PENNY BERNARD

SACRED WATER SITES AND INDIGENOUS HEALERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: THE NEED TO PROTECT KNOWLEDGE, NATURE AND RESOURCE RIGHTS.

There has recently been a surge of interest worldwide in the way Indigenous people interact with their environment and the value of their knowledge systems. Many international organizations, such as the Convention of Biodiversity (CBD-UNCED, 1992), the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), and the Working Group on Traditional Resource Rights (WGTRR), are calling for the recognition of Indigenous peoples rights to self-determination, the value of their knowledge, and the need for strategies to protect and preserve this knowledge (Posey & Dutfield, 1996; Gray, 1997). This has largely been precipitated by the global environmental crisis, which has revealed the shortcomings of an exclusively scientific approach, often within the western economic development paradigm, in solving the multitude of environmental problems facing present and future generations. There has been a corresponding awareness of the need to revisit how Indigenous people have managed to live sustainably within their environments, both in the past and the present.

The need to document and preserve such knowledge is thus seen as crucial for humanity’s long term survival on earth. It is pertinent to note that much of this knowledge is intimately connected with the broader framework of peoples’ cosmology and worldview, which is embedded within their physical, spiritual and social landscapes (Tilley, 1994; Hirsch & O’Hanlon, 1996). Hence procuring and preserving existing knowledge, although crucial, is only one aspect of the equation. Knowledge is dependent on the protection and preservation of these broad features of the landscape, within which people’s identity, cosmology and knowledge are embedded. In terms of the physical landscape, protection and preservation are just one aspect of the solution. Ensuring Indigenous people access to these sites is essential since such features are integral aspects of the nature, formation and transmission of knowledge. Throughout the world, over the last 200 years these communities have become increasingly marginalized and denied access to such resources, with the resultant threat to their knowledge. In South Africa Indigenous African peoples are emerging after centuries of alienation and marginalization from their landscapes, imposed on them by their colonial and apartheid masters. In the last century they were systematically denied access to a large percentage of their resources. The Land Act of 1913 is well recognized as the institutionalized mechanism which precipitated this, whereby it stipulated that over 80% of the population were to be confined to 13% of the total land mass of South Africa. Since independence in 1993, efforts have been made to correct this state of affairs but the present process of land restitution is slow, arduous, very expensive and fraught with many difficulties. Many who were uprooted from their natural landscapes have lost their knowledge and traditions, or have repudiated them in favor of monotheism, capitalism and globalization.

These transformations, as well as the inevitable population pressures on the restricted resources, have led to behavior changes which have resulted in environmental degradation and abandonment of much of the traditional ecological knowledge that is no longer relevant to them. These modern forces have all contributed to the
‘disenchantment’ of the landscape whereby the respect for the spirits of the land is rapidly disappearing and with it a powerful mechanism for limiting negative human behavior.

Despite these threats to knowledge, however, there remains a strong body of belief among a core of African religious functionaries, the traditional/spiritual healers. Despite being heavily ‘demonized’ by the Christian invaders they continue to play a significant and influential role in their communities. It is estimated that over 80% of the population in South Africa still regularly consult with them.

The following summary demonstrates the intimate connection that exists between the physical, spiritual and social dimensions of southern African spiritual healers’ knowledge and practice with particular reference to water resources and the belief of water spirits. It must be noted that water sources provide just one aspect of the knowledge base. Plants, forests and mountains are also integral to the training and practice of traditional healers. The data presented comes from research I have done among the Zulu, Xhosa and Karanga/Shona speaking groups over the last four years. These communities span a wide area of southern Africa, extending across several thousand kilometres and over a number of state boundaries (South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe). It is worth noting that I have identified a common corpus of knowledge linking the African healing traditions with the water spirits over this whole region that is not exclusive to these groups only. It also features strongly in other Bantu speaking groups in the region such as the Swazi, Venda, Sotho, Tshangaan, Ndebele and Tswana, and they are also prevalent amongst the original autochthons of southern Africa, the Khoekhoe and the San (e.g. the /Xam.). My research initially commenced with the Zulu speaking people of Kwazulu Natal, after I had been informed that my ancestors were from ‘the snake of the water’ and wished me to become initiated by a very powerful isangoma (healer), Mr S, who had himself been taken under the sea by the ‘snake’. This would be the ancestors way of teaching me and would help me understand the significance and reality of the water spirit complex for the Zulu people. Much of my research has been guided by the responses of the healers to my dreams, particularly regarding snakes and sacred water sites, but it is not my intent to focus on such reflexive experiences in this present paper.

Before commencing research I had already been struck by the recurrent themes of the water spirits that I had encountered in the literature and myths of southern Africa. It is this complex of common core symbolic structures, which stay remarkably constant over time and space, that I now present.

**Water Spirits and the ‘Snake’ in Southern Africa**

Among many of the southern African Indigenous people (Khoisan and Bantu-speaking people) there exists a set of complex beliefs regarding water, river systems and riparian

---

3The financial support for this research has come from the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Fund, the Rhodes University Joint Research Committee, and the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and is gratefully acknowledged. Ideas and opinions expressed in this paper should not be attributed to these funding bodies.
Water in itself is regarded among many African religious functionaries as a living force, a powerful symbol and medium for purification and healing, and as such water sources are regarded as essential parts of the landscape for conducting rituals to aid communication with the spirit world. The spirit world is regarded as the ultimate source of such life sustaining resources. Integral to such beliefs are various zoomorphic spirit manifestations, primarily the snake and the mermaid, who reside in or beyond the water and who interact with humans in a variety of ways. The rivers, wetlands and the sea, are the dwelling places of such manifestations and are of fundamental importance to many of the African healing traditions and their practitioners (e.g. amagqirha, izangoma).

