

T H O K O Z A !

THE INTFWASA INITIATION CEREMONY

FOR TANGOMA (DIVINERS) IN SWAZILAND

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Mahlatshwa doing her exam in "kuphengula" (divining); at left is LaMabuza

"Siyavuma!", the men shouted to the kneeling woman that sat in front of them, eyes closed, heavily perspiring, while a staccato of words came from her mouth, accentuated by snapping of her fingers and, what looked like threatening movements with the small knobstick she held in her left hand. Each time she gasped for breath with a loud grunting noise, the men shouted "Siyavuma" (we agree) as a response to the statement she had just made. Suddenly she jumped up and ran away, to the back of the huts, to emerge a few moments later with a small object that she waved in triumph over her head. "Mahlatshwa, Mahlatswha!", all spectators shouted, the rhythm of the big cowhide drums grew wilder and Mahlatswha, as the woman was called, performed a short, vigorous stamping dance, before kneeling down to allow one of the other women to fasten that small object to one of the many strands of her long red-ochred hair. The small object was the inflated gall bladder of a goat and it was a proof for all that old Mahlatswha had at last become a qualified "sangoma" or "inyanga", sometimes called witchdoctor or diviner, a medium between the people and the ancestral spirits.

For me this was the second time to witness an "iNtfwasa" ceremony, a two-day final test for the learner "tangoma" (plural for "sangoma") to determine whether they were skilled enough to leave the sangoma-"school" of LaMabuza, in central Swaziland.

LaMabuza ("La" being a female prefix and "Mabuza" her maiden family name) is a remarkable woman, highly intelligent, with a quick smile and quiet, gentle manners, whom I have been privileged to know for years. She is one of the many diviners in Swaziland, a small, landlocked country in the southern part of Africa, wedged in between the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique. It is a country of extraordinary beauty, with rolling hills, dotted with small kraals or family homesteads, cascading rivers, lush grasslands and forests. It is inhabited by 450,000 people, mainly Swazi, of Bantu stock, who claim their country has all the landscapes of Africa within its borders - except desert. They may well be right; the soil is fertile, the sun generous and the rains plentiful, permitting good harvests of maize, corn, citrus fruits, pineapples, many kinds of vegetables, sugar cane and....trees. Swaziland boasts some of the largest man-made forests in the world, the wood being used for timber, poles and woodpulp. There are iron-, coal-, kaolin- and asbestos mines and tourism is growing rapidly. The economy is booming in this country, that became an independent kingdom in 1968. The king, "Ngwenyama" Sobhuza II is the longest reigning monarch in the world, as he has led his people since 1922. A staunch traditionalist, he has nevertheless led his country to modernisation, always stressing to take only from the western world what is good and at the same time preserving the good from their own traditions. That has made Swaziland a country of remarkable contrasts: modernisation with preservation of age-old customs and traditions.

The site for LaMabuza's school for diviners could hardly have been more appropriate: situated in an area named Bethany, for a nearby mission station, on the slope of a hill, overlooking Matsapha, a booming industrial area, with metal factories, a beer-brewery, an oxygen plant, a railway junction, police school, the airport, an experimental farm (led by Chinese from Taiwan) and a Youthcamp (led by Israelis). The main road from Mbabane, the capital, to Manzini, the largest town, runs close to it, but few people realize that that cluster of huts on the hill is a place, devoted to the ancestral spirits.

It is strange to realize that the twenty or so learner-tangoma at LaMabuza's school have all been possessed by the "emadloti": the ancestral spirits, that are very much part of the life of many Swazis. Misfortune, disease or death is often attributed to the whims of these spirits, who may be felt ignored, and therefore should be appeased with offerings. This ancestor-cult is not a religion in the christian sense of the word, as the spirits are usually only called up in time of need; and even then, they are often more rebuked than praised, for "letting their children down".

Offerings to the emadloti-spirits are usually in the form of a beast that has been slaughtered for them and "tjwala", a kind of beer, that has been brewed for them. It is put in a hut, for the spirits to "consume", after which it is eaten by the people themselves - a practical way of offering.

Most of the learner-tangoma are women - and most are friendly, gentle and soft-spoken as Swazi women are. Their only distinction is their hairstyle: plaited in countless strands, with mud and red ochre dyed to a deep red, although, nowadays, red floor polish is more commonly used! The red colour in their "siyendle", as the hairstyle is called, signifies blood, another symbol of the spirit world. Many wear rings in their hair and various necklaces, some with little medicine-bottles, decorated with beads, spirals from certain shells, or pieces of bark; all this has ritual meaning. Nearly all wear the traditional "emahiya", brightly coloured cloths, worn around the waist and over the shoulders in a toga-like fashion.

How did a woman like Mahlathshwa get to this "school" and why? It all started with an inexplicable illness. Mahlathshwa suddenly fell ill, got pains all over her body and was troubled at night by strange dreams and visions. She went to a witchdoctor, who prescribed medicines and told the patient what sacrifices had to be made to the ancestral spirits.

Mahlathshwa did what she was told, but it had no effect and her condition worsened. She frequently woke up at night, suffered from nightmares and hallucinations and became more and more nervous. Deeply worried, her family advised her to go back to that "inyanga" or witchdoctor to find out what the real trouble was. And so Mahlathshwa went back to the home of the doctor who, upon her arrival, went into a trance, biting pieces of bark that were suspended from the necklace she was wearing. Suddenly the doctor started to speak very rapidly in a high pitched voice, suggesting why the patient had come, what her troubles were, what she had done recently. To all statements Mahlathshwa replied with the same word: "Siyavuma", meaning "we agree", although from the tone in which she said this word, the doctor could determine whether she were on the right track or not. This is a type of divination, called "kuphengula", and it is in fact the emadloti or ancestral spirits that communicate through the mouth of the diviner.

