

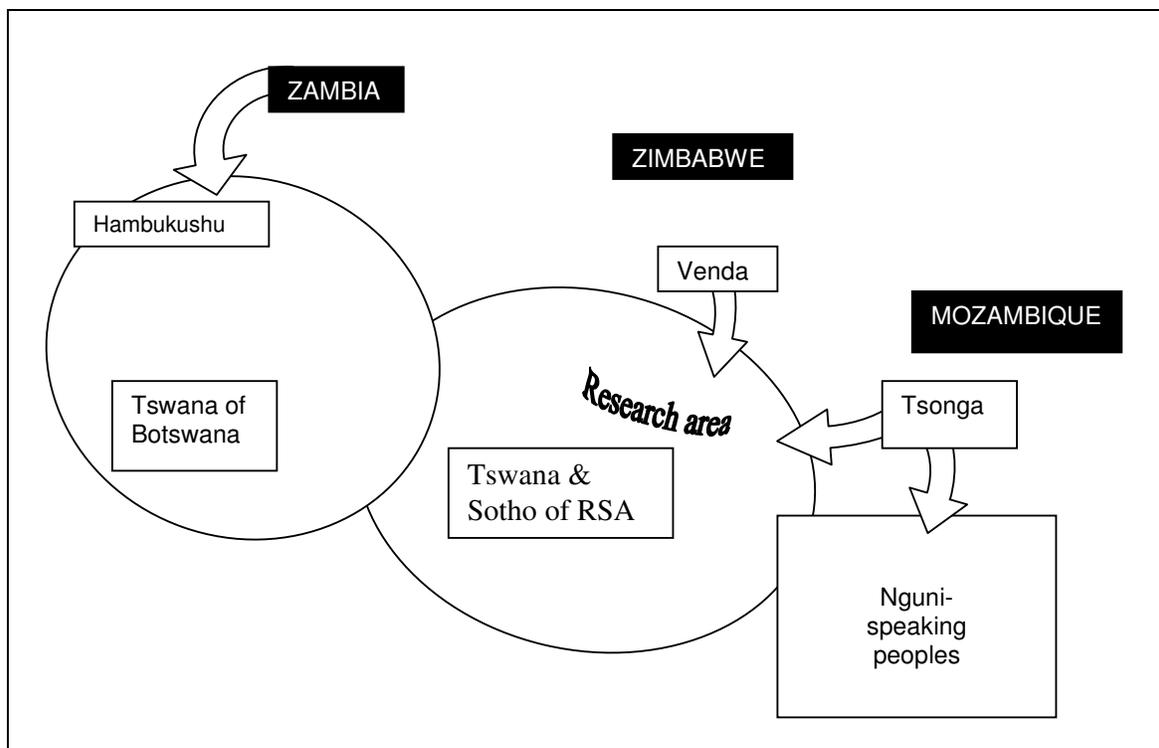
I have decided to forward the basic ethnographic data that I will use during my presentation for everyone's perusal. I still need to contemplate the presentation itself and will not be in time to prepare the final paper before the weekend.

## **Be(com)ing a cult member or spirit medium: the malopo cult in South Africa revisited<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Although the possession cult and spirit mediumship is well known in countries to the north and east of South Africa<sup>2</sup>, it has remained a peripheral phenomenon among the Tswana-speaking population of Botswana and South Africa as well the Sotho-speaking peoples of the South African interior. In Botswana it is only associated with the Hambukushu of Ngamiland who were once part of the Barotse Empire in Zambia (see *hathimo* affliction in Larson 1983) while in South Africa it reached the Sotho speaking communities fairly recently via their Venda- and Tsonga-speaking neighbours. Even among the latter it only dates back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stayt 1968:302-8; Junod 1927:479; see also Krige & Krige 1943:241 and Van der Hooft 1979: 110 *et seq.*) from where it spread westward to Sotho-speaking communities as well as southward to Swazi- and Zulu-speaking communities (see Krige 1936:307 footnote 2).



<sup>1</sup> Draft paper. Please do not quote.

<sup>2</sup> In these areas (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique) the cult (often also the possessing spirits and the affliction) is referred to with terms such as *vimbuza*, *mashave*, *mhondoro*, *mp(w)esa*, *majini*, *mazangaziwe*, *matu-waukulu*, *nantongwe*, *nantarat*, *ntume*, and *malombo* (see Boeder 1983; Beattie & Middleton 1969; Jackson 1974; Gelfand 1964; Gelfand 1967:8 *et seq.*).

Spirit mediumship involving lineage spirits has, of course, been part of the 'original' divinatory practices of the Nguni peoples<sup>3</sup> but, as Hammond-Tooke points out, the mediumistic divinatory practices of the latter differs fundamentally from those of Sotho-Tswana diviners as well as from the practices that are associated with the alien possession cults that were introduced to South Africa from the north (see Hammond-Tooke 1989: 9-14; 1989:127).

