical and uncomfortable with the pious hypocrisy that was exhibited by some adherents and functionaries.
Grahamstown Cathedral. I had a sense that there was something at my feet that I had long been looking for that would connect me with the amakhosi (but could not recall what exactly it was). As I looked down I saw a small brownish snake lying in the road in front of me. Suddenly a middle aged woman, wearing a 'German print' skirt, covered with a small yellowish towel at the waist and a white top, who I felt was either of Cape-Nguni or Khoi extraction, walked up to the snake in front of me and picked it up. Then she stood in front of me holding the snake by its head as its tail hung straight down. The snake just hung quietly, but in the dream I was surprised that she was not scared that it would bite her. She then turned, while still carrying the snake and walked towards the entrance of the Cathedral. She turned and looked at me as she entered. I then found myself standing at the tables of the outside vendors, who sell various items near the Cathedral. My mother was standing next to me and she picked up a scarf from the table and spread it out arm-width so I could see it. I noticed that it was a mixture of green, blue, yellow and white colours.

As with all my strong dreams, this one left me in a state of contemplation as to its meaning, and a desire to follow it up. However, because it was somewhat obscure, I was not sure exactly what it was signifying. Initially, I reasoned that my ancestors may have wanted me to have a scarf with those colours and I would find it outside the cathedral at the vendor stalls; so that morning I went down to the stalls but found nobody was selling scarves. As I was planning to leave for KwaZulu-Natal the next day in order to confront Baba about his failure to give me the ‘key’, I had to leave it at that. On my arrival in KwaZulu-Natal I first went to pick up Zanele and her children before going on to Baba, who I had notified of my pending visit. First, however we had to drop her children off with her sister near Elandskop, a short distance from Baba’s homestead. While having tea at her sister Busi’s house, the conversation drifted to the church that Busi was a member of. As they were extolling the virtues of Johannes, the man who led the church, Zanele told me that he had helped a number of izangoma to attain their divinatory abilities, after they had trained with Baba with no success. They told me that Johannes was “very powerful with the water”. Suddenly Busi suggested we join her for a river ceremony that Johannes was going to perform the next day, to which I agreed immediately as I was always keen to observe such rituals. With that, she went into her room and soon came out while putting a scarf on her head. The scarf was exactly of the same colours I had been

34 This is a commercial fabric that has been incorporated into Xhosa ‘traditional’ outfits, and is used to signify the marital social status of a Xhosa woman.
shown in my dream. On telling Zanele and Busi about the dream, they appeared to immediately know what it meant. “Those are the colours of the izithunywa (messengers/angels)” they told me, “they are the colours of Johannes’s church.”

After promising we would attend the river ritual the next day we, with some trepidation, set off for Baba’s homestead to find that Shorty’s predictions were all exactly as he had described to me. After the bad dreams we both had, which suggested to Zanele that Baba did indeed have a mamlambo (see Chapter Seven, Section 7.4.3), we planned to hastily get away to Busi’s house. After we told Baba we had to visit Zanele’s children to take food (which we did), we made our escape. Busi was already dressed in her church outfit when we arrived and soon we headed to Johannes’s homestead. There were about thirty women and children waiting in his sacred hut when we arrived. As I entered the hut my eyes were drawn to the large fabric banner on the wall opposite the door in front of which was a stepped altar, covered with white fabric, on which numerous candles were burning. The colours of the banner where exactly those of my dreams, and I felt convinced I had now connected with the symbolism of the dream and that I was in the right place. I was reassured when Johannes arrived. He was a slim handsome man, probably in his thirties, with a compassionate face and gentle eyes. He can be best described as having “the countenance of a saint”. His gentle compassionate manner was very reassuring and after we had all lit our own candles, he prayed over them and left them alight on his shrine.

We then followed Johannes in single file over the grassy hills for over a kilometre, with a chilly drizzling rain falling, to his pool. The pool itself was on a small stream and was not nearly as impressive as the various ones related to my dreams; but it was fast running water and the pool was deep. Johannes donned his garments, and, grasping his staff (isikhali), entered the pool, praying vigorously while troubling the water. The rest of us stood around the pool singing to the Holy Spirit. Then, one by one, we each had to enter the pool and be subjected to very vigorous submersions, as he prayed in the name of “God, the Son and the Holy Ghost. In the name of Jehovah cleanse this person of her sins!” It was an extremely disorienting and physical experience that left me in quite a state of shock. Kiernan’s observation of such activities (in baptism and purification
rituals) sums it up quite well, “This is a euphemism for being forcibly dunked in a strong river current, where it is difficult to keep one’s footing, by a single-minded Evangelist who will brook no argument” (Kiernan, 1978: 29).

After standing in the icy waters for over an hour and physically submerging all thirty of us, Johannes emerged out of the water. After we all put on dry clothes we had brought with us, we headed back to his hut. Back in at the warm shrine, after singing and saying prayers we each approached Johannes at the altar on our knees and while holding our candles prayed aloud to the Holy Spirit as to our particular needs and desires. As I quietly prayed for guidance, as well as for help and protection to confront Baba, Johannes gasped and sighed, showing signs of the Spirit: “Yo! Yo! Yo!” he gasped, as he grasped his back as if the Spirit was striking him between his scapulae. As I put a R4.00 donation in front of the altar Johannes leant towards me and said “Please stay afterwards. I have important things to tell you”. Once everyone had departed, Zanele and I approached him at the shrine and he first started to divine for Zanele. For this he used no props, but seemed to be inspired by the Spirit, his words came out in a continuous fast-flowing stream, far too fast to be thinking it all up. Having accurately identified much of Zanele’s present and past situation he then turned towards me. He said he could tell immediately that I was an isangoma, but I had problems, as my teacher had not completed my training properly. He could see I was covered with a dark shadow (like a cloth) and this needed to be removed, or something unpleasant, like an accident, may happen to me. I should have sacrificed a pure white goat for my mother’s ‘family’ (ancestors), but this had not been done. He added that this should have been done at my own home where I resided, and I must still do this. However, before I did the sacrifice, I needed to clean myself from the darkness. I would need to sacrifice two white chickens and wash myself with their blood and bile in a fast-flowing river. He also told me to get three green candles, as well as a red one and a white one. I must then pray with them in my shrine, especially “for the teacher who has done things wrong”. After I told him about my cathedral dream and being shown the coloured cloth of his church, he agreed that it was my ancestors and the Holy Spirit guiding me to him. Moreover, he seemed to understand what the symbolism connected to the snake was about; he asked, “What way was the woman holding the
snake? From its head or tail?" It was very symbolic, he said, because in holding it by its head the snake is looking up and things would be relatively easy to correct and come right. Holding it by its tail however, suggested that things would be a bit more difficult. I must confess I was quite amazed at being told all this by a minister of a church and yet who seemed very amenable to help me in my calling as a diviner. It seemed that he had in depth understanding of the traditional symbols associated with the ancestors and worked with them as well. I was instructed to buy four strips of coloured fabric, as shown in my dream, and some green, white, and red beads, and bring them to him the next day. He would pray over them and this would help protect me from any danger and evil. After him telling me a few more things, we bid our farewell and returned to Baba, as I still had to confront him. However, I was feeling a lot braver by now, with the sense that Johannes's protection had enveloped us, and we had a trouble free night regarding our dreams.

The next morning I drove to town to buy the various items that we had been instructed to get by Johannes. It was on our return that Zanele told me that she had heard from other izangoma about the fact that Baba had stolen and sacrificed my white goat, after my visit to Inkosazana's pool, eight years previously. This was something that she had long suspected, and it had now been confirmed by others. It was at this point I felt ready to confront Baba. After packing our bags and putting them into the car, we went up to his emakhoseni, and I told him all my grievances. I had written out a long list, on the instructions of Shorty, and given them to him to read at his leisure. Baba seemed extremely worried at my distress and hastily started putting medicines together to "take me up", which I declined since I no longer trusted him, and I was aware one should never take plant medicines with an "angry heart". He then told me to come back in the morning and he would start to teach me how to throw the bones. I said I would think about it, but that I was now ready to go. With that we left his homestead and went immediately to Johannes, who prayed over the candles, beads and fabric, and gave us some isiwasho (healing salts of a variety of colours) and ash (umlotha) to take with us and wash in, as well as purge ourselves. Zanele and I left for my home the next day, where, with Shorty's assistance, we did the rituals Johannes instructed me to do. I never returned to Baba.
Despite my disappointment with Baba as a teacher, the experiences and the guidance I got from my dreams (irrespective of their possible origins) have not undermined my respect for many of the experiences that the diviners claim. In fact, in being provided with what I regard as guidance in my dreams, especially in being led to Shorty and then to Johannes, my conviction that there is indeed an external, intelligent yet intangible, force that serves as a moral compass and guide for human activity, has been re-enforced. While I am still uncertain as to the true nature or identity of this force, I can fully understand and appreciate the profound influence that an experience of it has on people’s religious convictions, irrespective of the cultural framework in which it is embedded.

8.6 Discussion
This chapter has attempted to demonstrate how the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities, especially among the Zulu, have been extended and incorporated into many of the Zionist churches. In so doing it demonstrates the extent and depth to which these ideas are embedded in the minds of its adherents. These findings could also inform the model I developed regarding experience (level one), interpretation (level two), praxis (level three) and transmission (level four) and how agency may influence these. For this chapter, the level of transmission is not necessarily related to how knowledge of the water divinities is shared; rather it is how more dominant forms of religion and belief that have been imposed upon them (in this case Christianity), have been accommodated, transformed and domesticated.

Both Ashforth’s and West’s evidence suggests that the ideas of the water divinities are to be found in the large sprawling townships and shack settlements of Johannesburg, such as Soweto, and that these have had some influence on Christian adherents. While ambivalence exists among some churches and their members as to the moral nature of the more traditional understandings of the water divinities, it is instructive that it is the pools and places associated with the “monsters of the deep” that are regarded as the place where the Holy Spirit resides, and where baptism and purification rites take place. My own experiences with diviners, suggests that these divinities and the Holy Spirit are
intertwined and complementary, if not the same, at least in people’s minds, and potentially, at a more fundamental level. Thus while interpretation and praxis may be transformed by an externally imposed religion, the degree to which this occurs and direction in which this happens is not as straightforward as one might assume.

I have argued in this chapter that it is at the interface between the more traditional beliefs and practices pertaining to the water divinities and those of the African indigenous churches where the overlap and blending of ideas takes place in terms of indigenous cosmological assumptions and where the potential exists for people to access different forms of power and that this is where agency becomes most evident. I have shown how Baba, although recognised as having been granted the ultimate source of spiritual power by being taken underwater, sought to consolidate his power base by establishing and controlling his own church, which would have granted him not only social prestige, but also state sanctioned (or legal) authority to conduct a wider range of ritual functions. While such opportunities may provide an avenue to enhance one’s status, power and wealth, it also provides a service to those people in the community who are more orientated towards traditional forms of religious thought and praxis. On this point it is pertinent to note that both Kiernan and West have insisted that the leaders of the majority of the Zionists Churches they worked with did not appear to be driven by desire for personal enrichment, and that these were congregations of the poor who strove to assist all members in the church against the depredations of the outside world (Kiernan, 1974, 1977; West, 1975a).

Although we were never privy to the actual dreams or claimed spiritual revelations that directed Baba to join with the branch of the Zionist Church, as he never made their details public, one can deduce that, whether there truly was a revelation or not, it was a strategy which he hoped would bring him further prestige and respectability. While it worked initially, it ultimately failed due to the inconsistencies that arose regarding his role as both prophet and leader in the church, and his role as isangoma. There is no doubt that the situation was aggravated by the breaches in his moral behaviour that were becoming evident in his handling of his more secular affairs, and threw doubt on the
source of his spiritual power, which I have discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

The Zionist Churches that I have encountered in my fieldwork definitely claim to work in tandem with the ancestors, and to be guided by dreams. Johannes, who fully endorsed the need for ritual sacrifice to one’s own ancestors, made this very clear to me. His efforts to assist me in communicating more directly with the ancestors persist, as I await dreams for more information. Interestingly, although he prefers to avoid the use of herbal medicine, Johannes has told me that if I am shown plants to use in my dreams (which I have been), then I can continue to use those. While the use of plants based on dream directions may be permitted, the Zionist Churches tend to avoid the use of plant based *muti*. This is probably linked to the general disdain for the pervasive use of *muti* for sorcery in contemporary society, and concomitant breakdown of moral order. It also emerges from the fear regarding the ambivalence of a diviner’s power and the pervasive uncertainty of their motives and their source of power in this era where the desire for individual accumulation of wealth is on the increase. Despite this, suspicions on the use of *mamlambo* can extend even to the leaders or ‘prophets’ of certain churches. I have encountered a number of such rumours and suspicions in my research, both in KwaZulu-Natal and in the Eastern Cape. Even at the time of his research Sundkler encountered such speculation, when he described the rise and fall of a particular famous Zulu prophet, a Mr X., who it was claimed got his power from *umamlambo* “who visited him every morning in the form of a snake, in order to lick his body” (Sundkler, 1961: 113).

It is also worthwhile considering whether the rise of Zionist prophets may be a reversion to an older form of order that previously prevailed in Zulu society, where a diviner’s scope of practice was limited largely to divination rather than to the dealing and dispensing of medicines that is now, for economic reasons, the predominant practice. Diviners in the past, following divination, would rather refer their clients to reputable

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35 I have also participated in a number of sacrificial rituals and cleansing ceremonies performed for the benefit of Zanele’s family under the auspices of the Church of the Nazarites (also called the Shembe Church), of which the details, unfortunately due to lack of space cannot be included in this thesis. However, even in these rituals plant materials were occasionally used.
herbalists for treatment (Jolles and Jolles, 2000). This brings us to the phrases employed by Sundkler and Kiernan regarding the question of “New Wine in Old Wineskins” (Sundkler, 1961: 238) or “Old Wine in New Wineskins” (Kiernan, 1975). To what degree is this blending of religious ideas a reshaping of Zulu ideas into Christian thought, or Christian ideas into Zulu thought? I suspect that Bishop John William Colenso, an early Christian missionary among the Zulu, would have supported the latter. It was his opinion, after many years of working with the Zulu, that they were the closest living representation of the ancient Israelites who still held the “basic elements of an original revealed religion” (Chidester, 1996: 140). It was such a ‘preposterous’ idea that led to him being charged for heresy, albeit unsuccessfully, by the Anglican Church in 1862 (ibid). However, whether Colenso was right or not, the Old Testament certainly rings true for many Zulu people as it confirms the validity of their traditional practices, as do the healing activities of John the Baptist.
CHAPTER 9
ROCK ART, RAIN-MAKING AND TRANCE:
DEBATING SAN AND KHOEKHOE LINKS

This chapter is dedicated to Joy Owen who assisted me in my search and is inspired to write beautiful poetry:

The Ancient Ones speak in the land of Mama Afrika.
Through a whisper of lullabies in the reeds;
In the soft caress of the wind
And the light spray of cascading waterfalls on the skin.
They speak of a time
When unity was known,
Not contemplated,
When all life was one, divisible not even by natural order.
They speak of a time
When love was known and held sacred.
And when the beauty of the universe existed in the intimacy of soul mates.

They speak daily,
Are you listening? Joy Owen, 2004

9.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I focus on the Khoisan, their rock art that could be linked to the water divinity complex, especially with regard to rain-making and healing, and the possible transmission of ideas and practices (level 4 of the model I have proposed) between them and the Nguni-speakers. This will also serve as a useful example to demonstrate the complex problems in trying to determine the directions in which knowledge regarding the water divinities may have flowed between these two groups.

I commence the chapter with a vivid dream that I had in 2004 that ultimately led me to the Doring River in the Western Cape, an area that is populated predominantly by ‘coloured’ Afrikaans-speaking people largely of Khoekhoe and San (/Xam) extraction. This dream and my subsequent interviews with a number of informants in the area will serve as a useful introduction to the current debates amongst archaeologists, anthropologists and rock art
scholars that centre on the shamanistic approach to understanding San rock art in the region. These debates are mainly concerned with the claim put forward by David Lewis-Williams (a respected archaeologist and rock art expert) that certain San rock art scenes were depictions of the sensations (i.e. the sense of being underwater) and images that were experienced during the trance states of San ‘shamans’. Other issues that will be briefly considered are the current mermaid/swift debate regarding certain images depicted in rock-art in the south-east Cape region, as well as the debates surrounding the degree of cross-cultural influence and borrowing of ideas between the agro-pastoralist Nguni–speakers and the San/Khoekhoe groups. These debates will also throw additional light onto the pervasiveness and nature of the beliefs regarding the water divinities across the southern African region.

9.2 San origins and the rock art debates

9.2.1 The Doring River dream – 9th February 2004

In the dream I was seated in the front of a truck with my sister and brother and we were driving along a dirt road. I was very clearly shown the type of vegetation, which was typical Karoo veld, with its short tufts of wheat coloured grass and small scrubby shrubs and the general feeling of dryness of the soil. Suddenly we came to the edge of the plateau we were driving along and the beautiful vistas of distant hills and valleys opened out in the view before us. It felt like we were at the top of an escarpment or pass, and I remember coming to a screeching halt in the car because it felt like we were about to go over the edge, and I was relieved that I was able to stop in time. As we sat in awe of the beautiful view before us, I then saw that the road veered slightly to the right, as it dropped down into the valley. I felt it was safe to continue our journey and we started to descend slowly down the steep rocky track. On our left was a sheer drop and I drove carefully, hugging the right hand side of the road. In the distance I could see a large river meandering, but it did not seem to have much water in it. We then found ourselves in the valley and we had stopped at a small isolated farmhouse. I then found I was inside the house and was aware of the presence of its owners who were a middle-aged white Afrikaans couple. I noticed in particular the man, as he sat in a chair in the corner of a dark room, and looked at me with a serious face. The next moment I felt I was outside again and had stepped straight into some deep water in a river. I was able to grab hold of a rope and swing myself across to the water’s edge. I noticed the old man just sitting watching me, fairly unconcerned. I threw the rope to my sister and saw that my brother (who in real life is a keen ornithologist) was already on the other side of the river watching birds through his binoculars amongst thorn trees. I then found myself in the courtyard of the house and saw a woman standing next to a sculpture of a mermaid. I was aware she was using it as an attraction for tourists to come and visit the area. Suddenly a woman with a mermaid tail went past me, her tail flapping the ground. As I looked up I saw a small distinctly shaped hill, not far from the river, rising up out of the valley.
against which was a group of about six to ten modestly sized houses. I asked the lady where I was and she told me "You are on the road to XX". I awoke with the name reverberating in my mind.

Awaking from the dream, I immediately went to consult my South African atlas. I looked for the name of the place the lady told me in the index (I was not familiar with the name), and found a place of that name with the map reference. Turning to the correct page I discovered the place was on the Doring River, in the Western Cape, in a region north of the Cederberg Mountains. I noticed there were a number of passes and escarpments marked in the area and thought that I needed to follow-up on the dream and see if the place was anything like what I was shown. This was a region of South Africa I had never been to, but as I had heard about the beauty of the Cederberg Mountains, I decided to persuade my family to accompany me in search of my dream site during our Christmas vacation that year. I made a point of telling them my dream in great detail so they could be my witness should we find the place that fitted my description, and in early January the following year we took ourselves off for a camping trip to the Cederberg. Accompanying me were my brother and sister who were with me in the dream, my sister’s two sons, my two younger children and a couple of their friends. We got our rewards, not only in being able to appreciate the mystical landscape of the Cederberg, which were the popular hunting grounds of the San (Parkington, 2001, 2003), and abounded in their rock art, but in discovering my dream site. It was exactly as I described, in terms of the scenery, the pass, the river valley, the single farmhouse and the special shaped hill along which was grouped a number of small labourers’ cottages. Unfortunately, not one of us in our party could speak Afrikaans, the local lingua franca, to find out if there were any stories relating to mermaids in the area. All our efforts to communicate with the local ‘coloured’ people living in the area came to nought. I was reluctant to go and knock on the farmer’s door, as I feared, quite rightly, he would think I was mad if I told him that I had been shown his house in a dream. I was happy enough to know that I had found what I regarded as the right place and my brother kindly accompanied me back to the river site at dawn the next day in order that I could do a small ritual. After getting some directions on the best approach to the river (through gesticulations and smiles) from a kind ‘coloured’ lady, who lived at the end of the row of the worker’s cottages (that had appeared to me in my dream), we walked

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1 I prefer not to give the name to protect the area from those who may try to track such sites down.
someway down the river from the road-bridge to a large pool surrounded with reeds, which I felt had all the right properties favoured by the water divinities. I did a small ritual offering at the water’s edge (I lit candles, imphepho and offered white beads and silver coins to the water) to thank my ancestors for showing me the place in my dream, and to let them know I had found it. While I did the ritual my brother went up to explore in the cliffs and overhangs above the pool, as I had suggested to him that he might find some rock art in the area. Sure enough, he soon called me to join him at a small overhang that overlooked the pool, as he had found some rock art. The image, which was quite faint, consisted of people running, seemingly pulling the water-bull, or rain animal, behind them. It was much like the one depicted in Orpen’s copy of the Mangolong/Sehonghong rain-animal scene (Lewis-Williams, 2003: 64; see figure 10). From my familiarity with current archaeological interpretations of rock art, I surmised this cave and pool complex could be a /Xam rain-making site (see Section 9.2.5).

After our return to Grahamstown, I decided I had to follow-up as soon as I could with a return visit with someone who could act as an interpreter for me to interview the local residents of the area. I was keen to discover if there were any local stories regarding mermaids in the area, as a mermaid had featured in my dream. Fortuitously, I discovered that Joy Owen, my friend and colleague in the department, was still in Cape Town undertaking some research. As she could speak Afrikaans, and was of ‘coloured’ extraction, I realised she would be perfect to take with me. She kindly agreed to assist me and a month later, in fluid sapping forty degree heat, I was back at the dream-site, this time accompanied by Joy.

We decided to start off our search at the labourers’ cottages, and I suggested we should drive to the end house where the kind lady, who had assisted me on my previous visit, lived. After stopping at the cottage, and with Joy leading the way, we walked around to the back door, and I was pleased to see the lady who had assisted me, sweeping her back stoep. There was a man sitting on a chair in the shade. Joy did most of the communication and then very kindly wrote it all down for me, so I will use her words (in a slightly abridged version) to describe the encounter and the information we obtained. [Note: My comments are inserted in square

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2 This is what Zanele has told me to do when I find the correct place shown in a dream.
“Tannie kan ons miskien met tannie praat?” (Auntie, could we perhaps speak to you?), I asked. The lady came towards us in a very open manner. Penny asked if she recognised her, and when I indicated that Penny had been here in January, she smiled and nodded her head enthusiastically in recognition, saying that she had directed her towards the river.

I explained intermittently what Penny was doing, and they [the lady and her husband] demonstrated particular interest when I noted Penny had been led by her dream to this site on the Doring River. The lady and her husband, who was still sitting a bit removed on his chair, didn’t change their demeanour – if anything they became more open. When I had asked if the lady [I will call her Susannah] knew any stories about the Water Snake or the mermaid, she called her husband over [I will call him Jacob]. He indicated that most of the people in the community were young and so would not know anything. But the older folk might have some stories. When I again asked Jacob if he had heard anything about the Water Snake or the mermaid [he later told us he was 59 years old], he ‘opened up’, and said that as children they had been told stories to scare them away from the river. But he remembered that when they lived on the other side of the river, they would often see a white light on the river. When this happened, people said that the Water Snake with the diamond was about, and this was confirmed when one heard the sound of lowing cows and other cattle. Yet everyone knew that their own cattle were not down by the river. Also, he was told that one could steal the light, and to do this you would have to throw a cow onto the light [Joy reflects that he could have meant cow dung3]. Once you had the light, a wind came up and you had to be very strong to withstand it. When the wind died down, you knew that it (the Water Snake) would not return.

Penny encouraged me to re-iterate the question about the mermaid [as that was what was so clear in the dream]. And so I asked Jacob again. He then reported an incident he had experienced. Part of his job was to take care of the water pipes and as per usual he had gone down to the river to check them. When he arrived near the pump he noticed a large yellow fish (about one metre in length) lying on the bank, outside of the water. He thought he should kill it, and so went to fetch his revolver in the truck [note, this must have been a very large fish if he thought he needed a revolver to kill it!]. When he returned the fish ‘dove’ into the water, rather than sliding into the water. He was adamant that it had a rather flat face. He folded his hands, with his thumbs in, and placed them side-by-side to indicate the shape of the face. He re-iterated the flatness of the face by saying that ordinary fish had ‘beaks’ and this one didn’t. Once the fish, which he referred to in passing as the ‘waterbaas’ (water ‘boss’), had dived into the river, a troublesome wind came up which forced the reeds on the side of the bridge that he was standing to bend over flat. When he returned to the pipes, the bearings/seals had been broken off in the wind. He noticed that on the other side of the bridge there was no wind.

At times I found myself turning and looking at the river in the distance – it seemed particularly blue and

3 Hoff mentions that in order for healers (t!G!\text{ten}) to obtain the stone from the Water Snake’s forehead, they would ‘tame’ the Snake by covering the stone with cow dung, clay or ‘blue mud’ (Hoff, 2007: 16).
shimmered in the distance. When I asked Jacob about his experience with the waterbaas he indicated that it was very near to the curve of the river - near a deep pool of water. [This was in all likelihood the pool where I did my ritual and where the rock painting was situated. As this was all he could tell us we thanked them for their help and prepared to leave. Jacob suggested to us that there was an old ‘coloured’ gentleman, called Oupa (grandfather), who knew a lot more stories. He had been a shepherd all his life in the valley, as his father had been before him. He was by all accounts, a popular raconteur. I then enquired about whether the white farmer who lived in the farm-house (also shown in the dream) was approachable, and they confirmed he was, and it was worth speaking to him. He would also be able to direct us to Oupa. Again, in an abridged version, I will let Joy continue the story).

Penny and I drove to the farmer’s house. Again Penny noted some apprehension, especially given that the white farmer might look askance at us if we were to arrive asking about giant water snakes and mermaids. We arrived at the farm house and were greeted by two dogs. When we got to the door, we knocked and a large elderly white man, wearing a white vest, shorts and socks, opened the door [in his appearance and demeanour he was very like the man I had seen in my dream]. A young ‘coloured’ boy stood at his side [we were later to discover he was an adopted son]. I told him we had just been visiting Susannah and Jacob and they had suggested we come and talk to him about our interests. A younger dark-haired lady [his daughter] also came to the door and they invited us into the house. [After some time of chatting about various things, we explained the purpose of our visit. I thought it wise not to mention anything about my dreams, so we merely said we were anthropologists who were researching stories about the Snake and the mermaid in the area. I was surprised Mr K did not react with the disbelief often encountered amongst white South Africans when broaching such a topic, but seemed to think it was a perfectly valid enquiry. What is more he seemed to believe they existed].

Mr K. mentioned that there were a number of stories afoot in the community regarding the mermaid and a big snake, and that often as a child he had also been told such stories to scare him away from the river. [He clearly seemed to believe that mermaids existed, and to have given some thought about how they came to be, prior to our visit]. Mr K was of the opinion that there could be ‘an animal’ that ‘looked like a human and a fish’, as he had seen foetuses of animals that resembled humans. He commented that he felt that as men swam in water it was possible that [they may ejaculate into the water and] their semen could fertilise fish eggs, resulting in offspring that would be human and fish-like. In reference to the ‘mermaid’ he also used the term ‘waterbaas’ - reminiscent of Jacob’s reference too. [Although this ‘natural’ explanation for the existence of mermaids seemed fairly implausible I was particularly struck by his apparent conviction that they did exist and that some sort of explanation was needed to account for this. After more conversation about his family living in the area since the 1950s, we asked him if he would be able to direct us to Oupa, to which he kindly agreed]. Without putting on his shoes, but still wearing his socks, he got into his truck and pulled off leaving a trail of dust behind him. When we eventually caught up with him, he had already pulled alongside Oupa’s house, a small white rectangular cottage, and was talking to Oupa about our visit.

[As we pulled up Mr K then waved goodbye and took his leave of us. Joy went to introduce herself and
explained that we were researchers from Rhodes University and were studying stories on the mermaids and the Snake, and that Susannah and Jacob had suggested we speak to him. He was a delightful old man with a weather beaten face, etched in smile creases and had distinct features that reminded me of the portraits I had seen of //Kabbo, one of the //Xam informants, who had assisted Wilhem Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in their research of the Cape San (Bennum, 2004). His wife was a fairly short and round lady, but with an equally open-faced and friendly manner, and she sat with him for the duration of the interview. Joy continues...].

I asked him if he knew any stories, and he replied “The Water Snake? No.” As he had not said that he did not know any stories about the mermaid, I suspected that he did, and would soon fall into talking about it. He seemed particularly hesitant to talk though – I wondered if he wasn’t questioning the reason why Penny, as a white woman, would be interested in such stories. [At this point I suggested to Joy to tell them about my initiation as an isangoma and my dreams and having been led there. When she did, I noticed how his wife, Ouma, had beamed an enormous self-satisfied smile, and puffed out her chest, as if saying, “So you see we are not mad. Even a white woman can experience this!” Through her body language and his responses to us, it was evident that Ouma was the one who seemed to give him ‘permission to speak’. Joy continues...]