Finally the doctor stopped and told Mahlathshwa that she was possessed by a spirit. This is a very serious condition and the doctor proceeded to find out what kind of spirit this was. There are various ways in which the inyanga or witchdoctor can do this. One of the most common methods of divination is throwing the "ematsambo", literally "bones". The diviner keeps an assortment of, mainly, knucklebones of sheep, goats, cows, supplemented by different kinds of shells, pips, stones, coins and even implements like dice and bottletops in a special basket; each item has a special significance: there are male and female bones, bones representing children and old people, bones representing spirits.... the sangoma will take them in her hands, shake them, whisper to them, or spit on them, then throw them on a woven mat in front of her. By the way the bones fall down, how they arrange themselves, the spirits convey to her their message....which was in this case that they wanted the patient to become a diviner herself.

At first this was a shock to the possessed woman. Very few want to become a sangoma, as it means that they will not be able anymore to lead a normal life. A sangoma is respected, but also feared and has to observe many taboos. She will be a sangoma forever and this prospect horrifies many. But to fight the spirit is considered very dangerous and is usually unsuccessful; she will just get more and more sick. When it has been established that the patient will have to become a sangoma, she will go to a well known diviner, like LaMabuza, and start her training in the diviner's homestead.

Possession by the spirit may occur at any age. Mahlathshwa was already an elderly woman, but there were women (and one man) of all ages, some with their children, who stayed with them during

their course of training. There even was a girl, not more than fifteen years old, who had her hair in sangoma fashion and, as I was told, would graduate soon.

After the future diviners arrive at the homestead of the senior sangoma, they are broody, restless, often weep, wander about and yawn or sneeze - which is considered as manifestations of the spirit. They are instructed in the various kinds of divination, in the use of different medicines, and they are trained to get into contact with the spirit world. On several of my visits I saw them prepare frothy medicines, stirring up the froth of a liquid concoction in a clay pot with a forked stick, that they turned between the palms of their hands, singing special songs in which they called up the ancestral spirits. They then would eat a little of the froth and daub it on their heads, as this would "facilitate the contact with the spirits".

Almost every evening the big cowhide drums would beat out their rhythm and, usually about six learner tangoma would dance their special "emadloti"-dance, summoning the ancestral spirits: at first staying in one place, swaying their bodies to the rhythm of the drums and then, quite suddenly, they would scream and leap into the air in a vigorous stamping dance. They would dance inside a special hut, as a "sign of respect" to the ancestral spirits.

Suddenly the drums would fall silent and the learner tangoma, grunting, bellowing and sobbing, would kneel down in front of La-Mabuza, to greet her and the other people present. But it would not be the sangoma herself who would be greeting: these were the emadloti or ancestral spirits, that spoke, using the sangoma as a medium. Our reply to these spiritual greetings would always be the same: "Thekoza", a word, signifying happiness, a form of greeting used by diviners. The spectators would then hide small objects, usually coins, that the diviner would have to find, with this "kuphengula" technique, making suggestions and the crowd answering with that one word: "Siyavuma", we agree; still, from the tone in which it would be said, she would get her clues and eventually find the coin, although, as pointed out to me, it was not the sangoma herself who had found it out: it was her spirit who had shown her where it was. From time to time, the learner diviners would run out of the hut and run outside in a circle, to get "some fresh air, so that when they would get back into the hut they would be able to smell well and find the objects that were hidden", as LaMabuza explained to me.

After this the rhythm of the drums changed and the learner-tangoma put on red cloths around their shoulders. Small girls helped them to put on these cloths and the tangoma knelt down, shaking their body violently to the rhythm of the drums, that now called up a different kind of spirits: the Emandzawe.

The Emandzawe were actually a people who called themselves "Ndau", and who lived, a century ago, in what is now Mozambique. There is still today a people called Ndau, one of the Shona tribes, who live in central Mozambique, south of the coastal town of Beira. About a century ago, a group of Swazi warriors was marauding in that area and they came across these people who tried to resist them when they wanted to take their cattle. The Ndau, who were called emandzawe by the Swazis, told the warriors that these cattle were special cattle for offering to the spirits. But the Swazi warriors did not listen, they killed the emandzawe or Ndau people and took their cattle.

On their way home, some warriors became ill, and it appeared as if they were possessed by a peculiar spirit. They started to talk in a strange language, the language of the Ndau people and, upon their arrival back home, this possession seemed to spread to many tribesmen and their families. The diviners were powerless: this was a spirit of the emandzawe people, and no Swazi diviner knew, how to exorcize it.

The king of the Swazi in those days, Mbandzeni, then decided to send a group of men back to the land of the Ndau, to ask for a diviner from there who could come to Swaziland to exorcize the spirit. This happened: the Ndau diviner beat a special drum, made

from a clay pot, with which he could call up the spirit and exorcize it.

Although the emaNdzawe spirits were exorcized that day, the Swazi diviners had to learn this art too, as in later years and in fact up to now people get possessed by this spirit.

The emaNdzawe spirits are considered to be very powerful and they have a big place in ritual indeed. The red colour of the "siyendle", the hairstyle of the sangoma, and of the cloths they are wearing during the summoning of the emaNdzawe, symbolize blood, the blood that flowed when the emaNdzawe people were stabbed.

The person who is possessed by the emaNdzawe is supposed to be able to speak in the language of these people, and, as LaMabuza told me, this language does not have to be learned. In fact, people who speak that language while possessed, do not know it otherwise. One could of course think that they are just uttering meaningless sounds, that the people present might think is a foreign language; and, not being able to understand that language too, I could not verify if they really spoke another language!