Ever since its introduction to the Sotho-speaking inhabitants of the Limpopo Province in the early twentieth century, the cult has evoked ambivalent views among the local Sotho-speaking people. Although some are not interested at all and others merely participate in the often spectacular possession dances, some have indeed become active cult members and spirit mediums. In the Pedi-speaking communities of the Sekhukhune District (Limpopo Province, South Africa) where I have conducted research since the mid-1970s<sup>4</sup> cult members are still viewed as 'extraordinary' (*šele*: strange/queer) and they are often met with animosity due to the 'noise' (disturbance: *lešata*) they create during their 'incessant' nocturnal dancing and drumming. Becoming cult members or spirit mediums in these communities implies altering deep-seated 'existing' views about the relationship between the 'living' and the 'living dead' and accepting new ideas about the cause, diagnosis, and 'treatment' of illness, disease and misfortune. What are the characteristics of these 'existing' views, ideas and practices and how do they differ from those that are associated with the possession cult?

### **The cause of disease**

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It was, and still is possible to identify the basic beliefs regarding the cause and treatment of illness among the Pedi-speaking inhabitants of the rural areas where the research was done. In this regard the following need to be mentioned:

The concept *bolwetši* (which is translated as 'illness' or 'disease') is used as an all-inclusive term that may denote any type of misfortune or even social disharmony. A broad distinction is made between 'mediated' and 'unmediated' misfortunes (and illnesses), i.e. misfortunes that have been 'sent' and misfortunes that 'simply happen'. The latter category includes illnesses with a fairly good prognosis like the minor childhood-diseases, minor trauma and natural processes like pregnancy and ageing as well as with conditions which are (at least initially) believed to be the result of changes in climatic or environmental conditions and incorrect diet. An exceptionally large number of these natural illnesses (*malwetsi a hlogo*) are associated either with the abnormal condition, quantity and 'flow' of blood, with 'the heart' or with 'the bowels'. Blood is not only considered a vital element in the process of impregnation but is also closely linked with human emotions and sensations. The thickening, coagulation and accumulation as well as the incorrect flow of the blood may cause headaches, impotency, sterility (barrenness), dysmenorrhoea, epilepsy, hysteria and even insanity. Because the heart is associated with human emotions, any impairment of the mental processes which may lead to aggression or irrational behaviour is usually attributed to malfunctioning or abnormalities of the heart or ascribed to the accumulation of blood in the heart. All conditions characterised by 'foaming at the mouth' (including epileptic seizures) are attributed to foam (*lehulo*) in the heart. Apart from 'foam in the heart', madness may, however, also be caused by a special kind

<sup>3</sup> Krige 1936, Chapter 14; Lamla 1975, Chapter 4, Hunter 1961: Chapter 7; Kuper 1969:163-6, Broster & Bourn 1981. See also *motheketheke* in Ashton 1952:283-8).

<sup>4</sup> The data used in this paper were collected among Pedi-speaking community in the area to the south of the Strydpoort mountains, between Mokopane in the west, Nebo in the South and Burgersfort in the east. Most of the villages that were included in the research are situated in what is currently known as the Sekhukhune District.

of worm (seboko) which is said to bore into the brain. A clear distinction is, however, made between madness and the condition which precedes spirit possession.

If the course of a disease follows a pattern which can be accepted as normal on the basis of the past experiences of the patient or his relatives, there will be no cause for anxiety. If, however, deviations or anomalies do occur and the patient shows no signs of recovery, the particular illness-episode is most likely to be ascribed to one of the disease causing agents who has sent it or from whom it has 'emanated'. The two principle categories of causal agents are living fellow humans (specifically witches: *baloi*) on the one hand and the 'living dead' (*badimo*: ancestral spirits) on the other. This is broadly speaking also a distinction between misfortune 'sent' with and without evil intent. In this paper the focus is on beliefs with regard to the ancestral spirits (*badimo*).

Under normal circumstances the ancestor spirits are believed to enjoy a peaceful existence in the 'spirit world' (*badimong*). They may, however, become 'restless' when their (perceived) wishes are not obeyed, when they are not venerated and cared for and when their descendents transgress the accepted rules of conduct (laws: *melao*, customs: *mekgwa*, taboos: *diilwa* and rules of respect: *dithompho*). Any such transgression, neglect or lack of respect may cause the ancestor spirits to become 'restless' in which case they (ultimately) punish the 'culprit' as well as the latter's family members by sending some form of disease or misfortune or by withholding their protection. The punishment of the ancestor spirits is, according to my Pedi-speaking informants, devoid of evil intent and is rather aimed at 'reminding' their descendents of their proper duties and 'redirecting' them. It is thus actually a form of indirect communication between the spirits and the living. The diseases attributed to the ancestor spirits are therefore normally characterized by their lingering nature and will only end in death if the 'culprit' persists in his/her disregard of the spirits' wishes. This implies that an offender or transgressor has the opportunity to rectify his/her demeanor and thus regain the favour, support and patronage of the offended spirit(s). This in itself is, however, not enough; rectification should be followed by a sacrifice in which the entire lineage participates and which is not only an act of thanksgiving but also of reconciliation and atonement.

