

### **Description for the general public**

The aim of the project is to examine the mutual influence of Southern African and European esoteric thought and spirituality. I plan to thoroughly examine contemporary esoteric trends (including modern shamanism and New Age) in Southern Africa and establish their perception by Westerners, especially New Agers – the main representatives of contemporary Western esotericism. The research will be conducted in four countries: South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana because of cultural similarities among Bantu peoples in this region.

In Southern Africa most people believe that a human being consists of three inseparable elements: body, mind and spirit. A person can be healthy and happy only when they are in balance. This means: if the spirit is sick, body and mind also deteriorate and physical and mental diseases appear. To stay in harmony, Africans request help from people who practice ‘esoteric professions’: sangomas, shamans, diviners, clairvoyances, spiritual healers etc. In this way, they believe that they establish a connection with ancestral spirits who can protect and guide them. This is important because ancestors’ souls are believed to stay among the living to influence their life and help them. It is also important to ‘connect’ with the natural environment because it is believed that water, tree spirits and others can also increase human wellbeing. In many cultures of the world, people who have abilities to contact the spiritual realm, draw energy from nature and help those in need are shamans. They are believed to be able to get into a trance that transports them to spirits from whom they seek advice. They are knowledgeable in the holistic medicine, a kind of medicine that does not focus on body or mind separately but combines all aspects of human physical, spiritual and mental aspects. As I proved in the article ‘Sangomas, shamans and New Age: the hybridity of some modern healing and esoteric practices and beliefs in South Africa’ (*The Yearbook of Oriental Studies* T. LXIX, Z. 1, 2016, pp. 142–157) sangomas, who traditionally used to be diviners, in the 21st century perform the same duties as shamans, and many sangomas call themselves ‘shamans’. Also, like shamans, they play the role of priests, with all priestly duties and prerogatives.

The phenomenon of ‘white’ sangomas has not been fully examined either. ‘White’ sangomas appeared on the esoteric map of Southern Africa with the fall of apartheid. There were very few ‘white’ sangomas and shamans before that time; now their number is growing. They are usually South Africans of European origins, educated in the Western system, and are willing to co-operate with scholars. They first came onto the scene in RSA, now they can also be found in Namibia, Zambia and Botswana. Researching their ideology and practices will shed new light on racial reconciliation and cultural exchange within – once alien – cultures.

New Age is global phenomenon which became known in the times of protests against the Vietnam War. New Age ideology revolves around several concepts: pacifism, the belief in soul and reincarnation, holistic approach to health and life, natural healing (combined concepts and methods of many cultures), energy and its flow among people and all living beings and – as result – treating natural environment as Mother Nature. They are on the spiritual quest to find the best ideology for improving oneself. New Agers draw from many so-called ‘ethnic’ cultures, including African shamanism. My research has shown that, once Oriental influence on New Age is well researched, African elements are barely described. The aim of my project is to check if and how contemporary sangoma and shamanic practices in Southern Africa and New Age influence each other and to establish if this is a growing trend. The similarities in cultures of Southern Bantu (main ethnic group in Southern Africa) induce to conduct research in four countries: South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana.

I am the first person in Poland and one of very few scholars worldwide who examine Southern African spirituality in the context of mutual influence of shamanism and New Age so my project is innovative and contributes to the studies on sangomas, shamanism, African spirituality and New Age. The results and statistic data will be helpful to academics all over the world. I also plan a series of lectures in Polish schools and universities to increase the level of knowledge about African cultures and to raise tolerance.