The snake and the mermaid are specifically associated with the calling of healers and are seen as the providers of wisdom, knowledge and medicines, which are given to chosen individuals. This usually involves the physical submersion of the candidate under the water of a certain river pool or the sea (for a few hours, to days or even years) after which it is alleged that the individual emerges wearing the full regalia of a healer: a symbolic snake wrapped around his/her body and medicines. This experience of being taken under the water, often by a wind or a ‘snake’ can happen in a dream, but this is merely notification that the individual’s ancestors are calling him/her to become a healer. The "calling" is usually preceded by the candidate suffering an illness (ukuthwasa)⁶, although sometimes, especially in the case of children they just happen to be playing near the water at the time. The age at which one is taken seems to range widely, but in many accounts such experiences occur with children and young adults. If they are taken spontaneously without any signs or warning dreams, they will have to be apprenticed to a healer who has him/herself survived the same experience, after emergence from the water. This is to complete the process of learning and acquire the uniform/insignia of office, as well as to become associated with a healer group⁷. For instance, Thoba, who was the main officiant at my initiation, was taken under the water when she was still a toddler. She was returned to her mother after three days. At the age of five she was apprenticed as a novice (thwasa) to my teacher, Mr S, and at the age of eight she had qualified and was training other izangoma. In some instances it may only happen sometime after a candidate healer has completed his/her training and is practising the art. This is what happened to my teacher Mr S. He suffered the symptoms of ‘thwasa’ when he was 10 years of age. He became apprenticed to a healer from this time. Over the next 7 years he was to be sent to three other healers on the instructions of his ancestors. He had already completed his training, when at the age of 17 years he received a warning from his ancestors that he was to ‘go under the water’ and he was to get sacrificial animals.

⁶This is a complex of symptoms that are well recognised by African healers, particularly of the south Nguni speaking groups (Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele). Manifestation of such symptoms is an indication that one is being called. It involves both physical (backaches, headaches etc) and behavioural symptoms (e.g. reclusiveness). On accepting the call the novice is referred to as a thwasa or an umkwetha.

⁷Among the southern Nguni, healers form associational ‘families’ where they are linked to their trainer, and trainer’s trainer, through a classificatory kin based structure. The trainer is the parent and the trainer’s trainer is the grandparent. All novices who train under the same teacher refer to each other as siblings. These groups attend rituals together and support one another, and to some extent ensure that members adhere to certain codes of conduct. Each isiko/isibaya (Zulu) has its own distinctive uniform which enables one to easily identify a common member of the group.
ready for his return from submersion. It is claimed that he was taken under the sea by the snake near Durban in Kwazulu Natal.

It is the spirits that choose the client, not the other way around and resistance to the 'calling' usually leads to misfortune. Failing to accept the call of the ancestors or the river people will lead to insanity and death. Laubscher, a psychiatrist treating mentally ill patients among the Xhosa group in the Eastern Cape, reports “I know of many who were called (to the water) but were restrained and in consequence lost their senses and are now patients in the mental hospital” (1937: 4). Reasons for resisting the call vary widely but they are mainly linked to the forces of modernity, conversion of faith, and the inability of relatives to afford the expenses entailed in becoming a healer. Relative are not allowed to display any grief at the disappearance of one who has gone under the water or he/she may never be returned to the living. This fear of relatives breaking the taboo of not mourning provokes great anxiety in those who have had warning that they may at some stage ‘go under the water’. As a result they actively avoid pools of water where the spirits are known to be present, especially at the times of their peak activity: sunset, night-time and sunrise. Regarding this taboo Laubscher notes ‘It is simply and credulously accepted that if the one “called” does not return alive, someone has wept; there is no need for objective evidence, since only weeping can cause his death’. Anyone who enters these water sources without the calling of the ancestors will disappear, never to return.

Skills in healing, sacred knowledge and psychic abilities seem to be the gifts that are imparted to these chosen people by the water spirits or the river people. Various tasks are expected of them whilst under water, such as removing the snake which lies on a bed of white clay and smearing ones body with it. Many claim they are taught the secrets of life, healing and medicines. In Zimbabwe mention is frequently made of the food taboos that apply whilst they are under water. The novice only being allowed to eat mud and fish. Many claim that after such an experience they make regular visits under the water to obtain the special herbs that are used for healing. These are provided for them by the semi-daemons, the mermaids (the River people), or the ancestral spirit ‘animals’ (snakes and crocodiles) who they encounter whilst under water.

These key symbolic images seen under the water, are linked to the messenger animals that summon the "chosen" one to meet the spirits. They are remarkably similar within all the groups, namely: the snake or python, the water monitor (leguuan), the hippopotamus, the crocodile, the dolphin, the otter, the crab, the frog, the brown fly and/or the horse fly and certain other insects. The following account given to Hirst by a Xhosa diviner illustrate the role of such messenger animals in the calling of a healer:

When you belong to the river, you are called to the river, not by accident, but because you have been called by the ancestors. Because you are going to become a diviner. I am not talking about drowning. It happens that you are not thinking of going to the river with your clothes on. You go to the river as if by magic,

---

8Poverty is a major restraining factor for healers who wish to accept the call and complete their training. The major expense is the purchase of livestock for the required rituals. Although formerly a pastoralist society, loss of access to land and overcrowding in both the urban and rural areas mitigates against the keeping of livestock for the majority of the indigenous people in southern Africa.
undressing as though you are going to swim,⁹ but you are out of your mind. What happens to you first [is that] a brown-fly sticks to your forehead. That is the one that is calling you when you are being called to the river. Where you enter there is a path by which you go into the river....When you enter there, you pass a big oval grindstone containing the white clay called ifutha, which is smeared on the face and body of diviners. When you have gone past there, you will see a snake. There is a snake which resides in that place. Beyond the snake, there are medicines which have been spread out’ (Hirst 229).

In order to persuade the snake to release the chosen one, healers and relatives have to perform a number of rituals. Amongst most groups this usually necessitates the offering of a cow and/or a goat. In some instances the victim will have received advance warning through dreams indicating the preferred colour of the cow/goat (colour symbolism is of extreme importance in these groups) necessary for sacrifice. These sacrifices are usually performed once the victim emerges from the water, and it is said to be of crucial importance for bringing the victim back to his/her senses and this reality. The following narrative given by Mr S depicts many of these features. The narrative picks up from when he had returned from training with his third teacher in the Mount Fletcher area of the Transkei.