LaMabuza told me that she herself was trained and had graduated in Mozambique, among the Chopi people, who live along the coast, north of the capital, Lourenço Marques. She told me that King Sobhuza II of Swaziland had sent her to that place to "learn the wisdom of the Chopi people" and that therefore she was treated well by them. Otherwise she described the Chopis as "a frightful, vicious people, who cut tribal marks over their faces and who could kill and even eat you". Personally I thought that a rather unkind remark about a people she had stayed with for such a long time.

It is quite extraordinary that Mozambique is such an important place among diviners in Swaziland, many of whom are trained there or go there regularly. More than once I heard that LaMabuza was attending a "witchdoctor's conference" in Lourenço Marques where she would meet colleagues from Moçambique, South Africa and Swaziland. She speaks the Thonga language, that is spoken in the southern part of Moçambique, well, and it is this language that is used for calling the emandzawe-spirits.

At night, after the learners have danced the emandzawe dance on their knees, they go outside, where young girls pull at their arms, "to get rid of the spirit". After that the spell is broken and the learner tangoma, looking utterly exhausted and gleaming with perspiration, hang up their red cloths in the hut and go to rest.

The physical and mental strain on these learner tangoma must be enormous. During the day they work in the fields around the kraal of their teacher, who put it to me like this: "We make them work like children in school. They have to work outside, so that their "lidloti" or spirit that lives in them becomes active and can smell different smells, so that a sangoma can, even before you have told her, tell you from which place you come". It is also claimed that many diviners know beforehand when a person will come and what he will come for, as this is "told to them in dreams", so that they will already have prepared the medicines needed for this person.

Dreams play a great part in the life of a sangoma. Often a learner diviner sees in dreams what plants, roots or herbs she must collect and she walks about the countryside, looking for these; She has to go to a pool or a river, where pythons live; she will immerse herself in that pool, catch a snake with her bare hands and bite the head off the snake, while it is still alive. The snake is "made harmless by the emadloti or ancestral spirits" and it is again these emadloti that "eat the snake", reinforcing them. Still, it is a struggle, both physically and mentally.

She might compose a song and dance, dressed in an impressive costume with python skins, plumes, beads and shells; she might go to the sea to collect shells; and always she will be doctored with special medicines, she will have to purify herself by vomiting, and she will have to let blood, all this to make her ancestral spirits active, so that they will do the work through her as a medium. She is taught to divine, to dance, to throw the "bones", to foretell

foretune, to use the medicines and, generally, to fight witchcraft and sorcery; because the work of the inyanga or "witchdoctor" is mainly to combat the work done by an "umtsakatsi" or sorcerer, someone who has used evil medicines to harm somebody else. There are various ways in which a sorcerer can do this: one of the most common ways is digging a trench in the path that the victim is likely to use and burying medicine, mixed with for instance a little hair or a piece of clothing of the victim, in this, while calling his name. If he uses this path and crosses the trench, he will fall sick or may even die; or bewitching medicines may be mixed with his food or drink. My impressions about these bewitchings have always been that these are mainly psychological, in other words that the victim becomes so worried and afraid when he suspects he has been bewitched, that in fact he does get sick. But to many Swazi it is real enough and therefore a sangoma, who combats witchcraft, is a very benevolent person in Swazi society. As a consequence, she is much respected. In a patriarchal society like this, being a sangoma is one of the few ways in which a woman can hold a respectable position (although this now changes rapidly) and that might explain to a certain extent why there are more female tangoma than male.

Before independence, the British, in an effort to stamp out witchcraft, made it an offence to wear sangoma attire or to consult a sangoma. But the effect, according to the Swazi, was quite the opposite. The British did not understand that a sangoma combats witchcraft and so, because they could not work in the open, "witchcraft flourished as never before". Now these restrictions do not apply any more and the number of diviners has been on the increase.

During her course of training the learner sangoma has to observe many taboos, one of the main ones being that she has absolutely no sexual contact with men; to ensure this she is never allowed to go to town alone, but must always be accompanied by another person, and than "someone who is not too friendly with her", because "otherwise they could both be led into temptation".

She must not quarrel with anyone, use bad language, use medicines to harm someone or shake hands with anybody during her training. If she has done any of these sins, she will certainly be found out during her final test: the inTfwasa or graduation ceremony, where she will be "reborn" as a fully qualified sangoma.

And it was this ceremony that I could witness twice, and photograph, record on movie film and on tape, a great privilege, as diviners are usually rather suspicious to strangers, especially those armed with camera's, taperecorders and the like. But because I had been there so many times before and had often witnessed and photographed sangoma rituals, I could hardly be considered a stranger anymore. The fact that I had always given them copies of my photographs and I can speak the local language, siSwati, helped a great deal too.

I arrived early in the morning in LaMabuza's homestead and found that diviners were carrying the big drums from the hut where they were stored to the open space between the huts, where the two-day ceremony would take place. Others rolled out grass mats for the people that were present to sit on, and a group of men was mixing a "medicine", made from pounded roots, with water. The candidates, who would be called "ematfwasa" or "they who will be reborn", were waiting quietly in their hut, where they had been from the previous night, without food and without sleep. According to LaMabuza "they must not sleep so that their emadloti (ancestral spirits) do not sleep; they will in this way obtain the power that enables them to complete the ceremony successfully."

Some learner tangoma and a few young girls from the kraal took two sticks each, sat themselves behind the drums and started to beat them, in the quick dancing rhythm of the emadloti-spirits. After a few minutes LaMabuza appeared with two other elderly tangoma: these were her "bogobela" or seniors. One of them, LaMncina, was the most senior sangoma, and the one who started this "school" in Bethany.

