

**MY ODYSSEY  
INTO THE  
SPIRIT WORLD  
OF AFRICA**

# **SANGOMA**



**JAMES HALL**



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My Odyssey into the Spirit World of Africa

JAMES HALL

A Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam Book  
published by  
G. P. Putnam's Sons  
New York

## TO JAY LEVEY AND KAREN GLASS

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# Glossary

<i>baba</i>	father
<i>Bandzaawe</i>	African tribe whose lidlotis, through a sangoma, perform the Kufemba divination ritual
<i>Benguni</i>	African tribe whose lidlotis assist the sangoma
<i>bhayiskhobho</i>	movies
<i>bhejane</i>	rhinoceros
<i>bingelela</i>	sangoma's dance/song of greeting
<i>imbita</i>	medicine to internally cleanse the body
<i>imvimba</i>	payment of cows paid by a seducer of an unmarried girl to her parents to legitimize child
<i>Indlu Yemaphupha</i>	a house of dreams
<i>Indumba</i>	spirit house
<i>inhloko</i>	sangoma's insight or psychic ability
<i>Inkhanyan</i>	song sung by lidlotis to announce a litfwasa's readiness to complete kutfwasa
<i>insangu</i>	marijuana
<i>intebetebe</i>	footbridge
<i>khetsa</i>	choose
<i>kubhunyasela</i>	taking herbal medicines by burning and inhaling them

<i>kufemba</i>	“sniffing out” divination ritual performed by Bandzawe spirits through a sangoma
<i>kukhokha</i>	drawing out hidden objects using psychic powers
<i>kuphotfulwa</i>	kutfwasa graduation rites
<i>kutfwasa</i>	a process of secret rituals and studies a person possessed of lidlotis undergoes to become a sangoma
<i>kutsandvo</i>	herbal love potion
<i>lalatela</i>	ritual by which a three-month-old baby is presented to the ancestors
<i>libala</i>	illness affecting infants
<i>lichishamlilo</i>	medicinal plant
<i>lidloti</i>	ancestral spirit
<i>ligwalagwala</i>	bird whose bright red feathers are worn in hair by Swazi royalty and certain elders
<i>likheshi</i>	elevator
<i>lingedla</i>	long, carved fighting stick
<i>lintongomane</i>	peanut
<i>lishoba</i>	oxtail brush
<i>litfwasa</i>	sangoma-in-training (person undergoing kutfwasa)
<i>lobola</i>	dowry of cows
<i>maganu</i>	seasonal drink brewed from fruit of the umganu tree
<i>mutsi</i>	medicine
<i>Mkhulumnchanti</i>	God
<i>ngcondvombili</i>	a person of mixed parentage
<i>nkhosi’ami!</i>	my god!
<i>nyankwabi</i>	child who carries sangoma’s medicine basket
<i>sangoma</i>	diviner healer empowered by ancestral spirits
<i>sanwati</i>	medicinal plant used to treat ulcers
<i>sekusile</i>	good morning
<i>Sevuma</i>	we agree
<i>shayelwa</i>	drum beating ritual whereby ancestral spirits are summoned
<i>sibhaca</i>	Swazi dance performed by men and boys