I came back from the Transkei and then the ancestors said the clothes (his sacred garments) are not complete yet. I haven’t fetched the snake yet. They sent me to Masteshi (an isangoma), who trained Geza’s wife, where I would raise the amakhosi (ancestors). The ancestors arrived while I was there (in a dream) and showed me a bull with a white tail and a white face. It was to help me take this snake out when I fetched it. Even then I had dreams related to the snake. The ancestors showed me this cow with long horns facing backwards. I didn’t know where to find it. Then one day we heard a cow calling. It came here to the house, kicked the door and came in. People were shocked about what was happening. When I came out I saw it was the same cow I had seen (in the dream). I did not speak. I took a stick and beat it, thinking it would go home. It belonged to the Ndlovu family and I talked them into selling it to me as it was the one I dreamt about. Ndlovu said it gave him lots of trouble in the fields. He wanted to sell it and said it was going for R900.00. I sat there and sent someone to fetch the money. We paid and came home with it. Then someone from the Mthembu family, an old woman, asked me if there was any thwasas who wanted a goat because she had one which butted children to ‘death’. And she was wanting to sell it. I went to see it and it was exactly the one I dreamt about. At home they were surprised and were wondering why I was collecting cows and goats. What was going to happen? Then I told them in the next week they must prepare beer (ishwala). That evening a woman with a stroke arrived. I tried to help her and the man with her told me they had no money to pay for the consultation. They would give me a goat instead. The very same goat I needed. The same day, by morning I

⁹Being naked before immersion is another common theme. This has been seen by some scholars as a necessary part of the symbolism of the death and rebirth theme that pervades such accounts.
had everything, two goats and a cow. Then I went to look for the cars which would take me to Durban (the sea) to look for the snake. At the taxi Mr N who lives nearby said he would take me to Durban. He asked when and I said 7 o’clock. He said I must get R280.00 for two cars to take me there. Then it was surprise because the people here at home pay me that amount. So I paid for the taxis. Then the day came and all the sangomas came. I was wearing sangoma clothes but they (the ancestors) said when I reach Durban I must take them off and burn them in imphepho (incense). As I came to the sea I couldn’t feel I was in the water. It was like was getting through the fence of a traditional Zulu house (at this stage the snake came out of the water, wrapped around him four times and, with its head on his, took him into the water. It was at this stage that he ‘lost his brains’ i.e. blacked out). As I came to the Zulu round grass-houses, two old women came out. They had a present with them as if they were happy to see me. One hugged me and said take this and go back, but as she was hugging me she put something around my neck. I realised later that it was the snake (at this stage he was escorted out of the sea by a dolphin). Then as I came back the sangomas ran away. Only my mother took my clothes and dressed me (at this stage he had to kill the snake). My ceremony! The white goat was slaughtered and I drank its blood\(^\text{10}\). Then when we went to the kraal (cowpen) I drank the bull’s blood where it was slaughtered. I couldn’t see that it was the snake, my mind was so blind. I was only aware what was happening at 12 o’clock as if I was waking from a dream.

The ancestors, in the form of the snake, are said to dwell in the pools of the river below his house, where they maintain constant contact with him and protect him. The skins of the messenger snake and the dolphin who escorted him out of the sea, hang from the rafters of his sacred hut (emakhosini) above the sacred space (umsamo).

This account by Mr S reflects some of the key elements which are to be found in similar accounts throughout southern Africa. Inherent in this account is the awareness that the ancestors have the power to bring about events through mobilising the actions of both animals and the living. This is a fundamental aspect of their religious philosophy. Healers who have been ‘taken under the water’ by the snake, such as Mr S, are regarded as the most powerful and accurate with divination in the region. Both the Zulu and the Xhosa refer to them as the diviners of the amakhosi amakhulu (the diviners of the great ancestors), or those who work with the emilozi/abalozi/oonomathotholo spirits (the whistling spirits). They are called whistling spirit diviners because of their unique way of communicating with the ancestors through whistles which emanate from the rafters of the sacred hut above the sacred space (umsamo). Mr S communicates with the amakhosi in such a way, and when he wishes to communicate with them he burns incense (imphepho)\(^\text{11}\) and with the aid of his shoba (the tail of the sacrificed cow) calls on them to

---

\(^{10}\)Drinking the blood of the sacrificed beasts is an essential part of the process of becoming a healer and for connecting with the ancestors. They are ritually consecrated with imphepho and ubulawu before slaughter.

\(^{11}\)A pleasant smelling plant (*helichrysum odoratissimum*) that is burnt whenever invocations or important rituals are conducted to attract the presence of the ancestors. Used by the Zulus but not by the Xhosa.
respond to the questions posed by clients. Some claim they are taught how to interpret the
whistles while they are under the water in the land of the ancestors. However I have also
discovered that such interpretative ability can be induced by the imbibing of certain herbs
(imithi) which are shown to the initiate in his/her dreams. The identity of such plants are
kept strictly secret. For the Zulu this is equivalent to ‘being taken up to the ancestors’ and
is regarded as the final and most important stage of becoming a powerful healer, in that it
allows direct communication with the great ancestors (the amakhosi). Many healers never
reach this final stage and such individuals who can communicate this way are relatively
rare. Ngubane’s (1977) authoritative book on Zulu healers states that those who
communicate with the ‘whistling great ancestors’ are regarded as the highest in the
graded scale of divination among Zulu healers and are frequently consulted by chiefs and
kings regarding grave matters of state. Similar conceptions occur with the Xhosa. Elliott
describes diviners who communicate with ‘high pitched whistling voices’ and says
‘These diviners are not common but the Xhosa have an enormous amount of faith in them
and, where they are available, the Xhosa will go to great lengths to acquire their services.
The mystery of their powers apparently commands a great deal of respect and leaves the
audience overawed’ (1970: 118). Some scholars have attributed such whistles to
ventriloquism being used by the diviner, but I have not seen any evidence to support such
an assertion with the two diviners I consult regarding my own training.

Similarly healers who have ‘been taken under the water’ are relatively rare. Despite the relative rarity of such diviners, the water symbolism with which they are
associated seem to have a profound significance for all spiritual healers, and forms a
central part of their narratives in becoming a healer (Hirst 90).

Certain places are more favoured by the river spirits than others. They are
believed to live in deep pools of certain rivers, often below waterfalls or fast moving
‘living’ water or in the sea. ‘Living’ water is often associated with its ability to generate
foam and the foam appears to be symbolically important. Berglund cites a Zulu isangoma
informant who said “It is as I said water that is living, running in the river. That is the
living water. If the water had been in a dam as you asked (a while ago), then there would
not be a snake in it. It is the living waters” (1976: 146).

It is believed the ancestors or spirits of the water live in a dry area at the bottom of
these pools and they have a very similar life style to people living on earth i.e. they have
houses, cattle, chickens etc. and they are prosperous, peaceful and happy. In fact they
lead an idyllic life.