I pushed him a little, and asked yet again if he hadn’t heard anything about the Water Snake. Tentatively he offered that the old people had told him some stories, but that they were only ‘bang-maak’ (fear-provoking, literally ‘make scared’) stories. Again I ‘pushed’ him asking: “So what were these stories?” [Joy commented that it felt like they were having a teasing or sparring game]. He told me that as a child he had lived upstream, and they were often told not to go to the water. I asked him why, and he gave a rather mischievous grin, as if he was wondering whether he should tell me or not. His wife, looked on at him encouragingly [beaming her smile at us], and he intimated that he was told as a child not to go to the river, because there was a large snake there. I asked him what kind of snake, and he said a snake that lives in the river. I asked him why they were warned, and he told me that it was said that the Snake would take you under the water, into a room below the water. I translated for Penny, and intrigued by the ‘room’, she asked if anyone had been taken in the area. As I was about to ask him, he tried to rationalise a little, and said that of course the Snake had to live somewhere, when not seen during the day. Therefore it made absolute sense that he would have a room below the water. I then asked Penny’s question and he said no, they had never heard of anyone being taken under water. I pressed him a little and asked if there were any medicine-men, or ‘sangomas’ around [I suspected that in the way they responded to the question, one of them could have been]. Again both he and his wife had mischievous grins on their faces, but he said, “No, there are no medicine men here” [he added there was only the white doctor].

Penny wanted to know if he knew anything about herbs, so I asked him if there wasn’t a single person in the area who didn’t know something about plants, like buchu for instance. Again, he gave his enigmatic smile [Joy specifically mentioned buchu because she was familiar with stories about it when she grew up]. His response was that buchu did not grow in the area. Rather it was rooibos, which was exported all over the world and used
for many purposes other than tea.

I asked Oupa if there was anything special about the Water Snake, like a diamond on his head, and he said he wouldn't know (showing some reticence). Ouma realized Oupa's reluctance and she started to tell me that she had often seen a shimmering light on the opposite mountain — as if the entire mountain was lit up. She explained that when this happened, then often it would rain within the next three days of the sighting. After she said this, Oupa needed no further encouragement [as his wife seemed to indicate it was alright to talk to us]. He then said that the light was very similar to the sun shining on a mirror, and that it was rather peculiar, as it would just appear. The coming of the rain within the next few days, seemed directly linked to the appearance of the Water Snake. As a result, he concluded, the appearance of the Water Snake was a forewarning of the rain that would come, so that people would be prepared for it. He commented that the rain had been a long time coming in the recent past, and that they were experiencing a very bad drought. I asked him the last time it had rained, and he responded “Not in the last two to three years”. I then asked him when the last sighting of the light on the mountain was, and Ouma responded, saying it was about two to three years ago, just before they had moved to their current house. She noted that they used to live upstream.

Oupa spoke a little about the drought, saying that it was one of the worst yet, and that it felt as if “God closed his hand” (God het sy hand toegemaak). I found this comment particularly stirring, for despite the story of the Water Snake and it’s forewarning of rain, the two ‘belief systems’ didn’t seem incongruous — the belief in God, and the sighting of the light of the Water Snake. When I asked Oupa how they referred to the Water Snake, he said that they sometimes said it looked like the ‘walerbaas’ [i.e. a flat-faced fish). When I returned to the question of the mermaid, he said that they had not heard anything about mermaids. But, as if our questioning had jogged his memory, he then recounted an experience of his own, when he claimed he had encountered the Water Snake and its light. He stated that he had been walking home along the river one night, when he saw a light amongst the reeds. As he neared the particular area where he had observed the light, the light moved around as if someone was walking with a torch, and yet (as it was in the reeds) it must have been the Water Snake as it was feeding. He recounted that when he reached the point where he had seen the light, it disappeared. He walked as wide a berth as possible, and the next day, rather curious about what he had seen, he went to investigate. What he found was a ‘pol’. A ‘pol’, he noted, was a circle of reeds, with water in the middle. He said that as a result of the lack of rainfall there was little water on the outside of the reeds. When he looked inside the ‘circle of reeds’ he saw a deep hole filled with water, and in the midst stood a ‘willerhout’ tree. When I asked him if a willerhout tree was a willow tree, he said he didn’t know what the English word for it was. He said the diameter of the tree was wide, and that it blossomed with yellow flowers in the spring. For some reason, Oupa was tremendously disturbed by the sighting of the deep pool and the tree, and he said he beat a hasty retreat from the spot. (Interview conducted by Joy Owen – 5 February 2005). [A little while after he told us this story a young woman came out of the house, and on hearing what the conversation was about, confirmed that a number of people in the neighbourhood had reported seeing the ‘waterbaas’ or mermaid when crossing the bridge near to where the pump was located].

While this single set of interviews can never attain the same insights that more long-term
participatory research in the area would provide, I believe it does add some very useful information nonetheless. It was quite clear from the three sets of independent interviews, where, although each informant had his/her own unique encounters or perspectives to share, that there was a high degree of corroboration and consistency, not only amongst themselves but also with documented reports, regarding the Water Snake by scholars of Khoekhoe and /Xam beliefs (Hoff, 1997, 1998, 2007; Lange et al, 2007; Schmidt, 1998. See also Chapter Three). We were also struck by how the local informants responded to our revelation of my dreams (I never told Mr K). Whereas there had initially been some hesitancy on the part of Oupa to talk on the subject, he definitely opened up on hearing that I was approaching the subject from a more personal and experiential perspective. This was most evident in Ouma’s reaction, as she looked excited enough ‘to burst’.

However, there were far more obvious similarities to the descriptions I have already given regarding the shared cross-cultural elements of the water divinities (the Snake and the mermaid) in this thesis. In summary, claims made are as follows:

- All three informants were aware of stories about the Water Snake that resided in the local river and these had been told to them when they were children to scare them away from the river. This suggests that they were long-standing stories in the area, and were also a practical and effective way of reducing the risk of their children drowning⁴.
- Both of the ‘Khoe’ informants associated the Snake with having a bright light, like a diamond or a light reflecting off a mirror. This concurs with all reports found throughout southern Africa regarding the mystical Water Snake (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.2.1).
- Jacob mentioned that the light, which emitted from a diamond in the Snake’s forehead, could be stolen by trickery (probably by throwing cow dung at the Snake’s head). This concurs with similar reports by Hoff (1997, 2007) and Schmidt (1998), and in some instances the aromatic buchu plant is used⁵.

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⁴ Note that when Mary Lange suggested to her informants that such stories were merely a practical way “to keep the children and people away from the river” to avoid drowning (Lange et al, 2007: 8) the response was “No, Miss Mary these stories of the Water Snake are not to scare, they are the truth” (ibid).

⁵ Nana, one of Lange’s main informants (Lange et al, 2007: 36-39), gave a detailed account of how a white farmer had allegedly tried to steal the “crown of diamonds” from the snake’s head with the help of one of his farm laborer’s one evening while the snake ‘grazed’ at the river.
Jacob also mentioned the fact that when they saw the light down at the river at night they could hear the sound of cattle. This concurs with similar reports found amongst the Cape Nguni (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.4.2).

- Offending the Snake or 'waterbaas' can lead to its anger, resulting in a strong wind. This was related to the stories about stealing the diamond and Jacob’s own experience when he attempted to shoot the ‘waterbaas’. A similar account was given to Lange by her informant Nana, of the strong wind and rain that suddenly came up after a white farmer had allegedly tried to steal the diamond crown of the Water Snake with the assistance of one of his laborers (Lange et al., 2007: 36-39).

- Both Jacob and Oupa connected the Snake and/or waterbaas (which Oupa said could be one and the same creature) with deep pools, reeds and, in Oupa’s case, with the willow tree. These concur with reports found throughout southern Africa, but especially amongst the Cape Nguni (see Chapter Five).

- Significantly, Oupa said that the Snake could take humans underwater ‘into a room’ below. The use of the term ‘room’ suggests a dry place to stay, which concurs with reports throughout southern Africa that these beings reside in a dry place underwater.

- The light from the Snake is usually only seen at night near the river, but could also been seen on the mountains during the day, a few days prior to it raining. Oupa and Ouma linked the appearance of the snake with rain, and its absence with drought. Again, this emphasises the association of these water creatures with rain, which are common themes found throughout southern Africa. The discovery of a rain-bull painting above the pool where both Jacob and Oupa claim to have seen the light from the Snake emanating (and where I did my offering) also connects to this theme of rain.

I am still not certain why I had this particular dream since, as far as I am aware, I have no historical connections with the area. Its significance seems to lie in the fact that, as my dream accurately showed, this particular stretch of the Doring River is also associated with the mermaid and the Snake (or water divinity complex). Our interviews clearly demonstrated that local residents have not only heard about such ‘creatures’ inhabiting the river, but could recount what they claimed as their own personal encounters with them. This raises the question of how we are to understand the status of such experiences, which are claimed by people who are not called to be diviners, and not necessarily in a trance state – and whose
experiences display a remarkable similarity across different cultures in southern Africa.

This is not the only site my dreams have led me to that has a San or Khoekhoe connection. The pool on the Inxu River where I had to do the important ritual following the cow sacrifice in Zimbabwe has a significant connection to the San of the south eastern Drakensberg. It was this site on the Inxu River where, in my dream, I had encountered the giant Snake that emitted the blinding light from its eyes that caused me to pass out in the dream (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.2). The caves associated with the pool, and another just upstream from it (Ngcengane cave), abound with rock art and are reputed to have been the last residences of the cave-dwelling San in the area (Prins, 1996), before they were largely exterminated by the colonialists, and their remnants were forced to assimilate with the local Nguni-speaking groups. A few of the remaining San descendents in the region of the Inxu River cave/pool sites have provided rock art scholars with valuable insights into local San history, their relations with the pastoralist Mpondomise, and the link between the San rock art and local beliefs of the Snake (ichanti) and the abantu bomlambo (to be discussed further in this chapter). It is also regarded as an important San rain-making site. As I was unaware at the time of my dream (in which I encountered the Snake), and during its subsequent discovery, that this pool was the same that Jolly, Lewis-Williams and Prins had already done some research at, I was able to approach the community from a different perspective to these prior scholars. The significance of this site, which I discuss in more detail in Section 9.2.5 of this chapter, is that it has provided evidence for some of the key arguments in rock art scholarship today.

9.2.2 Evidence of the water divinity complex associated with San rock art

In 1980 archaeologist and rock-art specialist, David Lewis-Williams (1980), put forward a hypothesis that was to revolutionise the way the San rock art in southern Africa was interpreted. This was his so-called ‘trance hypothesis’ that argued that much of the rock art

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6 There is another site that I have found relating to a dream that is linked to a rock-engraving site situated close to a waterfall in the Lydenburg district of Mpumulanga Province. As the dream/s and its eventual discovery some years later were quite complicated I will not elaborate on them in this thesis.

7 Prins calls the pool Qoposini, while I was told it was called Gxubuse.
depicted on the cave walls and overhangs in southern Africa could only be understood in the context of San spirituality and were depictions of what the painter, usually a San medicine man/shaman, experienced while in a state of trance. He proposed that the San style of dancing that is still practiced in the western Kalahari to this day usually induced the trance state. Having emerged from the trance the shaman would then paint the images on the cave walls in order to share his experiences with his fellows.

In 1988 Lewis-Williams and Dowson drew on the findings of neuropsychologists to provide the scientific explanation for the trance hypothesis. Using evidence obtained from trance states induced under laboratory conditions, usually through the administration of hallucinogenic substances (such as mescaline and LSD), they argued that the three progressive stages of trance produce visual effects that resemble many of the images depicted in rock art (Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1988: 201-206). While the visual effects experienced during the first stage of trance are usually dominated by geometric, spiral and linear images (entoptic8 phenomena), it is usually during the later two stages where subjects begin to experience sensations of flying, penetrating the earth, rocks, water etc, transforming into animals and encountering spirit beings, monsters and, frequently, snakes. These experiences have such a sense of reality to them that “Instead of saying their visions are like, say, snakes, they say they are snakes” (Lewis-Williams, 1990: 57, his emphasis) and “the subject inhabits rather than merely witnesses a bizarre hallucinatory world” (Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1988: 211). The authors refer to this sensation as that of ‘participation’. It is especially during the second and third stages when the sense of participation is at its height that these visual effects are made meaningful within the cultural context (Lewis-Williams, 1990: 61).

Although this hypothesis has had its detractors, Lewis-Williams and other scholars have further refined and developed his ideas to counter, or to try and accommodate these (Lewis-Williams, 1980, 1982, 1990, 2006: Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 1989, 1994; Lewis-

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8 The concept of entoptic phenomena was derived from Tyler (1978) and refers to “visual sensations derived from the structure of the optic system anywhere from the eyeball to the cortex” (Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1988: 202). These visual effects usually involve lights that shimmer, move, rotate or pulsate and often assume geometric shapes (i.e. grids, zigzags, dots and spirals). Depending on where the visual stimulation originates in the ocular system there are two different classes of entoptic phenomena, namely, phosphenes and form constants (ibid: 202). Entoptic phenomena, which occur in all three stages but dominate stage one, are to be distinguished from hallucinations, which occur in the later stages (ibid).
Williams, D. & Pearce, D. 2004). The ‘shamanic’ or trance interpretive approach still enjoys support amongst many scholars and it has had a marked influence on the course and direction which rock research has taken over the intervening years.

Perhaps what were most significant about his findings in respect of this thesis were the particular rock art scenes and the supporting ‘ethnographic’ evidence that he used to put forward his arguments. One scene was the famous Ezeljagpoort ‘mermaid’ painting that is located near the Outeniqua mountain range of Western Cape Province in South Africa (see figure 10 below).

![Fig. 10. The Ezeljagpoort ‘mermaid’ panel – copy by Dowson, T.A. 1988.](image)

This panel with its images of an ‘amphibious’ nature has, according to Lewis-Williams “become one of the best-known and most debated of southern African rock painting” (Lewis-Williams, 1990: 8). I will return to evaluate Lewis-William’s arguments and the more recent interpretations of these paintings in the light of my own experiences and data further in the chapter.

The other, perhaps more significant paintings in terms of his arguments, were from the Melikan and Mangolong (later termed Selonghong) shelters situated in the southern Lesotho highlands (see figures 11 & 12).
Lewis-Williams promoted the principle of applying local ‘ethnographic’ exegesis to get an understanding of what these scenes may mean to those who practiced the art – that is from San rock artists themselves. Unfortunately, as the last remnants of the San painters died out at the turn of the twentieth century, he had to draw information from historical ‘ethnographic’ records obtained from San informants during the 1870s. The most important source in relation to the Melikane and Mangolong paintings came from the writings of Joseph Orpen, the appointed British Resident of the territory referred to as Nomansland, and what was to become known as East Griqualand. He was also a keen amateur rock art enthusiast. During an assignment into the Maluti Mountains in search of the fugitive Chief Langalibalele of the amaHlubi tribe, Orpen befriended his San guide, a man by the name of Qing, who was able to assist in the interpreting of some of the rock art they encountered during their trek across the mountains. Orpen also drew copies of the paintings and, along with Qing’s exegesis, sent
these to be published in the Cape Monthly Magazine (Orpen, 1874). The editor of the magazine subsequently forwarded the illustrations on to the two well known experts and scholars of San language and customs, Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd.

Bleek was an expert linguist from Prussia, who had taken into his care a number of /Xam ex-convicts who were to live for intermittent periods at his family home in Cape Town over a period of eighteen years. During this period Bleek, Lucy Lloyd, and later Bleek’s daughter Dorothea Bleek, were able to compile an extensive orthography and literature of the /Xam language and customs with the assistance of the likes of //Kabbo, /Hanǂkass’o and Dialkwain, the latter two who assisted in the interpretation of Orpen’s copies of the Mangolong and Malikane paintings. Although these informants came from the /Xam group located some six hundred kilometres west of the Lesotho cave paintings, their religious ideas were regarded by Lewis-Williams as being representative of a commonly shared pan-San thought system. It should be noted that it is this assumption that has attracted a significant amount of critique (Jolly, 1996; Helvenston & Bahn, 2002, 2003, 2004; le Quellac, 2004; Solomon, 2006a & b), which I will return to later in this chapter.

9.2.3 The Mangolong (Sehonghong) and Melikane paintings

Much to Orpen’s surprise, in one painting from Mangolong/Sehonghong depicting men leading a “rain bull” with a thong (see figure 11), Qing identified the animal as a snake. Although the animal clearly had a bovine or large bush pig appearance, and not the shape of a snake, Qing was quite clear in stating “That animal which the men are catching is a snake(!)” (Orpen, 1874:10 - Orpen’s parenthetical exclamation mark). Orpen then paraphrases Qing, who continues to explain the scene:

They are holding out charms to it, and catching it with a long riem (thong). They are all under water, and those strokes are things growing under water. They are people spoilt⁹ by the (Moqoma) dance, because their noses bleed. Cagn¹⁰ gave us the song of

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⁹ Using Megan Bieseles’s understanding of a similar concept from the !Kung San of the Kalahari, the use of the term ‘spoilt’ is translated by Lewis-Williams as meaning “to enter deep trance” (Lewis-Williams, 2003: 35).

¹⁰ Cagn or /Kagen is the name of the San creator or trickster deity who was sometimes represented as the mantis, but could also manifest as a snake, an eland, a hare or an eagle. He is described as “an ambiguous being who could be beneficent but who also tricked and deceived people” (Lewis-Williams, 2003: 43).
this dance, and told us to dance it, and people would die from it, and he would give charms to raise them again (cited in Lewis-Williams, 1990: 52).
Some fall down; some become as if mad and sick; blood runs from the noses of others whose charms are weak, and they eat charm medicine, in which there is burnt snake powder. When a man is sick this dance is danced round him, and the dancers put both hands under their arm-pits, and press their hands on him, and when he coughs the initiated put out their hands and receive what has injured him — secret things (Orpen, 1894: 10, cited in Lewis-Williams, 1980: 471).

The above explanation of Qing clearly links the activities depicted as having something to do with trance and healing, but it also suggests that the 'snake', which is underwater, has something to do with the healing process. In the above extracts Qing does not emphasise that the scene depicts a rain-making exercise but, as Lewis-Williams explains, this could have been due to the multiple translation process (which was through three different languages11) and the way Orpen transcribed the information, which he clearly found quite incomprehensible in terms of its explanatory content. However, Dia!kwain, one of Bleek's informants, was of the opinion that the scene depicted the activities of rain-control specialists who were involved in rain-making:

The paintings from the cave Mangolong represent rainmaking. We see here a water thing, or water cow, which in the lower part, is discovered by a Bushman, behind whom a Bushwoman stands. This Bushman then beckons to others to come and help him. They then charm the animal, and attach a rope to its nose — and in the upper part of the picture it is shown as led by the Bushmen, who desire to lead it over as large a tract of country as they can, in order that the rain should extend as far as possible — their superstition being that wherever this animal goes, rain will fall. The strokes indicate rain. Of the Bushmen who drag the water cow, two are men (sorcerers), of whom the chief one is nearest the animal. In their hands are boxes made of tortoise (!khu) shell (containing charmed boocchoo12) from which strings, perhaps ornamented with beads, are dangling down. These are said to be of Kafir13 manufacture. The two men are preceded by two Bushwomen, of whom one wears a cap on her head (Bleek, 1874: 12 cited in Lewis-Williams, 1980: 469).

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11 Qing was able to speak his own San language and that of his Sotho overlords, the Phuthi. As the Phuthi were descended from the Sotho, amaZizi (originally a northern Natal Nguni clan), and San through intermarriage their language siPhuthi was a hybrid mixture of these. The exegesis was done in siPhuthi and this would then have to be translated into English (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004: 21; see also Jolly, 1995).

12 i.e. buchu

13 i.e. Bantu
Lewis-Williams suggested that the use of the term ‘snake’ and rain or water ‘cow’ refer to the same entity and that these are alternative terms used to depict the personification of the ‘Rain’s things’, which can also include other animals such as tortoises, fish, swallows and frogs (ibid: 470). Although Qing’s exegesis (see previous quote) does not make mention of rain or rain-making, the fact that he too described the activities as occurring ‘under water’, alerted Lewis-Williams to the fact that water was the connecting element, which he saw as a metaphor for the experience of trance and its use in the ‘capturing’ of rain or in healing (Lewis-Williams, 1980: 470).

A central argument of Lewis-Williams is that these enigmatic statements of both informants, and the painted images themselves, are metaphors used to describe various hallucinogenic experiences during trance: “The metaphors and beliefs which I have so far described suggest that the southern informants’ reports of ‘death’, journeys beneath the water and the capture of the fantastic rain-animal should all be seen as accounts of trance experience rather than other events” (1980: 473). Central to Lewis-Williams’s assumption is that the trance state, which originates in the psyche, provides an adequate explanation for the experiences claimed.

The water/rain theme also dominated the informants’ interpretation of the paintings from Melikane (see figure 11). Regarding the depictions of rhebok-headed people (therianthropes) Qing gave Orpen the following explanation: “They were men who had died and now lived in rivers...” (Orpen, 1874: 2, his emphasis, cited in Lewis-Williams, 1980: 473). Lewis-Williams again sees this statement as referring to the fact that these are medicine men who have undergone a metaphorical trance ‘death’ and experience the sensation of being underwater (ibid: 474-475). However, there has been some disagreement and debate over this interpretation with some scholars (see Jolly, 2002; Challis, 2005; Solomon, 1997, 2006a & b) arguing that these could also be depictions of therioanthropic spirit or mythical beings, or merely depictions of hunters wearing camouflage rhebok caps in order to fool and capture animals (which apparently was what Dialkwain’s interpretation suggested—see above). Beyond what the images may represent themselves, some scholars also argue for a more functional explanation, saying that they could have served the purposes of sympathetic magic in hunting (Prins, 1990).
In Bleek’s extract (cited in Lewis-Williams, 1980: 469 – see above), Dia!kwain also pointed to the human figures in both the Mangolong and Medikane paintings as being medicine men or sorcerers. A ‘sorcerer’ in this sense is not necessarily someone who engages in bad or negative activities, but someone who possesses special power and ability to work with medicines, healing and rain-making. In some of Bleek’s records, unrelated to the Orpen paintings, Dia!kwain claimed that when people wanted rain they would approach the rain sorcerer, the !kwa-ka !gi:xa; “This man, perhaps accompanied by apprentices, went at night to a waterhole where a rain-animal was known to live: “For it is not a thing that walks by day, but by night. They threw a noose over the animal’s horns and led it out of the water and up to a mountain top” (Bleek, 1933: 379 cited in Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004: 141). Although Bleek and Lloyd saw these statements as referring to mythological rather than real activities, Lewis-Williams saw them as expressions of trance experience and he later drew from ethnographic evidence from the !Kung San to support this. He cites in particular an old !Kung informant of Megan Biesele, described as a shaman, by the name of K’xau, who claimed how, when he was in trance, he entered into a water-hole or river, and travelled through into the earth before ultimately emerging to climb a thread into the sky where he encountered the spirits of the dead (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004:123). The question of whether these paintings, and many others like them, represent the experiences of San shamans while in a state of trance, or depictions of actual rituals that were performed, or whether they were referring to more general mythological beliefs held by the San, has led to extensive and heated debates amongst rock-art specialist over the last three decades (see especially Dowson, 2007; Lewis-Williams 1981, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2007; Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1999; Solomon, 1997, 1999, 2006a & b).

My arguments and evidence in this thesis point to a pervasive and underlying complex of ideas regarding certain individuals who claim to experience underwater submersion, encounter snakes and other creatures (which are linked to rain and water generation), and

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14 According to Bleek’s informants the /Xam identified four different types of ‘sorcerer’ or medicine men (which many scholars now refer to as ‘shamans’): these were curers of illness (i:gi:xa – sing; /gie!ten – pl.), hunting or game specialists, rain-making specialists (/khwa-ka /gi:ten) and those who used their powers to harm others (Lewis-Williams, 1980: 470).
attain special powers as diviners or 'sorcerers'. While not dismissing the possibility of the trance hypothesis, I suggest that it seems both possible and feasible that the statements obtained from the San informants arise from knowledge (both psychic-experiential and regional-historical) of the same complex.

An important question that requires further investigation is why only certain sites on the landscape have been chosen to depict these images, and what are the topographical and other natural features that characterise such sites? Such questions need to be framed within the religious or spiritual contexts of those who either painted the sites or who continue to use them for ritual purposes. Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004) have also pointed to the validity of such questions, particularly at rock art rain-making sites.

While numerous rain-animals are painted in large sites where there are many other paintings, ample living space and evidence of occupation, others are small overhangs that could not have been living sites. It seems possible that these were places to which rain-controllers repaired when they wished to make rain out of sight of their fellows. As such, they were probably believed to be invested with special rain-control potency and hence social importance. Images concentrated in sites that were not living areas may not have been seen by many people, but everyone would have been aware that the /khwa-ka !ge:ten (rain-making specialists) had their rain-animals in those locations. That was where they went to make rain out of sight of ordinary people (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004: 197-198).

The implicit assumption in the above statement by the authors is that the San believed that the rain-animals could exist independently of the hallucinogenic images that are created in the mind during trance, and are associated with certain areas in the landscape, often closely located to pools and caves where such rain-creatures are thought to reside. My own dream experience and subsequent finding of the pool where local informants independently verified encountering such creatures tied in with this. The painted rain-animal scene was located immediately above the pool in a small rock overhang which could never have served as a living space.

It is surprising how little reference has been made in the arguments by the key protagonists in these debates to Hofst's ethnographic evidence with contemporary /Xam descendants and their belief in the existence of the Water Snake (see Chapters Three and Four). Like Lewis-
Williams, who was of the conviction that the paintings of Melikane and Mangolong and their accompanying exegesis was predominantly in reference to shamanic skills in rain-making and its control, Hoff’s informants also directly associated the Water Snake with the rain-making activities:

The concept of the Water Snake as provider of rain and ground water is emphasised in the custom of the /Xam in the past of asking the Water Snake for rain or “working with the Water Snake” to obtain rain. A few /Xam informants referred to the former role of doctors in approaching the water animals in order to obtain rain (1997: 26).

While Lewis-Williams emphasises the trance experience, one gets the impression from Hoff that the Water Snake and/or Water Bull are regarded by her informants as real entities that exist in certain rivers, pools and water sources, and can occasionally be observed in the conscious state, particularly with the bright shining light on its forehead at night. This was certainly the impression that we got from our informants at the dream site. Similarly, as with Hoff’s informants (in the above quote), the Water Snake was strongly associated with rain.

A problem with the use of the ethnographic evidence such as that obtained from the Bleek and Lloyd records is that it was to a large extent de-contextualised from its everyday cultural setting and their informants were being asked to give interpretations of rock art images that they themselves had not executed and/or were located some distance away from their sites of occupation. Such evidence should thus be interpreted with a degree of circumspection. Some recent scholars have incorporated both ethnographic evidence and ethology (i.e. animal behaviour) using the natural modelling technique\(^ {15} \) into their analyses. Based on the assumption that the San, being hunter-gatherers, were keen observers of animal behaviour and morphology, it is argued that paying attention to the artistic characterization of painted animals within the context of San mythology and ethnography will provide clues to the art’s significance\(^ {16} \). This natural modelling approach has been utilised by Jeremy Hollmann to

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15 According to Mallen, “Natural modelling refers to the inclusion of certain features and behaviours of animals in belief systems in order to elucidate a variety of “social and spiritual phenomena” (Hollman, 2002: 563)” (cited in Mallen, 2005: 3).

16 For instance, Lara Mallen has skilfully combined these two approaches in her analysis of an important rock art site in the north-east Cape (termed Lab X) which features a large antelope-headed snake (Mallen, 2005: 3).
analyse the so-called mermaid paintings in the George/Oudsthoorn area of the southern Cape (see figure 10). However, in this instance, animal ethology, such as the flight and behaviour patterns of swifts, supported with carefully selected evidence from the Bleek and Lloyd archives regarding the significance of swifts or swallows in San mythology, has been used to dismiss alternative ‘ethnographic’ exegeses, which suggest it depicts a rainmaking or underwater scene and possibly depictions of mermaids. The natural modelling approach still faces the problem of representivity in its selection of ethnographic evidence regarding animal scenes.

9.2.4 The mermaid/swift debate
Although the debates over the so-called mermaid paintings of the southern Cape have not been as vociferous or extensive as those over the images of Melikane and Mangolong, it is relevant to briefly point out the core arguments. In 1977 Lewis-Williams published a short paper which explored the existing interpretations of the Ezeljagspoort ‘mermaid’ painting. Previous scholars had interpreted the figures as depictions of mermaids based on the ‘legend’ of the watermeide (mermaids) that was narrated by an old ‘Bushman’ to Mr D. Ballot, which was subsequently transcribed by Mr Schunke, who then forwarded it to Wilhelm Bleek. It was Leeuwenburg who published this ‘legend’ after discovering the transcription in one of the Bleek collection files (see Appendix Seventeen) and he made a direct connection between the painting and the legend. It has been subsequently argued that the legend was given to Mr Ballot independently of his seeking an opinion of the Ezeljagspoort mermaid rock art panel from his old ‘Bushman’ informant – hence it cannot be regarded as corroborative evidence for the meaning of the panel (Lewis-Williams, 1977; Hollmann, 2003, 2005). Since his 1977 paper Lewis-Williams has argued against the mermaid interpretation. He based his argument, again, on the interpretation given to Bleek by his informant /Han=kasso whose opinion of the ‘mermaid’ panel was as follows,

...I think that these people, they address the rain that the rain’s navel17 may not kill them, that the rain’s navel may be favourable towards them. This man he has hold of a thing which resembles a stick. I think that they are rain’s people. I do not know them,

17 There is a possibility that he used the term ‘rain’s navel’ to refer to the Snake, which was depicted in the diagram (see Figure 10) as a long snake-tailed therioanthrope.
for I behold that they are people. For, they have their arms; they resemble people...They make the rain to fall and the rain's clouds come out on account of them. Hence the rain falls, and the place becomes green on account of it (cited in Lewis-Williams, 1977: 166-167).