<i>sidliso</i>	bewitched food
<i>sihlali lesimhlope</i>	herbal emetic for bringing good fortune
<i>sihlali lesimnyama</i>	herbal emetic for bringing good fortune
<i>sikhulu</i>	chief
<i>sipoko</i>	ghost
<i>siwebhu</i>	ceremonial whip
<i>siyabonga</i>	we thank you
<i>siyendle</i>	sangoma's hairstyle
<i>Siyenga</i>	professional song sung by sangomas at conclusion of kuphotfulwa
<i>spoliyane khotsa</i>	headache remedy made from burnt, pulverized roots
<i>thogoza</i>	traditional greeting to a sangoma
<i>tilwane</i>	metaphorical "wild animals" said to be responsible for mental illness
<i>timfiso</i>	sangoma's necklaces
<i>Timzmoz</i>	African tribe whose lidlotis are found in bodies of water
<i>tindlulamitsi</i>	giraffes ("tree passers")
<i>tjwala</i>	Swazi home-brewed beer
<i>togoloshi</i>	spirit creatures said to be responsible for sexual dysfunction
<i>umbuto</i>	warrior; member of the king's regiments
<i>umhlabelo</i>	bone-fracture medicine
<i>umlungu</i>	white person
<i>umnunzane</i>	senior male member of a homestead
<i>umsamo</i>	sacred place inside the Indumba, furthest from the door
<i>umtsakatsi</i>	witch
<i>umtuntu</i>	sangoma's medicine basket
<i>umutsi kuvikela</i>	herbal medicine that protects user from harm and misfortune
<i>yebo</i>	yes

GLENDOWER: *I can call spirits from the vasty deep!*

HOTSPUR: *Why, so can I, and so can any man. But will they  
come when you do call for them?*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
*Henry IV, Part One*



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# Swaziland

LOWHIDE DRUMS BOOMED like cannon fire. Half-naked Swazi women beat them with sticks worn smooth from use. In the evening's heat we crowded the interior of a grass and mud hut, the home of the ancestral spirits. A single candle burned on the dirt floor before me. Its dancing light shone in the whites of the women's eyes and in sweat that ran like tear tracks from purple-black shoulders and shone like dew on the dark areolas of their breasts.

A slim teenage girl with lynxlike thighs, several powerfully built middle-aged women, some children silenced by the thunderous drums into respect for the ritual now unfolding, a single impassive young man and an old crone with her hair molded with clay into an inverted red bowl over her wizened face: these were the people who were leading me with their flying drumsticks and chanting voices through my initiation rite.

More than two years had passed since the first hint that I might have the makings of an African tribal healer. The subsequent investigations, discoveries, contemplation, and decision that brought me here had seemed momentous as they were occurring, but they all paled compared to what was happening now, now that the learning had actually begun. The past was being literally and noisily drummed out of me by these women beating upon carved wooden kettles with leather tops to which tufts of cow hair still clung. The drums surrounded me as I sat expectantly, the way the women had positioned me: straight-backed with legs extended forward on a thin reed mat, my hands on my knees with palms up like two radar dishes ready to receive signals. The people belonged to this place, the ancient-looking spirit house called the *Indumba*. They knew what to do. Two women, clad only in beaded necklaces and calf-length patterned cloths tied around their waists, stepped forward and covered me with a heavy white sheet. When they draped it over my head it was as if they were snuffing out a candle, or the life I had known up to now.

It was December 1988, and in other places a terrorist bomb was igniting the skies over Lockerbie, Scotland; Ronald Reagan was lighting his last Christmas tree on the White House lawn; and moviegoers were watching *Working Girl* and *The Accidental Tourist*. Here on the southern tip of the African continent, where the seasons were reversed, the summer solstice was approaching. I sweated under my sheet, feeling impossibly distant from everything that was happening elsewhere in the world but excited by what was transpiring in this mysterious lost place. The rite I was undergoing was strange and magical and wonderful, everything I had hoped for. I resembled a ghost beneath my white shroud, and, in-

deed, this ritual was intended to put me in touch with other ghosts: ancestral spirits, or *lidlotis* in the SiSwati language I had begun to learn.

I could see little more than the candle's thin filament, gauzy through the fabric that enshrouded my head. But the cloth did not muffle the drums. Their thunder assaulted me, and the vibrations they sent out rose through the balls of my feet, my thighs, and buttocks and lodged in the base of my spine. The people were shaking rattles now, bringing them close to my head and withdrawing them like buzzing insects. The chanting ceased when a woman raised her voice above the rest and led a song like an African hymn. In words I did not yet understand, the woman's deep contralto called out in pleading tones, which were echoed by a chorus of others. As she sang, the energy level within the hut rose. The people called upon the ancestral spirits they said were within me to come forth and address them.