The three seniors went into the hut where the "ematfwasa" or candidates were sitting and led them out, one by one, into the open space. There were six of them, five women and one man, called Mahlabazimile Metsa, the only male sangoma, present. As a sign of respect to the spirits they were walking on their knees over the uneven, stony ground, trembling, sobbing and whimpering, as if they were already in trance.

They had to sit down on the mats in the open space, with stretched legs, to be doctored for the ceremony. Old Mahlatshwa was the first to receive the strengthening medicines. With a razor blade LaMabuza made small incisions on her forehead, shoulders, arms, chest and knees and then rubbed a charred, black substance in the cuts. She told me later that this medicine is in fact a poisonous root, that had been charred to eliminate the poison and make it beneficial. "It will make the candidate sangoma strong, so that she will be able to help even very sick persons and that she and the spirit that acts through her, will not be afraid because of the condition the patient may be in".

After they had been doctored, the ematfwasa or candidates were led back to their huts and were made to sit there, while the bogobela or seniors were making preparations for the next part of the ceremony, and, to my mind, the most gruelling.

LaMncina, the most senior sangoma, did a short, vigorous dance on her own to the rhythm of the drums, that kept on pounding. Then she went into the hut and reappeared again, leading Mahlatshwa by the hand, who, eyes closed, softly whimpering and trembling over her whole body, walked on her knees to the mat and sat down. She was wearing a white cloth over her shoulders as a symbol of purity, for the clean life she had been leading during her course of training. This cloth was taken from her and a female goat was led to her. The goat was then placed on Mahlatshwa's back, held by one of the seniors and some men that were present. A dignified old man, who, as I heard later, was a brother to one of the senior tangoma and referred to as "father to the ancestral spirits", now came forward, carrying a long knife. The men raised the goat on her back a little and then, with one swift thrust, he stabbed the goat straight through the heart. The animal gave one bleat and died almost instantly; immediately Mahlatshwa turned around, pressed her mouth against the wound and drank some of the blood, that spurted out of it. The men then carried the goat away, first walking in a circle around Mahlatshwa, who, with blood stains over her body, was led, still walking on her knees, to a few large metal and plastic dishes, filled with a murky liquid: ground medicines, made from bark or roots, and mixed with water. Perched on hands and knees, she drank of that liquid and then calmly pushed her fingers in her throat, and vomited it out: a common way in this part of Africa to purify oneself. She then drank more of this medicine and vomited again, as to get completely rid of the blood, she had been drinking.

This scene was repeated until all ematfwasa or candidates had been through this ordeal, under the watchful eyes of their relatives, that were present. It could hardly be called a very pleasant sight and I asked LaMabuza about the significance of this all, later.

"Look, my child", she replied, "this goat is a symbol of the fact that the candidate is now going to be a fully qualified doctor. It is a kind of certificate, one could say. The blood she drinks from it gives her strength and courage, so that she and her spirit will never be afraid of anything, not even of a very sick person who might be approaching death. It will make her spirit just as brave as a soldier, going to war. Now she will have to drink this medicine and then vomit the blood out again. This is in fact a test to determine whether she has been behaving herself well during her training: if she would have been in contact with men, or killed a person, then she would not be able to vomit the blood. It would clot inside her and she would surely die. The medicine in the liquid would be the cause of that and therefore we require her next of kin to be present: if anything might happen, then they could see that

all the candidates had taken the same medicines and that therefore it must have been her own fault. So you see", she concluded smiling, "it is just like the stethoscope a doctor is using: we can almost see inside her!" And what happened to the poor goat? "Well, some parts are used in the ceremony, like the gallbladder, but the rest is eaten!" Swazis are very practical.

While the carcasses of the goats were cut up, the ematfwasas or candidates were led back to their hut again and some men sprinkled sand and water over the place that was stained with blood. The gallbladder of every goat was carefully removed for the next stage in the ceremony.

Gall has always played an important part in Swazi ritual. It symbolises a new life and consequently newly born children were anointed with gall and a newly married couple was sprinkled with gall too, so that they might be fertile and bear many children. So, as in this ceremony the candidate sangoma would be "reborn", it was not surprising that they, too, would be anointed with gall.

Once more wearing their white cloths, the candidates were led again to the open space and, one by one, the bogobela or senior tangoma squeezed the gall from the gall bladder over their head, arms and legs and they also had to take a little in their mouth. "It also gives the power of knowing", LaMabuza said to me, "for instance knowing that somebody has come to your place even before you are told".

The sun had reached its zenith by this time and the huts around the open space offered little shadow. But in spite of the heat, the drumming went on ceaselessly, although the drummers, mostly young girls, changed frequently. Whenever the tempo slackened, one of the senior tangoma, a stern looking woman, wearing a red-ochred wig instead of her own hair, cursed the drummers and urged them on, blowing a police whistle she was wearing from a string around her neck.

There were long pauses between the different stages in the ceremony and I was getting quite hungry. The candidates did not get anything to eat or drink, but the seniors and the other learner-tangoma present drank large quantities of "tjwala": a thick, purplish beer, brewed from maize or corn; apart from slightly intoxicating also quite nutritious. This not really being my favourite food, I wanted to go to the town of Manzini, nearby, to get something to eat, but at the same time I did not want to miss any of the stages in the ceremony. Asking when the next part of the ritual would be, the answer was always rather vague. It was mostly "nyalo, nyalo!", meaning "now, now!", so I stayed on, only to find it still took nearly two hours to start! So, because I had forgotten to take food with me, I had to stay hungry that day. Normal life went on as well: there was a queue of people, who had come to consult LaMabuza and were sitting outside the hut, used by her to store her medicines: a rondavel with, in the thatch of the roof, two horned skulls of cattle, killed as an offer to the ancestral spirits.