Lewis-Williams argues that since /Han=kasso did not make any reference to the 'ichthyoid' tails, but merely mentions their arms, then it is unlikely that he could have been referring to mermaids or that he was familiar with them. However, /Han=kasso's emphasis that they 'resembled' people as "they have their arms" could suggest that, although they were not actually people, they were similar to them, as are mermaids, who have arms but not legs. It is also significant that /Han=kasso emphasised that they were the 'rain's people'. It should be borne in mind that the Cape Nguni who, as we will see below, have been heavily influenced by Khoe and San ideas and terminology, also refer to the mermaids as the Water or River People (abantu bomlambo) (see Chapter Four). As Lewis-Williams points out, /Han=kasso used the San term !khwa to denote not only rain but also water - hence 'Rain People' could also mean 'Water People', or even 'River People'. As I have discussed in previous chapters the abantu bomlambo are strongly associated with rain in both its life-giving and destructive form, which is what /Han=kasso suggested these figures were concerned with. They are also intimately associated with the Snake, which could have been represented in the Ezeljagspoort mermaid panel as the rain's navel and snake like umbilicus. In a later publication Lewis-Williams develops the idea that these figures are more likely to be depictions of swallows rather than mermaids (Lewis-Williams, 1990: 47-50), an idea that has been further developed by Jeremy Hollmann using the natural modelling framework.

Hollmann has studied a number of different 'mermaid' painting sites in the Outeniqua, Swartberg, Kamanassieberg, and Kougaberg mountain ranges (Hollmann, 2003). Drawing from detailed observations of swift behaviour, anatomy and flight patterns Hollmann dismissed the idea that these images are depictions of mermaids and argued that such assumptions were based on local watermeide stories which were nothing less than a "a red herring" (Hollmann, 2003: 125). Instead he used the 'evidence' provided by Bleek's informants (who lived a far distance away from the site) to support his argument that "the image-makers used this bird behaviour symbolically in order to draw parallels between the activities of the bird-people they depicted and those of Bushman shamans" (Hollmann, 2003:
123). According to Dialkwain’s testimonies, swallows (and possibly swifts) were regarded as ‘rain’s things’ which required special respect because of their association with rain and water (Hollmann, 2003, 2004; Lewis-Williams, 2000: 257). Not only did they fly low over water when searching for insects, or when dipping into the water to drink while still in flight, but they tended to flock just prior to rain arriving. Hollman compares the morphological characteristic of swifts with those of the images in the rock art, and argues that they display many similar characteristics. He then extends his study to examine the birds’ mating behaviour, wing-clapping and their tendency to perform ‘screaming displays’ and argues that these are also depicted in the various ‘mermaid’ panels found in the region. In support of Lewis-William’s shamanistic model he argues that San shamans adopted similar styles of dancing as to those found in swift ‘screaming displays’ and wing-clapping patterns. The association with the nesting of swifts in crevices and cracks in caves with the situation of these images that are often located near cracks and crevices of cave walls (these being regarded by the San as portals to the spirit realm) is also used to support the hypothesis. While his arguments may be valid in some instances, one should be hesitant to dismiss the ‘mermaid’ hypothesis outright. In many of the images the figures can be seen to be more mermaid-like than bird-like and the upper appendages seem more like arms (often holding objects) rather than wings. Moreover, instead of pointed beak-like faces, most of the images depict the creatures as having flat-faces; something which my informant Jacob emphasised was the characteristic of the waterbaas he encountered. It is curious that Hollman still chooses to promote the swift hypothesis despite admitting that the beliefs in watermeide are very strong in the population surrounding the mermaid painting sites18, and they seem to be associated with devastating floods and rains in the region. He gives the following anecdote to support this,

Severe flooding in the Oudsthoorn District, Western Cape Province, South Africa, in November 1996 brought these beliefs about supernatural beings associated with water

18 This was evident in a recent South African Country Life (June, 2009) publication which had the topic of “Mermaids in the Karoo” as a lead story (see Hardie, 2009). The article documents numerous encounters with mermaids that are claimed by the local people in the Little Karoo. The article notes a documentary that has been made available on DVD entitled “Searching for Mermaids in the Karoo”. In 2008 there was also a reported sighting of a mermaid, termed locally as a Kaaiman, just south-west of the Ezeljagspoort site on the Buffeljags River near the village of Suurbraak in the Langeburg Mountains (Pekeur, 2008: 1).
to the fore. People streamed to the CP Nel Museum in Oudsthoorn\textsuperscript{19} to report their experiences with \textit{watermeide}, i.e. ‘water maidens’ (Anita Holtzhuizen, pers. comm.). Rock paintings of figures similar to the famous Ezeljagspoort images were the inspiration for playwright and actress Antionette Pienaar to write and perform a play about \textit{Epora}, a mermaid who is responsible for the floods (Antionette Pienaar, pers. comm.). Influenced by this dramatic work as well as the traditional stories that had inspired it, local politicians later celebrated the reopening of the flood-damaged Meiringspoort road by toasting \textit{Epora} the mermaid and pouring a libation into a rock pool. The event was televised and broadcast on the evening news. Beliefs about water creatures and water spirits are deeply entrenched in Khoekhoe and Bushman thought (Hollmann, 2003: 121).

In an article in the Sunday Times (November 24, 2002) journalists Caspar Greeff and Ruven Boshoff told how they had gone to the Baviaanskloof\textsuperscript{20} to investigate reporting of the existence of river mermaids. They tell of their meeting an old medicine man, Oom Klaas, who had reported sightings of mermaids. He told them that many people living in the area had seen them, and,

\begin{quote}
“I saw the mermaids twice. The first time was years ago, in a pool near here. She had pitch black – long hair – and pure white skin and breasts like a woman. The bottom half of her body was in the water. She was combing her hair with a black comb, and when she saw me, she went underwater and disappeared. As she went under her hair spread out on top of the water. It was beautiful. I saw another mermaid two years ago in the same pool. Her breasts were bigger, she looked like she had had a baby, but she was very beautiful. She looked at me – she had grey-green eyes – then she also disappeared under the water”. Oom Klaas had been warned about the mermaids by his father, also a herbalist and medicine-man. “They ask you one question. They ask, ‘Do you eat fish?’ If you say ‘yes’ they will kill you – they are half-fish. My father saw many mermaids. One Sunday he went to the pool and sat on the rocks and they took him down to where they live under the water, and taught him about herbs. They live in houses like we do, only under water. If you ever kill a legavaan you will see that there is cow dung under its limbs. The mermaids send the legavaans up to get cow dung which they use to make floors. Sometimes they will pull a child under the water. If that happens to your child, you mustn’t cry and carry on, because then they will kill the child and throw her out (of the water). No, you must get a cow, and slaughter it next to the river, and cook it. Then send down the haunche. When you go home your
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} A similar public response was elicited at the purported discovery of a mermaid at the East London museum in 1998, which although it turned out to be a hoax, attracted numerous curious crowds from far and wide (Morrow & Vokwana, 2003: 2).

\textsuperscript{20} The remote Baviaanskloof wilderness is located approximately two hundred kilometers north-east of the Outeniqua complex of ‘mermaid’ rock art. It was inhabited by the Khoekhoe and is recognized as one of the last refuges of the San in the area.
While these accounts could be dismissed as anecdotal imaginings, it is quite clear that beliefs about mermaids exist in the area, and that they bear striking similarity to those found throughout the southern African region. Prior to European colonization the Bavianaaskloof area south of the Gamtoos River was dominated by the Khoekhoe and southern San groups, and the Cape Nguni only penetrated this far south more recently, long after the mermaid painting panels were executed. Assuming that some of these images are depictions of mermaids, which the evidence I have presented in this thesis lends credence to, one can assume that these ideas did exist amongst the Khoe and San in the area prior to the Nguni arrival. The sheer number of reported sightings of these creatures in this region, of which I have only documented a few, gives sufficient evidence that these painted images may well be of mermaids.

The interpretative statements by the San informants used by Lewis-Williams and his colleagues have become some of the most extensively cited, over-worked and exhausted bits of 'ethnographic evidence' that there is in modern rock art scholarship, and the reliance on such a paucity of ethnographic evidence to come to any definitive conclusions is tenuous at least. It is true that many of the scholars have made either a direct connection to, or a passing comment on, these enigmatic explanations of the San informants being possibly linked with the Nguni (both Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) and with Sotho beliefs of diviners who get taken underwater, their ideas regarding a great Snake that inhabits certain pools, or with divinatory practice in general. For instance Jolly notes that,

Qing’s remarks on the meaning of the painting at Melikane and Upper Mangolong fit well, moreover, with the experiences of southern Nguni and Sotho diviners, who, in dreams or in trance induced by the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances, go on long journeys under water in rivers. There they encounter their ancestral spirits in the form of the abantu bomlamba, the River People, as well as certain animals and the ichanti, a large river snake (Jolly, 1996: 280).

It is relevant to point out that in this statement Jolly (unlike Lewis-Williams) does not regard the trance experienced by Bantu-speaking diviners as resulting from dance, but rather from the ingestion of 'hallucinogenic substances'. This was indeed an assumption I had before I
became initiated into the diviner training school, and although plant substances play an important role, I am no longer certain that this is a direct plant-induced hallucinogenic experience.

The question as to whether these ideas held by the Bantu-speaking groups (Nguni and Sotho) are the source of San ideas, or whether the Bantu received this knowledge from the San has led to another contentious area of debate in rock art studies, which I now turn my attention to as it is relevant to the issue of transmission of knowledge between groups. This focus on transmission of knowledge relates to level four of the model I have formulated in Chapter One, Section 1.2.4. While it seems that information regarding the water divinities was shared across these groups, determining the direction in which this knowledge flowed is a complex challenge.

Although Lewis-Williams made passing reference to the beliefs of the water divinities held by various Bantu groups and their possible connection to San ideas, he did not analyse them in detail. However, Frans Prins and Pieter Jolly have paid more attention to this connection and have contributed, along with David Hammond-Tooke, the most to the debate on San or Nguni borrowing (see below). Interestingly, much of their evidence was sourced from the Inxu River region close to the sacred pools where I was led as a result of my dream. This is where some of the last remaining descendents of the Southern Drakensberg San still reside. They are, moreover, still associated with rain-making.

9.2.5 Rain-making and the Inxu River connection

In the mid 1980s archaeologists and rock-art specialists Pieter Jolly (1986) and David Lewis-Williams (1986) visited the area surrounding the Inxu River pool and cave site complex to interview one of the last remaining first-generation San descendants whose parents had resided in the caves and whose father, the rain-maker Lindiso, had painted in the shelters.

21 There are a number of important cave and pool sites located in the ravine, known as Bushmen’s Cuttings, through which the Inxu River flows. The river flows over the edge of the escarpment that separates the plateau that stretches from the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains, from the lower lying areas of the former Transkei. The river which is fast-flowing and full during the wet summer months flows over a series of impressive waterfalls in the ravine before meandering into the lower lying areas around Tsolo. The cave and
The person they interviewed was a woman, who they referred to as M, but in later articles after her death, was referred to by her known name, Maqhoqha (also known as Manqindi). Maqhoqha was the youngest daughter of Lindiso, a well known rain-maker in the area and local people still remembered the knowledge that her older sister Chitiwe held regarding the skills of rain-making that she inherited from her father. Chitiwe had died some five years before Jolly and Lewis-Williams interviewed her younger sister. Soon after these interviews the archaeologist/anthropologist Frans Prins visited the area and conducted more interviews with Maqhoqha and some Mpondomise diviners in the area, one of which was Simpani Togu, who I was also fortunate to meet prior to his death. It was Simpani who, similarly to me, had a dream in which he felt led to go to the pool site being led by children (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.4).

All of the above three scholars make reference to the historical accounts attesting to the presence of the cave-dwelling San in this area and their fame in skills of rain-making (e.g. Gibson, 1891; Callaway, 1919; Vinnicombe, 1976). The area is dominated by a number of important Nguni-speaking clan or 'tribal' groupings of which the Mpondomise are the most prominent and have the longest claim to being in the area. They co-exist with a number of other groups, some of whom were displaced during the Zulu mfecane disturbances from further north, such as the Zizi, Bhele, and Hlubi, and some of whom were sent to the area (collectively referred to the Mfengu)22 by the British to form a buffer and to quell the insurrection of the Mpondomise chiefs (such as Chief Mditchwa) following the murder in 1880 of the magistrate of Qumbu, Hamilton Hope (Hammond-Tooke, 1975a). David Wopula assisted me in conducting a number of interviews in this area between 2002 and 2003 regarding the importance of the pools and cave sites, which at the time were under threat from dam building and upstream agro forestry development. All these clan groupings recognised the importance of the sacred pools in the area and performed various rituals at them, and they emphasised that it was this that united them, despite the existence of other more politically motivated inter-group tensions in the area.

22 See Chapter Two, Section 2.4.1.
The history of the Mpondomise in this area has been extensively documented by Hammond-Tooke (1975a) and, to some extent, Soga (1930) and will not be discussed here (see also Prins, 1996), except to mention the close association the Mpondomise have had with the San, especially through intermarriage and rain-making. The most celebrated of these marriages was between the Mpondomise leader Ngcwina and a San (BaThwa) woman, Manxangashe (see Scheub, 1996: 231-235). The son of this union, Cira (sometimes spelt Cirha), became the next king of the Mpondomise, having been chosen by his father in preference to Dosini, who was the troublesome, although rightful, heir through the great house.

In the interviews conducted by Jolly with Maqhoqha she claimed in detail how the San medicine men would capture an eland through a form of magical hypnosis, which would then be led to the cave and have its throat cut. The eland was regarded as an animal of great magical potency and its blood would be rubbed into incisions on the person wishing to attain similar potency, and its liver was eaten. The blood was then mixed with paint and the images applied to the cave walls. Maqhoqha (M) also described the capture of a river snake, probably of a normal species (rather than the mystical Snake), but still regarded as holding much potency,

M also described a ritual ‘hunt’ which involved the capture of a river snake (Jolly’s emphasis). According to her, medicine men would “drop into the river” and capture a snake which she described as very beautiful, shining and long. They quietened it with herbs. Once it had been caught and subdued they would roast it, take its fat and eat it. They would also rub the fat into cuts made on their bodies. This snake medicine was considered highly potent and was believed to renew and strengthen the powers of the medicine men. It was also used as an ingredient of the paint (Jolly, 1986: 7).

23 The best source of oral history in this respect comes from Scheub (1996: 227-249) who documents the history of the Mpondomise people as related to him by Mdukiswa Tyabashe, a respected Mpondomise historian. While the Mpondomise are presently associated with the area around Qumbu and Tsolo, at one time the Mpondomise kingdom stretched from as far as Mzimkhulu in the north and Umtata in the south. According to Tyabashe, prior to the Mpondomise arriving in this area, it was inhabited by the San.

24 Although she did not say what herbs were used it is possible this could have been buchu (Agathosma betulina). However, unless it was obtained through trade, there may have been other plants used, since buchu only grows in the mountains of the south west Cape.
This description by Maqhoqha was reminiscent of Qing’s account given to Orpen regarding
the Mangolong and Melikane painting site, where he described the men with rhebok heads as
sorcerers who “live mostly underwater; they tame elands and snakes” (Orpen, 1874: 10, cited
in Jolly, 1986: 7). Qing also made reference to the use of a powder derived from snakes that
was used as a charm by medicine men while engaging in trance. However, rather than seeing
such explanations merely as metaphors for trance experiences, Jolly portrays Maqhoqha’s
testimonial as suggesting that the snake that was caught was an actual physical entity. In a later
paper he wrote,

M. described the magical capture of eland, ‘river snakes’ and ‘river animals’ as if they
actually occurred, in the sense that anyone present would have been able to see them
being captured and killed. She mentioned that she had personally seen a river snake of
the kind that was captured by the ‘medicine men’...She gave no indication that she
considered these practices to reflect the experiences of shamans in trance (Jolly

He also notes that her description mirrored the account of the capture of a rain-animal as
described by Bleek’s informants, especially if the rain-animal and snake were regarded as
synonymous. However, Maqhoqha’s description of the snake suggests that rather than being
the large mystical Snake, it was a snake of normal size and appearance, possibly much like
the one a diviner emerges from the water with around his/her neck (see Chapter Four, Section
4.3.1), and this could be what she was referring to. According to Maqhoqha, the main purpose
of the paintings in the caves near the Inxu River were to ward off lightning, and some of the
therioanthropic scenes represented the medicine men who wore such animals skins during
their dance rituals. It seems that the principle activity that was associated with these San
descendants was that of rain-making and Jolly emphasises this in a later paper which explored
the relationship that existed between the San and their Mpondomise neighbours in the Inxu
River valley. Drawing from Hammond-Tooke’s unpublished field notes he remarks,

San families acting as rainmakers for the Mpondomise, wore blankets, lived in small
huts, did not keep livestock and spoke isiXhosa. After rain they used to wander from
kraal to kraal collecting tribute which the Mpondomise were ordered to give them by
their chief. On occasion the chief would send one of his subjects to the San with an ox or cow (Jolly, 1992: 90).

Jolly further notes, however, that beyond their rain-making skills “the San were considered great herbalists and ‘doctors’ by many black farming communities” (ibid: 92). Prins’s research in the same area has also verified the singular importance of the San as rain-makers in this area (Prins, 1990, 1996). He also found that amongst the Mpondomise

Rain-making had to be sanctioned through the chief who would send a deputation to the San requesting rain on behalf of the ‘tribe’. The chief would then allocate to the rain-makers a special hut in his homestead where they would isolate themselves and experience altered states of consciousness until it rained. The rain-makers were also given presents for their services, usually a cow, goat or maize (Prins, 1996: 213).

He documents a particular case where the Mpondomise chief Lutshoto failed to give this ritual respect towards the San regarding their rain-making skills and publicly humiliated the rain-maker Nonqaba. This resulted in Nonqaba leaving the area, but not before he had allegedly put a curse on the chief which is believed to have resulted in a three year drought, the subsequent illness and death of the chief, and devastating erosion around his homestead which is still evident to this day. It was Nonqaba’s descendent Lindiso (the father of Maqhoqha) who eventually returned to the area after a number of years absence (ibid: 213-214).

Although Prins states that the rain-makers did their rain-making activities in a special hut at the chief’s residence, there is evidence that these rituals also took place either at the sacred pool caves or on the top of certain mountains. During our interviews in the area my research assistant, David Wopula, came across a number of recognised San descendants who claimed to have gone to the cave at the pool to participate in these rituals. One ritual that was

25 I have found a similar response from my informants.

26 He also interviewed a number of San descendants in the Thabankulu area who were related to the Inxu San and their group was similarly regarded as great rain-makers.
described by a number of different informants entailed the taking of traditionally brewed beer to the pools, and whilst singing to the abantu bomlambo for rain, they would pour some beer into the river. This would be followed by ritual ablutions of bathing naked in the river (with males bathing separately from females) and then returning home, by which time (it was claimed) the rain would normally be falling. One sixty year old San descendant of the N clan described how when he was a young boy he used to accompany his mother to the sacred cave by the pool when she went to ask for rain. They would take with them incuba labathwa (bushman tobacco) to give as an offering to their San ancestors who resided under the rock (i.e. in the cave under the rock overhang near the pool). When asked what impact a hydroelectric dam would have on them if built at the sacred pools he, as did many others, emphasised it would be a disaster as “people depend on the pool in order for them to get rain. The abantu bomlambo would be angry if they were no longer visited by the people”. To emphasise the importance of the pool site for them another informant stated that damming it would result in severe drought, starvation and death. David Wopula interviewed an old respected herbalist, M., from Cicira near Maclear whose uncle was San and whom he used to accompany to the Inxu pool caves. He described how,

When they went to the pool they carried maize [inkobe] and intsangu [cannabis]. During the day they would eat the maize, following which they would consume catha edulis [umhwazi]²⁷. After eating umhwazi they would feel strong and not get hungry for the whole day. His uncle smoked dagga [cannabis], and after smoking he would communicate with the abantu bomlambo in Bushman language. Again an offering of dagga would be given to the abantu bomlambo by his uncle. The rain used to fall the day they left the cave. M said he used to visit the caves four times a year. He visited them to ask for blessings from the ‘people’ [i.e. abantu bomlambo] who stayed under the rocks. After reaping his crops he would go to the caves to give thanks to them for producing good produce. (Interview conducted by David Wopula with M, 04 April 2002).

It was evident from these interviews that rain-making did not necessarily involve trance, but that the location of the place, which was associated with the abantu bomlambo, was what mattered. It seems that variation exists between what gifts or offerings were given to please or

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²⁷ Catha Edulis is referred to as ‘Bushman’s tea’ in English and is also commonly known as Khat (an Arabic term). It is a small shrub whose fresh leaves are chewed to reduce fatigue and tiredness. It also has a stimulant and euphoric effect (Van Wyk et al, 1997: 74).
induce these water creatures into giving rain. All the gifts mentioned are known to have some form of psychoactive effect. These varied from brewed sorghum beer, to bushman tobacco (*incuba labathwa* - ? species) to dagga (*intsangu - cannabis sativa*). The use of the stimulant *catha edulis* appears to have been used to give them stamina during the long ritual but it does have known psychoactive effects (van Wyk *et al*, 2000: 160). Maqhoqha also told Prins that her sister Chitiwe, who was a rain-maker, would ‘disappear’ into the caves and would emerge,

...in the late afternoon chewing the leaves of the *Iqwaka* plant [*catha edulis*]. It was remarked that the *Iqwaka* plant had great sustaining properties and chewing the leaves would revive a fatigued and hungry person... No mention was made of her chewing the leaves before she arrived at or while in the cave (Prins, 1990: 113).

The use of dagga by the San has also been noted by Frans Prins. During a ritual that he participated in with Simpani Togu at the Inxu River caves he noted that dagga, sweets 28 and brandy were offered to the San spirits of the cave (Prins, 1996: 221). He was also told by a Zulu diviner in the Mount Fletcher area that during curing rituals at the Rolweni shelter this herb (*i.e.* dagga) would be frequently used. He states that the “diviner added that there is a close relationship between dagga and Bushmen and the latter will often show a diviner where to look for such medicines when walking in the veld” (Prins & Lewis, 1992: 138) 29.

All our informants emphasised that the importance of the cave and pool site was because they were associated with the water divinities, specifically in the form of the *abantu bomlambo*. According to Prins,

Asked why the pools or rivers are so favoured [for rituals], Togu Sipani explained that the San were great rain-makers and that water in rivers or pools is associated with rain, as is the mythical snake *ichanti* who lives at the bottom of the pools... In fact, a common perception in Tsolo among all diviners interviewed is that underwater

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28 It is interesting that sweets were offered as these are usually given as gifts to the spirits of children. This resonates with the time we went to give offerings at the Inxu River and Zanele had a dream the night before in which she understood herself to be instructed to take orange juice for the spirits of the children who ‘reside’ in the Inxu pools (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.4).

29 Dagga was one of the key trading items between the pre-colonial Cape Nguni and the Khoi groups (Elphick, 1985: 65-67).
symbolism and associated ritual was borrowed or adapted from the San (Prins, 1996: 218).

It was this statement and an earlier paper written by Prins and Lewis (1994) that has stimulated the debate among archaeologists as to the origin of this knowledge, and the reliability of informants’ statements. Did the San share it with their Nguni pastoralist neighbours, or did the Nguni pastoralists share it with the San? Prins is of the opinion that the flow was from San to Nguni (Prins, 1990, 1996; Prins & Lewis, 1996), while Jolly argues that it more likely flowed in the other direction (Jolly, 1995, 1996, 2005, 2006a & b). It is of course possible that it flowed in both directions.

9.2.6 Cross-cultural borrowing – which direction?

There is abundant historical, linguistic and archaeological evidence that the Cape and Natal Nguni have shared a close relationship with the San and/or Khoekhoe groups with whom they have intermixed over several centuries. This intermixing between the Xhosa and the San groups has been confirmed through genetic research which shows that “the percentage of the typical Khoisan serum protein allele Gm 1,13 among them (Cape Nguni) is 60 per cent” (Jenkins et al, 1970, cited in Hammond-Tooke, 2002: 279). Of the different Nguni groups the frequency of the serum marker increases progressively from “the Swazi (25%), through Zulu and Mpondo (45%) to Xhosa (60%)” (Jenkins et al, 1970, cited in Hammond-Tooke, 1999: 131). Soodyall and Jenkins (1996) also show that these shared serum markers suggest relatively recent intermixing, and that mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) evidence suggests that prior to this the San and Negroid population broke off from each other “approximately 144,000 years BP” (Soodyall & Jenkins, 1996: 380).

It is the linguistic evidence that has mainly been used to argue for the sharing of religious and healing/divinatory practices between these broad groups, with the most evidence pointing towards San and Cape Nguni sharing, with the former influencing the latter. The most commonly cited evidence comes from the Cape Nguni word for a healer or ‘shaman’, igqirha, which is phonetically identical with the San word for a medicine man or person with supernatural power, igi:xa (Hammond-Tooke 2002: 279). Another important word which is frequently used by Cape Nguni diviners to address and alert the ancestors is ‘Camagu’. According to Prins & Lewis, Maqhoqha claimed that this word was also of San origin (Prins 501
As with the serum markers the use of the term tends to decline the further north one moves, with the northern Natal Nguni preferring to use the Swazi ancestral praise term "Thokoza", rather than the more southern Natal Nguni preference of "Camagu". Overall, it is estimated that "about 15% of the words of both languages (Zulu and Xhosa) contain click consonants derived from the Khoisan" (Wilmsen in Jolly, 1996: 296), although there are more clicks found in isiXhosa, suggesting longer and more sustained contact (see also Louw, 1979: 18; Hodgson, 1982).

Prins has argued that the linguistic, historical and cultural evidence points towards the Nguni adopting many of the religious ideas and practices from the San, particularly regarding the belief in the water divinities and the training of diviners. Although his informants, such as Maqhoqha and Simpani Tugu, endorsed such a view (see Prins, 1998, 1996; Prins & Lewis, 1992), Jolly has questioned the reliability of these informants by comparing the different responses both scholars elicited from them (Jolly, 1998; Jolly & Prins, 1994). Unfortunately, to argue his claim, Jolly draws on the prejudicial views of some past scholars regarding the reliability of diviners' evidence, and argues that, as bricoleurs, they were adept at telling scholars untruths and what they thought they wanted to hear (Jolly, 1998; for Prins' response see Prins, 1999). Jolly has also critiqued the implications of the theoretical paradigm advanced by Lewis-Williams which assumes the existence of a "structurally uniform pan-San ideological system, reflective of kin-based relations of production which existed from at least 2,000 and possibly 26,000 years B.P. until the present" (Jolly, 1996: 278), an allegation which Lewis-Williams refutes in his response to the same paper. Drawing from his evidence gathered from his research in the region of the Melikane and Mangolong painting sites, Jolly argues that the influence of Sotho and Nguni ideas and practices on the San was more

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30 Baba's group uses the term 'Camagu'.

31 Although Jolly accuses Simpani Tugu of being an unreliable informant who gave Prins the information he wanted to hear (1996), it should be pointed out that the Togu clan does have a close connection with the Khoi through intermarriage, and it was possible that Togu was drawing from his own kin derived source of knowledge. However, this does not necessarily explain why he might have told different researchers different things.

32 One needs to bear in mind that if there was linguistic and cultural diversity because of long-standing dispersal among the San, then this would suggest that a diversity of interpretations of rock art is required and not merely one "pan-San" system.
predominant. These include the beliefs in the underwater experience, their dance styles, as well as their dress and adornments (see Jolly, 1995, 1996, 2005, 2006a & b).

The anthropologist David Hammond-Tooke has also explored the question of San and Nguni cultural borrowing in a series of three papers (1998, 1999, and 2002) and has tended towards the argument that the cultural influence flowed from the San to the Nguni. His initial argument was somewhat contradictory in that he argued that although the Nguni adopted the same style of divinatory technique as the San, mainly through adopting their style of trance dancing (ukuchentsa), the San did not engage in divination (Hammond-Tooke, 1998: 9). He also argues that divination derived from entering into altered states of consciousness induced by dancing was not found amongst other African groups, who tend to resort to mechanical divinatory techniques (ibid). However, evidence from numerous anthropologists in Central Africa, such as from Friedson (1996), Janzen (1991, 1992) and Reynolds Whyte (1997), where dancing and ecstatic states play an important part in divination, disputes this. Hammond-Tooke also argues that the use of fly-whisks, dancing rattles and the Cape Nguni style of holding special sticks while dancing were also of San origin (ibid: 14). Although I agree with Hammond-Tooke's claim about the stick style of dancing (see also Jolly, 2006b), which is not commonly found amongst the Zulu, I question attributing the origin of the use of fly-whisks and possibly ankle rattles to the San, as these are ubiquitous throughout the Bantu-speaking regions of Africa. In the case of the Nguni, the fly whisk (umshoba) is intimately linked to the sacrifice of the cow dedicated to the ancestral spirits. However, all the above authors admit that the San did not call upon their ancestors in their rituals, nor did they perform any specific rituals for them or acknowledge them as a source of illness. I argue that it is this lack of ancestral 'cult' among the San that is the most significant element that obstructs an argument that supports a one-way flow of religious ideas from San to Nguni. As I have shown in previous chapters, the ancestors are intimately connected to the water divinity complex. It is most probable that ideas flowed back and forth between these groups, but as the San were regarded as the autochthons of the land their role with rain-making on behalf of all the local resident groups was more pronounced. This emphasis on linking the San with rain-making comes through most clearly in the evidence gathered at the Inxu River pool site.