The sending of misfortune is, according to my informants, more often than not only used by the ancestor spirits as a last resort. Their main method of communication with their living descendents is dreams, followed by general misfortunes and only then (eventually), one of the conditions that are normally associated with the spirits. Certain untoward occurrences like an eclipse of the sun or moon and the appearance of comets may also be attributed to the ancestors spirits. All these occurrences are, however, merely indications that a particular spirit or group of spirits, are 'restless'. The real cause of their restlessness and the appropriate way in which it may be rectified, can only be disclosed by a trained healer (*ngaka*, pl. *dingaka*).

### **Treatment of illness and other misfortunes: the role of the diviner-healer (*ngaka*)**

Although it is accepted that professionals acting within the sphere of biomedicine can treat disease and illness, a traditional healer has to be consulted to 'identify' the agent who has sent it in the first place and to prescribe the appropriate remedial actions that should be taken. It is, however, not the diviner who diagnoses the disease; he is but the go-between which the spirits use to disclose the reason why they appeared in dreams or have sent some form of illness or misfortune.

In the Pedi-speaking communities a distinction is made between those *dingaka* who have been ‘called’ (*go bitšwa*) to their vocation by the ancestor spirits and those who are self-made (*bongaka bja maitirelo*). Within the former category a distinction is made between diviners (*dingaka ta ditaola*: *dingaka* who use the set of divination bones) and herbal specialists (*dingaka tša dihlare*; *dingaka* of medicines; also known as *dingaka tše tšhupša*: hornless *dingaka*). A third category is made up of the so-called *maphale* (*dingaka tša malopo*: *dingaka* of possessing spirits) who also practice divination but who form part of the *malopo* cult (possession cult). Contrary to the former, the *maphale* are often ‘called’ to their vocation by ‘alien’ spirits (spirits that do not belong to the own family group or lineage).

Although the knowledge and skills of a *ngaka* are passed down to him/her by a particular ancestor spirit (an act in which the spirit takes the initiative), the ‘calling’ must be followed by a period of training with a master-*ngaka*. The identity of the latter as well as the main parts of his/her divination set are normally revealed to the would-be *ngaka* during dreams. The variety of bones and other objects which form part of the divination set (*ditaola*) of a *ngaka ya ditaola* are kept in a special bag (*moraba/thebele*) and will only be used when the client has paid the appropriate fee (*khunollamoraba*). These objects are usually blown upon by the client and then thrown onto a grass mat. The pattern in which the objects fall (the *lewa*) is interpreted in a *Gestalt* manner, indicated with a specific name, and praised with a special praise poem. Simultaneously the relationship between the different parts of the set, is interpreted in an almost systems analytical fashion.

Except for the *maphale*, a *ngaka* normally does not wear distinctive clothing and in everyday life they can hardly be distinguished from their fellow community members. Apart from the divination set he/she usually keeps the following utensils handy; an iron digging implement (*kepu*), an axe (*selepe*), a wooden pestle and mortar (*mose* and *lehudu*), a round grinding stone (*tšhilo*), and a stone mortar (*Ielwala*). Medicines are incinerated on a potsherd (*lekopelo*) or iron hoe blade (*letšepe*) and medicines kept in small bottles or clay pots (*dipitšana*), and in antelope horns (*dinaka*) of different shapes and sizes. A number of small medicine horns (*dinakana*) and a sweat scraper (*lebeko*) are hung from a type of skin pinafore (*Ielokwa*) around the neck. Various other instruments such as knives (*dithipa*), razor blades (*magare*), a cupping horn or calabash (*mohlogo*), a tuft of a cow’s or gnu’s tail (*seditsi/letšoba*) and various needles (*ditšhwana*) are kept in a skin bag (*sebeba*) at the waist.

The first type of service provided by the *ngaka ya ditaola* is to divine the cause of a particular ailment or misfortune. In this regard he/she acts as a ‘detective’ by identifying the agent who has caused, permitted or ‘sent’ the misfortune. If he is successful he may also reveal the appropriate remedial action which should be taken by the client.