Eventually the sternfaced sangoma stood up, blew her whistle and started to sing, with a high-pitched yodling voice. Immediately the drums started again and the candidates appeared, on their knees, with the white cloths of purity still around their shoulders.

LaMncina, the most senior sangoma, appeared with a shallow basket, that was filled with medicine: pieces of intestines of the goat. She put the basket down, but held a string that was attached to it, in her hand. Immediately the candidates ran, on hands and feet, towards it, trying to eat from it, without using their hands. LaMncina then pulled the basket away from them and they pursued it, grabbing with their mouths as much as they could, pushing and jostling each other. The other senior tangoma tried to beat them away from each other, as if they were a pack of hungry dogs.

LaMabuza explained to me later that they were competing with each other: they would, when they were graduated, work as good and as hard as they could, so that no other sangoma would take their patients away from them. Pieces of liver in the basket made them courageous:

if a Swazi says "he has a liver", than he means that person has a lot of courage.

LaMncina waved the basket over her head to show it was empty and the candidates were on their knees, shaking, hissing and sneezing in a kind of trance, while the drums were beaten vigorously. Then, at a sign of the seniors, they ran on hands and knees to the bowls of liquid medicine, to drink and purify themselves by vomiting. Thereafter they returned again to their hut.

This seemed to complete the first part of this long ceremony and, as LaMabuza put it to me, it was now clear that the emadloti or ancestral spirits of the candidate-tangoma could perform well. As an outward sign of this, the candidates put on a special costume: a black skirt, beautifully embroidered with beadwork in interesting patterns: lines circles, outlines of hands and in some cases even letters. Around their waist they had tied the white cloth, that was tied to form a "belt" and above the waist they only wore an "umngcwambo": strips of goatskin, crossed over their shoulders. They carried small knobsticks with handsome beadwork wrapped around it in the right hand and some, like Mahlatsywa, carried a small dancing shield in the other hand. The seniors had put on a similar costume, supplemented with a "lishoba", a special switch, made from the tail of a gnu, or wildebeest and, while the drums were beating, all danced in a circle; first staying in one place, body swaying to and fro to the rhythm of the drums; then they would tap their feet and suddenly all would leap into the air in this dance, called "kuvukela emadloti", the "rising up of the ancestors". LaMabuza and her bogobela or seniors seated themselves on a mat, a little to the outside of the open space and then Mahlatsywa, who had been dancing with the others, ran towards the seniors, knelt down in front of them, took the knobstick in her left hand and said, with a low, grunting voice, "Vumela, babe!"; "Yezwa, 'mgoma, yezwa!", LaMabuza answered, in response. It could be translated with "Answer, father!" and "Hear, sangoma, hear!", but these were no more than traditional formulae for this method of divination, called "kuphengula". Each time the diviner would make a statement, to which the response would always be the same, but, as LaMabuza put it, "her lidloti or spirit would tell her whether she were on the right track or not."

This was in fact Mahlatsywa's "final examination". The seniors had given the gallbladder of her goat to somebody in the audience and now it was up to her to find out from her teacher with whom it was. To the staccato of words that came from her mouth, accentuated by thrusting movements with her stick and snapping of her fingers, LaMabuza answered with only the formula "Yezwa, 'mgoma, yezwa!", without apparent change in voice. Mahlatsywa had closed her eyes, in concentration, perspiration ran from her forehead....suddenly she jumped up and ran towards a group of men, seated in the middle of the audience. "Mahlatsywa!", everyone shouted, laughing, clapping their hands. At least she had found out who had hidden it. Now the same procedure was repeated, with the men also responding in one way: "Siyavuma!", they shouted, meaning "we agree!". After a few tense moments she jumped up again and ran somewhere behind the huts to fetch the gall bladder from the place where the men had hidden it. "Mahlatsywa!", everyone shouted again and, when she appeared, the gall bladder waving in triumph over her head, the drums were beaten furiously and Mahlatsywa, in spite of her age, did a vigorous stamping dance and then knelt down, to allow the sternfaced sangoma to fasten the gall bladder in her hair, a sure sign that she had passed her examination and was now a fully qualified diviner. Everyone applauded and I was happy for her too, because I knew she had taken a good six years to qualify, while there were others who needed not more than a year. But, although she might not be such a talented sangoma, she had qualified now and everyone was happy for her.

Mahlatsywa rejoined the dancers and it was the turn of the others to go through the same examination. Although there seemed to be a few doubtful cases, in the end everyone passed and so Swaziland

obtained six newly qualified tangoma on that day.

After this the drumming stopped and soon the air was filled with tumultuous shoutings of "Siyavuma!" everywhere: the new diviners were demonstrating their power by finding coins, that were hidden by the spectators. They rattled off clues to which the audience responded with just that one word, "Siyavuma!", but in most cases they were able to find it. I suspected in some cases that differences in tone and volume, in which that word was said, gave them the clues if they were on the right track, but LaMabuza maintained that a real good sangoma does not need that: she will be told where it is directly by her lidloti, her spirit.

Suddenly it was all finished, the drums beat out a rhythm that sounded almost like a march and the candidates walked behind LaMncina, like a platoon of soldiers behind their commander. They chanted something that could be translated by "we are now tired", to which the crowd responded "you are now tired", and they disappeared into their hut, where they would remain for the night, again without food, in anticipation for the events of the following day.

