Oracle-Speech in Ancient Israel and Divination in (Southern) Africa: A Comparative Study

Alpheus Masoga
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6515-4236
University of Limpopo, South Africa
alpheus.masoga@ul.ac.za

Abstract

This study compares African divination and oracle speech to prophetic oracle speech in ancient Israel. It is generally acknowledged by scholars that both African divination and prophetic oracle speech in the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world—focusing particularly on Israel—do not confine themselves to the proclamation role, but, instead, broaden to accommodate the distinct supernatural prowess dimensions. This essay demonstrates that natural phenomena and paraphernalia—such as *ditaola* (divining bones), *metsi* (water), *mmu le lefatshe* (land spaces), *mebala* (colours), and the fauna and flora—are interrelated in an oracle-speech dialogue. The study argues for contextual and relevant perspectives of oracle speech in African divination in comparison to prophecy in ancient Israel. It is argued in this submission that oracle speeches in both Israelite prophecy and (southern) African divination share some striking similarities although some divergences can also be identified.

Keywords: divination; orality; oracle-speech; African culture; prophecy

Introduction

Although very little has been written about it, divination is central to African cultural life.[1] As Faki, Kasiera and Nandi (2010, 213) observe, it is important to study divination in an effort to understand African people in their culture as there is no aspect of life that is not touched by it. Divination in Africa has been labelled by Bible believing

1 The term "African" in this discourse does not refer to the broader continent of Africa; it actually refers to "selected" culturally-entrenched indigenous people of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Where the term may be used to refer to the broader African continent, specific examples will be stated.

UNISA university of south africa PRESS

Journal for Semitics
https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/JSEM
Volume 27 | Issue 1 | 2018 | #2937 | 26 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2937
ISSN 1013-8471 (Print)

communities and Western philosophy as a form of "magic", and, therefore, "irrational", "utilitarian", "egoistic", and "insufficiently religious" (Jakelić 2016, 41). As rightly noted by Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová, "missionaries who were themselves products of the Western Christian civilisation, carried with them their cultural values and had little doubt about the superiority of their culture" (2007, 257). Therefore, divination—both conceptually and in practice—is not afforded its rightful place among most African societies.

Both colonial legacy and post-apartheid apathy have been largely responsible for reinforcing negative perceptions such as those highlighted above, perpetuating the obliteration of African cultural beliefs imbedded in indigenous knowledge systems (cf. Loubser 2005, 74–88), including divination and oracle-speech. Khan and Mantzaris (2006, 279) concur that colonialism and the plundering of Africa not only devastated the moral and social well-being of inhabitants of the continent, but also resulted in the destruction, replacement, and indiscriminate theft of indigenous knowledge systems, perpetuating a vicious cycle of oppression. Despite extensive evidence that divination constitutes a central element in the history of human culture, and that it is generally acknowledged as one of the central elements of human spirituality, it is either negatively evaluated or ignored in the African context because of criticism against African cultural beliefs (cf. Nunn's (2012, 109) "rules of thumb"). Symptomatic of this state of affairs is that media practitioners, authors, and/or journalists who report on divination and oracle-speech in Africa do not consult with stakeholders, such as indigenous (local) leaders and diviners themselves. Traditional (indigenous) leaders and diviners need to receive the recognition they deserve. As a participant observer (see my personal experiences below) I have learned that local community leaders and diviners are greatly misrepresented by those who either write or report about their indigenous practices and the voices of these stakeholders are getting louder against such unethical behaviour. One would presuppose therefore that for any meaningful conversation on divination to begin, diviners should be regarded as role players who must be accorded their rightful place in society.

It is further problematised that modern technology, and other forms of modern life, have corrupted the cultural life of Africans. This includes Euro-American epistemological fundamentalism, which denies the existence of knowledge from the non-Western parts of the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, viii). Film production, for example, is a mirror of reflection of any society, just as folktale functions as a reflection of any given community. Film producers, nonetheless, are criticised for circumventing societal boundaries and protocols by interacting with local communities (especially in rural areas) without consulting the local chiefs or leaders. Diviners should be consulted, engaged and conversed with prior to, or during, the finalisation of a film production. In this way, local communities and diviners could meaningfully contribute to such film production which is aimed at representing something so central to their belief system, culture, and life.

For most local communities in South Africa, modern life does not exclude participation in divinatory practices. For example, I have observed a young, qualified engineer who drove a BMW 5 Series from Sandton to remote Giyani kaMalamulele. On his arrival, a diviner of the clan immediately met him and sprinkled substances on his car. A goat was then slaughtered for this special occasion. *Vakokwani* (grandmothers) of the entire clan sang praises to the young man. For some, this image may be strange. For most African people, it is a daily occurrence in which, upon acquiring a new property, including a car, a ritual must be performed as an appreciation to clan ancestors and as a dedication of the new property to the ancestors for protection. The ritual is central to their lives, philosophy, and culture. Indigenous Africans have a high regard for ancestors, whom they do not separate from current developments, modern technology, and the challenges and demands of modern living. Ancestors are deemed a living part of present life; they know about modern technology, such as laptops, and cars like BMWs.

This essay explores contextual and relevant perspectives of oracle-speeches in African divination in dialogue with prophecy and oracle-speech in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE)[2] world, including ancient Israel.

The present study has been informed by three critical problems. First, existing literature on divination oracles in sub-Saharan Africa is limited in scope because it was observed that most discourses on divination are explored from an outsider's perspective. The uniqueness of the present study is that the researcher actually participated in the proceedings through divination initiation at Tate Mavunlindlela's *sangoma* lodge in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Second, previous sources on divination have not been successful in comparing prophetic oracles of ancient Israelite cultures to African divination oracles, which the present essay does by making references to, and discussing, specifically biblical examples. Third, both academic discussions on prophetic literature, and the preaching of it, have not covered the perceptions of the recipients, namely the socio-cultural readership. This is because both academic and church communities focus primarily on topics of "intellectual interpretations" and "salvation from sin", respectively. This project attempts to bridge the gap by covering cultural, academic, and faith-oriented groups of readers.

2 In this study, the larger ANE world comprises cultures of Mesopotamia and ancient Israel. Because of limited space, this essay will not be able to cover every aspect of these cultures in relation to divination and oracle speech. The focus of the current study is ancient Israel; however, other cultures will also be discussed briefly.