A second type of service provided by the *ngaka ya ditaola* is the provision of a multiplicity of medicines. These may include medicines and compounds with definite physiological effects (curative and/or pain-killing) as well as those aimed at restoring or strengthening the ‘power’ (*maatla*) or personal shadow attribute (*seriti*) of the individual, or which have a purifying or cooling effect. All medicines or amulets are client-specific and will not necessarily benefit other people. If evil sorcery (*bo/oi*: witchcraft) is indicated as the cause of an illness or other misfortune, it is imperative to identify (*go sora/Iaola*) the agent who has ‘sent’ it. Only when this has been done, will it be possible to undo (*go dirolla/gatolla*) the evil, and to free (*go loyolla*) the afflicted person. In addition, the latter must then be ‘sheltered’ (*go phemela*) from further onslaughts. This necessitates the use of powerful medicines which will ‘redirect’ (*go bušolla*) the evil to its sender. The ultimate aim is to ensure the continuous ‘protection’ (*go upa*) of community members: a child’s fontanelle is thus rubbed in (*go phaphata*) with strengthening medicines as soon as possible after birth; the foundations of a hut must be

‘affirmed’ (go *thea motheo*), the home, the family and the household complex must be ‘trussed’ (go *tiiša/theyga lapa/motse*), and the fields and crop must be ‘insured’ (go *beeletša tšemo/puno*).

Apart from the above, a *ngaka* may be requested to lay a snare (go *bea letšwa*) for various types of villains (evil sorcerers, murderers, thieves, etc.). The main purpose in this regard is to force the evil-doer to admit his wrongs so that he may be dealt with in an appropriate manner. Medicines may be applied or administered in a variety of ways. Usually it is administered orally or anally or by inhalation of vapours and smoke. It may also be applied to different parts of the body in the form of a liquid, a froth, a powder, or an unguent. It is frequently rubbed into incisions made in the body (go *gaya*) - especially at the joints and on the side of the head.

Apart from the mere application of medicines and medicinal compounds, oedema, headache and conditions associated with the blood, is frequently treated by making small incisions in the skin thus allowing a means of exit for the ‘contaminated’ or excess blood. Although proper phlebotomy where a vein is opened, is uncommon, excessive or contaminated blood is often removed by cupping (go *lomega*). Apart from the inhalation of vapours given off by burning medicines on a potsherd (go *arubetša*) a patient may also be induced to undergo a steam bath (go *arametša*). It is common for *dingaka* to treat malaria and other diseases thought to be contagious by sweating them out in this way. Boils are usually only covered with unguents but certain abscesses may be drained (go *ara*) and treated with purifying medicines. The setting of bone fractures by using strips of bark is often performed by *dingaka*. In such instances as well as in the case of snake-bite, it is, however, considered more important to use medicines - healing medicines in the case of fractures and ‘expellants’ in the case of snake-bites.

Some of the services of the *ngaka* is performed in the interest of the entire community or clan. These include determining the correct time for the commencement of the initiation ceremonies, the preparation of rain-medicines, and various techniques for strengthening the borders of an area, the prevention of drought and hailstorms, and ensuring the invincibility of warriors.

From the above it should be clear that terms such as ‘traditional healers’, ‘diviners’, and ‘shamans’ do not provide a clear indication of the role of the *ngaka* in Pedi-speaking communities. These ‘professionals’ are not merely involved in the diagnosis, prevention and cure of somatic conditions but provide a holistic service to individual clients as well as to their communities at large. The indigenous term *ngaka* (p1. *dingaka*) rather than restricting translations may just as well be used in scientific reports and descriptions.

### **Spirit possession and mediumistic healers**

Formerly an ordinary diviner was consulted to ascertain the cause of the spirits' restlessness and to appease them as soon as possible in order to avert any further misfortune. The main purpose of all forms of appeasement was to restore the harmony between the living and deceased members of the community, thus redirecting the latter to a life of tranquility in the spirit world. Contrary to this, the main theme in the possession cult, is not to get rid of or to ‘bar’ the spirits but to entice them into entering the body of the chosen medium or mediumistic healer

The spirits involved in the mediumistic cult can be divided into two groups, namely, kindred and alien spirits. Kindred spirits are mainly those of deceased agnates and cognates while alien

spirits are the spirits of deceased members of non-related clans. The spirits of deceased members of the Changana, Angoni and especially the Ndzau people are considered to be alien spirits. While the normal terms for ancestor spirits are often used for possession spirits as well, they are mostly referred to as *malopo* (sing. *lelopo*).

When a spirit wishes a living person to become a mediumistic healer or simply a medium, it will usually afflict him or her with specific dreams and illnesses. The typical pattern of these dreams is that the spirit concerned identifies itself and its relationship with the chosen person, followed by a command to train as a medium, carry out prescribed ceremonies, dance the possession dance and obtain a specific outfit and divination set. In some cases the spirit will express a wish that the person should also train as a healer. This usually happens when the spirit used to be a healer him/herself during his/her life. In such cases the spirit will usually 'threaten' him or her with serious illness and even death should its wishes not be carried out - a threat which often brings serious conflict for individuals already practicing another profession.