I arrived the following morning just before 5 o'clock. The sun had not yet risen and the morning was cool. The huts were outlined against the morning sky and I could see fires, to prepare breakfast, in some of them. When I came nearer I could hear drumming from the hut where the ematfswa or candidate tangoma had been staying. Three women were beating these drums in a rhythm, different of that of the previous day: this was the rhythm of the emandzawe, the spirits of that people from Mozambique, who were killed by the Swazis, a century ago. The candidates were sitting in the hut, some snaking to the rhythm, others softly whimpering. They were wearing their black "sidwaba", the embroidered skirt, with over this to my surprise "emajobo", loinskins, made from animal hide, worn front and back in the traditional way of Swazi men. The white cloth of purity was folded and tied around their waist again like a belt and above the waist they only wore the strips of goatskin, cross-wise over their shoulders, and necklaces from beadwork with little medicine-bottles. At a sign of one of the seniors they picked up their with beadwork adorned knobsticks and went to the back of the huts where each of them collected a dish, in which the bones of their goats had been deposited. They placed the dish on their head and started to walk downhill, to the river, followed by a learner sangoma who beat the "emandzawe"-rhythm on a small drum she was carrying. I started to follow them too, but was stopped by the others, present: nobody could go down with them, they had to be alone for what they were going to do.

"They go down to the river", LaMabuza explained to me later, "to immerse themselves, with the bones of the goat, that will be left there. While in the river, they divine too and they cannot be watched. If people would come to watch them, they might be killed by the spirits. This is the final stage of the ceremony, marking the beginning of a new life for them".

Still puzzled, I watched them as they were coming back, followed by the learner sangoma, who was still beating her drum. The sun appeared over the hills towards Manzini and painted the hills, river and the huts in glorious golden tones. Slowly they walked up the hill, carrying the dishes on their heads. When they arrived at the entrance to the kraal, a young man suddenly appeared from behind one of the huts, waving a stick, and ran towards the candidates, who dropped their dishes and fled, hotly pursued by the man who tried to hit them, and chased them all around the kraal, to the amusement of the onlookers. LaMabuza, when I asked her about it, laughed and explained that this man was beating them as a symbol of all the hardships the learners had endured during their training; they had been commanded, scolded and, always, they had to accept this without protest. Now this would come to an end and they would themselves be qualified and not any more subject to this kind of treatment. The man chased them around with a stick, the last act of "hardship" they had to endure. When the candidates disappeared behind the huts,

pursued by the man with the stick, the people behind the big drums, that had been brought out into the open space again, started to play the rhythm of the "emadloti", ancestral spirits again. Then the candidates appeared from behind the huts and danced, with renewed energy the "dance of the rising of the ancestors". LaMabuza and the other seniors had seated themselves on grass mats, near the wall of one of the huts in the morning sun and watched the dancing. Then Mahlatshwa left her dancing colleagues and ran towards the seniors, knelt down and said again, in a low grunting voice like the previous day, "Vumela, babe" ("answer, father") to which LaMabuza answered again "Yezwa, 'mgoma, yezwa" ("hear, sangoma, hear"), starting the game of "kuphengula"-divination. Suddenly Mahlatshwa stood up again and ran towards a large clay pot that was placed between the dancing tangoma and around which they danced. Mahlatshwa knelt down and started to look for something that seemed to be hidden in that pot, that was filled to the top with ground bark or roots: it looked like sawdust. Then she stood up, with the coin that she had found in the pot, and she rejoined the dancers.

"Their lidloti or spirit must tell them what is hidden in the pot", LaMabuza told me, "and she finds this out by divination. This is just another way of making them stronger and it is a sure proof that they are real diviners now, because they can reveal things they could not have known beforehand: in this case, what had been hidden in the pot".

For some, however, it was not that easy. One of the candidates searched around in the pot, and then returned to the seniors to try again by divination; obviously her spirit had not told her what she needed to know.

The candidates had returned to their hut, to prepare themselves for the next stage of the ritual and also the bogobela or seniors had gone. It was very quiet, children played around the huts, one elderly sangoma came back from the river where she had fetched water, others were working in the fields. A goat bleated nearby and chickens were picking maize seeds from between the huts. The sun was shining brightly and LaMabuza's kraal looked in every-aspect a normal Swazi family homestead.

The quiet was suddenly disrupted by the vigorous pounding of drums, that came from the initiates' hut. Then LaMabuza appeared from her hut, followed by the other seniors. They were all wearing a cape, black in colour and embroidered with brightly coloured beads, like the skirts the candidates had been wearing. Geometrical designs, pictures of hands, circles, ovals and little strings of beads hanging from the edges. Around their heads they were wearing broad bands of kaurie-shells. LaMabuza told me these were called "timbamba" or beads of the emandzawe-spirits. These "beads" are able to "trap a ghost", she went on. There are people who sometimes get the feeling to be suffocated, who suddenly get breathing difficulties. This is attributed to a ghost that "grabs them by the throat" and if a sangoma approaches such a person with these kaurie-shells, he would recover immediately because "these shells would take the ghost from him".

The senior tangoma went into the hut of the candidates and led them out in the open. The first one to emerge from the hut was Mahlatshwa and she looked rather pitiful. She was wearing a loin-cloth and around her shoulders was the bright red cloth of the emandzawe-spirits. As a sign of respect to these spirits she walked slowly, slightly stooped; she was sobbing softly and so were the others who were led by the hand into the open space. The drums were playing the rhythm of the emandzawe-spirits and LaMncina, the most senior sangoma sang with a high, yodeling voice, while she and the other seniors accompanied the rhythm of the drums with rattles, made of small calabashes, filled with seeds.