Methodology

Firstly, this study derives primarily from the researcher's previous projects[3] in which the themes of divination and orality have been discussed at length. Secondly, qualitative research also forms part of the present essay, in which findings from interviews and participant observation are discussed. Data from two selected divination oracles drawn from sample interviews with diviners decisively informs the present study. Thirdly, the researcher will give an account of his own life history as informed by orientation and initiation experiences in a divination and oracle speech matrix. Fourthly, this project employs a comparative study method in which cultural belief systems and divination in (southern) Africa are discussed in dialogue with existing data drawn from oral theories and secondary sources on cultures and prophetic oracle-speeches in the ANE world of which ancient Israel formed a part.

Prophecy, Divination and Oracle Speech in the ANE

According to Starr (1992, 15) the belief that those in the divine realm can and do communicate to humans through omens and other divinatory practices was a near universal idea in the ANE. It appears there is significantly a thin line of difference between prophecy and divination in the broader ANE world in general and in ancient Israel in particular. The above observation is widely held in scholarship particularly because it is believed that "a vast corpus is available and first millennium BCE Mesopotamian empires deported Israelites and Judeans to these regions" (Kiboko 2010, 136). Nissinen (2000) argues that despite some differences, the portrayal of prophets in Joshua—Kings compares favourably with what we know of prophecy in Mari and Assyria, concluding that "the socio-religious foundation of prophecy in Joshua—Kings consists of the institutions of divination, kingship, and worship" (Nissinen 2000, 127). Jacobs and Person (2013, 2) also affirm that most references to prophetic activity in ANE sources occur in non-prophetic genres which did not undergo further copying or revision (e.g., the Mari letters). Kabamba J. Kiboko presupposes that divination was a highly regarded science that was organised and taught in the scribal schools of the ANE (Kiboko 2010, 40; see also Bottéro 1992, 125–137). However, Jacobs and Person (2013, 2) think that the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible remains unique in relation to other ANE literature on divination. However, while divination in the ancient Near East was very much considered a science, with training periods and written manuals of instruction or treatises, certain types of divinations seem to be much more of a gift and an art (Kiboko 2010, 40), such as communication with the departed which fits into the category of a gift and an art (Farber 1995, 1895–1905). During divination, the diviner read omens received from the gods, typically through some movement of, or deviation in the ordinary course of nature (Starr 1992, 15). Both Kiboko (2010, 141) and Beaulieu and Britton (1994, 73–86) think that this might include reading the celestial bodies

3 Masoga (2001); see also Masoga (2003, 217–225).

(astrology and astronomy). Divination was central in this ancient culture in that it also functioned within the political set-up of the time. Hence, Joann Scurlock concurs that "beliefs and practices of ancient Israelites can be traced back into their original context" (Scurlock 2006, 241). As already alluded to in this study, Israelite culture was influenced to a large extent by the ANE, particularly Mesopotamia. Barrick (2009, 7) admits that scholars are still puzzled over the appearance of "Ur of the Chaldeans" in Gen 11:28 and 31. The puzzle, as Barrick puts it, lies largely on technical matters and the time-frame in which Ur of the Chaldeans is situated and narrated, particularly according to the biblical view. There are theories of two cities named "Ur" in Mesopotamia: "Ur of the Chaldeans" and the "Sumerian Ur". The latter is believed to be some miles away from Haran. Ur is portrayed as an ancient city in southern Babylon where Terah and his sons were born (Gen 11:26–28), who set out from there for Haran (Gen 11:31).

Elsewhere, including in the biblical tradition, it is presented that Baal worship was prohibited, and so it was non-existent in ancient Israel. For example, when Ahab had established himself as king over Israel, he committed himself to worshipping Baal, hence Baalim (1 Kings 18:17–18). Baal was known to be the god of the Tyrians (Berlyn 2012, 54). Patricia Berlyn asserts that Josephus, whether drawing on early Tyrian sources or on his own interpretation, identifies the "idols" with a Phoenician *Ba'al* (lord, master), the generic biblical term for a Canaanite/Phoenician male deity. The worship of *Ba'al* among societies in the ANE is also reflected in the names which people carried, for example Ba'al-Hadad and Ba'al-Melqart. Berlyn (2012, 55) agrees that Ba'al-Hadad is so prominent in Northwest Semitic mythology that, in the Ugarit texts, he is simply called Ba'al, as though the title were a name.

Pophecy, Divination and Oracle Speech in Ancient Israel

Prophecy

Sawyer (1993, 1) defines prophecy as, first and foremost, a "proclamation", which suffices for the focus of this study. The concept of prophecy in this study does not confine itself to proclamation alone, but instead it broadens to accommodate the distinct supernatural prowess dimension. In Judaism, the Hebrew equivalent of the term "prophet" is defined as the "mouthpiece of another". Hoffner (1987, 257) maintains that OT prophecy is the communication of God's superior knowledge to human beings, not always involving information about the future and sometimes in matters quite mundane. The first reference made about prophecy in Israel is in 1 Samuel 10:5, which presents an orgiastic tapestry of prophecy. In the text, whilst travelling to Gibeah, Saul is introduced to a band of prophets in ecstasy (Wax 2013, 8). Having come across this band of prophets, Saul himself experiences ecstasy (1 Sam 10:10). The above notion is well captured in 1 Sam 26:22–24 in which Saul is depicted as stripping off his clothes and falling flat on the ground. Ecstasy, in this regard, involves a behaviour which is

unconventional and can be located outside the parameters or boundaries of societal activities (1 Kings 28:46).

Another significant prophetic action is the sign or token. In some cases, the angel or "mark" appeared as an intermediary between the prophet and the supernatural power, for example, "I too am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of God" (1 Kings 13:18). The ecstatic and gifted prophet was known as the "man of God" (Petersen 1997, 28). The rationale behind it is that the *'ish 'Elohim* ("man of God") has divine or special qualities which have been bestowed on him by a supernatural power. In this case, the prophet has special traits and integrity in community and brings *shalom* (peace) or *berakah* (blessings) with him; he is expected to have the ability of seeing through people. They were also sacrosanct as men of God, implying that it was not allowed for them to be offended (Kings 20:35ff.). They lived under strict divine rules, characterised by regulations to be observed obediently (Westermann 1991, 99). Their lives were governed by a divine call, a special prophetic call. Hence, Wax (2013, 8) maintains that the role of the eighth century prophets promoted the concept of monotheism, the effect of ecstasy on the prophetic message and the essence of the very words of these spokesmen for Yahweh.