Other problematic areas put forward by Hammond-Tooke include the alleged lack of any
system of divination amongst the San, the lack of any full-time healers, the fact that San shamans were invariably men, whilst Nguni diviners are predominantly women, and that their concepts of illness aetiology differ significantly (Hammond-Tooke, 1998: 13). In his later papers Hammond-Tooke revises some of his ideas and proposes that the distinctive San features that were borrowed by the Cape Nguni were the concept of the amatyala, or wild animal spirit guides/divinatory animals, and the San style of trance dancing. However, he admits that for the Cape Nguni the use of trance dances, “although producing similar ecstatic states, were not identical in technique or social context” (Hammond-Tooke, 2002: 281). As Prins has pointed out, while the San engage in out-of-body experiences during their trance states, where their spirit leaves their body and engages with evil spirits to remove illness (in typical shamanistic form), Nguni diviners rarely mention out-of-body experience but are more often possessed by spirits, an event which they can rarely recall (Prins in Jolly, 1996: 293). Although Hammond-Tooke’s ityala or divinatory animal argument is probably valid to some extent, more research is needed to determine whether this is unique to the San and Cape Nguni. Although Baba emphasised to me that the “Xhosa train by animals”, when he showed me his jackal skin, Zulu izangoma also get dreams of animals (especially snakes) that are equivalent of the ityala. The focus on the healing abilities of the water divinities and the training of diviners is definitely less pronounced in the literature on the Khoekhoe and San groups than among the Nguni groups. However, while Hammond-Tooke argues that beyond shamanistic trance other forms of divination were absent among the San, there is evidence that the San were well known for their skills in healing with herbs.

With regard to the San being the source of knowledge regarding the water divinities, there is another important factor that has not been considered by other scholars. As my research has shown, when a person is alleged to have been taken underwater among Nguni cultures, the means by which that person is returned and restored to his/her normal conscious state is achieved through the sacrifice of a cow and/or goat. This implies that domesticated livestock needed to be readily available for the kin members to offer as sacrifice. If the hunter-gathering San did not keep such animals, although they may have been occasionally acquired through

33 In fact, Hammond-Tooke attempts to explain this anomaly by applying Lewis’ now discredited deprivation hypothesis regarding spirit possession to the “deep-seated frustrations of Nguni women” as a result of their marginalised position in Nguni patrilineal and patriarchal systems (Hammond-Tooke, 1998: 13-14).
reciprocal relations with neighbouring Khoekhoe, Nguni groups or through theft, it is unlikely
that this knowledge came from them. However, the San evidence points to alternative modes
of securing release of one taken underwater. According to the ethnographic evidence obtained
by Hoff (1997) and Schmidt (1998), the /Xam seemed to emphasise their ability in charming
the water animals through means of deception, in order to either obtain the stone from the
snake’s forehead or to harness its ability to bring rain. There is thus a fundamental difference
in the way the water divinities gifts are rated and accessed between these groups. Other areas
that need more consideration include the importance of the use of ubulawu/asilawu 34, the use
of white and red clay on the body during training and the ability to communicate with the
whistling spirits (imilozi). As these elements appear to be unique to the Nguni groups, and are
not commonly found among the non-Nguni Bantu groups, it is necessary to consider whether
they could have been acquired from the San or Khoekhoe.

Hammond-Tooke (1998) has also pointed out that we need to consider whether the Nguni
may have adopted their ideas more from the Khoekhoe pastoralists, rather than just the San
hunter-gatherers, since both of these groups enjoyed intimate connections with the Cape
Nguni. This suggestion is important since the Cape Nguni mode of production was closer to
the Khoekhoe than that of the San, since both were pastoralists who sacrificed cattle.
However, early commentators on Khoekhoe culture make no suggestion that the Khoekhoe
had ancestral cults similar to the Nguni groups (Carstens, 1975: 83; Schapera, 1930/1965).
Although they did practice elaborate death rites (see Schapera, 1930/1965: 357-366), it seems
that the ancestors as a benevolent force were not called upon to participate in the activities of
the living, but rather the spirits of the dead were feared and avoided (Carstens, 1966). Most
scholars make reference to ‘moon worship’ among the Khoekhoe, which Carstens disputes
(see Carstens, 1975: 78-79), and mention their reverence for the Supreme Being or high

34 Wilson & Thompson (1969: 41) make brief mention that an alternative name given to the ‘yellow-skinned’
herders, the Hottentots (or Khoekhoe), was ‘i.lawu’, which by the early nineteenth century had “derogatory
connotations implying someone without customs” (Wilson & Thompson, 1969: 105). This was probably due to
the longer contact the Khoekhoe had with the Europeans and the fact that by the nineteenth century the
devastating effects of colonisation had seen much of the Khoekhoe culture lost. However, Wilson & Thompson
point out the term was unlikely used in a derogatory way prior to the eighteenth century when “a number of
Xhosa chiefs married Khoikhoi women as principal wives” (ibid). The use of the word stem -lawu to describe
the Khoekhoe is highly significant, as it is also the cognate of ubu- or isi-lawu (note the Zulu refer to the plant
medicine as ubulawu and the Cape Nguni as isilawu; see also Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3).
celestial God, Tsui//Goab, who was omnipresent, wise, a great warrior and magician, and who was the source of rain and fertility (see also Schapera, 1930/1965: 374-389). Tsui//Goab was part of a perpetual cycle of death, resurrection and rebirth. His dualistic opposite was a negative evil force known as //Guanab. Another important mythological ancestral hero was Heitse-Eibib, who had once been a mortal, and a great magician and prophesier, and had now assumed a god-like status. Like Tsui//Goab he came from the east and was part of a death, resurrection and re-birth cycle. However, unlike Tsui//Goab who was associated with the sky, he was associated with the earth and certain holes and fountains. Stone cairns, on to which the Khoe would always place rocks or plant material when passing, were dedicated to him.

Although very little mention is made in earlier texts regarding the Water Snake (in comparison to Hoff and Schmidt’s more recent findings) there is some evidence that Heitsi-Eibib may have been associated with a serpent located at certain springs or fountains. Captain James Alexander, whose evidence of Khoekhoe ‘folk-lore’ Theophilus Hahn greatly respected, reports how during his Namaqualand expedition in the early 1800s he was taken by his Khoekhoe guides to a hole “supposed to be inhabited by Heiji Eibib…” (Hahn, 1881: 53).

He goes on to say:

This water-place was called Kuma Kams (Goma-//gams), or the water of the beast tribe, and near it was a heap of stones, .... Which the Namaquas said was a heap over their deity Heiji Eibib (Heitsi-eibib)...I turned aside to get water at the fountain, ‘Ahuas, or blood (/Aus). In this was said to dwell a snake, which guarded it; but, strange to say, when the fountain was reached it was found to be dried up, and a water-snake, about six feet long, brown above and yellow below lay dead beside it. The Namaquas immediately cried out ‘Some one has killed the snake of the Fountain of Blood, and it is therefore dried up.’ Not far from the Fountain of Blood a young Bushman and his wife was met, and the woman accused her husband of having committed a great crime. She said that the day before they had drunk at ‘Ahuas, and the Bushman, seeing the snake there, killed it. He excused himself by saying that he was a stranger in that part of the country, and did not know that the snake he had killed at the edge of the water was the snake of the fountain (Hahn, 1881: 53).

Hahn later notes that “throughout the Khoikhoi territory the belief is extant that in every fountain is a snake” (ibid: 62) and that if the snake is killed the fountain will dry up. The

35 Hodgson points out that these stone cairns were also used for similar ritual purposes by the Zulu and Xhosa groups and were termed izivivane. She is of the opinion that these were derived from Khoe practices (Hodgson, 1982: 83-84).
account given above suggests that the San or Bushmen were not so familiar with this idea. Intriguingly, and without further clarification, Hahn also tells us that “The Korannas again say that Tsui//goab made the first man, and that the snake was together with the first man on earth” (Hahn, 1881: 62; my italics). This italicised phrase is exactly what I was told by Baba.

Linguistic evidence of religious sharing also exists between the Cape Nguni and the Khoekhoe (Harinck, 1969; Hodgson, 1982; Louw, 1977, 1979; Westphal, 1963). Harinck argues that the Cape Nguni term for the Supreme Being or God, uThixo, was derived from the Khoekhoe term for their High God Tsui//Goab or Thui// koo-b (Harinck, 1969: 151), a point which was also argued by the first missionary among the Xhosa, Van der Kemp who stated that the Xhosa “used the name Tuikwa or Thiko (Thixo) which they had ‘borrowed from the Hottentots’” (Hodgson, 1982: 42). Other linguistic evidence of religious influence between the Xhosa and Khoekhoe also exists. An important term that is used by the Cape Nguni in their invocations to the ancestors during all rituals and divination is the term ukungula36 (spelt ukunqulu by Harinck), which is claimed to be derived from the Khoekhoe term /nuru (ibid). In addition to the appellation ukungula used when summoning the ancestors, the word ukurhuma, that is used when giving an offering or payment following divination, or when offering gifts to the abantu bomlambo, is also derived from the Khoekhoe -xoma (Louw, 1977: 85). According to Louw, the Xhosa name of the River Willow, umngncumube (salix mucronata), that is sacred to the abantu bomlambo, also derives from the Khoekhoe language (Louw, 1979: 14). Furthermore, the Nguni term for a ‘head of cattle’, inkomo/izinkomo, could have been derived from the Khoekhoe term goma-b (Harinck, 1969; Louw, 1979: 17), as does the Xhosa term for sheep igusha, that is derived from the Khoekhoe term -gus (Louw, 1079: 17). Linguistic evidence also points to the Khoekhoe inhabiting the Eastern Cape seaboard to as far north as the Umzimvubu River prior to the arrival of the southward migrating Nguni groups. According to Harinck the absence of clicks in the Proto-Nguni language,

Permit us to state that terms for geographical features were in fact ‘borrowed’ from Khoi (and San) by the Xhosa as they and other Southern Nguni invaded the Khoi

36 According to Kropf’s dictionary (Kropf/Godfrey, 1915: 286) the term ukungula means “To call on the departed ancestors (iminyanya); to utter incantations for help...to worship, pray; to call upon God for blessings”.

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territories in the Transkei. By extension, Khoi and San occupied the regions between the Fish and the Mzimvubu Rivers prior to the entry of the Southern Nguni. Since place names with clicks are scarce north-east of the Mzimvubu and in Natal, we may deduce that this area was occupied by the ancestors of the southern Nguni for a much longer period of time than the region south-west of that river (Harinck, 1969: 151-152).

I have already pointed out in Chapter Five (see Section 5.4) that an important ritual, ukufukama, which is performed for diviner initiates by the Cape Nguni but I have not encountered among the Natal Nguni, could have originated from the Khoekhoe or San, based on evidence provided by Hoff’s /Xam descendent informants (Hoff, 2007: 17). Despite the borrowing of certain important religious terms by the Cape Nguni from the Khoekhoe and San, Harinck points out that the Cape Nguni language still retained many Bantu terms in their religious and ritual institutions, suggesting that they had a well established religious system prior to contact with the Khoekhoe.

Wilson and Thompson make the following observation with regard to other shared characteristics between the Xhosa and the Khoikhoi,

The intermingling of Nguni and Khoikhoi languages is ancient: so too are certain techniques and peculiar ritual observances. For example, the Nguni style of hut and homestead plan from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century resembled Khoikhoi rather than that of the Sotho or Tsonga, and the Xhosa or Mpondo manner of killing a sacrificial animal by breaking the aorta and wearing the inflated gall bladder in the hair is similar to that observed in 1622 and 1779 for Khoikhoi groups. In dress the Xhosa resembled the Khoikhoi more closely than they did their Zulu kinsmen (Wilson & Thompson, 1069: 104-105).

This similarity in sacrificial technique and the wearing of gall bladders in the hair provides evidence of possible sharing of beliefs and practices between the Khoekhoe and the Nguni, especially the Cape Nguni. Sheep were also important to the Khoekhoe and would on occasion be sacrificed near a river for rain (Hoernlé, 1985: 75-76). It is significant that sheep may occasionally be sacrificed by the Cape Nguni groups, yet very rarely amongst the Natal

37 Although this practice is more commonly found amongst the Natal Nguni.

38 For instance, I attended Zweli’s intambo yenkhulu (great necklace) ritual at the onset of his training as a
Nguni. Berglund has recorded a rare occasion when a sheep is sacrificed among the Zulu and this is for rain-making purposes. This rite involves the sacrifice of a fat black sheep (or a goat) and the rain-maker taking the skin, along with his medicine horns to a particular river overnight. Whilst he lies on a rock in the middle of the river he places the medicine horns by his side and draws the fatty sheep skin over his body. "At dead of night when everything is still and quiet, inhlwathi [the python] emerges from a very deep pool in the river, approaches the rain-maker and licks the fat off the skin which covers the rain-maker" (Berglund, 1976: 55). It then lies on the medicine horn, cooling the medicines, causing rain to fall. Although Berglund makes no mention of San or Khoekhoe links to rain-making in the area where this account was recorded, it is worth pointing out that Schapera notes that medicine horns were key paraphernalia used by Khoekhoe medicine men, !gai aogu for magical purposes. Hoff has also noted the same (Hoff, 2007: 20-26); these horns were filled with a mixture of plant, and animal ingredients (Schapera, 389-390), and according to Hoff's /Xam informants they would be used by the !khwa-ka !gi:ten when approaching the water to pacify or appeal to the Water Snake. Hoff also notes that among the /Xam, gemsbok horns were used by the !khwa-ka !gi:xa to secure rain or even cause the water in the fountain to rise.

The !khwa-ka !gi:xa carried a gemsbok horn in the hand when visiting a fountain. To announce his/her presence when approaching the water, the !gi:xa sounded a gemsbok horn (with a row of holes made along its length) which resulted in the water "arching like a rainbow". When he/she blew the horn again, the water subsided. If the Water Snake happened to be outside the water, the sounding of the horn calmed it so that it remained outside, giving the !gi:xa the opportunity to "work with it" (for example to collect medicine from it). ...the sounding of the horn could cause the fountain to dry.

diviner where he sacrificed a white sheep rather than a goat. He told me the reason for this was because he did not want to rush his training (which the sacrifice of a goat, which is 'quick', would imply), but he wanted to take it slowly (which he likened to the nature of a sheep).

39 de Heusch has made extensive use of this ritual recorded by Berglund in his Structuralist analysis of sacrifice, along with another rain-making ritual that induces Nomkhubulwana to cry (i.e. rain) when her favorite bird, the ground hornbill, is sacrificed in the river (de Heusch, 1985). Hunter describes a very similar ritual found among the Mpondo to the one given by Berglund, although in this instance a black or dun ox is slaughtered. the rainmaker goes at night to a rock near the river and covers himself with the fat and raw ox-hide. "During the night a wet mist comes over the pool, and the pool itself rises and there comes a great snake off the water and licks the fat that is on the skin. When the pool sinks the rain falls, and the rain-maker goes home when it is already raining" (Hunter, 1936/1961: 81-82). Hunter also mentions that the Mpondo, in the past, would also make use of the sacrifice of the ground hornbill or intsikizi (Bucorvus cafer), in times of extreme drought (ibid: 85).
or fill up (Hoff, 2007: 21).

Regarding the question of whether the San or Khoe were more influential in sharing their knowledge with the Nguni groups it should be borne in mind that there is general consensus today that both the San and the Khoe were closely related both genetically (Jenkins, 1986; Soodyall & Jenkins, 1997: 374; Tobias, 1997) and, apart from regional variations, also linguistically (Elphick, 1985: 6-8). Moreover, although the main distinction that has been drawn between these two groups is based on modes of production i.e. hunter-gathering versus pastoralism, it is argued that this was not a linear transformation from one mode to another, but that there was an oscillation within groups between these modes of production, depending on the vagaries of livestock holding (Tobias, 1997). Hence the boundaries between them are by no means precise.

9.2.7 Discussion

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the debates on rock art interpretation over the last several decades is that they are dominated by issues relating to the main themes I am addressing in this thesis. Examining ‘ethnographic’ evidence and informant testimonies and exegesis on the symbolism and meaning of the enigmatic rock art images found across southern Africa, as advocated by Lewis-Williams, has fortuitously thrown aspects of the water divinity complex into perspective. The emic explanations, presented in this chapter and used by rock art scholars such as Lewis-Williams, point to a link between certain rock art images, shamanic knowledge and/or trance states, and rain-making and its control. In being regarded as the autochthons of the land, the San were accorded ritual power by some of the Cape Nguni groups over the life-giving forces of rain and water generation, and these skills were recognised by the incoming agro-pastoral Nguni and Sotho groups. As the San tended to range within certain hunting territories (Silberbauer, 1981) their connections to, and ritual control over, particular pools and rain-making sites (such as I have discussed with the Inxu River site) are therefore to be expected. However, there is insufficient evidence to argue with any certainty that the knowledge of the water divinities was derived by the Nguni purely from the San or Khoekhoe. Although the evidence exists that both the San and Khoekhoe had knowledge of the water divinities (in their forms of the Water Snake and mermaid), the emphases on their benefits and gifts appear to be differentially rated. For the hunter-gatherer
San, who depended on adequate rainfall for the maintenance of their hunting and gathering resources, it was vital that rain fell, and their skills seem to be linked to that purpose. On the other hand, the pastoralists, prior to colonial restrictions, were able to migrate and move to better watered areas when necessary. For them, although rain was important, the importance of human fertility and its control was also an important issue, as it was through marriage and the resulting offspring born, that property, mostly in the form of cattle, could be transmitted. Thus, the evidence of Khoekhoe rituals given by Carstens (1975) and Waldman (see Chapter Five, Section 5.5.2), and the narratives collected by Lange et al (2007), seem to emphasise the role of the Water Snake in promoting and controlling female fertility. The Khoekhoe were also effectively purely pastoralists, who engaged in minimal to no cultivation, hence their ability to move to better grazing grounds were less restricted than for the Nguni. As I have already argued for the Cape and Natal Nguni, in Chapters Four and Five, hoe-cultivation, which was performed by women, was an important adjunct to male controlled pastoralism, hence we find far more ritual emphasis on crop fertility (evidence through the ukunikela and Nomkhubulwana rituals of the Cape and Natal Nguni respectively), while the Nomkhubulwana rituals among the Natal Nguni also emphasised female fertility. Even though they were agro-pastoralists, cultivation necessitated a more sedentary lifestyle for the Nguni, and rainfall would have also been vital to these groups. I have already demonstrated in Chapters Four and Five that among the more centralised Zulu groups rain-making was usually vested in the office of the chief or king. According to Hunter the same rule applied among the Mpondo, who sought rain from their chiefs. However, among the other more de-centralised Cape Nguni groups, such as those groups that we interviewed in the Inxu River area in Mpondomise territory, evidence suggests that the San autochthons' skills in rain-making were highly rated, and as a result they were accorded a special link with the rain-making pools and the nearby caves where they had previously resided. Thus, although commonalities exist in the water divinity beliefs among the San, Khoekhoe and Nguni groups, especially regarding their claimed experiences (level one of the model), the interpretation (level two) and the resulting rituals (level three) were influenced by the environment and their means and relations of production. The ethnographic evidence discussed in this chapter points to the fact that all groups recognised the existence of the Water Snake, which they saw as linked with rain and fertility, and sometimes regarded as being one and the same as the mermaid/s. This Snake could be observed occasionally during ordinary states of consciousness, with its
shining bright light on its forehead, and was associated with certain pools and/or fountains. It was believed that, if encountered, the Snake could have a trance inducing effect and take one underwater where certain procedures had to be undertaken by the living to secure the victim's return. The Snake is linked with rain, floods and drought and certain individuals among the San are believed to have the power to harness or control it in order to manage precipitation. The Snake is also associated with the great creative forces of the earth and the origins of humanity. Connections are also made between the Snake and the underwater experience with trance and healing.

However, apart from certain linguistic evidence, we have insufficient ethnographic evidence that the connections of the water divinities with the training of diviners and healing originated with the San or Khoekhoe groups. Thus, the extent to which transmission of the knowledge (level four) took place between these groups, and the direction in which it flowed, is not definite. One problematic area is that the complex of beliefs and practices related to healing found amongst Nguni and other Bantu-speaking groups, as I have described in this thesis, are integrally tied in with the ancestral cult and cattle sacrifice, which did not occur amongst the San. Although there is insufficient evidence documented for the Khoekhoe, it is possible that some ideas and practices (such as the use of ubulawu and certain rituals such as fukama) may have originated with them. Contemporary Khoekhoe and San descendants, who have suffered more extensive and severe acculturation (as well as loss of their indigenous languages), now seem to have a much more limited understanding on the relevant codes of conduct required of relatives should a family member be taken underwater. This is especially in contrast to their Nguni neighbours or even the Shona groups. This loss of knowledge was noted by Hoff's informants (Hoff, 2007: 7-11), and was very evident in the series of narratives obtained by Mary Lange (2007) from her 'coloured' informants in the Upington area. Although they were all in consensus that the “Water Snake” did indeed exist, and could take people underwater, there was some degree of uncertainty and scepticism about the rituals that should be performed. Most of the informants expressed reluctance and/or disbelief when instructed by 'doctors' to sacrifice a cow or goat in order to have their relative returned from the Water Snake, and this (i.e. failure to do so), in a number of the cases narrated, was regarded as the cause of death or disappearance of the one taken. The evidence obtained from the Zulu, Cape Nguni and Shona groups (see Chapters Three to Eight), demonstrated far more clarity and
knowledge on the codes of conduct required, with the successful return of the one taken. The reasons for this could be twofold; either the cultural integrity of the Bantu-speaking groups has been more robust and less vulnerable to destructive forces of acculturation (and this is evident in the vigour and integrity of their languages) or the knowledge, especially regarding the codes of conduct, originated with them, and was influenced by other groups during their southward migrations (Innskeep, 1978; Newman, 1995). The fact that very similar ideas regarding the water divinities are held in West Africa40 and its Diasporas41 suggest that a purely San origin of such knowledge is insufficient to explain its distribution.

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CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSION

The image of a woven tapestry serves as a suitable metaphor for this thesis. In this comparative ethnography, I have gathered together a wide range of threads regarding the water divinities from diverse sources, using existing literature, data gathered from informants across a variety of groups in southern Africa and auto-ethnography (especially dream-directed). Much of the text-based evidence I have collected, some of which has come from relatively obscure texts, was found in fragmented and/or anecdotal form. When brought together, compared and interwoven with other sources of evidence, they have revealed a complex multi-textured tapestry of repetitive forms and patterns, even though each thread may have its own unique detail and style. The end result reveals a complex of thought and practice that is significant in its implications for challenging our existing understanding of traditional religious thought and healing traditions in southern Africa. What may have been regarded as mere idiosyncratic beliefs and practices in each group, not worthy of much detailed attention, has been thrown into relief, revealing something far more significant in its cross-cultural implications. It also throws new light on our understanding of certain ambiguities that exist relating to the moral nature of the water divinities, the blending of traditional Zulu beliefs and Zulu Zionism, as well as the relationship between dream and/or trance states, San rock art and rain-making.

The question may be asked: Why after at least a century of scholarship in southern African religious beliefs has this body of beliefs, ideas and practices regarding the water divinities not been adequately appreciated by most scholars? The evidence from the various ethnographic sources and data derived from my own experiences suggest that cultural knowledge of the water divinities is based on experiences which are powerful and real for those who have them, and the entities associated with the experiences are regarded with great awe and respect, bordering on fear. It is furthermore believed that to discuss the water divinities will draw their attention to the speaker; for many people this is something they would rather avoid for fear of having a calling to become a diviner, with all the onerous, expensive and potentially dangerous, expectations that come with it. There is also the fear of being called under water and never returning alive due to inappropriate actions or correct adherence to the required
codes of conduct expected by kin.

Despite this constraint, the sheer amount of material I have gathered from the literature, although mainly in fragmented form, demonstrates that it was not regarded as secret knowledge. Why, then, has it not gained the same attention or detailed analysis as beliefs and practices regarding the ancestors, witchcraft and sorcery? This could be due to the fact that beliefs and practices regarding the ancestors, and to some extent witchcraft and/or sorcery, are more in the public domain. This is because knowledge of the water divinities tends to be held by specialists (i.e. diviners, chiefs, rain-makers etc) and diviners tend to not openly discuss the water divinities, or their experiences with them, unless expressly asked in a sympathetic way, or where there is a relationship of trust (e.g. Berglund, 1976). Similarly, the general population tend to discuss the water divinities with others not of their group, only when an event happens that compels them to share such matters. Aubrey Elliott, a farmer who grew up with the Xhosa people in the former Ciskei, who was a fluent Xhosa speaker and had a deep interest in their cultural beliefs, noted this tendency when he stated,

> There are many important and strong Xhosa beliefs of which even farmers and other white people who, in one way or another, have been associated with the tribe all their lives, have never heard. Or, if they have, then they know nothing more than they exist. It is only when something dramatic related to the belief like this happens [i.e. when a person disappears underwater], and which the Xhosa concerned cannot keep to themselves, that the whole story comes to the surface. The Xhosa belief in ‘The People of the River’ falls into this category (Elliott, 1970: 97)

Goulet (1998) and Miller (2007) have both observed this tendency for indigenous people to divulge to researchers “only what they believe them to be able to understand” (Miller, 2007: 192).

My own experiences with Baba are instructive on this issue. At my first consultation with him and his amakhosi he had insisted that I needed to first ‘take the water’ (i.e. accept the calling) before he could tell me more about his own experiences. If I had failed to accept the calling he presumably reasoned that my understanding of the complex of the water divinities would probably be very different. As the nature of this knowledge of the water divinities and how it comes to be secured, is held to be associated with altered states of consciousness, such as
dreams and trance-states, and thus falls beyond the normally accepted range of knowledge production found in western systems of thought, it would have been difficult for me to comprehend unless I had accepted the calling. Otherwise, I would probably have resorted to more conventional anthropological approaches, which are compatible with the scientific order of reality, to explain the experiences of others. In terms of Alfred Schutz’s approach (1973/1974), the scientific ‘order of reality’ and cognitive style, with its ‘finite provinces of meaning’ is presently not equipped to accommodate an order of reality which accepts the existence of physical underwater submersions for long periods of time, and accepts encounters with shape-shifting and largely intangible snake and mermaid entities. It stood to reason that in order for me to fully appreciate the meaning of what Baba was to tell me, I needed to try to experience and understand it from the perspective of the order of reality in which it was generated.

However, I realise that this principle put forward by Schutz (concerning finite provinces of meaning) places limitations on how I present my material and pose my arguments. While I have been upfront in expressing my willingness to accept that my ancestors and possibly the water divinities exist, and this was necessary for the purpose of radical participation into the realm of the potentially extraordinary, it is beyond my capacity to prove their ontological reality. I have thus utilised my experiences that have resulted from this engagement with what I encountered as the extraordinary to address more anthropological issues, such as the question of the continuity of ideas regarding the water divinities across southern Africa, the possible explanations for their similarities and differences, the nature of these ideas (especially how they relate to dreams and altered states of consciousness) and how they adapt to political-economic and cultural change. I have also explored ways in which experience can be factored into these more anthropological concerns.

I have shown in this thesis that the use of the radical participation method challenges our notions of cultural boundaries. To transcend these boundaries, however, does require a certain degree of openness to the possibility of alternate realities, a suspension of disbelief, and a willingness to engage in the ritual strategies suggested, and in the way recommended by, the host group. Logically, if I had refused to partake of the ritual medicines (e.g. ubulawu) or perform the rituals of acceptance of my calling, I could not have had any of the subsequent
experiences that I have described, especially those relating to my dreams. Beyond any possible psycho-physiological effects, the taking of *ubulawu* out of the ritual and cultural framework, or without being recognised and accepted into it, would not have resulted in any subsequent interventions by the *izangoma*. My reluctance to perform the first sacrificial ritual in the culturally recommended way (see Chapter Six, Section 6.4.1) also revealed interesting insights into how the *izangoma* understood rituals for one’s ancestors should be performed. To them, my initial failure to perform the ritual at my agnatic-linked home put me into a potentially dangerous and vulnerable position, which had to be remedied by further ritual cleansing; it also necessitated a repeat of the sacrificial ritual in a more appropriate way, which they regarded as having had largely positive results (*i.e.* the temporary resolution of my family’s crisis, the return of stolen property, the manifestation of the pythons *etc.*).