There seemed little I could do to help things along. But I was not expected to do anything, just sit still and let the spiritual realm manifest itself through me. How this was to be done I had no idea. I wondered: even if my European ancestors by some unknown scheme of the afterlife had become spirits, how could they be expected to acknowledge drum and chanted signals sent out by Swazi natives? There were lots of questions to consider as I sat mummified in my shroud, battered by the powerful rhythmic sounds all around. Certainly the biggest question was how had a white man from conservative Winnetka, Illinois, a former Eagle Scout and a Catholic, become a candidate to be an African shaman?

I remembered everything that had brought me there as the drums thundered, the rattles shook shrilly, and the women raised their voices to beseech their spirits (*my* spirits?). My thoughts flowed through familiar waters and returned as they often did to the liquid night-time skies of Guinea in West Africa, where I first heard the word that would change my life:

*Sangoma.*



For two months in 1986 I lived in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, as the guest of "Mama Africa," the singer Miriam Makeba. We sat in the rock garden of her small house as I conducted interviews for her "as told to" autobiography, which I was to write. It would be my first book of distinction, and one that I hoped would move me out of television writing and

into literature. Instead, the project was to move me into a bizarre world I had not known existed until one night when I asked Miriam about her mother.

Miriam's face, capable of such emotion when she sang, became inscrutable, and her large brown eyes focused far away. "My mother was special. She could . . . see."

Something mysterious had come over Miriam, and I proceeded carefully. "How?"

"She was what we call a sangoma. She had powers. People came to her with problems, and she told them what they were. Then she cured them."

"She was a tribal healer?"

"My mother was a Xhosa, like Themba and Zola." She mentioned our mutual friends in California who had brought us together, with this book project the result. My life was like that: a chance meeting or a friendship led to the most unexpected places. "But she trained to be a healer in Swaziland. She had no choice but to become a sangoma. The lidlotis—the spirits—wanted her."

I did not believe or disbelieve the story of Christina Makeba as related in respectful tones by her famous daughter. It seemed remote and dreamlike, an African fable. Miriam's mother had been a modern, fashionable woman in 1950, but had known enough of the ancient ways to recognize the signs of spiritual possession when they struck her: an inexplicable swelling of her feet and other mysterious illnesses that baffled the city doctors. These were followed by strange visions and sudden prescient insights into family members and neighbors. A local healer confirmed what everyone suspected, that Christina Makeba was possessed by the lidlotis, and these spirits were calling her to become a sangoma. She left the repressive apartheid state of South Africa and journeyed to Swaziland, where she underwent the secret rituals of *kutfwasa* and became a sangoma. When she returned home she enlisted teenage Miriam as her assistant.

The ancestral spirits endowed Christina with supernatural healing abilities, psychic insights, and precognition. By casting down an assortment of goat bones and sea shells and reading the patterns they made, she was able to discern people's ailments. But the lidloti spirits were demanding. They desired that Christina dress in unusual garments, perhaps in a foreign skirt or a man's loincloth, and it was Miriam's job to fetch these things, along with the snuff her mother would take while in the throes of one of her spirit-induced trances.

"Could she really tell people's illnesses by looking at them?" I asked.

"Sometimes she did not even look at them, she just looked at the 'bones.'"

Miriam fell silent for a moment, and then said in a voice little more than a murmur, "You know, I was not going to tell you about my mother. White people have made criminals of our tribal healers. It is all superstition and madness to them."

"But you trusted me?"

She replied in the same soft voice, "I do not know if the Africans in Los Angeles could sense this in you, but I can. You can see, I think."

"What do you mean, 'see'? Like your mother?" I was curious, in an amused way.

"Do you remember when we were discussing my first husband you said the first time I made love with him I became pregnant?"

"Well, you were talking about it, and I asked."

