'You cannot choose to be a sangoma'

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John Lockley was in trouble, he needed help. A man appeared in his dreams, telling him to find a Xhosa sangoma, but as a young white boy during apartheid, he didn't know what this meant. When Jonathan Ancer asked him: 'why not me?', he replied…


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White-faced women beat drums. Sangomas in beads dance, sing and clap. All eyes move to an ox in the kraal. The animal is blessed, a spear flashes. With its final breath it utters a loud bellow.
With that bellow Ucingolwendaba becomes a fully-fledged sangoma.

The ox's cry is a sign that Ucingolwendaba, a Joza sangoma, has been accepted by the ancestors.

He stands up. The people cheer and clap as this white, blond man in traditional Xhosa dress, who towers over the other sangomas, begins to dance.

Five kilometres and another world away, when he is just wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and kicking back in Grahamstown, the sangoma Ucingolwendaba is known as John Lockley, a 35-year-old psychology honours graduate from Rhodes.

He graduated from Rhodes in 1997. A decade later - on January 20 2007 - he graduated again; this time as a sangoma.

It's in this township where Lockley has spent much of his time over the last 10 years training to become a sangoma. He sleeps in the herbal room at the home of his teacher MaMgwevu. He has been initiated and adopted by her clan - Sogwini.

"I believe I'm one of the first white men to become a fully fledged Xhosa sangoma. I know there are others in other traditions like Zulu, Pondo or Sotho but I haven't heard of another white Xhosa sangoma," Lockley grins.

Since being taken under the wing of MaMgwevu, Lockley has travelled around the Eastern Cape as a candidate sangoma, helping with ceremonies.

He has also been studying plants, learning about humanity and dreaming. In fact, his journey into sangomahood started with a dream 17 years ago.

Lockley was on retreat in the Tzaneen mountains when he had a "calling dream". "A Xhosa sangoma man dressed in the old ways came to me. He told me he was going to teach me. It was very real. The dream was telling me that I needed to find a Xhosa teacher, but I was a white boy and it was apartheid, and I didn't know what

to do with the dream."

According to Lockley, when he woke up the next morning his legs hurt. "I looked down to see large welts and boils on my legs. I had contracted tick bite fever." That was the first of a "series of unfortunate events" that would last seven years.

"I got tick bite fever twice, glandular fever, hepatitis, bilharzia. I was swept out to sea. I snapped my leg, broke my toe. I was so sick it felt like I had 1 000 volts of electricity in my stomach. I had a near-fatal car accident. I couldn't sleep. I lost weight. I went to doctors but no one could help. I had exhausted the 'white' options."

He says he was going through the thwasa - the illness that afflicts initiates in order to put them in the direction of a teacher who will heal them and train them.

"I got sicker and sicker. I didn't know what to do. How could I? I'm a white guy."

In a bid to find answers to his mental anguish, Lockley decided to study psychology at Rhodes. "I got sicker and sicker. I dropped out of university in 1992 and went to South Korea to participate in a three-month silent retreat with Zen Buddhist monks." Still the thwasa kept coming: a lump in his throat, emotional turmoil, night sweats, no energy, feeling debilitated. In 1995, Lockley returned to Rhodes to complete his psychology degree.

"In 1997 I was doing my honours in clinical psychology. I was underweight and suffering from anxiety. I had gone into Joza with the honours class and the lecturer to work on an Aids-awareness campaign. That's when I met a herbalist. The lecturer was quizzing the herbalist. Here were two different world views colliding.

"I asked the interpreter to take me to a sangoma for a private consultation."

MaMgwevu says that when this tall, gangly white man walked through her gate, she knew he was the one.

"I had a dream the night before that came straight from uThixo (God) that I would train someone from another culture," she says at her home in Joza.

MaMgwevu explained to Lockley that he'd been called to become a sangoma and asked him if he would accept. He nodded.

"I was weary but as soon as I said yes I felt a burden had been lifted. She told me she was going to make me white beads, which is what sangomas wear. She saw inside my dream world. She knew my pain."

Lockley shakes his head: "I had spent years studying psychology in a bid to find answers - and the person who could help me unlock the key to what was going on was an illiterate Xhosa woman, who lived 5km away."

And so Lockley began training to become a sangoma; a member of the abantu abamhlope (white people). "This is not white people in the black and white sense," he explains. "Sangomas wear white beadwork, paint their faces with white clay and wear white clothes. They are pure and clean spiritually, and are connected to the

spirit world.

"A sangoma's job is to heal, to raise people's energy (umoya phezulu), to give people herbs and news (indaba), and to talk to their ancestors. Sangomas help to raise the energy of the community."

When MaMgwevu met Lockley she told him he would be a great trance dancer. "I was struggling with my knees after two bad accidents, but at my first ceremony I was shown how to dance. The people held me by the hands in the centre of the room. I felt a remarkable sense of peace. It's magic. The ancestral energy worked through me."