There was also another category of prophets known as the "school of prophets", "company of prophets" or "sons of prophets" (1 Sam 19:18–24; 2 Kings 4:38–44; 10:1–27; see Michael 2013, 122). These prophets had to dwell in common houses and have meals together. The aim of such guilds was in the interests of mutual support (see, for example, de Villiers 2010, 1–6). Their prime duty was to deliver and decipher oracles. Their prophetic role was not only confined to religious activities, but extended to areas such as politics, social transformation, the moral life of communities, international relations, and disputes. Hence, Liebman (1997, 2) maintains that "the very act of participation in the political arena influences religion to some extent".

Stökl concurs with this observation, asserting that the Hebrew Bible attributes Davidic qualities to a number of non-Judean rulers and it can safely be assumed that this way of understanding history theologically was influenced by a more common understanding of the way in which inter-/intra-national divination was seen to work (Stökl 2014, 50–51). Stökl further maintains (Stökl 2014, 49) that astrology, hepatoscopy, and prophecy were commonly used by ANE rulers in order to acquire access to information from the divine spheres so that they could improve their own decisions. As Blenkinsopp (2011**,** 130) notes, in Isaiah 65:11 there is a denunciation of the cult of deities presiding over fate, fortune, or chance, an indication that the biblical world of Isaiah understood the function of the deities in influencing fortune or curse. Blenkinsopp further refers to Jeremiah 44:1–14, which portrays that disaster would befall the Israelites who had settled in Egypt, because "of their addiction to *cults* other than that of *Yahweh*" (Blenkinsopp 2014, 13). This, too, explains that those who migrated to Egypt and were centred outside Israel would engage in other religious practices and consult deities other

than Yahweh. Blenkinsopp's study shows that there were other Judeans in Egypt, who, in their grief and perplexity, remained faithful to Yahweh and their ancestral traditions.

The question of anointing was also a critical contestation, as it is in our modern day, both in church worship[4] and in African traditional religions. It was an important cultural and religious ritual. As a result of anointing, one was believed to be able to perform extraordinary functions expediently. As Blenkinsopp notes, anointing was an important element in ceremonies of installation in the office of kingship in Judah, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, and such a ceremony may be alluded to in Isa 45:1–7. Blenkinsopp remarks that, in this ceremony, the deity addresses the king-designate directly (Psa 2:7–9) and presents him to the assembly (Isa 42:1–4; Blenkinsopp 2014, 141). It is also noted that some things (e.g., livestock) could be sanctified or dedicated to a special purpose for God by anointing (Exod 29:36). Other people were anointed for a special task such as priests (Exod 28:41), kings (1 Sam 10:1), and prophets (1 Kings 19:16). Generally, it is maintained elsewhere that biblical prophets have been understood as unique figures whose sudden appearance in ancient Israel had a profound impact on the development of Judaism and Christianity (see, for example, Aberbach 2005, 223). A superficial view of prophecy is that it is the gift of foretelling (Engammare 1998, 648). Petersen (1997, 28) remarks that the prophet speaks in the first person and refers to Yahweh in the third person (e.g., Mic. 3, 5–8). Prophets uttered their oracles in a poetic form. David L. Petersen could not have said it better when he states that "to be a prophet was to be a poet, though not in an automatic way" (Petersen 1981, 91). Prophets are also regarded as specialists such as mediums, diviners, priests, and shamans (see Kōkan 1990, 105–128). Another observation is that a prophet had a divine duty coupled with accountability. In that case, as Kōkan observes, one does not make himself or herself a prophet, but is called for a specific duty. The prophet has a public responsibility with a public voice.

Divination

Van Binsbergen (1995, 114) affirms that within any cultural domain more or less demarcated in time and space, and endowed with meaning within that domain, divination might be defined as the entire set of procedures intended to acquire knowledge which is of a supernatural nature or which is otherwise not available through everyday means such as direct sensory perception (see also Peek, 1991). This researcher views the concept of divination as a linking "zone" between "what is" and "what ought to be". In this regard, the process of divination allows the "what is" context to engage the "what ought to be" context. In this way, divination occupies the middle ground, and attempts to offer open avenues for responses, offering room for the "voices" of the two contexts to be able to engage with each other. The divine (supernatural) context

4 Due to space constraints, the present study will not discuss the notion of "anointing" as practiced by the modern church.

converses with the natural context. The entire process of divination constitutes a multi-faceted oracular context, comprising wise speeches, oracular declarations, views of the audience, symbolic bodily expressions of the diviner/healer, the place in which the oracle is declared, etc. In cementing this argument, a study by Wax (2013, 94) is worth noting. According to Petersen (2000, 41, cited in Wax 2013, 94), the report conveys the social process that elicits divination as well as the divinatory utterance. Huffmon (1992, 477, cited in Wax 2013, 102) remarks that direct communication was facilitated through dreams, lots, and prophets (1 Sam 28:6) while indirect communication was achieved through technical divination. Wax (2013, 109) further informs this thesis by revealing that Israel received divine information through dreams and visions, Urim and Thummim (the use of sacral lots or dice), divination, or necromancy, i.e., consultation with the dead as demonstrated in 1 Sam 28:6. Hutton (2004, 13, cited in Wax 2013, 109) affirms that some of these practices fell into disuse over time as demonstrated in 1 Samuel 9:9.

Oracle

The word oracle comes from the Latin verb ōrāre ("to speak"), and properly refers to the priest or priestess uttering the prediction. Flower (2008) remarks that oracles were thought to be portals through which the gods spoke directly to people. Wax (2013, 109) remarks that any attempt to clearly discern the voice of the prophet would demand a meticulous exegetical study that would deliver those original and genuine poetic oracles. Meanwhile, other scholars presuppose that oracles as presented in the biblical text are not "original". For example, Doorly (1989, 5) argues, "Before the oracles of the eighth century prophets reached their final form, as they appear in our scriptures, subsequent authors and editors wrote additional material including introductions, conclusions, editorial comments, liturgical insertions, and third person narratives." Meanwhile, some biblical evidence also attests to the fact that certain individuals claimed gifts of "speaking on behalf of God". For example, in Job 36:6 we read, "I have yet to speak on God's behalf."

