



Wisdom Keepers' Stories

The Zulu or AmaZulu are presently concentrated in the Natal Province of South Africa. They believe in a creator god (Nkulunkulu) who isn't concerned with the daily affairs of human beings. The spirit world can only be approached through the ancestral spirits (the AmaDlozi) by using finely tuned divinatory practices.

Sanelisiwe Gertrude Khanyile

It started for me when I was a little girl. The year was 1942. I was nine years old, getting ready to go to school in Bongolawane. Early in the morning on that school day, I received an unexplained shock to my body and fell to the ground. I immediately became sick. It was the sangoma sickness that came on me, although I didn't know it at the time.



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My father and a priest from the church were called. The priest came and made a prayer for me. When my father tried to touch me, I screamed. I didn't see either one of them. When I looked up I saw people throwing trees on top of me. They were green trees with thorns on them. Someone was also showing me all the medicines. I was seeing another world.

When I finally woke up from this vision, I noticed that my grandmother was holding me. She had passed away years before. Eventually, I got ready for school and went to class. At school, when I took my seat in the classroom, I felt like I was sitting on top of someone. It startled me and I jumped up. My slate fell to the floor and broke. My teacher was upset and took me out of the class. Since my home was near the school, the teacher shouted for someone to come get me. They took me back home and I stayed there for seven days without eating. People thought I was going mad. My mother had to call my father who was working in another town. She said to him, "Our daughter is very sick and you have to come back and see if you can do something about it."

My father came home and saw that I was very ill. He called a sangoma. That man threw the divining bones to see what illness was affecting me. When he looked at how the bones fell to the ground, he announced that there was nothing wrong with me. He said a group of spirits was on me. My father was uncertain about all of this because he was a Christian man of the church. He was only interested in God and had nothing to do with other aspects of the spiritual world. But since he was desperate in this situation, he asked for the sangoma's help. He asked, "Please, can you help and do something about my daughter?" When the sangoma started to work on me, I bolted away and ran into a field of banana trees. I went there to hide.



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While I was hiding, my father told the sangoma, "You can take your medicine and leave now. She's run away. If God likes, he can kill my daughter. I don't mind because I already have eight children." However my mother tried looking for me while my Dad cried out, "Why worry? She is choosing to hide." I stayed out there for three days. Finally, during the middle of the fourth night, I came out of hiding. The next morning my grandfather found me asleep inside the krall, lying on the corn next to the cattle. My grandfather told my sister to go grab me so I couldn't run away again. She reached for me and took me to my grandfather's room. When my father came into the room to hit me for what I had done, my grandfather told him to leave me alone. My grandfather sent my sister to find the priest of a spiritual church. His name was Elias Jaffa. He came and prayed for me. He spoke to the spirits, telling them to not do anything to me and to leave me lying down for a while. He said we would later receive a spiritual sign that would be a message about what was taking place.

I felt normal after two days and wanted to go back to school, but I couldn't because I had been suspended. I remember my mother telling me that I should go fetch some wood from the bush. When I went into the bush, I developed a strong feeling that something was going to happen. Then I saw my two grandmothers, one on each side. They were my ancestral spirits and their names were Mamsomi and Mamncube. I was not dreaming. I saw these ancestors while I was fully awake. One of the grandmothers said that she wanted to touch me. This scared me so I ran away from the bush and came home.

I told my mother exactly what had happened. My mother started crying and screaming and called for my grandfather. He asked, "Why are you crying?" She replied, "I'm crying because my daughter sees those people who have passed away." My grandfather understood these things. He said that there were groups on my body and that I mustn't be sent anywhere. "She must stay at home." He knew something was happening to me.

I began having unusual dreams. I saw things from our past. There were people who didn't speak, but moved about like snakes. When I told my grandfather what I was dreaming, he went out to get a teacher for me, someone who could teach me to be a sangoma. He knew that this was what was happening to me.

The sanusi came to our house. Her name was Mrs. Babhezise Gazy. She gave me the medicine to boost or help my first group of spirits. I immediately saw my two grandmothers again. I shouted out, "There are my grannys!" My grandfather started talking to those grandmothers. He started to do things to one of them. I told him, "One of the grandmothers is a sangoma." He knew who I was talking about and although he couldn't see her, he spoke to her. I don't know what happened next. It felt like I had lost my mind. I do recall that people were holding me up so I wouldn't fall down. They started to wash me and took me back to sleep. The teacher left our house and said she would come back the next day.

I had a dream that night and woke up my mother saying, "In my dream, I saw that the teacher left out two medicines when she made the mix that I drank." Grandfather was told this and he said, "We'll ask her about it when she comes over today." Sure enough, two of the medicines were missing. The groups of spirits were wanting those medicines and they had told me so. They told me to use the medicines for a month, to take it every morning. I was supposed to mix it with clean, fresh water and wash it all over my body. I was told to do this at half past three in the morning and to make sure that it was done outside of the house. I followed their instruction and did this for a month.