From behind the huts the same old man, who had stabbed the goats the previous day, appeared, carrying two small metal dishes, one empty and the other filled with a black powder. He started to walk down the path towards the river, and was followed by all of us:

pursued by the man with the stick, the people behind the big drums, that had been brought out into the open space again, started to play the rhythm of the "emadloti", ancestral spirits again. Then the candidates appeared from behind the huts and danced, with renewed energy the "dance of the rising of the ancestors". LaMabuza and the other seniors had seated themselves on grass mats, near the wall of one of the huts in the morning sun and watched the dancing. Then Mahlatshwa left her dancing colleagues and ran towards the seniors, knelt down and said again, in a low grunting voice like the previous day, "Vumela, babe" ("answer, father") to which LaMabuza answered again "Yezwa, 'mgoma, yezwa" ("hear, sangoma, hear"), starting the game of "kuphengula"-divination. Suddenly Mahlatshwa stood up again and ran towards a large clay pot that was placed between the dancing tangoma and around which they danced. Mahlatshwa knelt down and started to look for something that seemed to be hidden in that pot, that was filled to the top with ground bark or roots: it looked like sawdust. Then she stood up, with the coin that she had found in the pot, and she rejoined the dancers.

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the senior tangoma, the initiates, walking slowly, stooped and crying softly; other learner-tangoma, two of whom were carrying drums on which they were beating out the emandzawe-rhythm; six small girls, around ten years of age, each carrying a chicken; and then other inmates of the kraal, relatives of the initiates, and me.

We walked slowly towards the river, downhill, and two times we stopped, with the initiates kneeling down and, hands clasped, shaking their bodies to the rhythm of the drums, in this way calling up the emandzawe-spirits to follow them to the river.

Eventually we arrived at the stream, a narrow tributary to the Usutshwana river. The narrow, bumpy road that leads from LaMabuza's kraal to the main Mbabane-Manzini road crossed the stream here by a causeway. A few men were standing in the water, hacking away the reed besides the causeway, making a clear spot where the immersion of the initiates would take place.

The ematfwasas or initiates had knelt down besides the road, vigorously shaking their bodies up and down to the sound of the drums. The seniors were shaking their calabash-rattles and LaMncina was singing with her yodling voice, occasionally dancing a few steps. A mat was laid out close to the water and then LaMabuza fetched Mahlatsywa, who was made to sit down on the mat. The red cloth she had been wearing was taken off and then LaMabuza approached her with a big knife. Mahlatsywa, to a sign of her teacher, obediently stuck out her tongue and LaMabuza scraped the top of it with her knife. Then, with a razorblade, she made a small incision in Mahlatsywa's tongue and rubbed a little of the black, charred medicine in it.

"The medicine is rubbed in her tongue", LaMabuza explained to me later, "so that she will speak no lies while divining. Her mouth can only relate truthfully what the spirits are telling her".

Next LaMabuza took a chicken from one of the girls and, with the other seniors helping her, she cut off the head of the chicken with her knife, collecting a little blood in the second metal dish. She then unceremoniously tossed the chicken in the river, where it was collected by the onlookers: it would be their meal that evening.

The chicken blood was mixed with a small amount of the black powder and Mahlatsywa had to drink a little bit of it. She was still trembling and her teeth clattered against the metal dish. The girl, who had been carrying the chicken, had to kneel down and also take a little of the mixture.

"The chicken is symbolical of the learner-sangoma", LaMabuza pointed out, "when it eats it scrapes the ground, moves forward and scrapes again, thus covering the holes it has made. The learners have to learn, thus filling the "holes" in their knowledge. Further the blood and medicine will strengthen them".

When I asked her why the young girl had to drink a little of the mixture too, she replied:

"The name, given to this girl is Nyagwabe and she acts as a "wife" to the emandzawe-spirits, having to do special duties for them; she will dress the tangoma in their red cloths when the emandzawe have "woken up"; she has to assist them as well. Now, when she has drunk some of this blood and medicine, she will get the power of knowing what she has to do, without being taught. She can even speak the language of the emandzawe after this and can convey the messages of the spirits to the people".

I looked at her in disbelief and it flashed through my mind that I had often seen small girls assisting the tangoma in putting on these cloths, responding to them during divination, sometimes dancing to the drums as well and pulling their arms after the emandzawe dance, "to get rid of the spirit", as LaMabuza put it.

To me this all was very strange, but LaMabuza smiled friendly, maybe thinking that there was so much the white man did not know anything about!

After the girl had taken a little of blood and medicine, the dish was washed in the stream and Mahlatsywa had to stand up and was led to the water. There three strong men pulled her in the river and, without much gentleness, pushed her under three times.

It reminded me of a baptism ceremony I had witnessed in the Transkei area in South Africa a couple of years ago by a congregation of a so called Zionist church, one of the many independent Bantu sects; and I wondered if this was perhaps Christian influence in an otherwise pagan ritual. But after this "baptism" Mahlatsywa was completely limp and was carried out of the water by the men who then lowered her gently down on the mat where she had been sitting a few moments before. A white sheet was brought and Mahlatsywa was covered completely, as if she were dead.

"She is dead!", LaMabuza insisted later, "she has died her life as an ordinary person, and will be resurrected to a new life as a fully fledged diviner later. She is dead, but it is the same kind of death that occurs when in hospital someone is anaesthetized during an operation".

This was clear to me; many Swazis consider being anaesthetized as a way of dying and, when the patient comes round again, he has been resurrected to life. Asked about the immersion in the river, she answered that the water cleansed, washed away evil and in this water the emandzawe-spirits made them die, and the same emandzawe would bring them back to life again, in the village.

To see this I got a lift in an open van, in which the six "dead" tangoma were transported back to LaMabuza's kraal. The pounding of the big drums greeted our arrival and the six initiates were laid side by side in the open space. Then LaMncina, the most senior sangoma walked to Mahlatsywa, lifted the sheet and brushed her under the nose with a small switch she carried with her. Suddenly Mahlatsywa shot up, turned around on her knees in a kneeling position and, with clasped hands she shook her body violently to the emandzawe-rhythm of the drums. The white cloth of purity once more was draped around her shoulders. She was reborn and this same phenomenon was repeated until all six initiates were resurrected to a new life.

