

BEING ISANGOMA IS A GREAT HONOUR

Life is all about balance for wife, mother and sangoma Nokulinda Mkhize, who aims to dispel the misconceptions that still surround traditional healing both online and IRL.



‘I’M 31 YEARS OLD. I grew up in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. I was a moody child, very sensitive. I was always napping.

From the time I hit puberty, I knew something was up. It’s difficult to explain – there was just restlessness and longing under my skin. I struggled with my mental, physical and emotional health throughout my teens and early 20s. I had many visions – I felt like I was losing my mind.

I only worked out that I was called to *ubungoma* in my late teens, and that’s when the illness and intense visions began to give way to clear dreams, and my spiritual gifts began to become stronger.

My dreams were very literal – I had elders and ancestors visiting me in my dreams to show me what to do and where to go.

Isangoma is someone who has been initiated as *isangoma* through the process of *intwaso* – when someone is being mentored through the process of *intwaso*, before being initiated as *isangoma*, they are called *ithwasa*.

Each culture has their own *intwaso* initiation rites and processes. *Ubizo* is a calling to the practice of *ubungoma*. A sangoma who mentors and initiated *ithwasa* into *ubungoma* is called a *gobela*.

Every sangoma has to be mentored by and initiated under another sangoma. The process is sacred, so we don’t share details of the journey with people who are not initiated.

I was 22 when I went to *thwasa*. I didn’t know what would happen or what to expect. The directions to my *gobela*’s house came to me in a dream one afternoon.

I was in there for about six months, and as soon as I came home, I began practising. My family has been supportive throughout.

At first I worked corporate jobs in Durban and Johannesburg, and did my *sangoma* work on the weekends. But that didn’t work out well at all.

Guidance brought me to Johannesburg in 2010, where I established my practice and met my husband, with whom I have two

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children. It’s kind of a long story, but it involves a psychic and a lot of serendipity. Parenthood and being married add an extra layer of surreal to my life as a sangoma.

Eventually, I acquiesced to my ancestors and began to practise full time. I was practising out of my tiny apartment in the Maboneng Precinct. I used my Twitter account to let people know I was available for consultations.

In my practice, I do divinations (*ukubbhula*) using the traditional bone-throwing method. I do cleansings, healing and protection work using *umuthi* and the energy of water. I also connect people directly with their loved ones and ancestors in the spirit world. I am guided very strongly in all the healing methods I practise.

My clients call upon me the most when they seek spiritual guidance, affirmation or clarity in resolving issues in their lives. *Izangoma* are not only spirit mediums and intercessors, we also play the role of counsellors and mediators for our clients and the communities where we work.

The work is very labour intensive, and my health has suffered a lot because of it. I am working out how

to give my best without depleting myself and becoming burnt out – which has happened. I am recovering from adrenal fatigue. When I work, I can feel affirmed and helpful – while feeling exhausted and anxious about speaking to strangers.

There are also a lot of misconceptions and ignorance surrounding *isintu* (the systems of beliefs, views and practices that are indigenous to the people and cultures of our land) and our spiritual practices. And a lot of it conflates *ubizo* with mental-health issues.

Black communities still don’t readily recognise mental-health issues as real health issues, and in the same vein, there is an overemphasis and reliance on using what little is understood about *ubizo* (the ancestral calling) as the reason for troubled behaviour or personal/family problems.

Essentially, I have found many black people don’t receive enough support – or the right kind of support – for their struggles. The advice is usually a variation of: “Pray, get over it or go and *thwasa*”, when we express our hardships and struggles (particularly mental and emotional anguish).

Being *isangoma* is a great honour, and I am humbled every day when I think of how these gifts work to bring healing.

I can’t wrap my head around the fact that I am *isangoma*. First of all, I have psychic gifts. That’s a trip. Then I can communicate with spirits. Woah. I am also a *gobela* now, initiating other people into *ubungoma*. Wow.

It’s frustrating sometimes, because people and spirits don’t always respect boundaries. Another big challenge is working to align my physical and spiritual responsibilities as a mother and wife with my work as a sangoma. It’s a lot. But I love to be of service.” ■

Nokulinda will be giving a talk called Ubizo, Mental Health and Intergenerational Trauma in Joburg on September 3 and in Durban on September 9. Tickets via Quicket.co.za, or visit Ithonga.co.za for more details