The occurrence of certain plants near pools and river sources indicate the
presence of the water spirits. Palmer (22) notes that in the Eastern Cape the presence of the umkumzi reed, typha capensis, on the edge of pools is seen as sure sign of habitation
by the water spirits. The reed is a key symbol in Zulu religion and in one origin myth
they claim that they emerged from a bed of reeds (Callaway 37) . The reed mat is an
essential accoutrement of diviners and this is directly linked to its association with water,
healing and creation. For the /Xam the presence of reeds and water-buchu indicates the
location of the Water Snake’s dwelling place (Hoff 24). The foam generated from certain
plants, the sacred ubulawu, used by the Zulu and Xhosa for washing and eating in order
to purify and connect an individual to the ancestors through dreams. Many of these
species come from trees, bushes and vines that grow near water sources (Hirst 90). *Ubulawu* is very often administered to healers during rituals conducted in river pools.¹²

**Snakes and Mermaids - Determining their Identity**

Snakes and mermaids seem to interweave with the experiences and myths of the water spirits., the so-called River People. The latter are known as the *abantu bomlambo* (people of the river) by the Xhosa, and the *njuzu/njuvu/ndusu* for the Shona/Karanga. Both of these groups describe these beings as mermaids (half-fish, half-human beings). Surprisingly this term ‘river people’, indicative of a polymorphic group, does not seem to occur among the Zulu. The mermaid as a singular entity, however, is revered and addressed as *iNkosazana*, the daughter of the Lord of the Sky, *iNkosi yaphezulu*. In the course of my research it has been made very evident that the snake and the mermaid are differing entities. They are however intricately associated, hence a fair amount of confusion arises. Added to the confusion is the metamorphosing ability of these creatures. For the Zulu, the python or snake are the metamorphosed amalgam of the ancestors. They come to visit an individual either in dreams or in reality. Snakes that enter the house and are unthreatening are viewed as ‘family’ and as such should never be harmed. They often appear in the house when they are trying to attract someone to be a healer. They not only manifest as snakes, but also as birds or other animals. The Xhosa and Shona have a similar view of ‘shade snakes’ or their other ancestral animal manifestations (*izilo*).

The emergence of the initiate out of the water with a snake around his/her neck is a recurring theme of apparent key significance. In the majority of accounts the snake has to be killed by the victim thus conferring to him/her the newly earned status as a powerful healer. Another recurrent theme regarding the snake which takes the person under the water, is that it emits a mesmerising bright light from its eyes and this is the mechanism for sending people into a trance before they are taken to the spirit dimension.

There seems to be some discrepancy between the various areas as to whether the water spirits are regarded as shades (recently deceased relatives), of either paternal or maternal origin, or belong to a generalised amalgam of non-specific or very old ancestors. In Natal the water spirits in the form of the snake are referred to as the ‘*amakhosi*’ (the great ancestors). They have explicitly stated that the snake is the metamorphosed amalgam of ones ancestors who live under the water. Both Berglund’s informant (148) and my informants suggest that they distinguish between the snake(s) that is/are a manifestation of the ‘family’ (shade snakes) and the big one ‘The one which

¹²The primary focus of training among the south Nguni groups is to enhance ones awareness of the various forms of communication that we receive from the spirit world. Dreams are of utmost importance and they serve as a guide for the training process. To enhance the clarity and reception of powerful message dreams, a variety of species of plant are imbibed (the Zulu use over thirty species of plant, ranging from rare grassland flowers to large forest and riverine trees and shrubs). These are collectively known as *ubulawu* and the distinction of their administration is that they are soaked in cold water and beaten into a thick white foam which is then eaten. The foam is regarded as having a special cleansing ability. Purging is often induced following administration and the foam is also used as a body wash. *Ubulawu* is imbibed in special ritual contexts (often in pools and rivers) and may also be taken by novices and healers on a daily or occasional basis. These plants not only clean the person, but they are also said to ‘clean’ the ancestors. The power of the healer is dependent on the power of the ancestors. Through the ‘cleaning’ with *ubulawu* and periodic ritual sacrifices of goats, chickens and cattle, the ancestors are thereby ‘strengthened’, thus enabling the healer to do his/her tasks more effectively.
is the Lord’, representing the Supreme Deity i.e. Berglund's informant describes the python as iNkosi yamadlozi (‘the lord of the shades’ or 'the one above') who resides in the pool. He is in the pool ‘because the pool is the place of uhlanga’ and uhlanga ‘is the origin, the place of the coming out of men,’ furthermore it is the ‘snake of the waters that gives life’ (Berglund 144). For Mr S, who is also a Zionist priest, Jesus occupies the higher realms of the hierarchy of the amakhosi and as such can manifest as the snake. Like Berglund’s informant, he asserts that the snake has been present since ‘the making of men’. The link with the mermaids and the snake as the source of humanity is demonstrated in the Xhosa ‘River Myth,” as told to Hirst, which relates back to the beginning of time: ‘According to diviners, the river myth records what happened to the first diviner long ago and it constitutes the final part of the diviner’s instruction to the candidate’. From myths derived from the Wahungwe people in the Rusape district of Zimbabwe, Frobenius states ‘the dziova (pool) is a water of origin. In the same way as the rain comes from it, as does the knowledge of the arts and sciences, so the ancestors of the original inhabitants of the land are descended, according to the Wahungwe, from Wadziova’ (1973: 200). Latham (1986), Ashwanden (1989), Ranger (1995) and Daneel (1971) have indicated a close link between the Shona/Karanga Supreme deity, Dzivaguru (or Mwari), the original autochthon, from whence comes rain and fertility and the spirits of the pool. The Nyamakati pool, the sacred pool of Dzivaguru, in NE Zimbabwe, was where Dzivaguru is said to have resided on earth after his emergence from the pool. It is also the pool where his son Kuruva took his followers to reside when invaders arrived in the area.