Culture

Ani (1994) asserts that cultures are a phenomenological concept through which people retain their self-identity, build their views and symbolic expressions on a shared historical experience, and thereby create a sense of collective, cultural identity. It follows that culture is embedded in the life of the society with its variety of aspects, such as material culture, painting, drama, philosophy, etc. As Lin Foxhall observes, "technology can be viewed as one kind of mediation between people and the environment in which they live" (2003, 75). Foxhall further maintains that "technology is a means of interacting via material culture with the natural world, which is formulated within human social institutions but is simultaneously moderated in form by factors external to any particular society" (foxhall 2003, 75). The worldview of societies, in which culture plays a key function, shapes the way people live and how they interpret their experiences including the sacred. Brueggemann (1993, 1) admits that it is

inevitable that our categories of interpretation are deeply influenced and informed by the modes of culture in which they are practiced in every generation. In concurrence with Brueggemann's view, Van der Walt (2014, 253) also opines that reconfiguration is to make use of stories in other cultures, like, for instance, Mediterranean stories, and to incorporate them in a new story.

Healing

Grundmann (2001, 26) is right to assume that "Healing is a pan-religious phenomenon; it exists in all the religions we know of, be they of a primal kind or be they highly sophisticated. Healing thus cannot be monopolised by Christian groups or the Church." Bates (2001, 73) distinguishes between "curing" and "healing" as he discusses the fact that "curing" refers to "diseases", while "healing" is for illness. For Bates (2001, 73), "curing disease" is an organic process of remedying disease. Nonetheless, "healing an illness" is a human process that has to do with the perception as well as the understanding of wellness within a culture. Taking the cue from both Grundmann's and Bates' views, this researcher defines healing as "the restoration of human life and thoughts". This particular line of reasoning takes into account the disparaged human relationships, both within the natural and supernatural contexts.

Orality

During ancient times, humans did not have the blessing of writing; communication was oral, hence we speak of "orality". Walter J. Ong affirms that writing, in the strict sense of the word, the technology which has shaped and powered the intellectual activity of modern persons was a very late development in human history (Ong 2002, 82). Gelb (1963, cited in Ong 2002, 82) informs this study that the first script, or true writing, that we know of, was developed among the Sumerians in Mesopotamia only around the year 3500 B.C. Ong's affirmation is further convincing that "human society first formed itself with the aid of oral speech, becoming literate very late in its history, and at first only in certain groups" (Ong 2002, 2). According to Ong (2002, 82), human beings had been drawing pictures for countless millennia before this. Ong's study livens the idea that oral tradition of the past informs the future. Of particular note is Ong's view that the past "is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence, which itself is not an itemized terrain either. Orality knows no lists or charts or figures" (Ong 2002, 96). Ong further states that words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs (Ong, 2002, 46). Ong (2002, 1) adds that in recent years certain basic differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalisation in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by writing. Ong further maintains that knowledge of orality/literacy contrasts and relationships does not normally generate impassioned allegiances to theories but rather

encourages reflection on aspects of the human condition far too numerous ever to be fully enumerated. Examples of oral traditions are also found in the Hebrew Bible. For example, as Ong (2002, 17) also observes, Qoheleth ("assembly speaker"), or its Greek equivalent, Ecclesiastes, clearly adverts to the oral tradition on which his writing draws: "Besides being wise, Qoheleth taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized, and arranged many proverbs. Qoheleth sought to find pleasing sayings, and to write down true sayings with precision" (cf. Eccl. 12:9–10). Ong (2002, 36) further remarks that a familiar instance of additive oral style is the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–5, which he thinks is indeed a text but one preserving recognisable oral patterning.

Personal Experience in a Divination Ritual

In my first Northern Province fieldwork on divination, I remained an observing outsider, only asking questions. Most questions were more clarity-seeking than aimed at being engaged in the realities of divination itself. Nevertheless, since I had been introduced to divination and healing from early stages of my life, this changed. Very soon, the revelations that divination had had for me personally, at various stages of my own life, were awakened. For about four months, I frequented Tate Mavunlindlela's *sangoma* lodge. I was there almost every day and evening, sometimes staying overnight.

Life at the *sangoma* lodge showed me many aspects and layers of African divination and healing practices. Here, I found I was restored to my full human form. I experienced patterns and dreams of "sangomahood". Tate Mavulindlela, now my "father" (the rank used in this trade) was chosen by my ancestral spirits to initiate me. I greet her with the ancestral greeting:

> *Tate Mavulindlela, monna wa ga Nqeshe, o tswalwang ke koko Mashayi-hlombe, monna wa ga Nkomo Mokhari, o tswalwang ke Koko Magwetja Nkwe ya Thaba, monna wa ga Phoshoko.*
>
> *Ntate Mavulindlela, a man of Nqeshe, a son of grandmother Mashayi-hlombe, a man of Nkomo Mokhari, who was given birth by grandmother Magwetja Nkwe ya Thaba, a man of Phoshoko.*

This I have to do whenever I meet her at the *sangoma* lodge. I was then introduced to basic esoteric knowledge and the skills of handling oracular tablets. With regard to the digging for and gathering of herbs, as well as with the administering of medicines, I was supervised. I had to induce ancestral trances daily. I was also informed that my grandfather, Makobe, old and tired, spoke, and still speaks, through my mouth, asking for a stick to walk with. Sometimes, I am informed, he conveys messages about daily happenings and how they should be handled. Trance introduction is considered to be the decisive sign of one's calling.

After three months of training, I was sent to the Northern Province for initiation. The place was the *sangoma* lodge of Koko Magwetja Nkwe ya Thaba, Monna wa Phoshoko. Koko Magwetja Nkwe ya Thaba gave birth to my "father", Mavulidlela monna wa Nqeshe. It was the right time to be initiated into sangomahood. It happened before a large audience of lodge members, invited guests, and neighbours. I spent the first day and evening with no food, only wearing and covering my body with a red cloth. The whole night was characterised by drum rhythms and singing. Ululations filled the night. I was informed that the ululations welcomed two new *sangomas—badimo ba retwa e bile ba lebogwa ka mekgolokwane*.