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One night I dreamed of my grandmother giving me some beads. When I told this to my grandfather the next morning, he went out to buy the beads to put around my neck. After putting on the beads, I started to dream of songs. They were the sangoma songs. After a while, my grandmother came to me in another dream and said, "This is my song. You must sing my song first. Then you can sing yours." I was also taught how to dance that song in my dream. Ever since that time, I sing my grandmother's song.

When my teacher heard about this, she brought over three people and said that she was going to complete the training. When they started to sing a song, I stood up and began singing my grandmother's song and doing the sangoma's dance. I looked out and saw my grandmother looking at me. I screamed out, "There's my grandmother!" I pointed to where I saw her. The teacher declared that we must dance throughout the night until the following morning.

As the sun came up, I heard a person calling for me from the bush, near the mountain. It was a man's voice calling me to the mountain. The mountain was called Isiwa Samanqe. I ran toward it and stayed there for 10 days. The voice that was calling me was the ancestral spirit of my grandfather's brother. He stayed with me the entire time and taught me about traditional medicine. People looked for me, but they couldn't find me because they didn't look inside the mountain. When I was at the mountain I ate unboiled meat, eating pieces of beef that were raw and bloody. I didn't kill the cow. The meat was there for me. My grandfather's brother gave it to me.

I eventually dreamed that I should leave the mountain and cross two rivers at night—the Insuze and Yalambu. When I crossed the rivers, I heard the sound of singing around me. I came to a gate and collapsed to the ground. I had arrived at the home of a sangoma who did not know me. When they woke me up, I was unable to speak. They fed me porridge and milk and gave me a place to rest. After three



Sanelisiwe Gertrude Khanyile leads members of her tribe in a divination ritual



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days, I felt better and was finally able to speak. The sangoma, whose name was Mrs. Thuleleni Mazondi Ngema, asked for my father's name. She sent two men out to find my father to tell them where I was. When they found my home, my grandfather met them and gave a gift of two blankets for the sangoma. That's when the sangoma started helping me. She gave me four different types of medicines to use at different times and places. I was working with four different spirit groups at the time. They included my ancestors, the whistling spirits, and a group we call enono. These spirits want to be involved with a clean person so they don't want their host to touch anything dirty. They want to be clean on the inside and the outside. They want a person who does not steal and does not do bad things to others. You can have the whistling ones as your fourth group or as your fifth group. If you don't have the enono, the whistling ones will be your fourth group.

When I ran away to the mountain, my teacher was not able to finish the ceremony. It ends with the sacrifice and slaughter of two goats. Since this had not been carried out, my new teacher immediately brought out two goats to make the necessary offering. That was when I received my sangoma cloaks—the special colored cloth that I wear. First, they twisted the wool for me, then they slaughtered the goats, and finally, the clothes were sewn. I wore red cloth to boost my spirit groups. Now I was able to call forth my groups and ask what medicines to use for helping others.

When my training was completed, they called my father. Remember he was a Christian man who didn't want to believe in sangomas. He did not come for me. Instead my grandfather came. When he arrived, the sangoma said, "This child has too many groups. Those groups are fighting with each other. I'm trying to separate the groups because of their conflict." One evening, my teacher dreamed about me. She came to me in the middle of the night and woke me up, saying, "I am dreaming about you. In my dream, I saw you standing in between two spears." We immediately started doing the sangoma's dance, lasting through the night. The dance was very powerful that evening. The sangoma had around 10 students at the time and we were all dancing.

I stayed with the teacher for almost a year. Then I began helping the people and receiving knowledge about medicines in my dreams. Before I finished the training, there was another student who had recently completed his stay. The teacher hired a truck to take him back to his home. We had to travel quite a long distance. The other students went with him because he wasn't allowed to travel by himself. Along the way, we passed an area and on the top of a tree I saw a leopard. I told everyone that I wanted to chase that leopard and catch it, but they all held me down so I couldn't get off the truck. We finally got to the student's house and completed the ceremony that marked the end of his training.

When we got back on the truck to return, I told the teacher that I really wanted to jump on that leopard. The teacher replied, "I'm going to give you some medicine to keep you powerful" She didn't want me to go after that leopard. She wanted to slow me down. However, before she was able to give me the medicine, I fell asleep and had a dream. It was Saturday night and in the dream I again met my grandfather's brother. He said, "As you've seen the leopard, you must now go finish it. Go get it." I woke up and tried to jump up and down, crying and screaming. All the other students were awakened and they held on to me, afraid that I would jump out of the truck. The teacher asked what was going on and no one had an explanation. I begged my teacher to borrow her weapons, but she refused to give them to me. She said, "If I give you my weapons, I'll get arrested. If you run away, I'll be in trouble with your parents. Don't disappear from here. I started screaming again, begging to go after the leopard. The teacher's husband finally urged my teacher to let me go and to then follow me and see where I would go.



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I immediately started running while they all chased after me.