"The brush is called a "sizinga" and it has been doctored so that it has special powers", LaMabuza explained to me. It was a fine looking object, made from the tail of a gnu or wildebeest, with a handle that had strings of multicoloured beads tightly wrapped around it. When I asked if it ever happened that a new sangoma did not come back to life, LaMabuza answered:

"Yes, it does happen; if she has once in her life committed adultery, the emandzawe spirits will not restore her to life, so she will die forever. And", she added, "that is why the parents and next of kin are called, so that they will witness the whole ceremony. Because if it might happen that the sangoma does not wake up, they might say that we have poisoned her with some kind of medicine and this then could become a court case. But, now they are all here, they can see with their own eyes that all of them received the same treatment, so, when she dies, it must have been her own fault".

"It is a dangerous ritual", LaMabuza continued, "therefore we are so strict with them and watching them all the time, almost like we are looking after cattle! We have to watch them so that they will not be tempted".

After a while a group of men and women, who had been watching the ceremony, went to sit down on mats in the open space, all stripped to the waist. Meanwhile the seniors helped the initiates to put on a kind of harness that looked to me like tubes of white plastic that went crosswise over the shoulders, under the arms and over the chest. A white folded cloth was tied around their waist and, led by another learner sangoma who held the free end of this cloth in her hand, the initiates walked one by one on hands and knees to the people who were sitting in the sun on their mats. This ritual was called "kufemba" and its purpose is to "smell out" a ghostly body that may be living in a person's body.

"That harness is called "umfembi" and it assists the sangoma in finding that "ghost animal". Yes, it is made of plastic, but inside it are certain medicines, special roots and also one very potent ingredient: the nose of a hyaena: it is well known that a nyaena has a very good sense of smell and this helps the sangoma

to smell the ghost easily".

I saw the initiates "trap" these ghost-animals a number of times. They crept around the people, brushing them all over with a "sizinga" switch, sniffing them and sniffing the switch, while their victims were looking on, some a little frightful, others seemingly amused. Suddenly one of the tangoma grabbed a man by the shoulders and almost pushed him backwards. The learner who was guiding her tried to pull her away from him, but she seemed to be outraged, struggled with him and refused to let go. It took two more tangoma to pull her away from him and guide her a little away from the people. The initiate then brushed herself under the nose, she sneezed and returned to continue the smelling out of the ghosts.

"When they seem to attack the people on whom they perform this "kufemba"-ritual", LaMabuza said, "they have found such a ghost-animal" and it has entered their body now. They must then brush themselves, so that they can sneeze it out".

A similar explanation was later given to me by fourteen year old Elijah Khoza, one of the students in the school where I was teaching science. His father is an "inyanga", actually a herbalist, but he also has knowledge of divination. Elijah told me, that a spirit-animal could enter a person's body if someone had used a certain medicine against him; and it could also jump from the sangoma, who was sneezing it out, to somebody else if she were too close to him.

"This one could call a test, to see if she is able to trap these ghost-animals", LaMabuza said, "and just to make sure, the seniors will then perform this same "kufemba"-ritual on the initiates, to see if they have really rid themselves of these ghosts".

She gave me an example of the kind of animal-ghosts that could be smelled out. "You Europeans call it rheumatism", she said, "we say that one is attacked by "tilwane" (literally "animals", here to be meant these "ghosts"). So the sangoma can hold you by the knees and take it out; later, when you stand up, you are cured!"

It looked to me an easy cure, but I wondered how effective it really was.

After this the new tangoma sat down and now it was the turn of the seniors to perform this "kufemba" ritual on them, "to make sure that they have rid themselves of the ghost-animals". One obviously had not: she was almost assaulted by one of the seniors who flung herself on her and pushed her down on the ground. When the senior was finally pulled away, her victim was sitting there, shaking with laughter. She did not seem to take it very seriously.

And then it was all over. Once more the new tangoma wrapped the red cloths around their shoulders and went to the back of the huts to drink bowls of liquid "medicine" and vomit, to purify themselves from the "kufemba" ritual.

The ceremony was finished and the "ematfwasa" or initiates, "they that would be reborn", could call themselves "tinyanga", fully qualified tangoma or diviners from now on. That evening they would eat, something that had been denied to them for a full two days. And, after that, would they go back home to start practising on their own?

"Yes", LaMabuza answered, "provided they have paid their fees. Before they could take part in this ceremony they had to pay 30 pounds, and the ceremony cost them 20 pounds; they must have paid this before they are allowed to go".

Like many older Swazis, LaMabuza still thought in Pounds, although Swaziland had been using for more than ten years the South African Rand and, since 6 September 1974, its own currency, the Lilangeni. With 1 old Pound being 2 Rands or 2 Emalangeni, the whole "course", with initiation ceremony, came to 100 Emalangeni, about US\$ 125.

LaMabuza added that, if they did leave without paying, she could even make this a court case. She could afford to do this, I thought; she is a rich woman, who usually drives around in a Mercedes-Benz.

With the drums still echoing in my ears I left Bethany, with my

still cameras, lenses, movie camera and tape-recorder. And I reflected that, although the white man knows about these technical things, what does he know about the spirits? To these people they were as real as the photographs I had taken, were to me. It had made a deep impression on me.

I hope that the ancestral spirits, the emadloti and the emandzawe, will guide them and give them wisdom. Thokoza!

Ludo Kuipers
Evelyn Baring High School
Nhlangano, Swaziland, 1974

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Interviewing LaMabuza for this story at her home in Bethany, 12 October 1974.