The radical participation method has also challenged my understanding of spatio-temporal boundaries, particularly as they relate to different ‘orders of reality’ (Schutz, 1973/1974), such as between the lived-world and the dream-world, which appears to confound our lived-world notions of past, present and future. It has also challenged my understanding of the relationship between the natural, spirit and dream worlds, and how these different ‘orders of reality’ as proposed by Schutz (*ibid*) appear to intersect with different spatio-temporal dimensions in synchronistic fashion. As it is beyond my ability and the scope of this thesis to explain how these ‘transgressions’ of boundaries may come about I will not dwell on these issues further, suffice to say that their implications are potentially of great significance.

Using radical participation as the main methodological principle advanced by the anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE), particularly within the context of the Zulu idiom and guided by dreams, has revealed to me the potentially important dimension of experience and its role in driving and sustaining the beliefs and practices relating to the water divinities across a wide range of groups in southern Africa. These beliefs and practices appear to be able to adjust and adapt to differing cultural, ecological, social and political-economic contexts. In this thesis I have attempted to show that the model I have developed of the different levels of analysis at which these beliefs and practices might be understood serves as a useful heuristic device to explain how and why these adaptations and variations take place across the region.
I have argued that, because of the assumptions they make, the application of various theoretical approaches to aspects of the water divinity phenomenon fail to take adequate account of the very real nature of the experience for those involved and its grounding within the geographical landscape, and as such give us a deficient understanding of the complex. While most authors acknowledge the reality of the experience for their informants, they only mention this briefly, and then move on to analyse it within more conventional and psychological frameworks. In describing my own extraordinary experiences I argue for the potential usefulness of assuming that experiences of the water divinities in, for example, the Zulu, Cape Nguni, Shona and Khoisan situations may be ontologically real. However, this is not to argue that approaches that deny their ontological reality are therefore wrong; rather, they are attending to a different level of analysis. Applying the methodological principles of AEE, however, opens up a different path to gather data, and offers a useful way of making sense of the pre-existing data, which is potentially illuminating, precisely because it takes a different, but complementary, range of factors, possibilities and experiences into account. Through adopting the radical participation method I had access to dreams that complemented existing ethnography and served as a research method to elicit further information regarding my informants' understanding of the water divinity phenomenon.

In order to be able to accommodate a range of approaches to the material, I have suggested that we need to distinguish and show the interrelationship between the various levels of analysis with regard to the phenomenon of the water divinities; these being, 1) the claimed experiences themselves, 2) the interpretation of these experiences, as expressed in beliefs and guided by the individual or group cosmologies and norms, 3) the praxis relating to those beliefs (and the processes involved) that become evident most clearly in ritual, and 4) the transmission of these beliefs and practices both within and across groups (see Chapter Four, Section 4.7.1). We also need to consider the way in which human agency permeates and influences all four of these levels. While the more conventional approaches concerned with structure, process and agency have been more oriented to levels two to four, the level of experience has not been adequately accounted for. However, I argue that to focus only on the level of experience, or on those levels which conventional approaches address, is inadequate. To fully comprehend how the complex manifests and why it varies, all levels need to be
considered; experience (including those considered extraordinary) is embedded in everyday social relations and mediated by classificatory structures, norms and social processes, and the conceptual tools that have been developed in conventional anthropology allow for a richer understanding of these.

In order to summarise how I have applied this four level (or phase) model in this thesis I will briefly examine my findings in the various chapters:

Chapters Three and Four addressed mainly level two (i.e. the interpretation of experience), although implicit in much of the pre-existing documented material is the acknowledgment of the real nature of the experiences for the informants (level one). My own experiences, precipitated mainly by dreams and documented in Chapter Six, largely concur with many of these claims as documented in the literature. The comparative ethnographic study of the literature, and data obtained from my own informants, has revealed a number of core elements in the beliefs and normative structures (i.e. codes of conduct) of the cultural groups concerned. These include very similar claims across all groups of certain individuals chosen to be diviner/healers who claim to have been taken underwater. This is usually preceded by a dream, which warns the individual and his/her family of the possibility of the event, followed by the event itself, whether it occurs physically, or is experienced in a state of trance. The dream also serves to alert one to a potential calling or the underwater event, and the need to actually locate and go to the geographical site in question, where rituals should be performed. The appearance of certain animals, regarded by most groups as either the manifestations or the messengers of the ancestors, at key times or places, is also a common feature. Narrations of the underwater event contain remarkably similar symbolic elements, especially the confronting of the large Snake that has the potential to put one into trance, and often has a bright light that emits from its eyes or forehead. In many cases, a fish-tailed woman and or other snakes, as well as the person’s own ancestors, may be encountered in this state. These various creatures are frequently associated with the source of knowledge, healing, fertility, water/rain and life. My own dream experience of being taken to a pool by children and being put into a state of trance (in the dream) by the very large Snake that emitted light from its eyes, and being given the gift of a child (i.e. symbolic of life and fertility) concurred with many of the themes found in the water divinity complex. The fact that I was able to find the very place that I had been shown in the dream (which I was not aware of prior to the dream),
and was able to obtain corroboration from local members of the community in the area that the pool was reputed to have a large shape-shifting Snake which diviners would visit, preferably being led there by small children, suggested to me that this dream was more than just auto-suggestion, and potentially more than the experience of an unconscious archetype. My experiences at Inkosazana’s pool also demonstrated that the izangoma genuinely believed I also had the potential of being taken underwater. Furthermore, my family members’ experiences with visiting pythons at the crucial time of my Zimbabwe ritual, provided me with a greater sense of conviction that the izangoma claims were more than just imaginative or symbolic constructs and that there is some sense of unity between the dream, spirit and natural worlds.

All groups recognise a set of common codes of conduct applicable mainly to the relatives of the person who they believe to be taken underwater. These being the taboo on crying, the need to consult with a diviner who specialises in such events, the need to offer something (usually a cow or a goat) to the water divinities in exchange for the return of the individual alive, and the need for a specialist diviner to take care of the individual who has returned from the water for a period of time. While all groups agreed that the person held to be taken underwater would return a very skilled diviner, there were variations in regard to the material gifts that they would be given by the water divinities, and the nature of their divinatory skills (i.e. becoming possessed by the njuzu spirits among the Shona, communicating with the whistling imilozi among the Nguni, or being given plants or medicines to heal with among the Khoekhoe descendants. The material gifts seemed to reflect what were regarded locally as highly prized material or culturally symbolic substances or artefacts, such as white clay, white beaded clothing and/or a white stone for the Cape Nguni; a snake around the neck for Zulu diviners; or bars of gold, medicines, shells or double-headed axes for the Shona. It was relevant that although my teacher was Zulu, and I was trained in the Zulu idiom, he claimed that my own ancestors had told him that they wished to give me a gift of gold following my dream visit to the Nyamakati Pool, which connected me more to my own Zimbabwe origins. Thus, it appears that the material gifts were seen as specific to the cultural context of one’s origins and the location of the pool to which one was called in a dream.

In Chapter Four I examined in more detail the common ideas held regarding the Snake/snakes
and mermaid/s. While all groups were in consensus that these creatures were linked in some way to the ancestors and/or God, as well as to healing, water/rain and fertility, there were certain inconsistencies between them. This was particularly in relation to the mermaid/s and whether they were regarded as a group of beings or as a singular entity. There were also variations as to where these beings were placed or ranked in the various groups' cosmological schemes. Connected to their place in the cosmological scheme was the nature of the rituals that were performed for them (i.e. the concern of levels two and three), discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. I suggested that in order to account for similarities and differences in beliefs and practices across groups one needs to consider ecological factors, the modes and relations of production (particularly the gendered relations of production and the control of social reproduction), and the political-juridical social arrangements and norms. In those groups where there had been a history of centralization of power, such as in Zimbabwe and KwaZulu-Natal, the control over the forces of production fell on the king or chief, and there was a more definite connection between the water divinities and the Shona and Zulu concepts of their High God, i.e. Mwari and uNkulunkulu respectively. In Zimbabwe there tended to be a centralization of ritual control based at the Mwari cave shrines under direction of a priesthood situated in the Matopos Hills. Similarly, the roles of the chiefs and/or king were far more pronounced in the annual Nomkhubulwana rituals in KwaZulu-Natal, even though they were still largely performed by women. Among the Cape Nguni in the former Transkei (such as the Mpondo), such centralization of power did not occur but was dispersed between the congeries of chiefdoms. Here the water divinities, or abantu bomlambo, were more associated with the agnatic ancestors, particularly those of the clan chiefs, who also controlled the rituals at dispersed pool sites related to each clan. However, further south among those Cape Nguni who were no longer under the control of chiefs but had long been subjected to European administration and marked land deprivation, the rituals for the abantu bomlambo were associated more with agnatic kinship groups at the level of the minimal lineage and with their ancestors, and were particularly related to those called to be diviners. Rituals thus tended to be performed by agnatically linked kinship groups of two to three generations deep. I suggest that Friedman's (1975) application of the Structural Marxist approach (discussed in Chapter One, Section 1.2.1.1) may be the most useful heuristic device to understand these variations and dynamics, but more detailed and specific research would be required in order to apply it in specific contexts.
The detailed analysis on the series of *intlwayelelo* rituals (Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1) that I attended in the Grahamstown area served to demonstrate not only how local Cape Nguni people applied their beliefs to ritual action, but also how various theoretical approaches to ritual, especially those pertaining to level three of the model, were relevant to aspects of the rituals that were performed. The importance of maintaining the idealized agnatic structures came through in the way the rituals were organized and who participated, and this was despite the erosion of marriage, descent and the holding of agnatically linked property (especially livestock) over the last century. There was evidence during these rituals, however, of a latent tension between the calling, and/or demands seen to be made by the ancestral spirits from the maternal line, and the responsibilities of the male-controlled agnatic structures. While Hirst (1990) argued that the experiences of the underwater calling of a diviner, and the associated rituals performed by the agnatic group for the water divinities, were a cleverly contrived device for maintaining these idealised structures, such a claim sits rather incongruously with the evidence that many diviners actually claim to have inherited their powers and their calling from their maternal side. If this was merely a means to express and re-enforce the idealised agnatic structure then it would be more logical if they were to claim these skills as coming only from the patriline (which Hirst did try to argue and my data contests). This incongruity serves to emphasise that the driving force behind many of the rituals are held to come from dreams that concern specific maternal ancestral spirits that are not agnatically linked.

As demonstrated by Victor Turner's various analyses of ritual among the Ndembu (1968, 1969), the *intlwayelelo* rituals were permeated with conflict and tensions between various participants, which the ritual itself not only precipitated, but also strove to resolve. These tensions in the rituals I attended were derived from a number of sources, these being related to transgressions in ritual protocol, gender roles, and accusations of criminal and other forms of anti-social behaviour levelled at certain members of the family. The fact that the first ritual failed due to the perceived lack of signs from the natural world, signalled in a very real way to the various participants that their ancestors were angry with such transgressions. It was the perceived failure in the appearance of these signs from the natural world (animals, birds, fish) and the ways in which the offerings of beer and tobacco ‘behaved’ on the surface of the water, which motivated the participants to address and resolve these tensions, and to repeat the ritual.
the following week. Thus, the importance of the natural world and the landscape, which are understood as being the medium of containment for and expression of their ancestors, were essential elements of the ritual for the participants.

Chapter Seven served to further exemplify the interplay between the second and third level of analysis of the model, that of beliefs and norms, and of praxis. This was especially with regard to how human agency may permeate these two levels and how actions may be measured against the idealised norms. The tension between structure and process, especially between the group’s idealised norms regarding exchange and distribution of resources, and the threat of individual agency driven by greed, was the dominant theme of this chapter. The ideological norms associated with structure provide a gauge by which members of the community determine whether a diviner is working with the forces of good or evil. It was here where symbolic inversions (Needham, 1979) became most evident. While the S/snake/mermaid may represent those powers that are regarded as the ultimate representation of all that stands for the communal good (in that they provide life, fertility, water, knowledge and healing), and the Snake is frequently identified as the form which the great benevolent ancestors and God take, it can also represent the manifestation of evil, which can be magically manipulated by those who seek its power for their own individual benefit. It is believed that these misdirected benefit-seeking behaviours threaten not only other people’s bodies (through muti murders, demands of human flesh, and unsolicited sexual attacks) but also the integrity of the group. Inversions of the principles of exchange and distribution of benefits permeate many of the moral economy discourses around the mamlambo snake, and these have been exacerbated by the transformation of the forces and relations of production that have come in the wake of the colonial incursion and global capitalism. The inherent ambiguity of the water divinities and the fact that they are seen as the guardians of morality on the one hand, where they will inflict punishment on those who transgress their moral norms, versus their potential to be magically manipulated and harnessed by evil doers on the other, are also emphasised in the discourses of uncertainty regarding the source of power of some diviners. I have detailed my own experiences and how I perceived the role of dreams in guiding me through the maze of uncertainty regarding my own teacher, and these reflect many of the real tensions and anxieties that face diviner-healers today. As in the Biblical Garden of Eden account the snake may be seen to offer itself as the symbolic referent through which good and evil can be
distinguished; ultimately, this is determined not by the nature of the S/snake itself, but by how humans obtain and use its gifts, and whether they act in a socially and morally responsible way. From an etic perspective we can infer that, ultimately, good and evil cannot be ascribed to something external to human thought, action and motivation, but essentially are revealed within it.

The influence of an externally imposed religion, Christianity, that typifies the snake or serpent as a predominantly evil symbol, has added further confusion in many of the moral discourses that circulate in southern Africa. However, it is evident, as detailed in Chapter Eight, how many aspects of Christianity, especially with regard to baptism and healing, have been accommodated and/or transformed by diviners, especially with regard to the water divinity complex and the role of prophets in the church. However, it is also evident that many of the Christian-based African independent churches have synthesised many of the symbols found in traditional healing into their own practices. As Christianity is a religion that has been imposed (or transmitted) from outside of the southern African context and has been subsequently transformed, assimilated and/or domesticated, by African religious beliefs and practices, Chapter Eight can thus be analysed with reference to levels two, three, and four.

The processes by which two religious traditions penetrate and transform each other are complex and can work in both directions. Similarly, one needs to consider the role of human agency, which is governed by the perceived political, economic and social benefits that may be perceived to accompany conversion to Christianity, or even to resist it. As the case of Baba illustrates, accommodating the Christian ministry can be used to access prestige and power. However, when measured against the discourses of the moral economy, such prestige and power can prove to be the downfall of those diviners who seek it. But one must take care not to assume that this should all be attributed to manipulative or instrumental agency. Here again, based on my own experiences, dreams can be interpreted so as to act as a powerful source of guidance and motivation that help guide the izangoma to transcend the differences between Christian and African traditional spirituality.

In Chapter Nine I used my own dream directed experience of finding a pool situated deep in (formerly) Khoisan territory in the Western Cape, which local ‘coloured’ residents confirmed
was associated with the mermaid and with the Snake, to explore some of the ideas that scholars have presented regarding San rock art, the underwater experience and the possible flow of ideas between the Khoekhoe, San and Nguni groups. My own need to understand the possible connection between Nguni and Khoisan knowledge regarding the water divinities was heightened by the fact that three of my dream-led experiences took me to significant Khoisan rock art or engraving sites. I have examined two in this thesis; that is, the Doring and Inxu River sites, while the third site, a rock engraving site near the Lydenburg waterfall in Mpumalanga, cannot be examined in this thesis due to space restrictions. The fact that much of the material regarding the diffusion of knowledge draws on tangible evidence (rock paintings) from a distant past, comparative linguistic and genetic evidence, and more recent (in the last 150 years) ethnographically derived evidence, provides insight into the complexities and difficulties of determining the processes by which transmission of knowledge may have taken place (level four of the model). A commonly shared factor of both the Nguni and Shona groups is that they shared their territory with various Khoisan groups, especially prior to colonialism. The temptation is thus to assume that the Khoisan were the source of knowledge regarding the water divinities, which connects all the southern African groups. While this may be a possibility there are incongruities that do not clearly support such an hypothesis, particularly the fact that animal sacrifice, which the San never engaged in, was an important element of the Nguni and Shona water divinity rituals. Knowledge and practices regarding these claimed experiences probably flowed in both directions and this sharing of knowledge and practice was augmented by the intermarriages that occurred especially between Khoe women and Nguni men. The essential role of the San, as the ‘autochthons’ of the land, with their skills of rain-making and knowledge of indigenous healing plants, in assisting certain Nguni groups, is however, an important consideration in assessing the flow of ideas between these groups.

It should be pointed out, however, that the beliefs and practices dedicated to the water divinities are not exclusively confined to those groups south of the Zambezi River, and this also undermines the argument of a purely San source of the knowledge. There is abundant evidence from ethnographic and art history studies that similar ideas regarding the snake and mermaid, the underwater experience, the return of the person abducted having great skills of healing, and their ambiguous moral qualities associated with moral economy discourses etc.,
are to be found across a wide swathe of West and Central Africa\(^1\). Similar beliefs and practices are also to be found among the West African Diaspora, such as in Haitian Vodoun\(^2\). Although an examination of such material is beyond the scope of this thesis, the possible connections between the West African and southern African beliefs and practices regarding the water divinities are thus worthy of further consideration (e.g. see Drewal, 2008).

Also, falling beyond the scope of this thesis, but being still potentially relevant for further consideration and investigation, are the extensive beliefs in snake and fish-tailed deities and their link with dreams, healing and fertility that have been recorded in texts relating to a wide range of ancient civilizations\(^3\).

The question of what exactly these entities are, and how we can explain the claims relating to the underwater experience itself, falls beyond the scope of this thesis. The Jungian notion of the archetypal images that derive from the collective unconscious, often manifested in dreams, or the Eliadian notion of the “hierophanies of the sacred”, could present avenues through which such explanations may be sought. However, these need to be developed further in order to be able to address why many of the dream experiences, which I have had myself, occur as a series of unpredictable, yet synchronistic, logical and meaningful events (both internal and external to the body), which are relevant to the lived realities of the individual and which experienced as are strongly connected to geographical features in the landscape. I mentioned in the thesis that one of my dreams connected me to the birthplace and first temple of Asclepius, the ancient Greek God of healing, whose symbol, the snake entwined on a staff, is still used as a universal symbol of healing today. This experience, which goes beyond the scope of this study, suggests to me that we need to delve deeper, beyond the realms of the collective unconscious, but this will take us into the realm of religious metaphysics, which we

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3 These are numerous and an exhaustive list cannot be presented here, but examples include Campbell, 1898; Colpe, 1970; Doresse, 1960; Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945/1998; Eliade, 1958; Farbridge, 1923; Fontenrose, 1959; Gardiner & Osborn, 2005; Graves, 1955/1960, 1999; Harrison, 1912; Huxley, 1979; Leisegang, 1955; Meier, 1989; Narby, J. 1995; Robertson-Smith, 1927; Ustinova, 1999, 2005, 2008.
presently do not have the conceptual tools to address.
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APPENDIX ONE

The following narrative is the result of an interview I had with Baba regarding his experiences of becoming a healer:

P: When you were a child Baba did you know that you were going to be a sangoma?
B: There were signs that I had. I had the signs that showed me that I was going to thwasa because what I used to have used to be like this: Our home was built in Dedi site, everytime when the weather is overcast I started becoming fearful. Even in broad daylight, even going to school and even when I was asleep I would dream about the snakes. But when I dream of them coming to me, I did not become afraid and it would be like they are my friends. Then one day my sibling, Zwelani, got injured. Then as we were playing near a stone, when I lifted it there was this snake, a beautiful snake and I didn't tell the others because they were going to kill it, so I went without telling my brothers who were still playing. Every Saturday I used to go there to that stone and put 5 cents, not knowing why I was doing it. I don't know if they are still there as I forgot about it. Then when I was at school people were irritated by me. The teachers at the school did not like me. I was very clever, I was a genius and by that year (Std 5) I was going to thwasa. It was at that time that I saw I was thwasa. As I was a child I used to play my drum and call other children to make a circle for me, and act as if it was my umgidi (his final initiation party as an isangoma).

P: Were you ever sick as a child Baba?
B: I was very sick. I grew up being sick. Even at home we were very poor, without a father. As I was going to thwasa the ancestors arrived during the night. I saw them coming. They told me that I have to go. They want to take my mother out of shame and sorrow. She had suffered a lot. I was to be the one to take her away from this (sorrow). When I came out of a certain house, they showed me something that looks like a storage room (for potatoes/food). I came back wearing ‘umyeko’ (the beaded headdress worn only by izangoma) and it seemed like I was a sangoma. I was dreaming and in my hand was the shoba. I was dancing and dancing and then woke up thinking I was already a sangoma. By the next day I had forgotten the whole thing. At 2 o’clock, as I was collecting my things I was taken spontaneously, without knowing. I went to Bhuka, where I became a thwasa, and the sangoma took me to thwasa here at Mpanda. I stayed for a short time and then I ran away to Escourt, Emtsheni, house no 52, where I ‘thwased’ there religiously as a messenger. Then I came back and the ancestors said it was not enough. They wanted me to go on. I then went to Mt Fletcher in the Transkei. There I also was a thwasa and they sent me out in a rude Xhosa way......(lifting a myeko from his umsamo)...here is the umyeko from Mt Fletcher. It’s really from the Transkei...[he starts singing]....Hela camagwini, hayi yi. The animal I came out by I am going to fetch from my cupboard. The Xhosa ‘thwasa’ by animals. (He brought me a jackal skin and showed me a umshoba). Here, see, here is the shoba from Transkei.

Zanele: It’s beautiful. Do you ever carry it Baba?
B: No it belongs to the makhosi really. I came back from the Transkei and then the ancestors

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1. Running spontaneously to a teacher in this way, without really being aware of it, is a well recognised by the Zulu and is termed hayisa. One just happens to find oneself at the teacher’s home without being aware of how he/she got there.
said the clothes (his sacred garments) are not complete yet. I haven’t fetched the snake yet. They sent me to Masteshi, who trained Geza’s wife, where I would raise the amakhosi. The ancestors arrived while I was there (in a dream) and showed me a bull with a white tail and a white face, with a bit of colour on it face. It was to help me take this snake out when I fetched it. Even then I had dreams related to the snake. Do you know MaMthombeni, she saw the snake in daylight. She cried and went back into the house. At the time I was already a sangoma. She called Ben, a policeman to shoot it, but when he arrived the snake had gone. The ancestors showed me this cow with long horns facing backwards. I didn’t know where to find it. Then one day we heard the cow calling. The thwasa’s were here. It came here to the house, kicked the door and came in. People were shocked about what was happening. When I came out I saw it was the same cow I had seen (in the dream). I did not speak. I took a stick and beat it, thinking it would go home. It belonged to the Ndlouv family and I talked them into selling it to me as it was the one I dreamt about. I asked them if they were not selling the cow. Ndlouv said it gave him lots of trouble in the fields. He wanted to sell it and said it was going for R900.00. I sat there and sent someone to fetch the money. We paid and came home with it. I was feeling guilty. I wanted to tell someone about this but I couldn’t. Then someone from the Mthembu family, an old woman, asked me if there were any thwasa’s who wanted a goat because she had one which butted the children ‘to death’ and she was wanting to sell it. I went to see it and it was exactly the one I dreamt about. At home they were surprised and were wondering why I was collecting cows and goats. What was going to happen? Then I told them that in the next week they must prepare beer (tshwala). That evening a woman with a stroke arrived. I tried to help her and the man with her told me they did not earn a salary to pay for the consultation. They would give me a goat instead. The very same goat I needed. The same day, by morning I had everything, two goats and a cow. Then I went to look for the cars which would take me to Durban to look for the snake. At the taxi stop Mr N who lives nearby said he would take me to Durban. He asked when and I said at 7 o’clock. He said I must get R280.00 for two cars to take me there. Then it was a surprise because the people I heal here at home pay me that amount. So I paid for the taxis. Then the day came and all the sangomas came.

Z: What were you wearing Baba?
B: I was wearing sangoma clothes but they (ancestors) said when I reach Durban I must take them off and burn them with imphepho. As I came to the sea, I couldn’t feel that I was in the water. It was like I was getting through the fence of a traditional Zulu house. (According to an earlier account given to me by Baba, it was at this point that a snake came out of the sea and wrapped around him four times, and with its head on top of his it took him into the water. It was at this stage that he ‘lost his brains’ ie blacked out). As I came to the Zulu round grass-houses, two old women came out. They had a present with them, as if they were happy to see me. She hugged me and said “take this and go back”, but as she was hugging me she put something around my neck. I realised later that it was a snake. (Again, in an earlier account, he said he was escorted out of the sea with a dolphin and the snake was around his neck). Then as I came back the sangoma’s ran away. Only my grandmother took my clothes and dressed me. There were a lot of sangoma’s, even ones from Dambuza, Imbali. We don’t know why they came or who told them. My ceremony! The white goat was slaughtered and I drank its blood.  

2. Drinking the blood of the sacrificed beasts is an essential part of the process of becoming a healer and connecting with the ancestors. They are ritually consecrated with ubulawu prior to slaughter.
couldn’t see that it was the snake, my mind was so blind. I was only aware what was happening at 12 o’clock as if I was waking from a dream. I called grandma. I was already dressed. She told me what was happening, then I cried. People threw me a lot of money. Then in the morning, the *sangomas* (a lot of them) came up to my home. Even the chief came. That is how it all happened.
APPENDIX TWO


The following is an account given to Berglund by a ‘ventroloquist’ diviner who experienced going under water.

The ventroloquist described his experiences in connection with *ukuvuma* (accepting the call of the ancestors; lit ‘to agree’) thus: “I was very sick, having dreamt much for many nights. The body was painful everywhere, especially the shoulders and the sides. It was *izibhopho*. The whole body was in sickness. On a certain day, in the evening, I was sitting in the doorway. Just sitting there, there came a beetle (*umsifisi*). It came closer. It was white. It came closer and closer until it was next to me. I heard it saying certain words. It said, ‘Stand up! Follow me! Stand up! (*Sukuma! Ngilandele!*)’ It was saying these words very much, flying around about me. It spoke those words until I stood up. It flew in a certain direction, calling me all the time. I followed it. I walked and walked, following the beetle which was calling me all the same words. I simply followed, going in the direction of the beetle all the time. It was flying in front. I was walking behind. I felt strong. The energy returned to the bones. I even followed running. I was amazed, finding myself running but being such a sick man. The beetle flew to a certain pool, all the time calling me. I followed it to the pool. It entered the pool, all the time saying to me, ‘*Ngilandele!*’ I walked on the stones in the pool until I came to the bottom, all the time following the beetle. There I stopped, I looked everywhere, seeing many things. I saw a very great python (*inhlwathi*) coiled on medicines. It was surrounded by many other snakes, big ones and small ones. They were the snakes of our fathers. They were just there, at the bottom of the pool, lying there and looking at me with open eyes. The python had a lamp (*isekhethekethe*) on its head. It was shining in the pool, throwing light everywhere and revealing the things there in the pool. There was also a lady there with very big breasts, suckling the children of the python. There were many children of the python. It (the python) put spittle (*ama/he*) into the woman. She became pregnant and gave birth, producing the children of the snake. The python said to the shade-snakes, ‘Is this the man?’ They agreed, saying that I was the man. Then the snake (python) spoke to me, addressing me clearly, ‘Did the beetle bring you here?’ I agreed. ‘What was the colour of the beetle?’ I gave the colour of the beetle. It said, ‘Did it speak of medicines?’ I agreed that it had spoken of medicines, adding that I had also dreamt of medicines. It said, ‘The medicines are under my stomach, just underneath me. Just take some medicines.’ So I took some medicines, fearing very much. Then it said, ‘Smear yourself with the medicines seeing that you have work (to do).’ So I smeared myself with the clay, being naked. Then the snake put spittle on me. I feared very much. It put spittle everywhere. Then it returned, lying on the medicines, leaving me there with the medicines and the spittle. It was hot. Then the python said, ‘Look at all these. Do you know them?’ I said that I recognised them, seeing all the shade-snakes and the woman with the breasts, just suckling all the time. The python said to me, ‘Just take some medicines in the hand.’ I took medicines in the hand from under the snake. Then the beetle came to me saying the words as before. I followed it, walking on the stones of the pool. I did not look back, having been told not to look backwards. I walked and walked. I came to the top of the pool, following the beetle all of the time, just following it. When it came to the
bank of the river it stopped, saying, 'From here I leave you.' It returned into the water. There arose a mist. I found myself on the bank of the river, being naked and having the white medicines of the pool. There was whiteness everywhere on the body. Then I looked in the hand and saw the snake that I took in the pool. I hung it around the neck, its head resting on my head, the body around the neck. I walked home. I came home after walking a very long way. There was much noise, people lamenting very much, simply shouting and screaming (isilililo) the death lamentation. I said, 'Surely there must be a corpse, somebody having died, seeing that they are lamenting thus.' I came close to the homestead. I called on them saying, 'People of my fathers, what is the noise, my not having heard that there is a death in our place?' They said, 'No, there is the corpse of the one that is not. He left here one day in the evening, just walking in the direction of the great river. Since his departure he has not returned. So we are lamenting him, seeing that he did not return.' Then I knew that they were mourning me. I said, 'No, I simply went to the river being called by the beetle, taking medicines at the river. Even just now I have the medicines.' They came out. They saw me. They were very much amazed, seeing me naked and carrying medicines and with a snake. They said, 'But you were dead. We have heard of them that know (diviners) that you were dead. But now we see you living again. We cannot deny the things that were said. But you are living now, having medicines and carrying this thing. But how is it that you left, leaving no word?' Then they were satisfied, seeing me with the medicines and the snake. They took it (the snake). They carried it to its place. There they kept it. Then they were quiet, having stopped lamenting me. The pains in the side were less. But from that day I could not drink beer, or take beans or food made of beans. They just cause sickness and swelling. Even to this day I do not eat beans or a dish of beans. They kill me.'