According to Lockley, the thwasa began to lift as he took on his sangoma apprenticeship. MaMgwevu named him Ucingolwendaba - the messenger - "because I connect people and spread news".

"I am guided by my ancestral spirits on both sides of my family line, some of whom are Irish and some Xhosa."

Last week he delivered a seminar on the thwasa to Rhodes psychology students.

He explained that because white people have lost touch with their ancestral roots, when a white person starts to go through the thwasa, there is no place for them to go. "Their white culture has no answers," he said.

A Xhosa woman puts up her hand. "But how can a white guy enter my culture?" she asked.

"We all dream," Lockley replied. "We all have red blood and we all have ancestors. In our new democracy, black people can become medical doctors, lawyers, priests, etc, so to say that white people cannot become sangomas is racist. Being a sangoma is not about the colour of your skin, it's about your connection to the spirit world. If a person regularly has visionary dreams then they have sangoma blood."

In another corner of Rhodes University, anthropology lecturer Penny Bernard nods. "John's the real thing, the genuine article; he's got power."

Bernard put on her beads and sangoma paraphernalia and attended Lockley's graduation ceremony on January 20.

"He had it tough. He suffered," she says.

According to Bernard, the calling involves suffering. "You need to be afflicted before you can become a healer. It's the symbolism of death and rebirth. Dreaming is central. You need to act on the dreams, if you don't there's the agitation that something is not right."

Bernard, who grew up in Zimbabwe, received her calling in 1997.

"I was in a crisis-ridden period. Strange things were happening to me that was beyond my comprehension. There was a presence in my space guiding me - things were happening that I couldn't explain. I was having an existential crisis."

Bernard was doing her masters thesis on the phenomenon of water spirits in southern Africa and their role in the calling of sangomas.

A series of "coincidences" led her to a Zulu sangoma called Baba, who goes underwater to get training.

"When I arrived at his homestead he said he had to introduce me to his ancestors who subsequently informed him that I was like a Zulu sangoma and that I had been guided to him so he could help me. He laughed and said: 'They're telling me that you're one of us.' I wasn't surprised. This was confirmation."

Bernard had heard stories about white people being trained to be sangomas but were actually milked financially by their "trainers". But she knew Baba was the real thing.

Her training in the Natal Midlands lasted five years and ended with a ritual in Zimbabwe in 2002 where she graduated.

"I communicate with my own ancestors. My story is tied up with the Zimbabwean situation."

Bernard says that the fact that there are white sangomas shows that African spirituality is something that can be shared.

"I've been shown that there is a vast amount of knowledge of another reality that we - as whites - have lost."

"My husband, a scientist, was sceptical but he respects what I do and I discuss my dreams with my family."

However, most white people just don't understand it.

"There are misunderstandings about sangomas. People say: 'Oh gosh, that's bad stuff,' but that's the furthest from the truth. The humility and genuine reverence that sangomas show the human and spirit worlds is inspiring. It can't be wrong if what I'm doing is helping to heal and reconcile others."

Lockley says that although people in the township were initially suspicious of him, he and his teacher gradually won the hearts and minds of the Joza community.

"When the people saw me dance, they knew I had the gift."

Now, he gives people vumisa (psychic consultation). "When people consult with me; I can tell if they are sick and what is wrong. I open up to my umoya (holy spirit). I feel the wind move through me. Images flood my mind. I can sense people's obstacles: what's wrong with them physically, psychologically and spiritually. I can tell people if they are - or aren't - living according to their destiny. If they aren't living according to their destiny, I show people what they should do to improve their luck."

Lockley says that his family - who live in Stillbaai - have also come to understand his calling. They attended his Ukugoduswa (graduation ceremony) where Lockley's

father Peter thanked MaMgwevu and her husband Tata Sogwini for looking after their son. "I hope John continues to grow into a respected and strong sangoma," he said.

In the meantime, Lockley continues to dream.

"I follow my dreams; they are my roadmap," he says.

His dreams have told him to go to Ireland and the UK where he will run "ubuntu workshops". He will not be alone. His adopted ancestors - from the clan of Sogwini in Joza and his European ancestors - will be with him.

It's two months after he graduated and he is back at MaMgwevu's home. Lockley is no longer wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but is covered in his ceremonial beads, his eyes are outlined with white clay, a baby-blue towel is wrapped around his head and he brandishes a beaded shoba (an oxtail, the mark of a full sangoma) and a beaded spear covered in otter skin.

A group of sangomas call on Ucingolwendaba's ancestors to accompany him on his journey to Ireland. A white-faced woman beats a drum. Cherry tobacco and wild sage burn. Brandy is sprinkled on the ground. Ha-la-la-la-la-la.

After the ceremony, I ask Lockley why he was chosen and not me.

"I don't know," he shrugs. "That's just the way it is. You cannot choose to become a sangoma; you are chosen. I've been called. Why was Nelson Mandela chosen to become the father of the nation? It was his destiny. Being a sangoma is my destiny."

Find out more about John Lockley and his work at

www.african-shaman.com