The condition regarded as a calling by possessing spirits is associated with specific symptoms and is known as 'the illness of the possessing ancestor spirits' (*bolwetši bja malopo*). The illness is characterised by its prolonged and persistent nature and usually involves swollen feet, constant pain in the head and chest, depression, and heart palpitations. The afflicted person will withdraw from his family, wander around aimlessly and neglect him/herself. Although hysteria, violence, and destructive tendencies sometimes occur during the training period, these symptoms are usually associated with the effect of evil sorcery or even madness rather than with the spirits. Mediums and mediumistic healers are not regarded as mentally disturbed.

Because of the vagueness of the symptoms, prospective mediums usually pay repeated visits to hospitals but are unable to obtain satisfactory diagnosis or treatment. Sometimes the symptoms do temporarily disappear after medical treatment, only to reappear with renewed intensity shortly afterwards. In such cases the patient or his or her relatives will consult an ordinary diviner or seek help from a prophet or leader of one of the independent Black churches. Through the use of some sort of divination - usually the throwing of the 'bones' (*ditaola*) the diviner will attempt to establish the origin and appropriate cure of the illness. All possible alternatives will generally be explored and tried, before the presence of possession spirits is admitted. Especially in the case of first episodes the sickness can persist for months or years on end before it is correctly diagnosed. This is partly due to an unwillingness on the part of many afflicted persons to undergo training as a spirit medium because it is a long process involving considerable expense for the pupil and his or her family.

When the spirits choose a person to become a medium or mediumistic healer, the chosen one eventually has no alternative but to submit to their wishes. The reverse is also true; no person will be able to undergo training as a medium unless he or she has been 'called'. In all cases the initiative lies with the spirits. The calling to become a mediumistic healer usually originates with the spirit of an ancestor who had himself once been a healer and who wishes his/her work to be perpetuated.

If the treatment given by the ordinary diviner does not result in a cure, the help of an established mediumistic healer will be called in, either on the initiative of the afflicted or his/her family or on the recommendation of a ordinary diviner. The healer will consult his or her own divining set and if indications of possession spirits are present, will arrange with the afflicted individual and his relatives the period of required training and the expected remuneration.

The training is aimed largely at 'opening' the candidate so as to prepare him/her for possession and at carrying out the wishes of the spirit as revealed in dreams. If the spirit requires it, training

as a healer will also be given. The period of instruction varies from case to case, but always includes a variety of ceremonies and an eventual initiation into the cult. The execution of the spirit's wishes is in itself an effective therapy for the affliction of the pupil. Once a medium has been cured of the illness 'sent' by a spirit, he/she will not be afflicted by that ailment again except as a punishment for contravening the spirits' wishes. A second or third possession spirit can, however, send its own variation of the symptoms or some other misfortune in order to make its own wishes known.

The training of a mediumistic healer falls into two broad phases. First he or she is trained as a medium and initiated into the cult, and then, if it is the will of the spirits, he/she is trained as a healer. The same terms as those used by the Nguni peoples to indicate a pupil being prepared for mediumship are increasingly being used in the research area. Thus the term *mathosana* or *mathwasana* (singular *lethosana* and *lethwasana*) are used to indicate not only the novice mediums but also the ex-pupils of a particular master mediumistic healer.

#### *Preparing for and inviting spirit possession*

Training is aimed at permitting possession of the pupil under controlled circumstances, and at teaching him/her the techniques needed to make subsequent episodes as easy and 'painless' as possible. No attempt is made to 'drive out' the spirit(s). The medium remains a chosen favourite of the spirit concerned, and it is regarded as a great honour to be so selected. Instruction will begin as soon as the pupil's relatives can afford to pay for it and provide the necessary sacrificial animals. It usually takes place at the home of an established and qualified mediumistic healer, and during the course of training the pupil is expected to help out with daily household chores.

During the first few days attempts are made to stabilise the weakened pupil by means of medicines, to build up his/her strength and to protect him/her from evil sorcery or the unexpected, uncontrolled or violent possession by the spirit concerned. In order to purify and prepare him/her for the first episode of possession the pupil is induced to vomit frequently, and to consume various decoctions. In a great many cases the medicine is beaten in water along with certain bulbs in order to produce froth, which the pupil then drinks or which is sprinkled over him/her with a cows-tail whisk. Protective medicines are applied in the form of a powder or unguent which is rubbed into small incisions made at the wrists or on the head or chest. In other cases the medicine is heated on a potsherd and the pupil, covered with a blanket, inhales the fumes.

The period of instruction begins about two weeks after the advent of the process of stabilisation, when the spirit is invited and induced to possess the pupil for the first time and to reveal its wishes. It occurs during successive evening sessions of about two hours' duration which can be repeated up to four times per week until the spirit finally manifests itself. The performances start inside a hut which is specially set aside for the spirits (*ngwako ya malopo*), and in which the different outfits and instruments are kept but will at some stage be performed in the open gathering space (*lelapa*) between the huts. The sacred altar (*thokgolo*) where offerings to the spirits are made is often close to this hut.