Miriam shook her head. "You did not ask. You said. And you were right."

I did not remember the incident clearly. I knew that I occasionally filled in a blank in one of Miriam's stories when her mind wandered while reminiscing. Apparently, and without realizing it, I was doing this often, and with uncanny accuracy.

A series of inky jungle nights passed under jewel-bright stars or a beaconlike moon as we spoke in Miriam's garden, with dense foliage dark all around us. Wooden xylophones played by the Guineans filled the heavy air with a jittery, atonal tinkling. Such nights were conducive to reflection on the fantastic, and the possibility of some strange insight within me came up again. It seemed all the times in my life when I had made an offhanded prediction or presumptuous statement that turned out to be true returned to me. There was that time my brother called and I blurted out of the blue, "Larry! You're having a baby!" He was surprised, and annoyed: that was to have been *his* good news. Or the year before when I saw two cars waiting behind one another at a light and thought, They're going to crash. Then I watched with strange curiosity as the one in back, as if following a script, drove forward and rear-ended the other. And with Miriam, as our interviews continued, personal details of her life that I could not have known popped out of my mouth, seemingly without conscious thought. Aware of this trait now, I was embarrassed, and apologized.

Miriam smiled at me. "It's the sangoma in you."

"Well," I shrugged, "what am I to do about it?" Sangomas were black Africans steeped in tribal ways and ancient wisdoms. And I wasn't. Period.

Miriam's regal, unlined face regarded me intently. Though in her late fifties, she seemed ageless. Her embroidered robe flowed over her like a blue stream. "You must seek out a sangoma, who will tell you the truth."

"And what would that be? That I, alone among the white race, am possessed by *lidlotis* and I should undergo *kutfwasa* and become a sangoma? What then?"

"That is up to you. But I think many whites must have *lidlotis*. They just don't know."

We wrapped up this interview and the others; I returned to Los Angeles, wrote the book, found a publisher, and by Christmas I was back home in Chicago. But Miriam's suggestion that there was some sort of spiritual mystery in my life was never far from my thoughts.

I knew of few things that possessed the reassuring permanence of the giant Christmas tree at Marshall Field's department store. Three stories high, adorned with oversized ornaments, it filled the atrium above the seventh-story restaurant. When my mother first brought my two younger brothers, my sister, and me to lunch beneath the big tree, we drank Shirley Temples. Now the drinks were brandy Alexanders, and we were two. One brother had a job elsewhere in the Chicago Loop, another was in Colorado, and my sister was raising her own family in New Orleans. That left myself and my mother. My father worked in the nearby suburb of Cicero. He and I did our drinking at Wrigley Field, where he held season tickets to watch the woeful Cubs give lessons in humility.

My parents and I were three strong-willed people; we rarely agreed on anything and fought regularly, sometimes bitterly, so we would have to step back periodically and remind ourselves what we meant to each other. We could never seem to get enough of one another's company. From my father I inherited Swedish blood that gave me a cool temperament and Scottish blood that endowed me with a practical nature, and from my mother, Italian blood that heated me up and a touch of French blood for a piquant trace of *hauteur*. My father had been born and raised in Southern California and wound up in Chicagoland. The reverse happened to me. I graduated from the Division of Cinema at the University of Southern California, and was accepted into the Screen Writers' Guild on the basis of profitable if forgettable TV work. My ambition was to write novels, and I wanted to relocate to Chicago to do that.

Beneath the Christmas tree at Field's that day, my mother dressed with simple elegance, her hair was light brown, and the eyes that met mine were intelligent and warm. To collect my thoughts I gazed up at the



gargantuan tree and out across the impeccably attired patrons along the walnut-paneled walls, and the high, mullioned windows overlooking a snowy State Street. What would the holidays be without this little ritual? I could think of no more inappropriate place to raise the subject of my African discoveries than here. Perhaps for that reason, it seemed the ideal place.

"Something interesting happened to me in Guinea."