I screamed all the way to Kranskorp. There I found a straight tree with three leopards in it. It was a mgwanya tree. It's a tree you can't climb. Only the leopards jump onto it. I went right up to the tree's trunk and danced around it, singing as I danced. I looked and saw my grandfather's brother walk up to the tree, climb it, and attempt to catch one of the leopards for me. Two leopards came down the tree, a male and a female. The female ran away and the male stayed below the tree. Meanwhile, the third leopard in the tree was making a lot of noise. The other students ran away in fear. I stayed alone with those leopards. I grabbed the male leopard and held it with my hands. A man who had been herding his cattle came over to me and poked the leopard with his weapon. It fell to the ground and the man said, "Okay, now take your leopard and go back to where you came from." I found that the leopard was not dead. It was still alive and it tried to bite me on my back, but he didn't have enough strength due to the blow he received from the herder.

When I came back to the teacher, she was screaming and crying. When she saw that I had the leopard with me, she started dancing. She had her husband kill the leopard so it wouldn't harm anyone. Its legs were still moving when we opened its guts and I was asked to drink its bile. The teacher also took a drink of the bile. We killed an ox as a sacrifice. Whenever you kill a leopard, you must kill an ox. And we made a dance and slept in the corral. Other people came and ate the meat from our offering. There was plenty of meat—both beef and leopard meat.

From that day on, I started drinking alcohol. Ever since I drank that bile, I developed a desire for alcohol. It is for the leopard power that came from its bile. That power makes me want to dance. And that night, when I drank the bile, I wanted to dance and dance.

After the dance, on the following day, I ran to my neighbor's house and jumped on top of their roof. I found a small iron pot on the roof. I grabbed it and threw it down. The people inside were surprised. Everyone started screaming. My teacher was very excited. She was laughing and crying with delight. She proclaimed, "This is the right student. She's going to help the people. My teacher took me back to her house and we took the skin off of that leopard. I still have it today. I use that leopard skin with my dress.

My grandfather came back with a big bull, the largest one he could find as a gift to the teacher. I also changed the clothes I was wearing from red to black. I dreamed of receiving the leopard skins as part of my clothes. My grandfather's brother brought them to me. He said, "These are the clothes you are going to use." My teacher had the same dream. In her dream, she also saw my grandfather's brother bring me the skins to wear. That's why I still wear them today.

After spending nearly a year with my teacher, it was time for me to go back to my own home. I was nearly 10 years old at the time. I was happy that my training was completed. They put me in grandfather's home, because he had the round house. As soon as I got home, I started to hear whistling sounds coming from the roof. It became both whistling and singing. The song was a church song. It is a song you can use as a prayer. The teacher came over and she, along with my grandfather, listened to the sounds from the roof. My father heard about it, but he was too scared to come over. The whistling continued and became louder. It started to scare the other sangoma students. We had to get the sacred sticks to burn for the spirits on the roof. It took a long time for things to settle down and get quieter.



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After the whistling, the spirits sang another song. They sing it after they finish their work. We then slaughtered three goats and ate them. Since that time I am able to communicate with the whistling spirits, the Mlozi. Those spirits also dance. You can hear them dancing.

When my grandfather became sick, he called my father and me to see him. He told my father, "She has more power than you. You must give her a goat as a gift." Since my father didn't want to believe in sangomas, he hadn't previously given me a gift. But now he had to because my grandfather requested it. He gave me the gift and it was like receiving an apology from him. What my father said to my grandfather was, "I'll get a goat and give it to her, but you must call her teacher and make an apology for me." They called my teacher and she came and accepted the gift. It was slaughtered and we all ate it. It was Sunday when this took place and the next day my father went back to work at the town named Mkhumbane. It is near Durban. He asked my teacher and me to come visit him the very next day.

That week King Cyprian Zulu was visiting Mkhumbane. The king was there to discuss helping the area. I came wearing the beads over my head and my teacher was wearing her beads as well. We walked near where the king was speaking to a large crowd. The king was sitting with his son, Sithela Zulu. When the king saw us, he asked us to come to him. He said, "I need a sangoma." He showed me a sore on his leg and asked, "Who can help me cure this sore?" My teacher said, "We'll see you tomorrow." My teacher sent me to take a medicine to him. The medicine is called Nsukumbi Li. When the king saw me, he asked, "You are the sangoma?" He was surprised by how young I was. I treated him with the medicine and then he said, "I have no children. I need a medicine that will help me have children." The next morning the king sent one of his brothers to fetch the medicine. I made that medicine and it was given to the king. The first person that I made medicine for was the king. He was the first person I treated. And I still am his sangoma to this day. After that many people came to me for treatment and to learn how to be a sangoma.

I also have groups on the Christian side. I am the head of a church group that has over 19 churches. There are thousands of members and I am the archbishop.

This was a gift from God and it is part of my life in addition to being a sanusi. I see that it is the same for you. You have groups on both the Christian side and the sanusi side. You also can work with the plants and trees. You have the powers from both sides. Your groups work together and you can't separate them. Your dreams are clear. It is very good for us to be together.

When the king comes to me for advice, I always tell the truth to him like I do to all the people who come to me. I must be straight and say what is the truth even if it is something the person doesn't want to hear. I must tell you [Keeney] that there is a medicine that I want you to take that will finish your training as a sanusi. You must take it for a month. It is best that you live with me and take it every day. I know what is going to happen after you use this medicine, but I can't tell you now. I want to put the beads on top of your head. Please come back to us. There are more mysteries to be explored.