The pupil, wrapped in blankets, takes his/her place in the middle of the dimly-lit hut while ex-pupils of the teacher sit around her and begin to sing softly. The rhythm is provided by drums and a set of hand-held rattles (*ditšela*). The tempo is usually gradually increased during the course of the session, and the atmosphere manipulated by skillful drummers. The pupil will periodically have medicines administered to him/her by the trained mediums. While these medicines also strengthen the pupil and protect him/her against malign influences, the main

purpose is to 'open the chest' so as to 'open the path for the spirit'. The rattles are considered a valuable aid for calling the spirits because the spirits are believed to be greatly pleased by the sound.

At this point, other pupils who have reached a more advanced stage of training usually begin to summon their own possessing spirits by means of its typical dance. This serves both as an example to the novice and as 'practice' for the more advanced pupils. During the dances the pupil will often sit perfectly still for hours on end and completely lose contact with the material world. An altered state of consciousness and stiffening of the joints are common occurrences. In the event of the spirit not manifesting itself, the session will be concluded and the healer will say a short prayer of thanks and supplication to the spirits at the altar. The sessions will recur until the spirit makes its appearance for the first time.

#### *First appearance of a possessing spirit*

The first possession of a pupil by the spirit that has chosen him/her, is awaited with great expectation. While it sometimes occurs without any external signs, the moment of possession is usually marked by the unusual actions of the pupil. When the necessary precautions are not taken and the teacher is caught unawares, the pupil may become hysterical and even violent, in which case he/she will be restrained in order to prevent injury to herself and others. The normal pattern, however, is that the pupil goes through a period of apparent apathy, enters a trance state and then suddenly begins to fight for breath and make hoarse choking sounds as if her throat is being blocked. His/Her body stiffens in the same manner as an epileptic seizure. These actions are often imitations of those of other mediums she has seen, and will only take on an individual cast in subsequent episodes of possession.

The possessing spirit is welcomed by the other mediums by means of characteristic gestures and excited outcries, while the healer calms the pupil and ensures that he/she does not injure him/herself. When the pupil begins to grow calm he/she will whisper the identity of the spirit and the reason for its manifestation. The spirit will begin at this point to make its wishes known to the medium and his/her companions. More detailed information and commands will be made known at subsequent sessions. These usually include broad descriptions of the outfit the medium is to wear and the spirit's wishes with regard to the specific ceremonies, sacrifices and dances to be performed. If the spirit wishes him/her to become a mediumistic healer, it may make this known during the first possession. Usually, however, such details are supplied at a later stage.

If it is an urgent wish of the spirit that the possession dance be performed on this first occasion, the pupil will have to comply. In such situations a delicate understanding between the pupil and those who provide the rhythms by means of drums, tambourines and rattles, is essential. The pupil usually begins with a few fairly slow steps while she sings a simple string of words. These words, often merely an identification of the spirit concerned, are immediately repeated by the other women and will become the 'summoning song' with which the spirit will be invited to subsequent sessions. Being part of the pupils training, this dance is a private occasion at which only the teacher, her pupils and a few relatives of the novice are permitted to attend.

After possession has taken place, the wishes of the spirit have been heard, and the dance completed, the mediums will request the spirit to leave the pupil so that he/she can rest. The pupil is then calmed and treated with medicines. Although at this stage he/she is usually exhausted, her first possession will be a turning point in her life. The symptoms of her illness will begin to disappear almost immediately and he/she will become noticeably calmer.

If more than one spirit wishes to possess the pupil opportunities will have to be provided for them in the following weeks. For each of them the abovementioned process will have to be repeated in order to determine their respective wishes. As the pupil becomes more skilled, subsequent first possessions by new spirits will become progressively easier. Because it is usual for mediums to be possessed by more than one spirit, the period of training can last as long as eighteen months. When both kindred and alien spirits possess an individual, it is likely that the kindred spirits will manifest themselves first. Subsequently possession will occur by Changana spirits, Angoni spirits and finally the Ndzau spirits. Mediumistic healers are often visited by new spirits years after their initial period of training but because they are experienced in controlling the process, further instruction is not necessary.

On later occasions the pupil is encouraged to dance more and more wildly. The drum rhythm is accelerated from the usual seven to eight beats per second to between eleven and 12 beats per second. The rhythm for dances of kindred spirits are usually more elaborate than those for alien spirits, the leading drum keeping a steady beat with one of the smaller drums introducing another beat in advance of the main beat and a third drum elaborating on the beat of its counterpart. A troupe of experienced dancers can, indeed, change the 'atmosphere' at will by changing the rhythmic patterns without obvious signals to each other. The manifestations of the alien spirits - especially those of Ndzau origin - are very impressive and far more exhausting and painful than those of kindred spirits. The possession dances associated with alien spirits are also much wilder and the dance behaviour becomes extremely frantic at anything from eight to ten beats per second, sometimes reaching an agitated thirteen beats per second. As the pupil regains her physical strength and becomes more experienced in inducing the possession faster and less painful, she also becomes more skilled in performing the possession dances.