The reason why the ancestors, or even God, come to the living in various animal forms was explained to me in the following way: ‘The ancestors come with different forms, they come with the snake, with the birds . . . they can talk with you, just because if you see them you can die. They are very strong, that’s why they come with different animals.’ The big snake, identified as the Lord-of Lords or the ‘one above’, by Berglund’s informant, is described as being so powerful that too observe him would bring instant insanity and death. If he comes to earth ‘then everybody would be eaten up by fire’ (Berglund 143). He is in the pool ‘because of the coolness of water. It gives coolness to him.’ The great snake gives power to the ancestral snakes, who give the power to the living. This power must be used for good purposes or it will be removed and the healer could be destroyed. Similar moral injunctions exist with the mermaids. Although many accounts tend to represent the water spirits as capricious, the fault lies not with the water spirits, but with the transgressions of the victim. Not only do they punish breaches of moral taboo but they also punish harmful environmental practices (to be discussed below). Hence they act as the ultimate guardians of ecology and human morality.

The symbolism of the snake as one experiences them in real life or in dreams are thus connected with the great ancestors, the so called amakhosi, or even the great iNkosi.

They are not the same as the mermaid. However for the Zulu the mermaid can also sometimes manifest in the form of the snake. Although she is not an ancestor she is closely associated with them. She is principally linked to the great creative forces of this world. She ensures fertility of the land and its creatures, including humans, hence she is linked to rain making and fertility rites. Amongst the Shona and Xhosa, the mermaids takes on a more polymorphic form, but they still have the important role of giving fertility, making rain and causing the rivers to flow. The Zulu iNkosazana has amazing
transformation powers, manifesting as the mermaid, snake, rainbow (referred to as uthingo iweNkosazana the bow of iNkosazana), soft gentle rain and mist. She is not spirit but semi-daemon. She is tangible and in her watery medium she straddles this world of the living and that of the spirit. In all areas it is believed that the mermaid/s reveal themselves to those who are pure of heart and she does this in a physically tangible way. Healers and chiefs/kings are regarded as being the only people who may approach her pools. She prefers to live at the base of waterfalls which are protected by forests and overhanging trees. The following explanation was given to me by a healer who claimed he had seen iNkosazana:

The people that must go there are the izangoma and the kings (chiefs) of the Zulu people..... She stays in a perfect place with water coming from an upper place to the pool (waterfall) where she stays and she moves from one pool to another waterfall. You will never find her in (just) one place, and she stays near the forest so that when she comes out in her own time, no one should ever see her. It is lucky when the rainbow comes in the rain. You never get a rainbow anywhere without rain, the sea or the river. The river came with iNkosazana, there is no way you find it anywhere else. (If she calls you in a dream) I think maybe there is something she wants you to do. You go there with a goat or chicken to talk with her, after that you listen to iNkosazana and do what she tells you. She does not trust other people whose hearts are changing. Maybe you trust that person but his heart is cruel. Inkosazana is disturbed by the heart of that person. Inkosazana cannot hear because (of the presence) of that person. She does not want to see people she does not trust....that is why iNkosazana stays in a secret place, in a dangerous place. Nobody can come to play, stay or visit there without permission. If you go there on your own (i.e. decide to go there on your own), you will get your punishment, you will die.

The Zulu emphasise that she is a generous benevolent being, but she can be extremely dangerous to people with a bad heart. The isangoma went on to say;

So the basic point here is don’t be afraid of iNkosazana. Inkosazana is a beautiful thing. She brings good luck. When you pray to her you get what you want. When you listen and go with their rules that they give you and you do not break any of them, you get what you want.

In all three areas where I have conducted research I have met healers who claim they have witnessed the mermaid. The descriptions of her appearance are remarkably similar. Her upper torso is human and she is fair skinned with blond hair (three healers have told me I bear as striking resemblance to her) and she has a fish tail. These descriptions are reflected in other documented accounts. Samuelson (1930) reported a similar response when she visited Chief Mpande’s kraal in 1872 in the company of her father. While admiring her braids Chief Mpande likened her appearance to iNkosazana from under the sea.
In Zimbabwe certain mediums can be possessed by spirits of deceased njuzu that will give them healing powers. Very often the mediumship is passed down through families. The njuzu (mermaids) are said to be closely linked within the python and the puffadder, all of which feature very strongly at the shrines to the Shona high God, Mwari (Mlimo), at the Matonjeni cave complex in the Matopos region of SW Zimbabwe, as well as at the Nyamakati pool shrine to Dzivaguru in NE Zimbabwe. The aforementioned shrines are central to the rainmaking cult in the region. This link with the rain making forces and fertility is a common theme throughout southern Africa. Inkosazana (also referred to as Nomkhubulwana\textsuperscript{13}), the Zulu heavenly princess, as the bringer of soft soaking rains, is responsible for both agricultural and human fertility. Propitiation and appeals are made to her by virgins at the beginning of spring each year, appealing to her to bestow her gifts of fertility and to help them select a suitable husband. There has been a recent revival of these ceremonies in response to a healer who claimed Inkosazana had appeared to her and asked her to re-instate the annual propitiation rituals. The traditional practice of virginity testing has been incorporated into this ritual in response to the recent AIDS epidemic. They have proved immensely popular in many regions in Kwazulu Natal, with between 7000 to 10000 young virgins attending the ceremonies in the Bulwer region in any one year.

There are many other rituals that are performed for the water spirits at rivers throughout southern Africa. The purposes for conducting them and the ritual process may vary from group to group. They are mainly conducted for diviners at various stages of their training, but some households will propitiate periodically to appeal to the spirits to bestow them with wealth, rain, good harvests and fertility. Among some Nguni groups propitiation rituals are still made prior to planting in spring. A portion of the seeds to be planted are placed on the surface of the sacred pools. The river spirits will accept half of them and return the other half to mix with the remaining seed so as to enhance the fertility and yield. If none of the seed sinks, but just spreads over the water, this is an indication that the ancestors and spirit world are offended by the misdeeds of the living. Should this happen the participants will immediately seek to determine the cause of their anger and frequently confessions of social tensions and jealousies get brought to the fore. These are discussed and resolved as speedily as possible, thus reaffirming the intricate balance that exists between the social and spiritual world.

Sacred Pools, Behavioural Taboos and Ecology

As a result of the profound sacred status that the many rivers, pools and water sources hold for southern African Indigenous communities, there exists a range of taboos surrounding their access and utilisation. Pools, rivers and expanses of water are held with a mixture of awe, fear and reverence. In many of the more traditional rural areas great care is taken to avoid disturbing or angering the water spirits. Common people are forbidden to go near sacred pools where the snake, mermaids and spirits were known to exist. This injunction is re-enforced with the fear that uninvited people would be taken under the water never to return.