The morning of the initiation dawned. This day I will never forget as long as I live. I was to be initiated together with an elderly woman from a Shangaan background. We both knelt and sniffed our *motsoko* (snuff), without uttering a word to one another. The great moment came. My ancestral goat passed by. It was taken right up to the ancestral site, *'egandlelweni*, the place where ancestral spirits reside. *Khalel' nkani, khalel' nkani, nkani ya bobaba bayibuz' nkani*—translated as "I am crying for the healing horn, let my ancestral spirits bring the healing horn to me"—was the song sung at this moment. With drums beating in the background, the song was sung repeatedly. Tate Mavulindlela came forth to fetch me. I crawled on hands and knees over rocky and rough ground to *'egandlelweni*. Finally, I reached my destination. I drank the blood from the cut throat of a dying goat and drank water from a big bowl. I had to take out the water substances with blood faster. Having taken that out brought a sense of relief to all, that is, *ngaliphuza ngaliphalaza*. Finally, I was initiated.

These three incidents provide some insight into the importance of divination for people. In general, this is not acknowledged in our modern and so-called "enlightened" society. This disjunction has provided the general rationale for this thesis and has also determined its particular structure.

Divination, Oracle Speech and African Herbalists

The common trend among African herbalists is to divide indigenous healing into two categories, herbalists and diviners. Ilse Truter (2007, 56) acknowledges that "African traditional healing is … intertwined with cultural and religious beliefs, and is holistic in nature. It does not focus only on the physical condition, but also on the psychological, spiritual and social aspects of individuals, families and communities." *Dingaka Tšhupya, inyanga* (herbalists) simply *treat* diseases with natural medicines and the like. They do not diagnose illness nor venture into any divination strategies. This skill of treating diseases can be learnt. Very often, it is inherited. To this category, one may add the growing number of homeopaths and naturopaths whose activities require some investigation. Bapedi communities have a specific terminology for this category of healers: *ke ngaka e tšhupya* which is translated as "he or she is a healer who does not use divining bones" (Truter 2007, 57). This healing typology involves the herbalist

having a thorough knowledge of herbs which are used in treating which ailment (*mere* or *dihlare).* In other words, the healer has to have good skills in knowing the correct prescription for a particular disease or illness (Leonard 1998, 18, see particularly footnote 17). In most cases, the healer studies, or becomes an understudy of, a particular skilled herbalist healer who later imparts the skill to him or her. Part of the training involves going into the field and bushes to dig for herbs *(go epa mehlare goba mere).* The entire procedure and protocol in digging up and stamping on the dried herbs is explained painstakingly to the learner or disciple. Some procedures cannot be easily understood but demand complete commitment on the part of both tutor and disciple. Respondent Ruth Motlatsi from Thaba Moopo points out that:

> *Seo o swanetšego go se tseba ke gore gona le mehlare e mengwe eo o ka se kego wa e rema fela gona le ka fao melao e beilwego gore e rengwe ka gona. Mohlala, nka go botša ka mohlare o thušago tša bonna, ge motho wa senna a na le bothata bo bo bjalo. Ngaka e swanetše gore e sale gosasa e tsoge e tšeye kepu le mokotlana wa yona e lebe thabeng. E tlare mola e le kgauswi le wona mohlare, e tla apola dikobo e sale e ponoka... e ponoka ke a go botša. Ke moka e tla thoma ka go o rema. Ga e a swanela go bolela goba go lealea kua le kua. Sa yona ke gore mahlo a yona a tsepelele fao e šomago gona. Ke moka ge a feditše o tla tlatša mokotlana wa yona. E boele gae. Ga e a swanela go lebelela morago mo a tšwago. Ga e a swanela go boledišana le mang kapa mang go fihla gae. Melawana e ka moka e direlwa gore sehlare se goba pheko ye e tle shome e phediše batho.*
>
> One has to note the fact that there are herbs that cannot be cut as one wishes. There are rules pertaining to the cutting procedure. An example is the specific herb that helps impotent men. The healer has to cut it at dawn. When he or she is about to reach the said tree, he or she has to take off their clothes and then proceed with the cutting process. He or she is not allowed to talk or look around but instead to fix or rather use the tree as his focal point and attention. When the process is complete, he or she will return home, but is not allowed to look back or talk to any person he or she meets on the way until he or she finally reaches home. All these little rules are meant to be observed so that the potency, efficiency and effectiveness of the herb is guaranteed.

From the above interview with Mama Motlatsi, one notices a few important elements. The herbalist has to be skilled in order to observe all rules pertaining to herbalism. Knowledge and observation of rules pertaining to herbalism separate the healer from the everyday patterns of life. For example, when he or she is about to reach the said tree, he or she has to take off his or her clothes and then proceed with the cutting process; and he or she will return home but is not allowed to look back or talk to any person he or she meets on the way until home is reached. The rules are extraordinary because they need to ensure the extraordinary nature of the cure or healing that is to be performed. Rules are there to be observed and demonstrate the level of commitment of the herbalist. The second category to be taken note of is that of "diviner-healers": *Ngaka tsa marapo/ ditaola/dikgagara/izangoma/amagqirha*. Diviner-healers can diagnose and prescribe medicines. Truter (2007, 56) acknowledges that traditional medicine plays an important

role in primary healthcare in many developing countries. Truter further remarks that, in South Africa, it is estimated that between 60 and 80 percent of people consult a traditional healer before going to a primary health care practitioner.[5] African diviner-healers' medicines and diagnostic skills and art are even used in the social, economic, and magical spheres of life. Traditional healers receive payment for their services in ways that should result in different incentives to provide quality amenities from those of modern practitioners (Leonard 1998, 2).

Calling refers to the actual entry into divination and its intricacies. The general trend has it that one does not decide to become a healer but is destined for it. Respondent Ntate Mopedi, an African healer from the Northern Province, at the place called Makgane, notes:

> *Nna ke be ke sa rate goba ngaka, ke bile ka bitšwa. Bongaka bjo ke bo filwe ke bokoko le borakgolo. E be e le bošego ge ke be ke na le pono. Ke bile ka bona makgolo khukhu yo nna ke bego ke sa motsebe. Yena oile a itsibiša gore ke mang le gore ke wa moloko o fe. O ile a nhlalošetša le gore oile a hwa lehu la mohuta mang. Seo ke ilego ka se bontšhwa ke yena, ke mokotlana wa ditaola le gore ke tla o hwetša kae. Go tsogeng gaka ke ile ka napa ka ba botša ka mo gae. Ba bagolo ba ile ba kgonthišiša lebaka leo. Se se go bontšha gore bongakeng ga wo ikgethele, fela o wa bofiwa, bagolo ba ile ba kgonthišiša lebaka le.*
>
> I did not want to become a healer, but was called into it. The gift came from both my ancestors and ancestresses. It was in the night that I saw my great-grandmother whom I did not know. She explained herself to me and accounted for her own death. She showed me a bag full of divining bones, and even informed me about their actual whereabouts. In the morning, I informed my family about my dream. They (the older ones) confirmed her actual existence and the fact of her healing trade when she was still alive. This shows very clearly that one does not merely decide to become a healer, but is rather called.