The following narrative was conducted between Berglund and the 'ventriloquist' whose account is recorded above:

B: “Was the python a shade snake together with the other snakes in the pool?”

"The snakes were all shade-snakes, being our fathers, that is true. But the big one, lying on the medicines of whiteness, it was inkosi yamadlozi (lit. the lord of the shades)."

B: “Who is he that is lord of the shades?”

“As I have said, I have not seen him but this once. He is not seen. It brings insanity to the one that is too near to him too much. That is why we do not see him. He brings this thing of fearfulness on men. So he is in the pool because of the cool of the water. It gives coolness to him.”

B: “By way of insanity, I know that also the brooding of the shades brings insanity if it is too long. Is this snake then not a shade?”

“You are speaking the truth, saying that the brooding of the shades brings insanity. But that is only an inferior insanity (ukuhlanya nje). When the brooding ceases, then the man becomes well again if they (the shades) wish it. Sometimes the man takes medicines and becomes better, not suffering so much of the insanity. But the insanity of this big one is the great insanity, the insanity which finishes a man (ukuhlanya okumgedayo umuntu). That is the bad insanity. There is no healing from it, there being no medicines against it. The person just dies. He is eaten up by the insanity completely.”

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B: "So you are indicating that the snake is not a shade?"
   "That is what I am saying".
B: "Who is he?"
   "Let me tell you nicely. It is inkosi yamakhosi omkhulu (the lord of the lords, the great
   one). (The diviner lifted his eyebrows and glanced upwards a moment.) He is the one. I think
   you understand me now?"
B: "You are referring to the one above?"
   "That is the very one."
B: "Does he come down to earth?"
   "He himself does not come. If he came then everybody would be eaten up by fire. He
   sends his animal. That is the one that is the snake of the pools. That is the one he sends."
B: "It was the one that put spittle into the woman, making her pregnant?"
   "He is the one. It was a sign. The sign says that the life (imphiyo) comes from the one
   above. He was giving fertility to the woman. That was the sign of the woman."
B: "But procreation is the work of the shades. They are the water of men, fertilizing the
   woman?"
   "It is so. But the shade-snakes were there, receiving the power from the big one. They
   receive the power to fertilize from the one above. But they (the shades) are in the water of
   men, causing conception."
B: "Was the spittle the water, fertilizing the woman?"
   "It was the thing that made her fertile. That is how he puts water into a woman. His
   mouth is the place where it comes out."
B: "Was the spittle the same as male fluid?"
   "They are the same. The spittle of the big one fertilizes the woman. The water of men
   fertilizes their wives, causing conception. They are the same."
B: "So there must be a close relationship between shades and the snake?"
   "There is a closeness. They work together. The great snake gives the power to the
   shade-snakes. They come to men with it, giving power to men. That is how it is."
B: "You were called to the pool?"
   "I was called by the shades. They are the ones that called me. They answered the great
   one that I was the one. So it is they who called me."
B: "What about the beetle?"
   "It was sent by them the (shades)."
B: "What were the snakes that the woman was feeding?"
   "They were signs showing that the children come from the great one. That is what
   they were saying. They were just pictures, saying that the children of men come from inkosi,
   as I have said."
B: "So they were not shades?"
   "No, they were not shades. They had not been men. So they could not be shades."
B: "Must a shade have been a man (umuntu) before being a shade?"
   "That is so. If the shades are like the ones in the pool, then they must have been men
   before being like those shades."
B: "Are there shades which have not been men?"
   "I have never heard of such shades. But there are other living creatures (ezinye
   izinyamazane) like the snakes that the woman was feeding. Sometimes they are not known."
B: "Are these snakes known?"
   "They are not known. As I said, those snakes sucking the woman were just pictures,
saying that life comes from the great one.”

B: “Was the woman a sign for something?”

“She was the sign of birth, giving birth to the children of the great one. That is her sign.”

B: “She was feeding?”

“She was feeding, like all women who have little ones to feed. There is nothing in the feeding. That is the work of women. The sign was the birth of the little ones.”

B: “You said she was heavy in the breasts.”

“That is what I said. She was heavy in that she was giving the breast (to little ones). All women doing this work are heavy in that way. Even here, every woman doing this is heavy. There is nothing in this.”

B: “Many things are clear now. But it is not clear why the great one was in the pool.”

“He was in the pool because the pool is the place of uhlanga.”

B: “What is uhlanga?”

“It is the origin, the place of the coming out of men.”

B: “Did men come out of the pool?”

“That is where they came out. The reeds are the carriers of water. They penetrate the earth, causing conception of mankind.”

B: “We are talking of conception all the time. You were sick with the sickness of diviners. How are these things related?”

“They are related because there was a birth. There was a birth of a diviner. That is the thing that connects the snake of greatness and the diviner.”

B: “Did you know this when the beetle called you?”

“I knew nothing. I was just sick, having great pains. That is all I knew.”

B: “Who told you all these things of the snakes and medicines?”

“They were revealed. (Long silence). Yes, they were revealed.”

B: “How?”

“In the way of the shades.”

Although it was the python that lay on the white clay the diviner very clearly and definitely identified the whiteness of the clay with the shades. “That is their colour. They are the white ones. When a man comes out (of the pool) it is known that he comes from the shades in that he comes out white.” Not only did he associate the colour white with the shades in this manner. He said that the shades are white. In the dream which to him was an experience of firm and rigid realism, he had seen that they were white. This was an undisputable fact, based neither on rumours nor hearsay, but on personal experience.
APPENDIX THREE


The following account was given to Dr M. Kohler while practicing as a missionary doctor at the Centocow mission in the Bulwer District of Natal in the 1930s (over 70 years ago). The first account was from a young woman, identified as A.M.N., who had been an isangoma but at the time of interview claimed to have become converted to Christianity. The account is labeled No. 16, and entitled ‘The great dream or vision of an ithwasa’; the notation is as Kohler used it in his publication.

79. It was a Wednesday. At eight in the evening a white bird came, and I went into the house where I was staying, and it followed me inside. Wo! I went off and walked (? following the bird). It was pitch dark outside and it was raining, but I walked on and went to the pool.

80. When I was about to enter the wagon road, I met a huge black monster with fiery nostrils. I was terrified but just went on and passed it. I went on in front, but it came up to me and we went on together. At midnight I arrived there and oh! I got a fright at seeing the huge pool, I sat down to think out a plan about going in. I was very much afraid and trembled violently, for the monster shone with fire where it stood.

81. Then at dawn I entered the water, but it disappeared completely, so I walked easily and went down the stones and vanished below. I reached the interior and stood on my feet. I looked and saw on my right hand a large snake in a ditch which ran down and away into the distance. The snake stared at me, and I stared at it all the time. It had a head like a large stone, its body was dark brown, it was huge and terrifying; its wicked eyes were blood red; its head was bigger than a pot. A lamp was shining on its back, a small lamp which shone like all ordinary lamps.

82. I also saw a black woman. Wo! But she was black! She went naked, having no garment on her body, and there were children of the snake near her that she suckled. She had breasts all over her body, many of them and large also.

83. Then another monster, fearful to behold, appeared. It had red eyes and was large, it was as big as a beast. On its forehead it had a lamp that gave off heat. This lamp came and stood on my left, facing towards me, so that a great heat overcame me; as I had been seated I now got up and stood on my feet. The monster groaned horribly so that I suddenly thought it was going to devour me.

84. Thus, whilst I was still sitting there, sickening fear grew within me. There was another thing; a gigantic girl appeared from out of the snake’s ditch, and approached me burning with rage and fury. She came near and then fell down. Wo! As she was nearly frightening me to death, she cried, “What put you here? What do you want? You will assuredly learn today, having reached the ends of the earth. There is no ruler here (not clear); there is only suffering and death. You will suffer and I also.” I felt it was hard to die without having prayed, so I plucked up the courage and replied, “Ish po! What do you say I should have done, seeing that
I was summoned?" She said, "They are coming, others of our people. They will fight with you; they are a great army of warriors."

85. Wo! I took to my heels, but the snake barred the way, erecting the crest on its back. I retreated to my former place and looked at all the creatures. However, before other animals arrived, the girl went off and disappeared near where the snake was.

86. Meanwhile the beast like monster was groaning there all the time. Suddenly there appeared another animal that was quite white all over, head, feet and body. It had white fur on it whole body, which was not tall. However, this creature was not fearful to behold, on the contrary it was rather nice! It was not fierce, so that it restored my courage. It spoke of the matter of other people having been devoured there. Then, as I was still sitting there, a little white buck came and sat by me. There was a noise of skins (meaning uncertain) and I danced inside there, but without seeing them.

87. Oh! I was afraid of this last one which also lay down by me. Then cattle came, one white beast and one black. The black one was in a small puddle of water, it played there going around the puddle and entering it, and then coming out again all the time.

88. After this I looked up and lo! There were old men wearing nothing, many of them, and small like the person you see (reflected) in another’s eyes. They were each taller than the next, as they held one another’s heads, each one holding the head of the other, in pairs. There were chickens that resembled birds, very small and whitish, like the birds that came when I was sitting in my hut. They were also sitting there in the house of the snake but they did not inspire fear.

89. Again there came other water animals that looked like people, though shorter and grey on their small heads, but larger as to their bodies and with hideous faces; they were females, males and children, these latter quite small. They spoke a tongue unknown to me, they were weeping with tears in their eyes.

90. Wo! Then there came those animals that had made me to go there. I heard soft voices and remained seated. Though they said I would come to grief I stayed on. They did not let me know the medicine when they fetched me from home. Another snake appeared, a short one. It came out of a big ugly hole, which was very hot, but I did not see inside properly, as there was much confusion and people were crying, so I could not observe accurately.

91. Then on Thursday I was told to go below the earth. I went with the animal with the white fur and we went down below to the sand near another ugly dirty river, and unpleasant to the taste, being like salt. There I felt I could stay always, for it was very beautiful and the snakes of that place were very handsome.

92. Then I saw a beautiful white person who walked on the water and who gave me many lovely things. He was a handsome man and his clothes were too beautiful. Then many other white people appeared out of the water. There was white sand near it. They came out on to the sand and then went back into the river again. As they went in, small creatures appeared.

93. There was at that river a doctor (or moon – inyango), big and red. About sunset I saw him (it) approaching and about to come out of the water. The river was wide so that I could not see the other side (? the sea), I only saw sand on this side. I did not see the sun properly, I only saw the rays faintly, but it was nevertheless warm.
Now the monsters also entered the water, then came out again and stood where I was. It was very windy at this river and near it there were furious blasts.

94. Then the creature that had the light on its forehead came back again. It shone with light and we went back to the snake, getting there at twilight, and I sat down with those animals. There came evil spirits (a Christian concept) and they said, “Go and take your medicine from under the snake yonder”. The spirits departed, and removed the snake from the trench where my medicine was.

95. I went and took the medicine and returned with it; I went to the monster, which rubbed it on my forehead and all over my body. The monster having finished with me, the snake now proceeded to drink water, it reared its head aloft, but the water was finished, and the snake became huge after having drunk so much water. The monster spoke, “Go now, but in which direction will you get out?” And indeed I saw no place where I may get out, for above there was not even the smallest opening, there were only huge rocks.

96. This then is the end of the matter. My mind became dim when I was about to go out. I saw dimly that the earth was at an end, as I did not see those old men; they had completely vanished. Now the monster went on in front of me on the way I had come.

97. On Friday morning the snake performed and played before me and opened out the handsome markings on its back. I did not want to look at them at all, fearing that it would swallow me. Now when I looked round in all directions, for it had raised its head which stood on the end of the part of its body which was above, I looked down half-way and then turned towards its head again and looked at its eyes.

98. This is the end of the story of the monsters, and I shall now tell what happened outside. On coming out of there, I simply walked along without seeing anything. I came out of the pool and, soon after, my relatives came and took me home, but they were afraid of me and thus my things were left behind. So I went back later and brought home what was there. This is the end.

The next excerpt (No. 17) from Kohler’s documentation come from an individual known as Sikhumbana, who he describes as “an old doctor and imbongi (reciter of praises) and very well acquainted with the laws and customs of his tribe, the Dlamini, near Centocow. He titles the account ‘Wanderings during ukwethwasa’.

99. An isangoma enters a pool, sinks and arrives at the place where the snake ixanti lies, and takes of the white ochre. He gets to where the ixanti is, because it lies on top of white ochre. The isangoma coaxes it a little, puts his hand underneath, takes the ochre and comes out of the water with it. He paints it on his face and body. He goes home, followed by other female learners. He stays under water for some time, he breathes in the place of the ixanti, for it is dry place, the water is some way off, it is just earth.

100. In his wanderings an isangoma goes about in the flesh. It is like dreaming. He may also go in the spirit only. To go in the spirit is one thing and to go in the flesh is another, they are distinct. When his body is at home, people do not know that he is wandering; only he himself knows. It is he who knows that our brothers are coming (to consult him). It is he who will know the time when they will arrive to consult him about a certain thing. It is he who will say, “There they are!”
Another old isangoma (M.J.D) who became an isangoma in her youth and then apparently 'converted' described the following key steps that take place in the initiation of a isangoma (Narrative no 14: page 17-18)

When a person thwasa's (becomes an isangoma) he often sleeps. In his sleep he dreams of his ancestors who are dead, who take him down into a pool in a river; there they paint him with white earth. This pool is feared by the people who do not go to it. The ancestor spirits take him out of the pool, and he goes home shouting hysterically. He enters the cattle kraal and sings the song of the ancestor spirits which runs:

"Wo! the ancestor spirit cast me away;
The illness took me in the shoulder blade!"

The people awake and come to the cattle kraal where they clap hands for him as he dances. He works himself into a fit of hysteria, goes out of the kraal to his hut, flings himself down, still shouting, and faints. The people are startled to see him thus taken by the ancestor spirits. When he comes to, they rush to the cattle-kraal and stab a beast, and take out its gall bladder and bladder. These are blown up and both are tied to the back of his head.

69. Next day a certain object is hidden whilst he is away. Thereupon the ancestor spirit takes hold of him and leads him to the place where the object was hidden. He has a fit of hysteria and he is helped in his search by his ancestor spirit, which leads him to discover the thing. Having found it, he takes it to the cattle-kraal and enters it, still shouting.

70. They take the skin of the animal that has been slaughtered and rip it to pieces with a knife or spear and make imisweswana or iminqwamba out of it. He takes them and puts them on over his body. After this he divines for all the people and receives payment from them, He is now a qualified isangoma. All the medicines which he uses for cures he is shown by the ancestor spirits in the pool. And the great dance also and the sings that go with it he is taught by the spirits. If a person is ill, he betakes himself thither, even though he has not been summoned, for he is sent by the ancestor spirits.

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1 Umqwavamba (sing.): a single strip of skin which, something like a pair of braces joined together at the middle before and behind, is worn by witch doctors over the shoulders and round the body (Bryant, Dict. p 449) (as taken from Kohler, 1941).

The snakes into which men turn are not many; they are distinct and well known. They are the black *Imamba*, and the green *Imamba*, which is called *Inyandezulu*. Chiefs turn into these, common people turn into the *Umtlwazi*, and chieftainesses. Another snake is called *Ubulube* or *Inkwakwa*, and another *Umzingandhlu*; common people turn into these only.

These snakes are known to be human beings when they enter a hut; they do not usually enter by the doorway. Perhaps they enter when no one is there, and go to the upper part of the hut, and stay there coiled up. A snake of this kind does not eat frogs or mice; it remains quiet, until someone sees it and calls others; it is not afraid so as to run away, and it is left alone. Some say, “Let it be killed.” Others say, “What, kill a man!”

If the snake has a scar on the side, someone, who knew a certain dead man of that place who also had such a scar, comes forward and says, “It is So-and-so. Do you not see the scar on his side?” It is left alone, and they go to sleep.

During the night the chief of the village dreams, and the dead man says to him, “Do you now wish to kill me? Do you already forget me? I thought I would come and ask for food; and do you kill me? I am So-and-so.”

In the morning he tells his dreams, and says, “Let a sin-offering be sacrificed, lest the Itongo be angry and kill us.” They fetch a bullock or goat; and pray and eat the flesh. They look, and the snake is no longer there. It has now completely disappeared.

A mere snake, when it comes into a hut, looks from side to side, and is afraid of men; and it is killed because it is known to be a wild snake. A snake is also known by its mere appearance to be an animal, even though it does not look from side to side, because it is neither an *Imamba* (black mamba), that is a man, nor an *Inyandezulu* (green mamba), which is known to be a man. Those which are men and those which are not, are distinguished by their colour. The Puffadder, the *Ivuzamanzi*, and *Inthlangwane*, and the grey and spotted *Imamba*, are known to be mere beasts. It is impossible for them to ever become men; they never become men; they are always beasts. And those which are men are always men; as soon as they are seen they are known to be men; and truly they speak in dreams; and even if they do not, it is known that they are men.

Those that are men are known by their frequenting huts, and by their not eating mice, and by their not being frightened by the noise of men; they are always observed not to be afraid of the shadow of a man; neither does the snake of an Itongo incite fear in men, and there is no feeling of alarm as though there was a wild beast in the house; but there is a happy feeling, and it is felt that the chief of the village has come. When the men see it, it is as though it said as they look at it, “Be not afraid. It is I.” So they are able at all times to associate with it.

If it has been killed by someone who is wholly ignorant; it comes to life again, and it has the marks of the rod on its body by which it was killed; and complains in a dream of the treatment it has received. And after that a sin-offering is sacrificed. This, then, is how snakes are
distinguished....

Again, if a snake which is an *Itongo* lies on its back, with its belly upwards, it is cause for great alarm, and it is said something of consequence is about to happen, - or, the village is about to be destroyed.
The other (snake) charmer was Zizwezonke Mthethwa who frequently visited Eshowe where I lived some thirty years ago, to display his collection of snakes. The snakes were contained in a soap box and carried by his 12 year old daughter on her head. Together they walked regularly to Eshowe from their home at Ngudwini, some fifteen miles to the south. Zizwezonke was a direct lineal descendant of the celebrated Mthethwa king, Dingiswayo. He hauled the snakes out of the box like so many vons and placed them on the lawn in front of Adam’s Store where he soon had a crowd of on-lookers.

As soon as the snakes began to move he held them in check with a light switch, but he also appeared to exercise some form of hypnotic control over them. He was a well built man, very black, with piercing eyes. The collection consisted of two black mambas and a green one (each about eight feet in length), a cobra and two puffadders. The snakes were fully fanged. This he proved to me later when he borrowed my pocket knife and snicked off the fangs of one or two, explaining that they would remain harmless for about a fortnight, by which time they would have grown again.

When performing he frequently draped his snakes about his neck and shoulders, and held several suspended by their heads between his teeth. To do this was quite a simple matter. As the snake lay on the ground he pressed it down at the back of its head with a stick, seized its jaws between finger and thumb and then transferred this grip to his mouth.

As a test of courage he asked me to hold a mamba between my teeth, but I informed him that my *isibindi* (liver), the repository of all courage, had been removed by a doctor some years before. Besides, I only had false teeth. (Persons who wish to experiment by dangling snakes between their teeth are advised not to do so if they have dentures.)

On one occasion he happened to be in town during the visit of the late Dr. Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs. He stayed with Mr. Basil Adams, chairman of the Town Board, and I sent Zizwezonke over with his box of tricks to entertain the Minister. While performing, he was bitten on the hand by a puff adder but suffered no ill effects.

In the book *Sangoma* written by filmmaker Attilio Gatti, (1962), Mr Lugg wrote down the life history of Zizwezonke Mtetwa, as told by the individual himself.

“Zizwezonke Mtetwa, the Sangoma, tells his story:
“My paternal grandfather was the late Chief Matshali Mtetwa killed during the Bambata
Rebellion in 1906, and he in turn was a grandson of the celebrated Mfetwa King Dingiswayo, who laid the foundations upon which his general, the great Shaka, later built the Zulu nation. Thus, it will be seen that I am a lineal descendant of Dingiswayo’s. I was born in 1918, and live on a ridge overlooking the Tugela River about fifty miles from here, under a chief of the Zulu clan.”

“We Mfetwa people are of Tonga stock, and consequently do not belong to that branch of the Nguni family which include the Zulu and their kindred clans. As a tribe, the Mfetwa have always been famous for their Sangomas or amadalakonke (the creators of everything), as they are often referred to, whose assistance and advice is sought from far and wide.”

“Although I am not a licensed medicine man, I am a recognized by my people as a qualified Sangoma and snake charmer. I am anxious to secure a license, as I am not supposed to practice as a medicine man without one, but so far I have been unsuccessful, as the Government is restricting the activities of Natives engaged in this profession. I am about to renew my application.”

“As I am anxious that my children and their descendants should know how I came by my calling, I wish to record the circumstances under which this came about.

“Before a man or woman can become a Sangoma, he or she must pass through a process of initiation or apprenticeship, known as ukwethwasa. At the outset, the novice is afflicted with a peculiar malady or ‘sickness’. He becomes possessed of a spirit, and it must be clearly understood that only those who become so afflicted may qualify as diviners. In some cases the cause of the ‘illness’ can be detected by the patient; in others only by a medicine man or a Sangoma. In my case I diagnosed it myself.

“It is a hard and difficult course. With me, an elder brother was taken ill, but died without qualifying. He was followed by another brother. He also died, despite having gone to a European hospital for treatment. Then my turn came. It took the form of dreams and visions. In one of these I saw myself sitting, partly submerged in a pool of water like a duck, and I was seized with an urge to immerse myself in water – an urge with which I frequently complied. About the same time I developed a sore on my penis, and I found that the only way to alleviate the pain was to immerse myself in water. Eventually the sore disappeared, but appeared again later. Continuance of the water treatment eventually effected a cure.”

“Still I was far from well, and in my dreams I saw many snakes, the sight of which I also developed an urge to hunt and capture them. It was one that I could not resist, and I was impelled to seek them out of their hiding-places and the capture them. To improve my health I cooked and ate one, and derived considerable benefit from doing so. On one occasion, when attempting to capture a green mamba – one of the variety that changes colour from green to a shade of copper brown it bit me and I got very ill, with burning pains across my chest. I treated myself, with a mixture of whey and a brew made from the leaves of the mqaqongo.

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1 1906, 1918 and 1946 were years worked out by Mr Lugg in some elaborate way of his own, as the Sangoma of course didn’t refer to these, or other years, by number, but by quoting events which allowed Mr Lugg to fix the dates.

2 After hearing what we had to say about the Sangoma, the Magistrate granted him the license at once.
"In one dream, I was instructed by the Unseen to remove my foreskin as it was causing ill-health. I did so, by cutting it off with a knife the next morning, and immediately my health began to improve. In this connection I wish to record that, in early times, circumcision was practiced by most tribes in Zululand, including our own, and the custom was only dropped when Shaka prohibited its further observance. It is still followed by many Natives living in the Cape Province."

"It is the custom for most novices to serve their period of probation under the guidance of a qualified Sangoma, but I have never done so. I have acquired all my information and knowledge by second sight. I get an idea – a sort of message – which I receive at times even when awake. When I was bitten by the green mamba, the use of whey and mqaqongo simply came to me – I do not know from where, for such a mixture is not in common use."

"On occasions, when sick people have been on their way to consult me, I have been afflicted with their complaints, and in consequence have had full knowledge of their sufferings by the time they reach me. The names of trees and herbs I have had to study and acquire but, apart from this, all my knowledge has come to me in a supernatural way. Early in 1946, Mdlambe, the daughter of Magemfana, one of our local headmen, expressed a wish to visit the home of her intended husband, but I had received a ‘message’, warning her not to do so, as she would meet an untimely end. I warned her accordingly, but my words were treated with scorn and I was regarded as a lunatic. On reaching the kraal, she died suddenly without having shown any signs of illness."

"Shortly after this incident, I received another ‘message’. It concerned a young man named Mgungundlovu, of our neighbourhood, who was then working in Johannesburg. He had killed a native in a quarrel, and I received a warning from the dead man’s spirit, that he was bent on having his revenge. I warned Mgungundlovu’s people, and advised them to slaughter a beast to appease the spirit and anoint Mgungundlovu with the gall, but went unheeded. Shortly after Mgungundlovu’s return to Zululand he attended a wedding and on the way home got involved in a fight and was killed. After these happenings, people realized that I possessed supernatural powers, and began to seek my advice. Among many other things, I have had occasion to treat a number of married women for sterility, and have been successful with all."

"Now, although still unlicensed, I am regarded as a fully qualified medicine man by my people. As a snake charmer I have been bitten once by a green mamba, already referred to, and four times by the large black variety (black mamba), and numerous times by and imfezi or cobra, and many times by the ordinary puff-adder. You will have seen that all my snakes are at present fully-fanged,"
APPENDIX SIX


The following is the account of the river ‘myth’ given to Manton Hirst by Mandla Tyota, a Xhosa diviner who had been taken under water.

Mandla: When one belongs to the river, one is called [to the river] not by accident but because one has been called by the ancestors: for one is going to become a diviner. I am not talking about drowning. It happens [that] one is not thinking of going into [the river] with [one’s] clothes on. One goes into [the river] as if by magic, undressing as though one is going to swim, but one is out of one’s mind.

What happens to one first, a brown fly sticks onto one’s forehead. That is the one that is calling [one when] one is being called to the river.

Where one enters there is a path by which one goes into the river. One does not enter just anyhow when one is called here. One does not drown; one goes in [and] one does not die. One dies after the complaint which comes from one’s people when it is heard that one is in the river. Should one’s people complain when one has been called to become a diviner by the ancestors; if there is to be an objection at this point, one will die. One will be taken out there (i.e. at the river) with an eye that has been disgorged, or an ear or the genitals having been bitten off.

Yet again, when one enters there one passes a big oval grindstone with the white clay called ifutha which is smeared [on the face and body] by diviners. When one has gone past there, one will see a snake. There is a snake that resides in that place. Beyond the snake there are medicines which have been spread out. These are spread out on the grass. Beyond the grass there is a human being, an old woman, wearing a girdle round her waist, who lives there. She will come to see one to inquire what one wants here. Now this old woman is the one who initiates diviners at the river.

The snake is a messenger that kills; it kills one if one is a person who does not belong in the river, or if there has been a complaint. It (i.e. the snake) cries because bad things are in store for one.

If one’s people complain when one appears at the river [and] one has gone past that stone having proceeded further on, one has not been called by the ancestors to become a diviner. If when one suddenly appears at the stone the white ochre (ifutha) becomes visible to one, one smears one’s face with it [and] one goes past the snake. That snake now knows that one belongs to that place. Now one goes to the medicines which have been spread out [on the grass]. If the complaint comes after one has smeared one’s face that snake will spit at one. Now, then, one has moved back to the place [one came from].

That old woman is a human being in the upper part [of the body] and a fish in the lower part.
Her hair reaches her back, [and] her skin is scaly covering with no flesh thereon. She is a fish but a fish which is a human being in the upper part [of the body]. She is a person of the river. This old woman is the one who resides in the river; she is the female diviner of that place who has favoured one when one has met the ancestors of the river.

One is shown what one will see if one goes in there at the river; one sees that white clay which is not wet. When one has been called to thwasa it is not a case of one having sustained some injury, but that one will become a diviner. One smears it [on] first [i.e. the white clay], one does it oneself, nobody smears it [on] for one. Having proceeded further on, one is now being shown [the medicines spread out on the grass]. One cannot go past that white clay [without smearing it on]. If one should go past that white clay [and] go past that person, one will be frightened by that snake. That [i.e. the white clay] shows [the snake] that one belongs there. When one goes past now, having smeared oneself first [with the white clay], one will see this snake. The snake will not harm one. On one’s passing now one will see medicines there. Medicines which have been spread out. Now one will go to the ubulawu so that one can talk to this old woman.

If no complaint starts there among one’s people, and having come upon that white clay, the one for the propitiatory offering of the diviners, one will go past that snake. Some say it is called iChanti. It can injure one’s eyes [and] it spits at others and makes them blind [and] thus they are driven away from the river.

Having gone past this, one is going to that ubulawu of one’s home; that same one is there in the river, the one that is eaten by the ooNomathotholo {whistling spirits}. From there now one proceeds to the old woman, the one that is called upon even now by everybody who is a diviner. They are called old women, that is how they are called at the river, it is those old women residing ther. But there is one called for the amaNgqosini, another called for the amaMzangwa or such and such a clan (isiduko) - people who have thwasa’d at the river. This one [i.e. the old woman] is going to tell one what has called one there – it is one’s ancestors. “Here are your ancestors; to go past that snake in bad conditions. On earth I am this,” she is going to say, “I am your great, great grandparent. But I was put there in the river because I must reside there. Then, go home now, you are going to be a diviner, heal your people and other people.” Now, then, one has been called by the ancestors to become a diviner.