As the wishes of the various spirits become known, the pupil's time is increasingly occupied by the manufacture of the various parts of the outfit and the amulets and bead-strings needed for each. At the same time she is still expected to assist with various household chores and to take part in the dances and instruction of new pupils. The teacher will now begin preparing the various amulets which will become part of the newly qualified medium's outfit. These will not only protect her from malign influences but will also help her to maintain the 'channel of communication' with the ancestor spirits.

During the mediums training, special meetings of the cult members are also periodically organised. These are very colourful and noisy events which attract many spectators. All the mediums wear their unique outfits, and the dances for kindred spirits (in contrast to the wild Ndzau possession dances) involve a slower tempo and a more complex rhythmic pattern. Those mediums who are known as particularly good dancers are welcomed with great excitement by the onlookers. Though not themselves mediums, many of the spectators, are caught up in the music, dancing and excitement of the moment and will spontaneously join in the dances. In such cases the dance itself, rather than the actual possession will become the focus of the event. Possession dances, however, are not carried out purely for the purpose of entertainment.

Possession of Ndzau spirits usually take place at the end of gatherings, and are characterised by sitting or crouching dances performed by groups of mediums. The women sit in single file with their legs stretched out in front of them while they move their bodies in time to the music uttering strange sounds. In time, their breathing will quicken and they will take up a crouching position and dance with wild jerking movements.

*Accepting pupils into the cult*

The duration of a pupil's training depends on the number of spirits who wish to possess him/her. As soon as he/she is able to conduct episodes of possession in a controlled manner, he/she is for all practical purposes accepted as a member of the cult. Final enrolment, however, takes place during a special initiation ritual which is planned long in advance. The nature of this rite is determined by the kinds of spirits involved. Because most mediums are possessed by both kindred and alien spirits, different combinations of the various ceremonies tend to take place. For financial reasons, however, they often take place on separate occasions months apart.

The initiation rite usually begins with a sacrifice to the ancestor spirits. The pupil cleanses herself and is treated with special medicines. At twilight, while the pupils and qualified mediums begin to sing the appropriate songs the teacher pours beer onto the sacrificial altar and requests the support of the spirits whom she invites to join the ceremony. Sometimes the family of the novice will simultaneously make a similar sacrifice at their own homestead.

A new fire is kindled in front of the huts and the drums placed around it so that they become supple, while the invited guests take their places. The rest of the night is passed in song and dancing in order to create a pleasant but excited atmosphere. Periodically the festivities are interrupted for communal eating and drinking - occasions in which the ancestor spirits take part. During the night, the novice and the older mediums are possessed in strict order of seniority first by kindred and then by alien spirits. The dancing activities culminate in the dance performed by the teacher in the early hours of the morning.

The main events usually begin just after sunrise when the novice is laid on a sleeping mat in front of the huts. A goat which had been designated by the spirits and which had been sprinkled by the teacher with special medicines, is induced without much trouble to lie down beside the novice. A blanket is thrown over both of them. After a few minutes the teacher will strike the goat gently with her whisk. As soon as it jumps up, it is caught and slaughtered by the men present. The meat of the goat is then carefully examined by the teacher. Any defect or abnormality in the goat's meat and internal organs is regarded as an indication of a similar defect or abnormality in the novice and the cause of the latter's sickness. The liver, source of courage and bravery, is then roasted and the pupil eats it without salt. One of the goat's horns, an anklebone and a thin strip cut from its hide are then saved. These will later be made into a container for medicines and various amulets which will be worn by the medium as proof of her qualified status.

After the teacher has received her part of the sacrificial meat, the rest is distributed among the guests and the remainder of the day spent in festivity. The following day the medium will leave for her own homestead, accompanied by other members of the cult, and her family will perform a thanksgiving sacrifice to the spirits. As a qualified medium she will in future often visit the homestead of her teacher in order to assist in the training of new mediums and to attend the ceremonies and gatherings of members of the cult.

If a pupil is also possessed by alien Angoni and Changana spirits, an additional rite of initiation will be needed before she can leave for home. The forelegs of the sacrificial goat are placed on the shoulders of the novice from behind. She usually assumes a sitting or crouched position. The teacher then makes an incision with an assegai or pointed knife between the animals forelegs. The pupil turns around and begins to suck the blood greedily from the wound until she is violently pulled away. Immediately after this rite, which is aimed at facilitating direct communication with the spirits, another ceremony follows. Small pieces of meat that have been treated with medicines are placed in a grass basket and pulled along on a rope. The pupil follows the basket on her knees, picks up the pieces of meat in her mouth and then spits them out again. When the basket is empty she is taken aside and given medicines in large quantities to induce

vomiting. She is then regarded as purified and ready to receive the gift of supernatural insight from the spirits. The gift is immediately tested by hiding parts of the sacrificial animal amongst the guests and around the huts.

