



'WE ARE PEOPLE

BY ALEX J. COYNE

Of The Light'

WHEN the calling to become a sangoma came to Chris Nthombemhlophe Reid, he was initially plagued by terrifying dreams. Until they all made sense.



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sangoma, the calling had passed onto him from his mother.

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Other signs according to him are preferring to be in nature, and somehow being 'different' without being able to put your finger on the missing puzzle piece.

The job comes with misconceptions.

First, there is the title of witchdoctor:

Reid says this dates from colonial times, when people were made to believe their beliefs are somehow 'wrong'. The title 'sangoma', however, comes from isiZulu.

"Mostly, the only press we get is sensationalism about muthi murders."

He is clear that what he calls the dark side has nothing to do with being an abantu abamhlophe – or 'People of the Light'. "We wear the beads. The counterparts are hidden, and don't openly practise their thing."

He notes that these often operate on a very clandestine, hush-hush basis.

What about so-called muthi-markets? "The whole aspect of muthi-markets and the way that it's done is the unsympathetic way these medicines are collected." He says that these products aren't

collected by sangomas – as should be done – but instead by people who have no knowledge

of what they're collecting and will spend days harvesting 'as much as they can'. When collecting himself, Reid notes that everything collected is done sustainably and then reported to the chief. "We are trained to collect as we need and to take so that the tree stays alive

for many years so that the tree can go for many years. Muthi markets are catering for the huge population drawn to work in the cities, or where people live outside city limits." This creates a too-large demand for traditional medicine in a non-traditional environment, where some will see a gap to make a quick buck.

"The people who collect for muthi markets are unscrupulous and don't collect with any sympathy or empathy for the plant."

He hopes that the way natural plant medicine

'WE revere and respect ancient ways.'



T'S a calling," says Chris Ntombenhlope Reid, who has found himself working as a traditional healer for '24-odd years'. He found his calling in Port St John's in the Transkei, when he says he was just in the right place at the right time to listen. "I snapped

my foot upside down and tore all the ligaments." Stuck for eight months, the doctor recommended Reid take daily walks – barefoot.

"On two different occasions there was someone on the path speaking to me in Xhosa, which I didn't understand." The third time, however, a Xhosa-speaking friend was there to translate. The message was clear: The visitor had dreamed of Reid's presence, and urged him to see a sangoma and seek his calling. Reid found himself plagued by strange dreams. "Recurring dreams of myself in a dark place with candle-light, running, a lot of people singing, myself covered in blood and putting white beads on." The dreams, out of context, initially terrified him, he says. According to Reid, the blood symbolised the blood of sacrificed chickens as part of the initiation ritual.

Finally, he found himself consulting with a sangoma. "The sangoma went into trance and told me about my whole life, about my mother; she had a difficult life and used to have prophetic dreams and speak to relatives who died." He says that his mother was initially afraid, but his dad – an Anglican Church elder – knew his wife well enough to accept these things. According to the



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is collected will balance out to a point where it is completely sustainable.

Learning about plants is part of the job, and he recommends *Medicinal Plants Of South Africa* as a reading-guide for those wanting to know more about nature.

"At my home in the Transkei, I'm busy doing ritual and ceremony for my students, consulting and treating clients, collecting and preparing herbal medicines and continuously observing and guiding my trainees. "Living with nature is an important part of our life - we daily spend time in the forest collecting dry wood for the homestead fires and carrying water from the river for use at the homestead. Our day starts at 0h300 every morning to prepare and take a steam bath with various herbs. Our life is simple and agricultural, tends the garden and caring for our livestock."

About the spiritual aspects of his work, he says, "We don't worship anything. We revere and respect ancient ways, and we fulfill – from a Western perspective – the role of a psychologist, doctor and priest at the same time."

According to Reid, at least 70 percent of the country makes use of sangomas or traditional healers.

"In South Africa, we are recognised by government."

This recognition means that registered sangomas are allowed to add 'traditional doctor' to their job titles, and that some medical aids will cover consultations with a traditional healer. Still, he says that about half of traditional healers have not been government registered as yet.

"I've had people from all cultures," he says. "Latvia, America, England, Germany, France as well as local South Africans. It doesn't matter what colour you are or where you're from, I've come to trust the process itself that works."