Now, then, we know about that thing – we being my elder brother, my father’s sister and my younger brother – that you disappeared in the river. Let you come out of the river and not go home; “Let us go for divination at the diviner,” or [perhaps] we know that you have sunk down in the river – ducks will come, river fowls will arrive here at home. They indicate that you have come out of the river. We must brew beer here now and dance. We take a tin beaker of ubulawu with us [and] white beads to the spot where you submerged. We arrive [and] put in those things. [When] we see you it is to be said, “There he is, he sank down here.” You return to the surface [and] you stay [there] a moment and you sink down, and so for about three days. On the third day, we will find you at dawn when the beer is ready at home. You have shown now that you are alive [and] not dead. Now let me say that you are separate in the form of a disinterred corpse (isithunzela) but it is necessary that we prepare things for you so that you can go home. You are scared [and] you don’t want to meet people. Then we brew beer, we go to pour those white beads and that beer. Even if it is the two of us, an elder and a
younger brother, we will not call any people. When you arrive at home we direct you into the house with your ubulawu, with your tin beaker of ubulawu and that grass (i.e. imizi). You will start talking to us now.

Now then having returned there, you mention those things that were not done; that propitiatory offering of yours that was provided by us – there we provided those white beads without any beer and only ubulawu. When you arrive here at home now beer will be prepared here at home. People start to dance even before your arrival. If those beads were provided when you were repeatedly seen to disappear [in the river], ducks and fowls arrive [and] there is going to be brewing at that time.

Beer is brewed now [and] that house (i.e. intondo) is to be opened. One will arrive at dawn or at sunset. One doesn’t talk to anybody. One is going to turn to that beaker of ubulawu. Now, the, this diviner is going to say this: “Here is your tin beaker of ubulawu.” One will go in and eat one’s ubulawu, [and] one stays in that house alone. That is one’s intondo now.
APPENDIX SEVEN


Regarding the izilo (ancestral animals) Mantshawe, an Mpondomise diviner told Hammond-Tooke the following.

Every person has an isilo of his home. They are the same izilo as the ones found in the forest, i.e. elephants [?oobade, Xhosa indlovu], lions, leopards, jackals, baboons, and so on. There are also river animals (izilo zomlambo) such as crocodiles and hippo. The isilo looks after a person and protects him from danger. When a person is ill the isilo will come and help him. They help diviners but they also help ordinary people. They can come as dreams, or as ideas in the mind. Izilo of the home are very important and it is necessary that something should be slaughtered for them at times. Normally your isilo will not attack you, even if you come across it in the forest. Even if you do not notice it at first it will make you realize that it is present. You must then move off.

Mantshawe then told Hammond-Tooke her own experience of encountering her izilo:

For some time as a child I had been unwell in the mind. One day we went to bathe in the deepest pool of the Qalethe stream. As we were swimming I suddenly felt myself being drawn down to the depths of the pool. At the bottom I came to a place where there was no water at all. I saw a gate before me and there met a diviner. Before me were two four-legged animals. I did not know their names, but I knew that they were my guardians, my izilo zomlambo.

From February to November I lived alone in the darkest part of the forest. I avoided human contact, living on wild fruits and roots. I became fat and healthy. One night I was wakened by barking and saw a jackal circling the bush in which I was sleeping. I then knew that the jackal was one of my main izilo. I went to sleep, and woke up with a baboon lying next to me. Thus the jackal and the baboon are the two most important animals to me.

One day I became hungry and went to the umgwenny tree [Kafir plum, Odina caffra] to get some wild fruit. I found it very difficult to look up into the tree – something told me not to – so I collected only the fallen fruit. I ate the fruit and slept. In my sleep I was shown what was in the tree. It was a leopard (ingwe). It did not want me to look up as it did not want our eyes to meet. It is one of the animals of my home.


Manyoni’s dream.

Manyoni, wife of Malimini, the brother of the location headman, had been a church member, but later became a well-known diviner in the district with a record of having trained eighteen novices during their thwasa period. She was an intelligent, friendly woman of about 45 with
two young children under 5 years and a son of 18. It is interesting that in her account of her
dreams she described them as being sent by demons (*indemoni*), probably a concession to her
mission training and a White investigator. This was her story: (There is no doubt that
Manyoni believed implicitly that the following happenings took place; they are probably a
vivid dream-content and should be compared with similar material published by M. Kohler,
*The Isangoma Diviners* (1941), Ethnol. Publ. No. 9, Department of Native Affairs.)

She became sick with pains in the body and dreamed about the deceased chief, Mngcisana.
Her husband was a member of the royal (Zulu) clan and this is an interesting example of how
a relative of a husband can be the troubling spirit. In one hand he held an *isiyaca*, the fringed
head dress worn by diviners, and in the other the white stone (*ikhubalo*), also associated
with the cult. In her dream he placed the *isiyaca* on her head, but told her that she would have
to find the stone herself. All this happened in ‘a very difficult and dangerous place in a pool in the
river’. She then awoke.

Early the next morning she went along to the pool indicated in her dream. She had wound a
white towel round her head. In the towel was a snuff tin (*iguza*) and, still fully clothed, she
went into the water. She sank down until she reached the river bed, where she saw an old
woman with one leg. The water above was making a noise, but the old woman said: ‘Don’t
look up, look down.’ Manyoni followed the woman and found herself in a room (*indlu*) under
the river bank. ‘It seemed just like a kraal.’ Spoons were hanging on the wall and she was told
not to touch them. Then she saw a small, wizened little man carrying a pail and rinses ‘just as
if he were going milking’, but he went out without speaking. The old woman beckoned to her
and showed her a speckled black and white snake coiled up in the corner of the hut.
Underneath it was the white stone. The woman warned Manyoni that the snake would spit and
ask her for the snuffbox concealed in the towel on her head. She put some snuff on her palm
and threw it into the eyes of the snake, blinding it. Quickly the old woman darted forward and
snatched the stone.

The woman clasped Manyoni’s hand around the stone and with it smeared her face so that it
was covered in chalky whiteness. This indicated that she was now a novice (*umkhwetsa*).
After that the old man with the pail reappeared but still said no word. The old woman
explained that he was dumb. By this time the snake had recovered and Manyoni came out of
the pool. When she regained the bank she found herself in the midst of a large herd of cattle.
She learnt later that they been driven to the river by her husband who thought that she had
been taken by *ichanti* (a legendary river snake believed to claim victims who can only be
saved by driving cattle into the river). She explained it thus: ‘When the first beast entered the
water it passed water, and after that all the cattle were forced to do so, so that the water was
dirty and the snake could not see me.’ (The snake in the dream is almost certainly
*ichanti*....There appears to be some connexion of *ichanti* with the ancestral shades, as the
Bhaca say that a person who sees an *ichanti* will probably become an *isangoma* and, despite
the danger, ‘The *amathfongo* show the *ichanti* to those whom they love’. ) The men with the
cattle threw stones to drive away the snake and a woman put a black shiny stone called
*inyangeni* on her head to protect her (from the cattle). She walked away from the river with
the cattle and entered the cattle-kraal with them. In this case the beast that first passed water
was earmarked for an initiation ceremony (*inkomo yekhawu*).
Extracts of Nombuso’s graduation at the Gulandoda Forest in the Transkei.

The graduation does not necessarily take place in a forest. Nombuso says it depends from whence one is called. Her animal called her from Gulandoda forest and so she graduated in the forest. She is therefore known as a “forest doctor”. Others, who are called from rivers to graduate and are known as “river doctors.” The latter are called to the river by an animal sent by the “river people” – ancestral spirits in the form of mermaids who inhabit rivers.

Among the Mpondos, Mpondomise and Bomvane tribes sacrifices are made to “The People of the River” and it is said that the river heaves up and seeps away the offering. All tribes believe that victims of drowning are called by the “river people”. In such cases, even if the river is in flood, the cattle are driven to the river bank where they sniff the water and low, calling to the ancestral spirits. Usually when one animal enters the water, the body is recovered. Burial then takes place on the river bank and no weeping is permitted.

In her dreams she [Nombuso] had seen the forest of ancient conifers, giant yellow-woods, their branches festooned with lichen and far beneath them the moss-covered paths that awaited her. There was a path for the lineage of each of her parents. She chose the one of her father’s people.

Nombuso says that as the graduate enters the forest, the ancestors cast stones in front of her. She immediately pauses, says “Camagu” and reverently lifts the stone thrown by her particular ancestor. Being a symbol of ancestral presence, the stone strengthens and sustains her as she carries it into the innermost depth of the forest. Her destination is a sacred pool which lies beneath a waterfall and is enclosed by reeds. Besides the pool she surrenders her mind. In a trance and naked she sinks deep into the water where all is revealed to her – the knowledge beyond understanding, the secrets of life and death, the unity of the living and the dead and the ability to talk with spirits and animals. She is in the presence of the ancestral spirits and although she does not see them they encompass her and witness her transformation from a student to an igqirha. Her graduation is a dramatized purification rite in that she dies ritually to her past and is reborn. She emerges from the reeds cleansed of past sins. The reeds denote her purity and creation and establish her status as an igqirha. Forthwith she will fulfill her calling.

Nombuso does not know how long she remained in the water, but when she came out her body had been painted with white clay. She had received a new spirit and entered a new life. She had been reborn; she went into the water a student and reappeared as an igqirha.
APPENDIX NINE


Those clans which make special expeditions go to particular pools. The Nyawuza *ukunikela* [this is an offering of a beast, grain, seeds and beer made to the River People on behalf of a clan] to a pool of the umZinhlava River in eastern Pondoland, beside the site of an old umzi of the chief Faku; the Khonjwayo *ukunikela* to another pool of the same river, beside which pool Kiwa, son of the progenitor Khonjwayo, was buried. The Tshezi *ukunikela* to a pool of the Kukaphi River in eastern Pondoland, on the bank of which are buried their old chiefs Takani and Mankunzi. The amaMose, an offshoot of the Khonjwayo, used to *ukunikela* to the Khonjwayo pool till five or six years ago, when a diviner of their clan announced that they should now go to the umTakatyi, a river on whose banks they now live. When the diviner was ill the amaMose did *ukunikela* to this river. While I was at nTibane the diviner ordered another offering to the river. Mose *imizi* prepared beer, and I was told that two beasts would be offered...........The amaNyala and amaXabe offer at the umDumbi River, the amaYalo at the umGazi. The amaJola (amaZizi) offered at the Xora River, ‘for once when they were out hunting their dogs fell into it’. Their offshoot, the amaGebe, also used to offer at the Xora River, but one day when the Gebe chief was crossing the Ngqungqu River his *intambo yobuluunga* fell in, and since then the clan has offered at the pool into which it fell. The amaJola of Mpondomise offered at the Gwanya pool of the Thina River. During the wars the chief was buried at the bottom of the pool. The last three clans are not Pondo, but I give them because of the reasons they adduce for changing the river to which they offer.

Wives married into a clan *ukuhlonipha* (avoid) the river at a pool of which that clan makes offerings. They *ukuhlonipha* the whole river, not only the one pool. When crossing it they cannot lift their skirts as they do ordinarily, but must trail them through the water if it is deep, and they tie their head handkerchiefs low over their foreheads. They cannot draw water from, or wash in, that river, or eat food cooked in the water of it. And they do not gather rushes for mats from it banks. The Tshezi women *ukuhlonipha* the name of the river Kukaphi, avoiding words like it. These taboos, as the avoidance of senior men of the family, apply to wives only. A daughter of the clan may raise her skirts as she walks through the water.

Snakes come to the *imizi* of the people of the rivers to which they *ukunikela*. Different clans regard a particular species of snake as being a manifestation of their ithongo, and treat it with respect, not killing it or driving it away when it comes to the umzi, for it is *umninimizi* (the owner of the umzi). The amaKhonjwayo respect the *izilenzi*, a long black snake, probably non-poisonous. ‘Even when it crawls over us we do not touch it.’ The amaNdosine, the *inkwakwa*, a brown poisonous snake. The amaTshezi, the *izilenzi* and *isiphakula*. The Khonjwayo snake is addressed as Nyewula, the name to it when it is seen in the river (but in the river it is fabulously large, and at the *imizi* a common variety of snake), the *tshezi* snake as Tshezi. The amaJola respect another snake and address it as Jola. Formerly, it is said, the snake was killed for when it was seen. Now people only kill if they have harmed the snake accidentally. Quilibane, a Khonjwayo saw a snake lying under a mat, in his father’s umzi. Not realizing that it was an *izilenzi*, the species which the Khonjwayo respect, he took his
stick and killed it. On discovering that he an izilenzi was killed, his father killed a goat. The amaKhonjwayo and amaJola say that formerly a snake of their respective clans used to come into a hut where a woman who was about to give birth to a child was lying, and crawl round the hut, or coil up beside her. Then they would know that she would survive labour, and that the child would be born healthy. A Khonjwayo says that when a ritual killing was made an izilenzi came and coiled itself round the skin of the animal killed. Pondo will kill snakes which are not the ithongo (an ancestor) of their particular clan.
APPENDIX TEN


The following extract comes from an honours dissertation written by Kelly Luck who documented Zweli’s calling to be a diviner.

Whilst attending school at Lovedale, Zweli had a vision of three individuals standing in the doorway of his school classroom. These three beings were covered completely in reeds, with only their eyes visible. They spoke to him telling him they had come from the Tyumi River (runs between Fort Hare and Lovedale) and that they were to take him for a short while. Bewildered, having reported he did not really understand what was happening, Zweli told these beings that he could not accompany them as he was in class. It is pertinent to point out at this time that the water is closely associated with healers. Certain izinyanya (ancestors) are held to reside under the water. Individuals, usually in a state of ukuthwasa may be called by the ancestors under the water where they are given guidance and tutelage in the art of Healing (Bernard, 1998:4; Hirst, 1997).

The beings that Zweli saw can be understood as messengers of the river people, the name given to ancestors who reside under the water. The reeds that covered the bodies’ of the messengers are also significant as pools in which the ancestors reside are said to be deep, sometimes flowing, sometimes still and surrounded by reeds. Reeds also make up part of the body adornment of healers and their abakhwetha (student novices). This serves to symbolize their connection with the water and their introduction to the ‘river people’.

The teacher, alarmed by Zweli’s actions asked him what was going on. Zweli responded with the ‘truth’; that three beings had come to take him to the river. The teacher, clearly accepting what he said as plausible, spoke to the beings whom only Zweli could see and asked them to leave. They did, saying that they would be back for him later. The teacher informed the Principal of the incident who decided that Zweli should be taken home. As he was going into Grahamstown on business the following day, the Principal took Zweli home to his parents and the farm on which they worked in nearby Salem.

As the car pulled up, his father, himself a healer, was seen leaving. Zweli and the Principal were left to be greeted by Zweli’s mother and his father’s father, an igogo (prophet). His father returned after the Principal’s departure with a tall skinny Basotho man. This man had been called as he had extensive experience in quieting the ingulo emhlopho (white sickness), which is present from birth in anyone who has been chosen to be a healer. A black sheep was slaughtered and Zweli was given its meat along with a bitter tasting medicine.....

The wishes of the ancestors however, could ultimately not be stalled. Last year (1999) Zweli’s health deteriorated tremendously and he entered ukuthwasa .................Zweli describes his entry into ukuthwasa as a somewhat traumatic experience:
“I was visiting with friends. Suddenly I could see the outside of the street and people walking up and down. I was sitting with my back to the window. I asked the lady of the house if there were any mirrors. She said no. I told her to look out of the window. I told her correctly who was coming and going. Next I saw a woman dressed in blue and white. She stopped in the middle of the street and turned towards the house. I did not recognize her as coming from our area. I looked again and she was gone. Alarmed, the man took me to Mrs N (a diviner). By now I did not know where I was – people were telling me afterwards that I spoke to them – things I can’t remember. Mrs N began singing...........she said I was being called by the ancestors and that I would soon have to go to the river”.
APPENDIX ELEVEN


As a boy, Salani had often dreamed that he was falling into a river or was pushed in. He was, therefore, always afraid of rivers and seldom went bathing. His father had hinted even then that these dreams might come from Changana [the ancestor wishing to possess Salani. Changana had been a very powerful healer himself].

During the time when Salani was getting thinner and thinner something incredible happened. Early one morning – he was still working as a night-watchman – there was a great whirlwind. I came towards Salani, seized him and took him away. Many people in the settlement watched the event. Some tried to hold him back but to no avail. A European eye-witness even pursued him in his car but could not keep up with him. – The whirlwind carried Salani to a deep pool in the Mtilikwe river. He disappeared there for two months, despite searching for him for a long time no-one saw him during that time.

Life in the pool

For two months Salani lived in the depths of the pool, together with a snake and a crocodile. He lived down there in such a normal way, as if he were at home, and that surprised him so very much, he said. He was given only mud and small fishes to eat, never anything else. His living quarters consisted of a cave whose entrance was deep down in the water. This cave went all the way up so that its topmost part was above the water-level. There, a small opening let fresh air into the cave. The cave looked like a hut, but it was huge. There were also goats, many clothes and medicines in it.

Salani spent his time sitting cross-legged between the snake on his right and the crocodile on his left. Both “animals” are njuzu, Salani explained. The snake showed him medicines (plants) which he would later use as n’anga. On its head it had red hair, and it had big, radiant eyes (Salani compared them to car’s headlights). This snake was able to suddenly stretch a long way (up to a mile, Salani insisted) and then shrink again into a small snake. Another time it rolled itself up and was then as tall as a man standing up.

The male crocodile on his left (the snake, as the more important njuzu-creature, sat on his right) was already known to him. As a boy, he had recognized such a crocodile when no other boy in his group did. When he told his parents, they said it was a rarely seen njuzu-crocodile.

What was remarkable about the crocodile was that there were plants growing all along its back. Salani stressed two kinds of plant. First, the reed which indicates the creature is njuzu. Salani has one of those reeds which has curative effects. In addition to the reed, roots grew in profusion on the animal’s back, and stalks bearing flowers grew upwards. These flowers are also used for healing.

While Salani was sitting between the two animals they showed him the various plants on the
crocodile’s back. But the animals could talk to Salani only in his dreams. When he slept his head rested on the crocodile’s back, and the snake lay curled up on his right with its head on his thigh. In the dream, mainly the snake appeared, speaking to Salani in a human voice. It explained to Salani the plants and their use in healing. Even today, after his return, Salani regularly dreams of the snake. It reveals important healing herbs to him.

Occasionally Salani was allowed to emerge, accompanied by the crocodile. They sunbathed on an island. As soon as they heard voices in the distance they submerged at once. The snake never left the water. However, in the morning it sometimes climbed up to the small opening in the cave and put its head through the hole.

Salani’s return
Despite precautions, one morning some people claimed to have seen Salani on the island. The rumour spread, and a few boys took the initiative: they crept close to the island and hid. They thus discovered Salani and told his relatives about it. The father immediately sacrificed a little tobacco to Changana, saying: “We have seen your grandson, he is still alive, please do not take him now, but leave him where he was seen”.
Salani’s parents then visited a n’anga in Mozambique who was famous for freeing people caught by njuzu.

The n’anga accompanied the parents and relatives to the Mtilikwe River. There they began to prepare for Salani’s return. The specialist stuck something which looked like a small umbrella into the ground at various points. Next to the “umbrellas” he placed medicines and in several places he made fires. When everything was ready the n’anga and his assistants began to beat the drums. They danced all night through, without drinking beer. Early in the morning it happened: Salani returned from the pool. He rode on the crocodile’s back with the snake coiled around his body, its head on his. Before leaving the pool, he had been given medicines by the “animals”, and on that morning the snake even vomited two eggs for him (with them, Salani can remove evil from patients’ bodies). – The animals, unseen by the other people, accompanied him to the shore and then returned to their own abode at once.

No-one could give an interpretation of the symbolism of this recall-ritual. Salani merely said that it deprived the snake of the power to retain him any longer in the pool.

After his return, nobody present was allowed to touch Salani – or he would have been pulled back into the pool immediately. Only the n’anga, carrying special medicines which bound Salani, was permitted to approach him. He carried Salani on his back into the hut especially prepared for this purpose. This hut was dedicated to the ancestors of the tribe, i.e. to Changana also.

First the specialist gave Salani a medicine, after which the latter brought up all the fish and mud he had eaten in the pool. This changed him back into a normal human being. Other medicines made him forget the idea of returning to the njuzu and the pool.

A few days later, the n’anga and Salani returned to the river. They took a plate full of medicines. First, Salani refused to go because he was afraid of being pulled back into the river. – By the river, the specialist sprinkled the surface with an ox-tail dipped into the
medicines. He called: “Come, so that we can negotiate about your person. He has now arrived home safe and well.”

Suddenly, the water became choppy, it boiled, and then the crocodile and snake appeared on a sandbank. The n’anga addressed the njuzu: “I thank you for giving back our person. Please do not take him again.” In gratitude for Salani’s return the n’anga threw £2.10.0 (pounds) in silver into the pool. – The two “animals” disappeared.
The Girl who got Gold: pp 24-30

This ‘story’ was told to Anita Jacobson-Widding during her research in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. It was told to her by Mrs Sauramba who said she had learned it from her maternal grandmother who had lived on the other side of the border, in Mozambique. Jacobson-Widding adds, “She was a legendary n’anga, her granddaughter said: “A very popular doctor” (just as the girl in the fairy tale)” (ibid: 26). I hazard a guess it was her grandmother’s own experience told in story form.

Long, Long ago, there was a sacred river. In that river there was a dangerous pool. All the people in this country were warned not to go close to the pool. Nobody was allowed to take smelling things to this pool, such as soap. In the pool there was a beautiful mermaid, who was dwelling there. But she was very selfish. The mermaid was looking for somebody whom she would turn into a n’anga (healer, diviner, doctor). Many people tried to go down into the pool, but nobody came out again. The people were killed, and were then seen floating in the water.

One day, there was a girl who had a dream. She dreamed about a mermaid who wanted a person in order to make a doctor of him. She also dreamed that many people tried, but made mistakes, and thus did not succeed, and got killed instead. The girl had no parents. She lived with her tete (= paternal aunt), who had taken care of her. One day, she said: “Tete, I have been dreaming something, and now I want to visit a foreign country. I might stay away for a week or a month, but don’t cry while I am away! I will not die there, but I will show you what I have dreamt when I come back.” The aunt quarreled a little. The girl said: “Tete, it is impossible for me to stay, because what I have dreamed about is so great. But is you cry, I will be killed, and will not come back. I intend to travel very far away, and I will travel under water.” The aunt prepared a chicken and rice. The girl went off, and traveled and traveled, until she arrived at a big pool. The journey took her three nights, until the fourth day.

At the pool, she began to wash clothes, together with some other girls. They told her: “You must be careful. This place is dangerous. People used to be taken away from here.” Soon after the conversation, she slipped into the water. The other girls ran home to tell their parents what had happened at the pool. The parents said: “It is her own fault. Besides, we don’t know her, she does not belong to our country.” After one week, the girls went back to the pool, and saw a reed mat floating on the surface of the water, with a mutundu (the basket of a doctor), gold, and medicines. The girls went back to their parents: “Ah, guess what we have seen in the pool! There is a basket, medicines, and gold.” “Let us go and take it,” the parents said. They arrived at the pool. One man wanted the gold, so he went into the pool, and did not come up again. Then there was a woman who said: “But how about the girl who went down into the pool?” After a short while they saw the girl sitting there. She collected all her things, and began to walk toward her country. Some of the people in the foreign country followed her.
They traveled for three days, but could not reach her. Some people who had not brought any food died on the way. But those who had food continued. Then, on the fourth day, they saw the girl arrive in a village, and her aunt came out and ululated for the girl. The girl became very popular and successful in her work (that is, in her work as a n’ganga). People came there to be treated. Every month, the girl was brought to the pool by the mermaid. The girl had great success already from the beginning, and lived well until her aunt dies. Thereafter she lived well with the people.
APPENDIX THIRTEEN


The pool doctor inherits his skill through a special water spirit *shave* [alien spirit] which has possessed one of his relations or ancestors. It may have been a man or a woman who was previously possessed, but usually the present generation has long forgotten that one of their ancestors was once a pool doctor. It is believed that the *shave*, which has been lying dormant for all these years, suddenly decides to possess one of its descendants in order to make this medium a *nganga*. The person selected may be engaged in ordinary employment. He may be a herd-boy, and one day when he is herding his cattle he comes to a river or large pool and sits down on the bank to fish. Suddenly a whirlwind arises and draws him down into the depths of the pool. He sinks to the bottom and is taken by the water spirit. Perhaps the person in question is a young girl who is drawn into a well by a strong wind while she is drawing water and here she is snatched by the water spirit. Then again the girl or boy may be swimming in a pool or river with other youngsters when a whirlwind suddenly arises and drags down the selected medium who is then captured by the water spirit. It is assumed by the parents that the youth has been accidentally drowned. When they consult a *muwuki* [diviner] they are told by him that their son or daughter is still alive and that one day he (or she) will return with the paraphernalia of a healer-diviner. The family finds it hard to believe this and consults two or three other *vavuki* until finally they are satisfied that the first *nganga* was correct. The day the son appears he is found sitting in his mother’s hut fully dressed as a *nganga* and with his doctor’s outfit. Some of the people are frightened but not his parents, who have been expecting this to happen. Everyone becomes excited and happy, the men clap their hands and the women shrill. On hearing the joyful tidings people from the neighbouring villages arrive on the scene, and as soon as everyone is present in the hut the new doctor becomes possessed and explains what has happened to him. He tells them the name of the water spirit whose shave now possesses him, reminding his relatives of their long-forgotten relation. He continues with his story and when it is finished he adds: ‘I have brought all that is necessary for healing. I obtained these from the Pungwe river.’ The Pungwe river is reputed to be one in which water spirits live, and it is considered significant for a young doctor, when possessed, to mention its name. Even if he were snatched by a water spirit in a river or pool far from it, it is believed that he still finds himself in the Pungwe River where he is taught his art.
APPENDIX FOURTEEN


*Njuzu* are “water spirits”. They have been described by informants as akin to mermaids, with long fish-like tails and human torsos. They are even at times attributed with long black hair. Like the Sirens they sing enchantingly and attract humans to their watery homes. *Njuzu* live in perennial pools (*dziva*), but may also inhabit wells (*isime*). There are certain pools that are famous for their *Njuzu* and others which attract only casual attention from them.

Seemingly, they can transport their ethereal bodies from pool to pool. Informants point out that some *njuzu* are identifiable kinsmen or historical figures. An example of the latter is the Nyamakati pool near Miti Michena at the Dzivaguru cult centre in Choma, Mt. Darwin. Into this pool, according to legend, walked Dzivaguru’s son Karuva and his followers, rather than be captured by Nyabapa a neighbouring chief.

On moonlit nights the *njuzu* of this pool may be heard singing and playing their drums. They are reported to have been seen dancing and playing near the pool, but it is never the informant that has seen them, always someone that he has heard of. If one does see them, one has immediately to turn ones back on them. Otherwise one is irresistibly drawn to them and thence into the water. *Njuzu*, though thought of as fatal in this way are nevertheless seen as friendly spirits (Whisson and West, 1975: 20-23). If they do entice one into the pool or well, one may stay there for several years - or forever.

In many cases, however, after sojourning with them for a lengthy period, people are released to go and practice as *svikiro* or *nganga*. The knowledge imparted to such gifted mediums is held in high regard. Others are less fortunate and may remain with the *njuzu* forever, or be released by them only as *midzimu*. If a person falls into a pool and drowns, relatives and friends must not mourn and shed tears. If they do the *Njuzu* will become angry and jealous and not give the person up. He will be drowned and even the body may not surface. If they rejoice and show gratitude this may be reciprocated by the release at some later stage of the living body or of the spirit of the person, intact, as it were.

In the dry season of 1970 a child fell into the Sabi River, into a big pool, just below the causeway linking Northern Buhera with Wedza. Relatives and friends saw the child “walk off the rock”. When the girl’s mother arrived on the scene, she immediately began to wail and cry out, damning the *njuzu* for taking her child. This was viewed with concern by others present and she was admonished that she was killing her child “murikuuraya mwanasikana wenyu”. After several hours she was prevailed upon to stop. An elder in the nearby village who had witnessed proceedings then instructed all present to turn their backs on the river and to throw offerings of small change or other items (a pocket knife, snuff box) into the pool to appease the *njuzu* following the mother’s rash actions. If they did this perhaps the *njuzu* would relent and release the child. All parties complied without demur.

Shortly afterwards the child’s corpse surfaced. This was seen as a partial forgiveness by the
njuzu. Had the mother not behaved so rashly, they would probably, it was considered, have released the child as an adult to be a powerful nganga, underscoring the point that the njuzu are essentially kind-hearted.
APPENDIX FIFTEEN

Interview with the husband (H) of Alice, who was taken under water Murewa District, Zimbabwe, September 1999. Interview conducted by Noah Mapfumo (Q), in presence of Penny Bernard and Dianne Thram.

Q: How do you know that a person has been taken under water?
H: We know this because we follow them to the river.
Q: Do they get into the water?
H: Yes, they get into the water.
Q: After doing that what do you (the observers) do?
H: When it is the first time that the person has been taken by the njuzu, they (the person called) goes straight under water. Yourselves (the observers) remain outside the water and go through certain traditional formalities. They will come out and in (of the water) again (three times). When they go for the final time you will know they have now gone. You then go and buy traditional necklaces, different kinds, which you go and place where they went (under water). After three days you go back and check whether or not the necklaces were taken. The necklaces are place together with different types of cloth. The cloth has to be white and black.