Van Binsbergen did extensive fieldwork in Francistown and surrounding areas in Botswana. Van Binsbergen (1991) provides a comprehensive narrative of his initiation into what he calls "sangomahood". He succinctly points out, "There is no doubt that becoming a *sangoma* offers me, as a researcher, a vast range of information, both of esoteric, social and bodily patterns, which may not be as accessible to the participant observer who remains an outsider" (van Binsbergen 1991, 333).

The procedure sketched above, though summarised, introduces one to the meaning and functions of African divination. How one is called into divination varies from one healer to another. In the case of Ntate Maamushi, he experienced visions and dreams. *Badimo* visited him in his sleep and made their wishes known to him. In turn, these dreams and visions exerted a profound attraction. Respondent Tate Mavulindlela from the Eastern

5 See also Setswe (1999, 56–60).

Free State, Phuthaditjhaba, Qwa—whose ancestral name is Mavulindlela, the man of Nqhese, born by grandmother Mashayihlombe, the man of Nkomo Mokhari—points out:

> I was very sick. I went from one hospital to another. Western doctors could not account for the cause of my disease. One doctor at Manalo Hospital hinted at asthma as the cause of my disease. This problem was not only located physically but socially as well. My marriage was in a shambles. My husband left me. There was no verifiable cause for his departure from home. He returned home and chased me away. I was deeply hurt by his actions. Fortunately, my maiden family was supportive. They took me to consult with a traditional healer. He was very forthright. This is what he said to me: 'You do not have a problem. It is ancestors who are behind all these problems. They want you to be initiated into healing/divination. I guarantee you that after you have gone through the initiation, your affairs will be restored to normality.' I then decided to undergo the initiation process and I am now back to my normal state.

Tate Mavulindlela had to be subjected to some form of physical and emotional pressure to indicate that ancestors wanted her to do something. Becoming sick or falling sick necessitates that an established or qualified diviner be consulted. Van Binsbergen (1991, 318) notes, "It turns out that the social and psycho-somatic complaints of patients in both types of therapy are very similar. Even so, the sangoma cult idiom seeks to establish, in the consciousness of the clients, a coherent image of a viable and meaningful social order anchored in the village, exorcism." The diviner may come to a solid conclusion that such an illness, as in the case of Tate Mavulindlela, is not amenable to simple treatment by any healer. Findings and conclusions in this regard may be that the patient is at an early stage of the novitiate (*uyathwasa).* Literally, the term "go *thwasa/uku-thwasa*" means "coming into view".

Some scholars, in this very same context, translate it as "blossoming" (Setiloane, 2000). In particular, Setiloane (2000, 27) mentions that "Go *thwasa*" properly understood, means "to blossom"; "to come to blossom", like a flower; "to come into being", like a new year or month; or "appear in view", like the sun or moon. In this case, it simply means that "to become the novice" is at an early stage of entry into divination. Only the most experienced, established and renowned diviner is capable of *ukuthwasisa* (helping with the initiation) of the novice. It is at this stage that the novice often begins to grow delicately and become eccentric, dreaming frequently, often about wild ferocious animals and serpents. He or she is instructed to take note of dreams and visions and convey them to his or her *gobela*, "the established diviner" involved in the training. Novices are of a highly neurotic temperament and are often in a trance, while, at other times, they become violent. They often become particular about food. They are often fond of snuff, *lefola* or *motsoko,* and easily get shaken by convulsions. They shed tears and weep extravagantly. They may get up in the middle of the night and sing. Those around them or in their company are expected to respond by clapping hands and beating a cowhide drum rhythmically. Usually, the spirit in possession begins singing her or his

favoured/preferred song and is then joined by those who sit around. At one of the *Ndombs*, which are rightly translated by van Binsbergen to be "cult lodges" (1991, 316) in Soshanguve, Pretoria, I observed the following: the novice sitting on the floor began to shiver and had uncontrollable hiccups. She began to move her feet uncontrollably. Immediately those sitting around her spoke patiently: *Botse, le seke la tla ka bogale, tlang* ka *lethabo, e kaba mokgekolo goba mokgalabe, re a le amogela*. This is translated as: "Wonderful, wonderful, do not come with trouble, come with happiness, whether an old woman or man, we welcome you."

The *ithwasana* then moved out of the ancestral room towards the place of the *gobela.* She was going to *hlehla,* literally meaning "to greet accordingly". She started to sing her preferred song: *Awee Shai makarakaragana, awee shai makarankara, rena bagologolo shai makarankara, re a le lotšha, ke nna Phalafala, shai makarankara...* She started by greeting the *gobela* and then moved. So far, one can see the importance of a call to this vocation. The candidate is supposed to be in a suitable physical and spiritual condition to receive a revelation or direction from a guardian spirit. The guardian spirit reveals the vocation as well as the supposed trainer. The directives of the guardian spirit are binding and must be obeyed. At this stage, one has to note that one healer has the ability to commune with more than one guardian spirit.

Another good example of this is the account of Mrs Melita Lekota, a healer from Soshanguve, whose ancestrological names are Magwetja Nkwe ya thaba, the man of Phoshoko, born by grandmother Mahlasela; the man of Mtetwa Nyambose, born of grandmother Le dada phulamanzi*;* the man of Ndwandwe Nxumalo, born of grandmother Mkhwekazi; the man of Ndabezitha Majola—Majola the progenitor of the initiation medicine (drug). Mrs Lekota indicated to me that she has more than twenty guardian spirits. She is particularly impressed by the presence of one guardian spirit that can foretell tomorrow's happenings. This particular guardian spirit is able to inform her if her interlocutors are telling lies or not. Lastly, she is able to discover hidden articles because of the help of this particular guardian spirit.