\textsuperscript{13}These two terms Inkosazana and Nomkhubulwana are used interchangeably by many of my informants. A few assert they are different beings, but the majority insist they are one and the same.
Only healers associated with the water are allowed to approach such areas. I have accompanied the izangoma to a number of these pools and they are always approached with singing and prayer. The healer will inform the spirits who is approaching and reassures them that they come as friends. It was strictly taboo for anyone to extract plants or resources from the waters edge. This could only be done by healers who were allowed plants for medicinal use. Traditionally healers approach the plant with humble clapping of the hands and appeal to the ancestors to allow them to utilise the plant for healing purposes. After removing the plant they replace it with white beads as a sign of thanks. Similarly when approaching water they often make offerings of beads and silver money.

Killing or injuring any of the messengers of the water (such as crabs, snakes, frogs or water birds) is also regarded as a great offence and there are many groups in southern Africa for whom the eating of fish is strictly taboo. Transgression of such taboos could result in the drying up of the water source and droughts. Many groups limit the distance to which residential units can be erected near rivers and where cultivation may take place. Hoff noted that the Xam prefer not to live very close to a water source because of their belief that “Water Snakes wander in the immediate vicinity of their homes, making these areas particularly dangerous” (Berglund 24). In many places the effects of modernity and the pressures for population resettlement have overwhelmed these traditional fears and restraints, leading to catastrophic results. Many people living in squatter settlements along rivers and streams in urban areas of South Africa have lost their lives and homes to flash floods in recent years.

The effect of this diminishing respect for the water snake and ancestors in recent years is well demonstrated in the following case from Zimbabwe.

In 1994 Matowanyika et al described a sacred pool that existed in the Nyataure district of Nyanga

Birira pool and a number of other pools are sacred and inaccessible to the living. Birira pool is inhabited by a mermaid (njuzu) and strange things happen there. When the mermaid is cooking its meal one can see smoke spiralling from the pool and hear the hissing of the mermaid’s great pot as it boils. At other times one hears cocks crowing and cattle lowing. People who have gone much closer have reported seeing a reed-mat (bonde) on the surface of the water and on top of it a bar of gold. Those who have the opportunity to see the mermaid basking on the mat say it is a feminine looking creature which is half-fish and half-human. No-one dares enters such pools except those who want to disappear into them and emerge in later generations as diviners and medicine men. (1994: 89).

This area is very close to where I was brought up as a child and on a recent visit there this story was confirmed to me by a man who lived near the pool. As a child, he and his friends were terrified of venturing close to it for fear of disappearing. The pool is on a mountain slope and is heavily surrounded by trees. These trees, because of their proximity to the pool, were sacred and no one was allowed to cut them for wood. Unfortunately in recent years, under the government’s resettlement programme, strangers from other areas have been resettled in the area. The new inhabitants disregarded the warnings from the local population and proceeded to chop down the trees and plant their crops close to the waters edge. This resulted in heavy siltation and damage to the river,
but the final blow came when following a heavy storm, a large portion of the granite rock face above the pool dislodged and the resulting rock fall swept away all the trees and crops and destroyed the river course. A similar event occurred on the exact same night to another sacred pool thirty kilometres to the south. The local inhabitants have attributed this double calamity to the anger of the njuzu as a result of the disrespect shown to them.

The water spirits are generally believed to live in pools and swamps that never dry out. It is said that their role is to protect water sources and keep them alive. They are the guardians of the river. In Zimbabwe, Aschwanden reports that local opinion is that:

In the past - before the arrival of the white man - there are said to have been more pools and springs with water-snakes. The many noises that came with the Europeans made many njuzu leave their habitats for ever, which caused aridity. However, disobedience by many people is also said to have prompted the njuzu to retreat (Aschwanden 189).

Damming or channelling water from rivers can also upset the river snake. Well known examples of this was the resistance given by the valley Tonga when Kariba Dam was constructed. Their main fears were that the great water serpent Nyaminyami would be angered. The many disasters that beset the project were largely attributed to Nyaminyami’s distress from being separated from its mate downstream from the wall. The more recent Lesotho Highlands Water project encountered similar resistance from the local inhabitants who attributed the seismic motions to the great snake’s distress with the project.

How people harness the idiom of the water spirits to mount powerful community opposition to social, political and developmental projects was clearly demonstrated in the Ambuya Juliana movement that swept through southern Zimbabwe in the early 1990s. This was in response to certain environmental catastrophes such as severe drought and rodent plagues. The movement was inspired by a prophetess by the name of Juliana who claimed to be an emissary of the water spirits (njuzu), with whom she had resided under water for a period of 4 years. She made her first appearance in the Zvishavane, Mberengwa region at the height of the drought of 1992. She attributed the drought to the breakdown of respect that people had for the earth’s resources, particularly water sources, for lack of social harmony and abandonment of traditional practices and beliefs, and for the failure of the government and state to acknowledge the role of the spirits in the War of Liberation. The major grievances of the njuzu were the construction of dams and the drilling of boreholes. She stated that the smell of cement drove away the njuzu who were pivotal in the provision of drinking water for the people. It was stated that ‘The government is wrong in the manner in which they are blocking quite a number of streams to make dams. The government is also sinking boreholes and wells in a bad way, making explosions which frighten away the spirits and all other creatures’ (Mawere & Wilson 252-287). She instituted a set of harsh taboos which the community had to observe

---

14 According to Mawere & Wilson (1995: 257) these taboos/rules included the following:

i) A complete ban on such work activities normally done on Sunday and Wednesday chisi ‘holidays’, such as fetching firewood, sweeping yards, making how handles and yokes, drawing water and washing clothes.
should they wish the drought to break and to facilitate the return of the njuzu who would regenerate mountain springs, underwater and surface rivers. Among these was the banning of the construction of dams and the drilling of boreholes as well as the use of soaps or the immersion of metal or enamel containers into the rivers. It was also forbidden to kill any wild animal or to collect wild fruit or plants for sale as these attract the rain. The thousands of people who responded to her pronouncements, and adhered to the harsh taboos and restrictions which she imposed, is a graphic example of the great respect many people still hold for the water spirits in this region. A glance through the complete list of taboos listed in the footnote reveals how these rules reflected a collective rejection of the modern economic forces of capitalism, agriculture and religious (especially Christian) intrusion into the area. All these are seen as a threat to the maintenance of traditional practices.