Encouraged by the spectators she runs hither and thither while waving a charmed whisk in front of her. All the items are usually found and brought to the teacher who inflates the sacrificial goat's gall-bladder and ties it in the pupil's hair as a sign that she has successfully completed the initiation rite and the test. If a medium is also possessed by Ndzau spirits, the initiation rite for these will usually take place after the appropriate ceremonies for all other possessing spirits have been performed. At sunrise the teacher and her entourage take the pupil to a nearby river. She is led into the water where she is almost immediately possessed by her Ndzau spirit. The teacher and her helpers dance and sing around the novice until she pronounces her new name which the spirit have revealed to her. The whole company then returns to the teacher's homestead where cold water is poured over the pupil until she is once again possessed by the spirit. The blood of a chicken is then sprinkled over her and her tongue is ritually scraped clean so that she may speak clearly on behalf of the spirit(s) and receive the power to reveal mysteries through direct contact with the possessing spirit, i.e. without the use of divination instruments.

In some cases the rites end with a ceremony in which she must prove her powers by drawing the sickness out of one of her teacher's patients. During this event she crawls around the patient, touching him with her whisk while she sniffs at it and sneezes. After this illustration of her abilities, she is regarded as a fully fledged medium and can return to her homestead. If the spirits require her to become a mediumistic healer, however, she will remain with her teacher until the completion of the relevant training.

#### *Training of a mediumistic healer*

The initial training period of a mediumistic healer seldom lasts more than one year but can only commence after the individual has been trained as a medium and has been incorporated into the cult. Training as a mediumistic healer includes information about the composition and use of a variety of medicines, as well as alternative therapies and training in some form of divination - usually the throwing of bones. During training the student continues to assist with domestic chores in the household of the teacher, the gathering of raw materials for the latter's medicines, and the preparation of medicinal compounds. The divination sets of Pedi-speaking mediumistic healers are practically identical to that used by ordinary diviners, and the training involved, is often the same. The method of divination and the constituent components will be revealed by the possessing spirit and its composition may take several months because the various components are not simply collected but revealed by the specific spirit in successive messages. The most common method of divination is that of throwing the bones. Mediums possessed by alien spirits are able to divine by communicating directly with the spirit concerned but all mediums possess a divination set in any case.

After completion of her training the healer's knowledge is formally tested, after which her qualified status is announced at a festive ceremony and a sacrifice of thanksgiving is made to the spirits. The test requires the novice to prove her ability to interpret the divination set. Sometimes the bones are cast into a clay pot filled with beer. The novice has to interpret them while they lie in the pot, after which the beer is drunk in order to absorb the power left by the bones. The ability to 'smell out' medicines in the veldt after guidance from the spirits in dreams, is regarded as a final proof of the healer's calling.

The outfits of mediumistic healers (diviners) have become extremely elaborate since the 1980s. Apart from the ever present whisks (made of the tails of various animals), medicine horns and bead strings, mediums all have a whole wardrobe of colourful skirts and shawls printed with lions, leopards or mythical figures. In all instances the apparel is prescribed by the specific possessing spirit(s). Often, a trance state followed by rapid possession occurs when a medium simply looks at the outfit when it is fetched from the hut where it is kept.

### **Be(com)ing a cult member or spirit medium: the malopo cult in South Africa revisited**

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#### **Short Summary**

This paper revisits the malopo spirit possession cult in South Africa by examining the way in which membership is attained through an intense emotional journey from afflicted individual to a fully cured spirit medium, involving intense training and major cognitive adjustments.

#### **Abstract**

The spirit possession cult known as malopo in South Africa apparently has its roots in East and Central Africa. Ever since its introduction to the inhabitants of the Limpopo Province in the early twentieth century, the cult has evoked ambivalent views among local people. Although some are not interested at all and others merely participate in the often spectacular possession dances, some have indeed become active cult members and spirit mediums.

Becoming cult members or spirit mediums implies altering existing views about the relationship between the 'living' and the 'living dead' and accepting new ideas about the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of illness and disease. The core question that this paper aims to answer is how this process of adjustment is managed by the individual. How does the individual reconcile the 'old' belief that the ancestral spirits should be confined to their ancestral abode to preclude illness and misfortune with the 'new' belief that such spirits should be enticed to actually leave their abode and enter the body of a living person to facilitate a cure? What are the successive steps that a person has to take in order to progress from an afflicted individual to a fully cured spirit medium or cult member? Is it possible for an individual to feign an affliction in order to become a cult member? This paper explores the processes of becoming a malopo spirit medium or cult member by focusing on the emotional struggle to submit to the 'call' of the ancestral spirits.

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