My mother gave me one of her attentive and businesslike looks that had impressed the voters of Winnetka, who had just elected her to a second term as mayor of the affluent North Shore suburb. It was Winnetka where I had grown up raking autumn leaves and shoveling snow, where I watched the sun rise over Lake Michigan and dated my first black girl, the only one in town: cheerful and energetic Mary James, now a Stanford-trained nuclear physicist. My mother found this agreeable during those liberal days of Woodstock and civil rights. Now that we were deep in the Reagan night of racial intolerance, I did not know how her enthusiasm fared, for I still dated African-American women. I was thirty-two and it was rare when I spoke to her about my personal life, but it seemed important I do so now.

I explained what little I knew about sangomas, and when I was done, my mother, who had listened intently but without reaction, asked, "How does Miriam know you are such a thing?"

"Well, I'm not anything, yet. But it's intriguing that perhaps I could be. How would Miriam know? Her mother was a sangoma. Miriam thinks she may have some of these spirits herself. Supposedly, sangomas can sense one another." I finished with a shrug. "Anyway, the only way to know for certain is to consult another healer."

"And you're going back to Africa to do that?"

"When the opportunity presents itself, I will. I *am* curious. Why me? The next time I'm over there, I'll arrange something."

My mother's gaze grew severe. "Why did you let them talk you into their religion? Why didn't you tell them about yours?"

I explained that a sangoma was not a priest but a healer; that Africans had other people who officiated at their religious rituals. I was satisfied with my Catholicism, as casually as I tended to take it. Like many American Catholics, I was a "smorgasbord Catholic" who picked and chose what I wished to apply to my private life. I did not do this thoughtlessly or arrogantly, but I was unable to reconcile the American belief in personal choice with the Church's demand for unquestioning obedience. I engaged in premarital sex, which meant that either I or my



partner used birth control, which meant I was going to hell. Under the circumstances, going to confession when I knew repentance was beyond me seemed foolish, and going to mass seemed hypocritical. But I still went to mass, felt uplifted by it, and assumed a hopeful attitude that everything would somehow work out.

I reminded my mother that my first ambition as a child was to grow up to be a priest. There was something in my character from an early age that was willing to trade worldly pleasures for an ideal, a belief. Perhaps this temperament would suit me well for kutfwasa training if I came to believe this sangoma business was relevant to myself.

My mother and I left the restaurant, and we passed through the Gourmet Shop, a jumble of delicacies from all over the globe. My mother browsed as I, six feet, two inches and a head taller than she, loomed behind. She stopped, and a thoughtful, distant, and sad expression passed over her face. "Mother would have liked this place," she said.

"Don't worry," I smiled. "Where grandma is they have an even bigger and better Marshall Field's."

"I know . . ."

I had made my little joke, but I suddenly felt a strange discomfort, and a chill came over me. A moment passed before the sensation left. I looked about at the brightly lit store with its colorful displays, an unlikely spot for a haunting, and wondered what it was that had just passed through me.

I returned to Los Angeles after the holidays. The year that followed brought an increasingly bizarre series of electrical mishaps that were never explained. They began innocently enough as I drove late one night down a deserted Los Feliz Boulevard at the base of Griffith Park. The street was suddenly and noticeably darker. Glancing back, I saw that a street lamp had gone out as I drove beneath it. I drove on and did not give the incident another thought until a week later when the same thing happened.

This time the top was down on my most cherished possession: a streamlined white 1937 Cadillac convertible I had restored. I saw the street lamp burn out directly overhead as I passed beneath. At the traffic light I thought, "This must go on all the time. Funny, I never noticed."

But I was forced to notice on my final night in the only Los Angeles apartment I had ever grown attached to. The classic old building was being demolished for a high-rise, and a moving van was coming in the morning to fetch my things. I had the flu, the rain was dribbling down in cold mists, and driving down Westwood Boulevard the Cadillac's brakes went out. By downshifting and applying the hand brake I avoided disas-