This desire to return to tradition has been witnessed recently in the Mvoti valley area of the KwaZulu Natal Midlands where certain rural communities have re-instituted the ancient day of rest for the heavenly princess, iNkosazana. This day was known traditionally as lesuku lweNkosazana, and was regarded as the day when no-one was allowed to utilise the river or to tend their fields. The re-institution of this day of rest was in response to a claim made by a lady (isangoma) who claimed that iNkosazana had visited her whilst she was hoeing her field. She said her children’s names were Saturday and Monday and that on those days no-one should use the rivers but should leave them in peace to recuperate and so she and her children could enjoy them in. The message was to be relayed to all five chieftoms in the area. Collecting water, washing or utilising any water directly from the river on her day (Mondays and Saturdays) is now strictly prohibited. This recent revival of lesuku lweNkosazana in this valley bears a striking resemblance to an account given by Bryant many years ago. In discussing a series of cultivation rituals that were performed for iNkosazana/Nomkhubulwana he says

‘She is attributed to giving man corn and for teaching them how to brew it. Nomkhubulwana, ‘who moveth with the mist.’ From time to time she even herself appeared ‘mostly to women-folk, while hoeing in their fields, and dressed in white’, her purpose being to give them some new law or foretell them something

---

ii) A ban on referring to baboons by their Karanga name (makudo); since these belong to the same monkey totem as the spirits of Matobo (Matopos - the cult centre). They should be referred to as ‘grandfathers’ (vanesekuru).

iii) A ban on commercial beer brewing.

iv) A ban on drum beating and other Zionist music.

v) A ban on using borehole water, since the drilling of boreholes frightens the spirits. People were told to draw water from the sand in the river beds and from natural wells.

vi) A ban on referring to mice by their Karanga names, during the period when their post-bumper rains epidemic was leading to severe crop damage. They had to be called sacks (masaga) or blankets (machira).

vii) A ban on the trade of indigenous fruits.

viii) A stated opposition to the grazing scheme in Indaba Ward, on the grounds that the spirits do not want to be enclosed by wire fences.

ix) A number of price regulations on local produce, most significantly goats.

x) A ban on starting farming for four days after the rains has started falling (in this area even such a small delay in ploughing and planting can severely affect yields.

---

46
that will happen. On one of these occasions he forbade the Zulu women to tend their grainfields on a Saturday. Then another year she came and forbade them to work on a Monday. Hence it came about that in that district the more pious women confined their work on Saturdays and Mondays solely to sweet-potatoes and such like(apparently outside her jurisdiction), and cultivated their cereals on whiteman’s Sunday” (Bryant.,1949 : 667-668).

Connected with the taboos in respect of iNkosazana is the revival of the planting ceremonies for her in spring. In the Mvoti area all members of the chiefdom have to contribute a portion of their crop seeds, and some money to purchase a goat, to the chief prior to planting. On a designated day all the people in the chiefdom awake early in the morning. Taking with them their hoes and spades, traditional beer (tshwala) and sour milk (amasi), they congregate together in a forested valley above the river. The men demarcate a piece of land which is to be dedicated to iNkosazana and construct a fence around it. The soil inside the area is dug by all present. Then the chief’s mother and wife and all the elder women plant to grain which has been collected from the households (those households which do not contribute are fined). They then sit down and eat and drink the food and beer that they brought with them. They do not consume all of the food and drink though. The remaining portions are sprinkled on the field. An elder addresses iNkosazana saying “Here is your food Nkosazane, we have cultivated this field for you.” A goat is sacrificed near the river and an elder takes the bile from the gallbladder and sprinkles some of it into the river. He then ascends the mountain to the forest where the field is located and sprinkles the remaining bile on the field. I was told that this is a crucial part of the ritual since a connection has to be made between the water and the field “This is done to show the significance that the garden, the goat and the river, all belong to Nomkhubulwana”. Traditional songs are sung and there is much dancing performed. Following this the women, who are dressed in leaves from the Msenge tree (cabbage tree), a tree sacred to iNkosazana, descend together to the river to take a bath. The Msenge leaves are stripped off their bodies and thrown into the water, and all naked, the women wash themselves in the water. No males - young or old - are allowed anywhere near the river at this stage. This is to emphasise respect for the women’s’ bodies, as much as respect for the heavenly princess, the bearer of fertility. No woman is allowed to return home until she has taken the bath. The bath signifies the end of the ritual.

I conducted a small survey (n = 32) in this valley in early 2001 to evaluate how popular such rituals and constraints on using the river were to the local community. The majority of the respondents were very happy to be participating in the rituals even though many of them did not have a clear idea of exactly who iNkosazana was, as these things had been long forgotten. It was noted however that those who don’t observe the day of rest or participate in the rituals, have very poor and unproductive gardens. Those who had some hesitation or doubts about the practices were converted Christians who claimed

---

15One wonders if there may be a link between these days of rest for the mermaid iNkosazana, and that which has been traditionally observed in Zimbabwe, namely, the chisi day. The abandonment of the chisi day of rest by present rural communities in Zimbabwe was one of the major complaints reported to Juliana by the njuzu (Mafu, 1995)
they had abandoned the ways of their ancestors. One such respondent even went so far as to say that these practices ‘were things of darkness’ and that ever since she had met Jesus she refrained from the practices of *Nomkhubulwana*. All the respondents endorsed their support for traditional leadership through the chiefs. This is of interest since I believe traditional governance through the chiefs has a powerful role to play in ecological management, particularly where it has been sanctioned by the spirit world.

While these examples can be seen as convenient idioms in which communities object to the forces of modernity, capitalism, monotheism, land invasion and loss of control of resources, it cannot be denied that they have all experienced the negative ecological and social consequences that development has brought. These negative consequences merely confirm the communities’ conviction that the divine powers of the water have been disturbed and this idiomatic expression is the most effective means by which protest can be voiced.

I now want to briefly examine some of the negative impacts of development and modernisation and the threats these pose to Indigenous knowledge.

**Environmental Threats to Sacred Pool Sites - Implications for Indigenous Knowledge**

In the majority of the areas where I have conducted research, sacred pool sites of key significance for healers are being systematically threatened by development projects, mining and modern agricultural practices. The privatisation of land has led to many of the sacred pools being inaccessible to healers and I am aware that a number of healers have been arrested and imprisoned for crossing private land in order to get to the sacred pools. These restrictions can severely hinder a healers training process.