When one has finally accepted the call, he or she is admitted into a place called *Ndomba* or *ka ndombeng* or *ngoako wa Badimo* (an initiation lodge) (cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 316). This is a place where guardian spirits reside and take charge. There is a special ritual that is performed when an initiate (novice) is received into it. He or she stands at the entrance of the yard and is covered with a veil, depending on the requirements of his or her specific guardian spirits. The preliminary ritual is performed. It is the ritual called "*go phasa*"—in isiZulu, *ukuphahla*; in Sesotho, *hohlabela badimo*—meaning "to communicate with the ancestors and ancestresses". It is at this stage that the *badimo* of the novice is evoked and welcomed into the house of the trainer or senior's adept (van Binsbergen 1991, 316) *badimo* in order for them to *thwasa* (blossom) (Setiloane 2000). It should be noted that the whole process revolves around the ancestors and ancestresses. Every communication has to do entirely with them. It is the *badimo* who are about to

thwasa and not the novice. The use of the term "novice" refers to the *badimo* because they have not as yet "blossomed". They are still regarded as being young. Having admitted them, the human novices, into an *indomba*, they now are ready to be taught and trained to become skilled healers.

Training of the novice, both the possessed and the guardian spirit, involves both physical and mental aspects. The physical aspect of training entails rules pertaining to diet, fasting, cleanliness, etc. The mental training, on the other hand, covers thorough knowledge of the novice's family history, history of the controlling guardian spirit, religious developments within the family, as well as ritual rites and taboos. Acquiring knowledge of healing herbs is vital in this aspect of training. This type of training is regarded as basic for *ithwasana* (trainee). After the experienced trainer has established that the *ithwasana* is ready for higher training; he or she (*ithwasana)* is then introduced to the most complex esoteric philosophies about life with regards to healing. Training basically deals with the individual's intellectual, intuitive and spiritual aspects. The intellectual capacity provides knowledge about the profession, as well as dealing with the mysteries and powers contained in the profession.

In developing this aspect, the candidate has to be able to demonstrate knowledge of *ditaola/amathambo/tinhlolo*, translated as bone-casting or divination using oracular tablets (Van Binsbergen 1991 and 1995). They should be privy to how to conduct the psychological treatment of patients, exhibit concentration and demonstrate mastery of trances: *go tlelwa ke badimo le go tseba go gwerana le badimo ge ba tlile ka melaetša e bohlokwa eo e nyakago gore e fitišetšwe go bao ba phelago ka keno.* The intuitive capacity, on the other hand, deals with the power of knowing or understanding something without reasoning or being taught. This capacity lies in one's ability to connect closely with one's guardian spirits (*go ntšha badimo gore batle ba tsebe go dira mošomo wa bona*). The spiritual aspect deals with powers utilised in the control of the human soul, nature, prophecy and the reading of the human mind; thereby finding hidden articles and secrets. One has to note that all aspects indicated are mutually inclusive and aid one another in fostering a comprehensive healing skill and art. All have to be maintained and viewed as of equal importance.

Another important dimension in the training is the secluded life that has to be led by the neophyte. Part of this seclusion is the strict observance of chastity. In some cases, the neophyte has to avoid all common footpaths and is constantly given medicines to purge. One respondent, Mahamba-nomoya (she preferred to use her ancestral name), pointed out to me that *Goile gwa ba le nako eo ke ilego ka se apare* dikobo *tša badimo ba ka. Ba ile ba nkgama. Se bontšha bogolo ba seo badimo ba lego sona.* This translates as: "It happened that one day I did not put on my ancestral clothing. I was forcefully pressed on my throat. This is what the ancestors are all about."

The role of fear is central in this case. This researcher discovered that fear operates on two levels. First, it is the general fear of the ancestors (Kinoti 1992, 80). Second is the "complex-fear" (Van der Walt 2003, 51–71). The first view of fear is general in the sense that neophytes have to obey their ancestors. This is general and applies to almost everyone who is within the African social symbolic universe (reality). The second view is complex and tricky. It involves a serious and clear relationship one (the neophyte and/or experienced diviner-healer) has with his or her ancestors. The neophyte or diviner-healer is always careful and in fear of the wrath of ancestry. The ancestors, in this case, are not supposed to be angered or provoked but should be cushioned until the neophytes become stronger to work. Expressions like *ke šoma ka badimo* ("I work through my ancestors") are common within this latter view of fear. The preceding descriptions enable one to get an idea of the specialised terminology used by some in the field of African divination communities.

Comparison Between Prophecy in Ancient Israel and Divination in (Southern) Africa

In ancient Israel, the biblical tradition reveals that the Israelites were commanded by Yahweh not to associate with local communities and their cultural practices. Although "divination" as a cultural practice was never encouraged among Israelite communities, the reality depicted in the biblical text itself demonstrates the contrary. For example, in Deuteronomy 18:10–11 we read, "There must be never be anyone among you who practices divination, who is a soothsayer, augur, or a sorcerer who uses the charms, consults ghosts or spirits or calls up the dead. For the man who does these things is detestable to Yahweh your God." In my opinion, both the ancient Israelite community moving towards occupying Canaan and the missionary enterprise (which is usually associated with colonialism in Africa) were subversive in their approach towards convincing local communities that a divine world order was emerging which needed to be adhered to. Cultural and indigenous practices of healing using local herbs and concoctions which is common among African societies was also practiced in ancient Israel. For example, as Mlambo (2016, 4) notes, the prophet Isaiah treated King Hezekiah's wounds by pressing figs on his sores (2 Kings 20:11–17; Isa 38:1–2). Mlambo further explains that Hezekiah got his recovery from this remedy because there is evidence from the Bible that God heard Hezekiah's prayers and that he was promised fifteen years more. Similarly, as noted by Grierson and Afolayan (1998), the indigenous people of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa have a long history of traditional plant usage for the treatment of various diseases and ailments including the uses of plants for the treatment of wounds. For example, the gel from the leaf of a plant called aloe vera is smeared on the wound area which is traditionally known to be providing healing properties (Manvitha and Bidya 2014, 85–88).