Q: After that what then happens?
H: You continue going back to check. If the things have been taken you then wait until the day they come back. They usually come back at night. The cloth will be wet. They usually just pass through quickly as if it is a bird which has passed such that you are left asking each other what has passed through. It is the way of showing that I am back. All the people of the home are gathered together and they start singing and dancing asking the spirit to come into the home. As soon as they come into the home you start playing mbira (a musical instrument). At the same time singing and dancing faster. In the morning you are then going to be told what they have brought (the spirit). They have now come into the house but should they decide to go back again it means that there is something wrong at home. Everybody should be living in harmony.

Q: When did she (the wife) start going to the river and how old was she then?
H: She started going when she was ten years old.
Q: Was that the first time that she was ever taken by the njuzu?
H: That was the first time she was taken by njuzu. The spirit was always there only that it hadn’t let people know of its presence. There had been a lot of problems in the home and so I decided to consult traditional healers who told me that there was a water spirit. They also told me to settle all the problems in my home.
Q: Was the spirit always there?
H: The spirit was always there, only that it was very recent that it took her for the first time.
Q: So it was always there?
H: Yes it was always there, only it was just showing signs.
Q: What kinds of signs did the spirit show?
H: The signs were that she would fall to the ground and not breathe as though she was dead. The other sign was that if she went into a room where there was a dead body she would fall and become unconscious. People would have to go through a traditional
formality of clapping hands before taking her elsewhere.

Q: Was there at least a ten year gap between when these signs started showing and when she started going to the river?
H: Yes there was ten years. That’s when I started knowing what was happening.
Q: Were you husband and wife in those ten years?
H: Yes (he had been given her as a wife when she was still young).
Q: You took her when she was still young and started staying with her?
H: Yes
Q: Have you ever seen a njuzu or has someone (you know) seen it before?
H: Yes, people have seen njuzu before, but it can only be seen by good people (as in kind or good hearted people). The way you see it is just the same as the way a hippopotamus shows itself by showing its nose above water. When the njuzu takes a person down into the water it shows them different traditional medicines.
Q: Do they do it while they are out or in the water?
H: Even in open land with grass only.

A question is asked relating to white stones – not audible on tape.

H: The white ones (stones) will be gathered together.
Q: But they are not pure white because sometimes they have a bit of red.
H: That’s very true.
Q: When she takes these stones then what happens (apparently they are eaten)? Does it help with the spirit?
H: I think it helps.
Q: Is it possible for it to start working immediately after looking at (?) eating the rock? Is it possible to see ahead (to foretell things)?
H: No it cannot

I ask if it is like white clay, like chalk. The husband then sends his children down to the river to collect some of the stones. The young boy asks which ones.

H: The small ones which look like goats faeces. You will find them near where you usually go to bathe.
Q: The place where they go through (where the njuzu live), is it a special place where they go, or are there other (places)?
H: They themselves know where to go.
Q: Are they in or outside the water and what is the name of the river?
H: It is in Mount Darwin, in Mazowe (River). Right now if they do not have a river they can go into you. You can sleep yourselves but they will run away during the night. That is the person who will have been taken by njuzu. If you should try to follow them you won’t know where they went through (the water). After that has happened it means they have gone. You can’t go telling everybody, even you children, otherwise they will not return.
Q: Isn’t anybody allowed to cry?
H: If anybody cries they (the person taken under) will never return.
Q: Do you kill a cow, goat or chicken when they are gone?
H: Only when they are back (when they return from the water). When they come back a
black bull is slaughtered.

Q: When did you kill the bull yourselves?
H: Myself, I did not slaughter on because my wife’s family did that, but it was me who should have done it.

Q: She is asking whether njuzu and midzimu (ancestors) go hand in hand?
H: Njuzu is on its own and likewise. Midzimu is not tangible but njuzu is tangible.

Q: So your wife, how many midzimu’s does she have?
H: She has three. Here we have mukombwe, mvurayaneta, then there is zvimbakupa. This is one which says that this person is ill or predicts that something will happen.

Q: Is it possible for you to know whether the njuzu is male or female?
H: Nobody really knows.

Q: Do you know what njuzu look like?
H: I can’t exactly explain. People say they have seen but nobody really knows about it.

Q: How does it look like to them?
H: Some say it looks like a fish and others say something different.

Q: In this area are there any such places where people can’t go?
H: Definitely; just that in this area people are mischievous. They are definitely two sections of the river where people can’t go.
APPENDIX SIXTEEN


Certain mountains in the Northern Province are associated with mythological phenomena. These extra-human phenomena were identified to me as being either a deity or an ancient ancestor spirit which is believed to be responsible for creation, and a colossal snake which usually lives in rivers, fountains and deep water pools near mountains. The belief in such a mythical water snake is also found among other ethnic groups in South Africa (cf. nemulambo — Venda; kganyapa — Southern Sotho/Tswana; inkanyapa — Zulu and nyampsang — Tsonga)."

One was rather confounded by the strong belief in the presence of the very large water snake (mamogaswa) in a number of pools and rivers near mountains in the area where the majority of the people were members of Christian churches. One such a place was pointed out to us at the foothill of the Molomela mountain under a big overhanging cliff. Molomela adjoins the sacred mountain, Mogoši. Both of these mountains are to be found in the area of Matlala.

During a visit to the place in the area of Matlala where it is believed to be living underneath an overhanging cliff one of our research assistants, when we came near the cliff, sang a praise poem to appease mamogaswa and begged it for permission to visit its dwelling place. It was pointed out that it was taboo to drink water from any pool where mamogaswa lived without begging permission to do so.

Mamogaswa is believed to have been created by the supreme being himself and can manifest itself in male or female form of virtually any phenomenon, although its most common manifestation is in the form of a snake. It is particularly associated with tornados and other very strong winds coming from the south. A red glow in or near water at night is also an indication of the presence of mamogaswa.

Mamogaswa is both respected and feared by humans. It is particularly feared by people for the destruction it sometimes causes when it moves from one water pool to another. It is then that strong winds demolish houses, uproot trees and cause destruction along the way. People believe that houses with shining new corrugated iron roofs are usually targeted by mamogaswa since it is associated such reflecting surfaces with water. It was noticeable how many roofs in the research area were painted in a dull colour.

The mysterious character of mamogaswa is further augmented by its close association with ancestor spirits and rainmakers. The Matlala believe, and this has been confirmed by experts from the Langa people, that mamogaswa often acts as a messenger of the family ancestors if they, for some or other reason, are displeased with their living descendents. It is such a harbinger of misfortune that mamogaswa usually performs such destructive acts. On the other hand, one can also, with the assistance of a traditional doctor as facilitator, perform a sacrifice to the ancestor spirits and ask their protection from the destructive influence of mamogaswa. Such a ritual must of necessity take place near a water pool where mamogaswa is said to be found.
It is also believed that *mamogašwa* occasionally vomits into the water where it lives. Such water then has a healing potential when drunk by the ill. It can also strengthen people, particularly chiefs, when they bathe in the water.

In the last instance *mamogašwa* is also associated with rainmakers. The people of the Langa and Matlala still believe that *mamogašwa* occasionally, when it is approached by rainmakers in the correct way, will expose a small part of its back above the water. They are then allowed to cut out a small piece of its hide which is then used to make the strongest rain medicine conceivable. According to the experts, these beliefs also explain why some rainmakers have better success than others in ensuring enough rain during the growth season.

Some of the above-mentioned information in present beliefs may sound incredible to outsiders. It has, however, become increasingly evident during the research that all classes of people, from the most traditionally orientated to even apparently completely westernized individuals believe in the existence of *mamogašwa*. *Mamogašwa* unquestionably is still part of the worldview of many of the indigenous people of the Northern Province.
APPENDIX SEVENTEEN


‘A story told to me by an old Bushman who appears to be between 70 or 80 years of age’ (as recorded by Mr D. Ballot).

‘On asking old Afrikaander: “Do you believe in Watermeide [Mermaid]?” he lit his pipe, took off his hat, sat on the ground, and then commenced: Baas, I have never seen the thing they call a Watermeid, but that there is such a thing I believe as firmly as I sit here. For the missionaries said that my sister was too clever a girl, and she was very pious besides, and she told me with her own mouth that she believed in them. I know many stories of waterwomen which my mother has told me, and I will tell Baas one of them.

There was once a girl who all the people said was so good looking. One day this girl went out to walk along the river, and came to a large waterhole over which a krantz was hanging. (Here old Afrikander stopped short, and advised me never to go near a waterhole over which a krantz is hanging, for, says he, “Met zoo een gat is dit nooit helder nie, Baas”, and then he continued his story.)

Well, Baas, I told you she stopped at the hole to look at some flowers which were very attractive, and which were drifting near her, till at last one of them came so near that she stooped over the water to pluck it. But she had hardly touched the flower when she was caught by the hand and dragged into the water.

Now, as the girl did not come home, her mother went to look for her, and traced her spoors to the hole wherein she had been dragged, and when she saw that the spoors did not go any further, she knew at once that the Waterwoman had caught her child, for she was a clever woman. She therefore ran in the veld, and there gathered some shrubs which she knew the waterwomen were very fond of. When she had enough of these shrubs, she ran home, dried them hastily by the fire and ground them into a fine powder. Then she ran back to the hole, and threw the dust over the water. When she had done this, she went and stood a little way off and waited. She had not waited long when she saw her child coming out of the water and walking towards her. She was unhurt, but the waterwoman had loved her so much that they had licked her cheeks quite white, and this remained so ever afterwards.

She told her mother that the people who live under the water had such fine houses, and that they live there in great abundance. As I have said, the girl’s mother was a very clever woman, and she had instructed her child from her youth how she should behave, and what to eat if she should fall into the hands of the waterwomen. If they ask you: “What will you eat, fish or meat?” you must say “I eat neither, give me bread to eat”. If you ask for fish or meat, it will be certain death to you, as the Waterwomen are half fish, half flesh, they would think that you would want to eat them.”
In the following extract Isaac Shapera details the testimony of Kgabyana, daughter to the Chief Lentswe of the Kgatla tribe in SE Botswana. It details her experience of visiting the big snake that resided on top of Modipe hill in a cave which contained a small pool. This snake, Kgwanyape was a central element of the chief’s rain-making ability.

Kgabyana said she herself had been to Modipe several times. She told me (6 September 1934) that her father used to send her there when he was running short of essential medicines. She would leave Mochudi at dusk, so that when she got to Modipane village all would be quiet and dark, with no light visible except that emanating from the snake. At the foot of the hill she removed all her clothes, smeared her body with tshitlho (protective medicine), and started to climb. The light from the snake was sometimes so strong that it ‘weakened’ her and prevented her from climbing, but she was generally able to ascend to the top. When she got there, the snake would come out of its cave ‘very angrily’, with a strong wind blowing. ‘But as soon as it comes to me it begins to lick my body, then it becomes gentle and cool, and lies down as if dead; and I leave it there and go into its cave and take its dung.’ On the way out she deposited at the mouth of the cave something she had brought along to leave as lebogo (gratuity), such as an earring or bangle; and on passing the snake she repeated aloud her father’s praise-poems (maboko).

The last time she went there was after Lentswe’s death, in order to report his passing. She took some of his ‘things’ (I failed to ask what they were), and put them upside down in a stream on the hill. This was to inform the snake that the owner was dead. ‘They are still there, even now.’ The snake also was still on the hill. ‘Its light is usually visible about Christmas time, and can be seen by anybody, even from Sikwane [fifteen miles east]. It goes about, moving through the veld, and uproots the trees in its path.’

Kgabyana gave greater details of her experience of visits to Kgwanyape to Shapera’s field assistant, Sofonia. This is a verbatim transcript that Shapera includes in the text:

My father once sent me to Modipe. This is how I went. He first gave me tshitlho from his big horn, and said I should go with Malebye [her father’s confidential assistant]. When we reached the foot of the hill, Malebye remained there, and I went on alone. As I was about to start climbing, I heard my father call me, and when I looked round I saw him coming. I waited, and when he came up to me he showed me the place where I was to undress; it was beside a small mohwidiri tree [Rhus pyroides], where he himself also used to undress.

And he said to me, ‘As you go along you will see small slender snakes; when you see one don’t be afraid, because it is they who strengthen (tiisa) your heart, so that you won’t fear the big one.’ He showed me the tree, and said I should go straight to it. When I looked there, I
saw a small slender snake near by. I walked past it, and it ran away. After passing it I continued going ahead. I saw another, bigger than the first. I went on, and kept seeing small snakes varying in length. I came at last to the mohwidiri tree I had been shown. On getting there I undressed as my father had told me: he said I should undress here, anoint myself with tshitlho, rest for a while, and then go on. I smeared the tshitlho here and there on my body and my head; it was the royal tshitlho, with which only the chief anointed himself.

I drew near to the little pool which had been described to me by my father. It was close to the entrance of a cave, and when I reached it I trod on water. As I stood there, a wind sprung up and clouds began to form, the water in the pool rippled, the trees rustled, and an angry noise (kgaruru) started in the cave. The snake came out and approached me, with its eyes flashing. It startled me, but I stood still. As I looked at it approaching, it seemed to have facial features of a human being. Its body gleamed, and on its head was [what looked like] untidy thatch (setlhankhukhu). The chief and his doctors tell the people that this is straw (motlhaka), but it is not; it is a clump of hair (sekhu saboditse), to which many mosquitoes were clinging.

The snake came up to me, and licked me. I remained quite still; I did not tremble, because my father had told me that I must on no account make any movement. Had I moved, I might have provoked the snake to bite me. It did not bite me because, having smeared myself with its tshitlho, I smelt like one of its own kind, and not like a human being. When it licked me it put its tongue into my ear and licked me there. As soon as it had finished licking me it fell asleep at my feet.

I left it there and went into it cave. I took its eggs and mucus (borekereke). Then, leaving it asleep, I went back down the hill. As I left it I did not look back, but went straight on. I came to my clothes and put them on, still looking ahead; and when I was dressed I descended to the bottom of the hill. On my way down I met my father sitting on a stone. When I reached the bottom I found that Malebye had fled far away; he said he thought I was dead, because he had seen the trees shake in the wind. I went home with him, leaving my father behind on the hill in good spirits.

By the time we got home we were wet, because it had rained on us. And there we found my father, although I had left him on the hill. I gave him the egg. He told me not to eat anything until the following afternoon. He then called me and gave me an emetic to drink. It was made from a bulb called motlapatlapa [fool, idiot].

He sent me again to get water from the pool, giving me a skin bottle (modutwana) to use for the purpose. When I got there I did the same as before: I undressed at the mohwidiri tree, smeared myself with tshitlho, and went up to the cave. I waited there at the entrance. The snake came out and licked me. When it stopped, I dipped the bottle into the pool; I did not use a scoop, but let the water flow in through the neck. Then I went back home.

I was sent again to the hill to get a branch of the modumela tree [Kirkia acuminata]. I carried an axe, with which I was to cut the tree quickly, and only once; if I cut twice, the snake would kill me. I was sent also to get its flesh, but never for its dung, though if I had been asked to get that I would have had to do the same [as on former occasions].
APPENDIX NINETEEN


In 1856 a young adolescent Xhosa girl, Nongqawuse, claimed she had been visited by ancestral spirits near the Gxarha River in the Centane district of what was then known as Independent Xhosaland (which abutted British Kaffraria), the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape. She claimed that she had been asked by them to convey a message to the Xhosa nation. She was to tell them that they should slaughter all their cattle, destroy their crops and relinquish the use of magical charms. This would result in the return of all the dead, both relatives and cattle, and the return to the idyllic lifestyle they had experienced before the depredations of the British colonisers. The white intruders would be swept into the sea by a strong wind and peace and prosperity would return (Peires, 1989, 2003). The tragedy that ensued has been well documented and it resulted in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of cattle (over 80% of the nation’s herd) and 40,000 people died from starvation. Some historians are of the opinion that it was this event that broke the back of the Xhosa nation and turned them into the destitute landless proletariat that was to provide the labour for the emerging South African economy (Peires, 1989, 2003). It has been argued by Peires that the cattle-killing was precipitated by the prevailing scourge of lung sickness epidemic that was wreaking havoc amongst the herds at the time (ibid). Cattle were a crucial component to the political, economic, social and spiritual well-being of the Xhosa nation (Hunter, 1936/1961). The upheavals that colonialism had precipitated had led, according to some Xhosa observers, to an increase in witchcraft and other evil activities among the subjugated tribes. Some native observers, including Mhlakaza (the main instigator of the millenarian movement), saw the lung sickness epidemic being the result of such witchcraft, and this was confirmed by the prophecy and visions of Mhlakaza’s niece, Nongqawuse (Peires, 1989: 80). For them, the only way to appease the ancestors and to lift the punishment they had inflicted through the lung-sickness was to sacrifice the cattle. One of the purposes of the sacrifice of a beast was, as it still is today, to cleanse a person or his/her family from sin, and to return disorder/misfortune back to order/harmony.

According to Peires, Sir George Grey, then governor of the Cape Colony and the High Commissioner to British Kaffraria which bordered independent Xhosaland, “utilized the desperate starvation of the people to engineer their mass exodus via the colonial labour

1 The most detailed account of the Nongqawuse ‘Cattle-killing Movement’ is by Peires (1989, 2003 – 2nd edition) and this remains the authoritative text on the subject. Various other authors have incorporated aspects of Nongqawuse’s prophecies into their own historical analyses of the region, or have responded to some of Peires’s arguments and hypotheses. These include, among others, Bradford (1996), Craig (1992) and Stapleton (1991, 1993, 1994).

2 Some scholars and Xhosa people criticize the use of the term Cattle-killing as it overemphasizes the slaughter of the cattle (Peires, 2003) rather than then destruction of crops and grain and the refusal to plant for the following year. These were equally devastating on the population. An alternative title could be the Great Sacrifice of the Xhosa.
market, while filling their former lands with white settlers" (ibid: 317). The effects of the Nongqawuse movement still reverberate down to the present time for as Peires notes “almost all Xhosa today hold Sir George Grey personally responsible for the Cattle-Killing, believing that in some way he manipulated Nongqawuse into prophesying as she did.” Peires goes on to add that “This interpretation is very old and probably dates as far back as the Cattle-Killing period itself.” (ibid: 317). Scheub (1996: 307-313) records the oral history related by Nongenile Masithathu Zenani, a Xhosa storyteller who details this assertion very clearly in her version of the Nongqawuse prophecy. Countering this version at the time of the cattle-killing was that of the settler press who proposed that “the whole Cattle Killing was a plot by the chiefs to force their people to fight again against the Colony and claimed that the Xhosa had been justifiably punished for their sins” (Webster, 1999:12). Both Peires and Webster find there is not enough evidence to support either of these assertions. Timothy Stapleton (1993) has argued that the cattle-killing was a response of the commoners against the old order of hegemonic rule by the chiefs. As most of the cattle belonged to the chiefs and were lent out in the busa system, killing the cattle would be a means of eroding their power (ibid). However, this argument does not stand up to the evidence as much of the killing was driven from the top by the chiefs themselves (Peires, 2003). Bradford, a feminist writer and historian, has critiqued other scholars for failing to recognise the gender power differentials that existed in Xhosa society at the time. She argues that they need to consider the possibility that Nongqawuse, as a young female, was challenging ‘male patriarchal power’ through her prophecies (Bradford, 1996). Crais has argued for historical analyses to have more focus on the existing cultural and cosmological framework of Xhosa beliefs as they may have influenced peoples’ insights and decisions at the time. In this respect he has recognised that the beliefs of the River People were an important factor that need to be taken into account, even though his understanding of the water divinity phenomenon appears limited; Crais concludes that “In the millenarian Cattle-Killing of 1856-7...the People of the River came out of the water to instruct the Xhosa to purify their defiled homesteads” (1992: 23). With reference to what I have discussed in this thesis, it is possible that the individuals, whom the interests of the Great Sacrifice served, drew on the imagery of the water divinities to validate and facilitate their claims because they knew how powerful that imagery was in the minds of the people. However, although Nongqawuse received her first and subsequent visions and messages near the pool, the means by which the messages were reputedly conveyed to her do not tally with what has been presented in this thesis. There were never any claims that Nongqawuse actually experienced submersion underwater to receive her instructions from either her ancestors or the abantu bomlambo. According to Peires, Nongqawuse’s initial encounter with the messengers from the river was also witnessed by the young girl Nombanda (Mhlakaza’s sister-in-law), and this occurred near their garden: “As they stood in their fields guarding the crops (from birds), Nongqawuse heard her name called by two strangers [men] standing in a small bush adjoining the garden, they entrusted her with the following singular message...” (Peires, 1989: 79). These two strangers ‘manifested’ at the same place on the next day directing her to instruct Mhlakaza to heed their warnings and take their message to the chiefs. It was only after people started coming to the Gxarha River, to get proof for themselves of the pronouncements, that the scenes of revelation seem to shift to the river, caves and the sea; these manifestations were in the form of vague shapes emerging from the river, marsh and sea, or disembodied voices emanating from behind bushes. None of these alleged manifestations fit with the evidence.
Peires is quite clear that, unsurprisingly, many of the individuals who were sent by the chiefs to investigate the claims came back unconvinced. However, once the momentum of the killing and sacrifice took hold and the believers (especially the chiefs) had morally committed themselves, it was probably difficult for them to back out without losing face, and so the killing continued. Of interest, Peires (1989: 82) gives an account of how the power of the Xhosa king, Sarhili, who supported the sacrifice, was augmented by his association with a python, and this may have been significant to events surrounding the prophecies. Sarhili’s association with the python at his kraal Hohita, is still expressed in Xhosa praises to this day.

The case of Nonkosi, a second prophetess, is relevant to this point. Crais uses the deposition of the young prophetess Nonkosi (an 11-year-old) as further evidence for his argument on the role of the ‘river spirits’ in fuelling the tragedy. Nonkosi was the daughter of a diviner who lived in Chief Mhala’s district. Chief Mhala had been an active believer in the prophecies, exhorting his people to slaughter their cattle and destroy their crops (Peires 2003: 222-225). Nonkosi’s prophecy came at a time when support for the course taken by Mhala was waning and it proved to be the flame and justification he needed to continue the task. Nonkosi claimed that while she was playing near the Mpongo River she had encountered a man who emerged from the water claiming he was the great diviner and deceased leader, Mlanjeni (lit-from the river), who told her he had come to raise the dead (and this was seen as support for the movement). She claimed she was even shown a number of dead chiefs. Significantly, Nonkosi claimed that Mlanjeni took her underwater to his homestead where there were livestock, and showed her their houses and all kinds of foods, and he then returned her through a tunnel to the dry land. It should be noted that these claims by Nonkosi reflect far more congruence to the reported experiences with the water divinities than those of Nongqawuse.

According to Peires (1989, 2003) there seems to be sufficient evidence that the cattle-killing prophecies were manipulated and encouraged by Nongqawuse’s uncle, Mhlakaza (from the Ngqosini clan), who probably had his own reasons and agenda for endorsing the prophecies. The role of Mhlakaza is pivotal to the questions raised of the possible reasons for the cattle-killing. In the most recent addition of ‘The Dead will Arise’ (2003), Peires responds to subsequent critiques on this matter elicited from his first edition, by giving further evidence to support his convictions. According to him there is very strong evidence to connect Mhlakaza as being the same individual as Wilhelm Goliath (his English name), and he still firmly endorses this view (2003: 360-362). According to Peires, Goliath (Mhlakaza) was a baptized member of the Methodist Church in Grahamstown and “In June 1849, he became the personal servant of Nathaniel James Merriman, the newly appointed Archdeacon of Grahamstown”

3 Peires notes that this was suspected by Brownlee, who was the Commissioner at the time of the cattle-sacrifice (Peires, 2003: 131).

4 Zweli (pers comm.)

5 Mlangeni gained fame (or notoriety) as a revolutionary prophet that led to the War of Mlanjeni (1850-53). He also had strong connections with the river where he would spend sometimes days sitting “up to his neck” in a pool on the Keiskamma River (Peires, 1989, 2003).
Over the months the two developed “an intimate and near equal relationship” while they traversed hundreds of kilometres of the countryside by foot. In this time they shared their religious ideas and the traditions of their respective cultures. Goliath was the first Xhosa to become confirmed and to receive communion in the Anglican Church. Significantly Peires notes he became “deeply hostile even to the most innocent Xhosa religious practices, and he once sternly reproved a young mother for telling her child to throw a stone into the river in order to propitiate the spirits who lived there” (ibid: 35). After a while it appears that the Merrimans became intolerant of Goliath’s increasing material demands, with limited repayment in work, and eventually he was dismissed from the Archdeacon’s service.

The great desire of Wilhelm Goliath’s life, wrote Mrs Merriman, was to be a ‘Gospel Man’. Blocked and ridiculed by the very household which had initially promised him so much, Wilhelm quitted the Merrimans some time in 1853 and went to live near his sister’s place on the Gxarha river in King Sarhili’s country just beyond the borders of British Kaffraria. There he resumed his own name of Mhlakaza, and within a few years he began to preach a new Gospel of his own devising (ibid: 36).

According to Peires, Mhlakaza was to take with him the young orphan girl, Nongqawuse, whose parents had been killed in the Waterkloof region during the frontier wars (Peires, 1989:36). It may be relevant that, according to De Jager and Gitywa (1963:109), the clan to which Mhlakaza belonged, Ngqosini, had strong connections with the abantu bomlambo. They observed that the River People were reverently addressed as ‘Cihoshe’, which is one of the praise names of the amaNgqosini clan. This could explain why Nongqawuse’s prophecies, which were strongly supported by Mhlakaza, were taken so seriously by some. However, as already mentioned, the evidence Mhlakaza used to convince the sceptics failed to resonate with aspects of Xhosa knowledge about the water divinities and this could explain why there were many unbelievers; there were too many inconsistencies in the way Nongqawuse claimed to have received her revelations and these were not in keeping with the age old ways that these divinities were known to operate and manifest.

The Ambuya Juliana Movement
In 1992 the prophetic movement of Ambuya Juliana swept through southern Zimbabwe. Although it was set in a very different social, economic and political context, there was a fundamental similarity with the Nongqawuse movement in that the prophecies were inspired from messages allegedly received from the water divinities. The movement was initiated by a prophetess by the name of ambuya (grandmother) Juliana who claimed to be an emissary of the water divinities (njuzu), with whom she had resided under water for a period of four years. At this time the region was in the grip of a severe drought and rodent plague and the people were suffering great deprivations and political, social and economic discontent. These deprivations, Juliana explained, were largely brought about by the peoples’ own actions and
omissions in the environmental, spiritual, social and political arenas. According to Juliana, the severe drought and rodent plague was a “consequence of a breakdown in the relationships within the community; between people and their natural environment; the community and the land guardian spirits; and between the government and the spiritual guardians of the people and their land” (Mawere & Wilson, 1995: 254-255). Her pronouncements were met with great enthusiasm and the movement rapidly spread across the whole of south-central Zimbabwe (an area of about 30 000 km²). Juliana recommended a set of harsh taboos and restrictions that would appease the spirit world, bringing an end to the drought, pestilence, social and spiritual upheavals, and a return to the traditions of the past. Thousands of people responded to the call, attending the mass mutoro (rainmaking) ceremony and attempting to abide by the constraints imposed upon them. According to Mawere and Wilson (1995: 257) these taboos/rules included the following:

- A complete ban on such work activities normally done on Sunday and Wednesday chisi ‘holidays’, such as fetching firewood, sweeping yards, making hoe handles and yokes, drawing water and washing clothes.
- A ban on referring to baboons by the Karanga name (makudo); since these belong to the same monkey totem as the spirits of Matobo [the cult centre]’ they should be referred to as ‘grandfathers’ (vanasekuru).
- A ban on commercial beer brewing
- A ban on drum beating and other Zionist music.
- A ban on using borehole water, since the drilling of boreholes frightens the njuzu. People were told to draw water from the sand in the river beds and from natural wells.
- A ban on referring to mice by their Karanga names, during the period when their post-bumper rains epidemic was leading to severe crop damage. They had to be called sacks (masaga) or blankets (machira).
- A ban on the trade of indigenous fruits
- A stated opposition to the grazing scheme in Indaba Ward, on the grounds that the spirits do not want to be enclosed by wire fences.
- A number of price regulations on local produce, most significantly goats.
- A ban on starting farming for four days after the rains had started falling (in this area even such a small delay in ploughing and planting can severely affect yields)
- In addition to this the people had to contribute financially to the holding of a special mutoro (rainmaking ritual) and to donate tribute (rusengwe) to the Mwari cult centre at Matonjeni in the Matopos to which Juliana was connected.

It must be noted that after several years Juliana’s credibility waned. According to Ranger (pers. com) she was still camped outside Harare in 1999 waiting for an audience with President Mugabe to relay to him the complaints of the njuzu spirits. In a recent book he stated that she still attracted a strong following (Ranger, 2003: 86). According to Ranger, Juliana’s spiritual claims led her to the heart of the influential Mwari cult in the Matopos Hills, where the priesthood apparently recognised her.

7 Discussing the Juliana movement, Ranger asserts “Juliana’s teaching links the njuzu directly to the Mwali cult. They taught her to ‘become a Nyusa, rainmaker, and to lead the people back to observe traditional rituals.’ She says she comes as a messenger from Mwali and from the njuzu. So she is bringing the ‘mermaids’ to the centre of the Mwali cosmology.” (1995: 239). His recent publication over the struggles for control over the Mwali shrines in the Matopos Hills also confirms this standpoint (1999).