Examples of environmental threats to the status of pools are many. For instance in Zimbabwe the Pungwe River is viewed throughout the country as having the most sacred pools for the *njuzu*. Gelfand’s (1959) informants stated that no matter where a healer gets taken under the water he/she will land up in the Pungwe River. In the early 1990's following the severe drought, the government awarded a contract to a European construction company (with many rumours of backhand bribes being accepted) to channel water from the Pungwe to a dam near the town of Mutare. Little consultation was made with the local communities. After construction had commenced the local healers became aware of what was happening and mounted an opposition campaign against to project. After much negotiation it was agreed that the projected amount of water to be channelled out of the river would be halved - still an unsatisfactory outcome for those who see the river as sacred.

Another example is to be found in the Venda region of South Africa. A recent newspaper report has highlighted the environmental damage that is being inflicted on Lake Fundudzi (sacred to the Venda people) and other river systems in the region, by large scale mining, chemical and industrial development projects in the area. Many of the rivers in the region are so polluted with chemicals and radiation that livestock and humans who drink from the water are suffering from multiple health problems, including birth defects. The newspaper reports:

The threat to Lake Fundudzi were caused...because the province failed to allocate enough staff to its environmental impact assessment division and expected two
staff to process 15 environmental impact assessments, 35 mining applications and roughly 15 other large development applications a month. The government therefore simply allowed subsistence farmers to invade and begin ploughing the steep hills above Lake Fundudzi on poorly constructed terraces without conducting environmental impact assessments or obeying other land use laws’ (Nkosi & Arenstein 4).

This report perhaps overemphasise the role of environmental impact assessments in curtailing such negative effects (they are well recognised as being biased in favour of developers who pay for their services), and does not investigate more deeply into the benefits and disadvantages of such large scale development projects in the region, or why there has been a need for local peasant farmers to move into the area in the first place. In the past the region around the Lake has been strictly monitored.

Van de Waal documents the difficulties researchers had in gaining access to the sacred Lake and he describes the ‘myths and superstitions’ regarding it in the Venda region. These are completely in keeping with the general conceptions of the snake (python) and the water spirits that I have already outlined.

This lake itself is alleged to be inhabited by the ancestral spirits of the Vhatavhatindi people. Even today, the foreign public is not allowed access to the lake. Only Gota (headman) Netshiavha can give permission to visit the lake itself. In an attempt to conduct surveys on the lake, lengthy negotiations with the headman and his Tshivase Tribal authority at Mukumbane and Chief Tshivase himself were required, after which temporary permission was given to conduct a short pilot survey on the lake in 1988 which was later withdrawn (1997: 51).

The impact of large scale agroforestry in many of the areas where sacred pools exist pose another serious threat to their well-being. The Mvoti river, which I have already discussed, is under serious threat by intensive agroforestry (pine, gum, wattle and poplar plantations) and sugar cane farming. Most of the privately owned farms upstream have been bought out by large multinational agroforestry companies whose principle objectives are profits above any environmental concerns. This is evident in their indiscriminate planting of water hungry trees directly into river valleys and mountain slopes. The general consensus of the community surveyed in the valley is that the water levels of the river have dropped considerably in recent years.

Similarly I am working in another area in the NE Cape where there is a pool of great significance to the local Xhosa/Mpondomise people. This was a pool I was led to in my dreams and it is confirmed by the local community to be the home of the snake and the mermaids. In my dream I was led to the pool by children. This is exactly what happened when I was eventually able to locate it. I was to discover that the pool is so sacred that no-one is allowed to approach it unless being led by children. This pool has recently become a popular trout fishing spot for many South African anglers, which has the potential to threaten its sacred status. Furthermore this pool is now under threat from large agroforestry plantations that are being planted over an extensive area upstream, in the rivers main catchment area. Local white farmers in this region are very bitter about these recent developments as they assert they were led to sell their farms to the same
multinational agroforestry firms under false pretences. They were told the land was to be used for beef production.

It is with these concerns that my present research is focussing towards steps that can be implemented to protect such water sites. At present there are scarcely any mechanisms by which healers can appeal for protection of sites and access to them. One option would be to campaign for the introduction of ‘culture significance’ legislation in line with sacred site protection laws that have been introduced in other countries such as Australia (Ritchie 47). Scientists and developers have very little awareness or knowledge of these beliefs and in general I have found them to be sympathetic when these are explained to them. At present I am working in collaboration with water research scientists to see if there is a way such beliefs and practices can be recognised by the new Water Act through the concept of the reserve. The notion of the Reserve consists of two parts:

- the quantity and quality of water required for basic human use (including religious and cultural needs).
- the ecological Reserve, which is defined as the water required to protect the aquatic ecosystems of the water resource.

The basis of this approach is in agreement with Carmichael et al who maintain:

> There are different ways of knowing about the earth, about sacred places........some ways are scientific and some are spiritual. One way of knowing does not negate the validity of another. Although the world-views and goals of Indigenous peoples and archaeologists (or scientists) will not always correspond, the protection of cultural sites should be an instance where they can. Anti-science and anti-spiritual sentiments are both counterproductive. It is essential that scientific knowledge and influence are accepted, but at the same way the legitimacy of traditional Indigenous ways of knowing must also be recognised (Carmichael et al 7).

In conclusion this paper has demonstrated the scope and complexity of common African perceptions of water sources in southern Africa and the need to recognise the importance of Indigenous beliefs and practices in issues of riverine management. The repository of much of this knowledge comes from Indigenous healers who are regarded as the custodians of very ancient traditional wisdom and knowledge. This transferred knowledge is augmented through spiritual insight and communication with the ancestral world, and passed on to future generations through rigorous systems of training and apprenticeship. This knowledge is dependent on the availability and accessibility of resources. Without the plants needed to get spiritual insight, or without the presence of healthy water sources where the spirit forces reside, access to such knowledge will be denied. Moreover knowledge is now under tremendous threat of being discarded and forgotten as many communities are abandoning their traditional ways in favour of western education and capitalist enterprise, where the priorities for individual accumulation override collective needs of the group, with resulting devastating effects on the environment, both physical and spiritual, the source of their knowledge.
REFERENCES


Bryant, A.T. 1949. *The Zulu People. As they were before the white man came.* Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.


