Traditional Healing

Story and images by Modjadi Maleka

Traditional healers used to heal people with 'muti'. People didn't have to go to doctors to be cured or healed. Things started to change once medical doctors were introduced to the townships and members of the community started to forget about their culture and where they come from.

We were lucky enough to attend a ceremony in White City Jabavu (Soweto). The ceremony was held to bring a sangoma back to her birthplace so she could be welcomed there. Family members catered for a feast and traditional beer (inqomboti) was drunk to welcome the ancestors. Other traditional leaders were present to accompany their colleague home.

We interviewed the sangoma to gain more insight.

MM: Do you treat traditional healing as a career?
S: No, because if it is a career, it means you get paid. This is a calling from the ancestors.
MM: What makes this special to you?
S: It makes me feel special because I shouldn't forget where I come from nor should I forget my ancestors.
MM: How do people react to you when you wear your traditional clothing?
S: They are used to me and they respect me. Also, I have that dignity around my community and my family members who are not afraid of me.
MM: Are values and customs part of traditional healing?
S: Certainly! There are rules and regulations which need to be followed to show respect to the ancestors.
MM: Are you permitted to work in hospitals with patients who require traditional herbs?
S: Yes! I have a certificate from a workshop I attended which allows me to work at government hospitals when there are patients who need or choose traditional healing over "western" medicine.
MM: How old were you when you were called by the ancestors?
S: I was twenty years old and I was still at school. At the time I was matriculating and I could not write my exams because that's where my spiritual calling started.
MM: How did it all begin?
S: My grandparents were traditional healers and my father followed in their footsteps. It seems I got my stronger genes from my father's side and I too became a healer.
MM: Are there ceremonies which need to be done regularly?
S: Yes, to show that I care, respect and remember the ancestors, I need to perform a ceremony every three months.

Rural people still believe in sangomas because they say it reminds them of their loved ones who have passed on and should not be forgotten because they are not dead; they are simply asleep.

South Africans seem to have forgotten about their ancestors; they don't even perform the small ceremonies required to show that they remember the ancestors.

Bones are used to instruct a sangoma or to tell her what is going to happen in the future. People used to trust the bones and now that has changed because people have put their belief in medical doctors.

When the bones have spoken, nothing should be negotiated or discussed about what they have said. Rural people still believe in what the bones say and don't question them because that implies that you are questioning your ancestors. It is also as if you are discouraging your ancestors from communicating with you because that is their only way.

Things have changed; people hardly even visit their loved ones' graves to talk, clean or even introduce their children to these ancestors who are not dead but merely asleep. Maybe it's time we rethink this and return to our cultural roots...