In my view, prophecy in the ANE and divination in Africa can both be classified under spiritism. Myambo (s.a.:11) affirms that as spiritism flourished in the ANE, people

believed in receiving oracles from spirits of the dead, a practice which is common in Africa in which people consult the *n'anga* in an attempt to converse with the spirit of their dead ancestors. Daneel (1977, 189) also writes that *n'anga* (traditional healer) and prophets both concentrate on personal causes of illness or misfortune. According to Daneel, every patient visiting the prophet is subjected to one or several diagnostic spells which the *n'anga* also does. Thus, scholars such as Watts (1985, 126) viewed prophets in the same way as those who evoked spirits in fortune-telling. Myambo (s.a., 19) admits that if God wants to do something, he can. For example, as Myambo opines, in the case of Balaam, God made the donkey speak (Num 22:29). Therefore, with the above trajectory in mind, it appears God can use anyone anywhere to communicate his commands to humankind, hence the argument that African traditional healers (or divine healers) can in some sense be viewed in the same as biblical prophets.

Balogun (2007) also maintains that divination oracles define and determine human destiny at least in most African communities. Reasons for a divination ritual differ from community to community among Africans. It is not an overstatement to say that among some cultural practices in Africa consulting the dead was conducted as a ritual of communicating with the divine (God). In the same fashion, consulting the dead was common in ancient Israel. For example, 1 Samuel 28:5–7 reads as follows:

> When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek for me a woman who is a medium that I may go to her and inquire of her.' And his servants said to him, 'Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor…'

Although from a Hebraic/Judaic perspective Saul's act was not condoned, two main factors present themselves clearly: (1) that individuals, including kings, would consult specialists with divine and magical gifts on various complications such as the location of a stray donkey/sheep, and (2) that the Bible mentions divine healers/spirit mediums/individuals with special spiritual gifts of art and magic, an indication that among societies of ancient Israel, traditional/cultural belief systems also played a critical role in salvaging socioeconomic and health malfunctions.

Thus, prophecy, oracle speech, and prophetic utterances practiced in ancient Israel can also be compared to spirit-possession among numerous African societies (Mutekwa 2010, 161–176). This study has it on good record about reports from southern Africa (i.e., in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, to be precise). In Zimbabwe, the Shona people believe that there is a God (*Mwari*) who is neither the source of morality nor the evaluator of moral behaviour to reward and punish as Christians believe (Pearce 1990, 147). As Bourdillon (1982, 267) also affirms, "the high god is too remote and his interests are too broad to concern himself with private individuals and their problems". Hence, *Mwari* of the shrines in the Matopo Hills cannot be consulted by ordinary folk having ordinary questions. The community elders (guided by divine healers, possessed

by a spirit) play a critical role of "evoking" the spirit of the departed ancestors, who will in return speak to God on behalf of the village community or individuals. In Mozambique, a cleansing ritual involving divination would reportedly be conducted for war veterans from former warring parties in order to integrate ex-combatants into a societal environment (Granjo 2006, 277–294). Granjo adds that the cleansing ritual is performed by a healer called the *Vanyamussoro,* in order to promote healing and reconciliation between the soldier and his village, or between the home-comer and home (2006, 277–294). Granjo further remarks that the most common divination set in southern and central Mozambique is the *tinhlolo*.

From the preceding examples, it is not uncommon that every human community "recognizes a need for the special knowledge gained through divination" (Peek 1991, 1). Although prophecy, divination, and oracle speech in ancient Israel cannot be contrasted "head-for-head" with divination and traditional/cultural and healing practices common among African societies, in both situations there is a fundamental belief in the spirit world and its influence on the wellbeing of individuals (Sobiecki 2008, 333). Having said that, Africa still prides itself on its divinatory practices in which traditional medicine is believed to cure illnesses and other health complications. Unfortunately, divination was, and still remains, marginalised, in spite of the fact that some of its intuitive findings and assertions are surprisingly "scientific" (Peek 1991, 1). The "magnified" problem of "marginalisation" of divination in Africa, as Peek asserts, is further compounded by the advent of Christian teachings which discourage its adherents against African way of dealing with spiritual/health matters.

Another impediment standing in the way of divination in Africa is that most African indigenous healers cannot express themselves through the medium of literature (Peek 1991, 200). This brings in the question of orality (discussed previously). In most African oral cultures, the diviner does not, and cannot, read but looks and listens, sees and hears (Peek 1991, 200). With that in mind, the role of the diviner is to decode, or to be precise, to interpret, the esoteric codes for the client in the divination process. It is for this reason that some social anthropologists have not represented local (African) diviners well. Therefore, one would say that the esoteric knowledge of African indigenous healing systems has survived the test of time. The above assertion arises from the fact that in spite of the "discouragement" and "demonisation" of indigenous knowledge systems in general and divination, oracle, and divine healing in particular, most Africans who have been converted to Christianity become Christians during the day, but traditionalists/herbalists during the night.

Chavhunduka (1994, 1) states that before the advent of colonisation of Africa, traditional healers enjoyed tremendous prestige in society. The emergency of Christianity and western education made traditional healers to lose their prestige and status. Mlambo (2016, 2) concurs with Chavhunduka by stating that colonial governments and Christian missionaries attempted to suppress the traditional medical

care system for a number of reasons. Mlambo provides two key appraisals to support his argument. First, Mlambo says the missionaries did not know that traditional medicines were effective in curing many illnesses. Secondly, Mlambo remarks that the missionaries presupposed that traditional healers encouraged the belief in witchcraft which was regarded as one of the major stumbling blocks in the way of Christian missionary work. Chavhunduka (1994) goes on to say that the terms used during the colonial era to describe traditional healers further undermined their position in the society. Mlambo (2016, 2) who also agrees with Chavhunduka (1994) on derogatory terms assigned to local African practitioners, gives the most common terms used to describe a traditional healer as follows: witchdoctor, herbalists, medicine men, sorcerer, diviner and magician. "These terms," adds Mlambo, "are derogatory and pejorative, they are misleading terms which were used by missionaries and western scholars and they got domesticated to the extent that even the Africans use them comfortably" (Mlambo 2016, 2).

In my view, as both Mlambo and Chavhunduka affirm, derogatory terms assigned to local traditional health practitioners by the missionary church was deliberate as an attempt to assign a superior status to OT prophecy. However, it is not an over-statement to say that there is very little difference (perhaps no difference at all) which can be identified with certainty between Israelite religio-cultural practices particularly in terms of healing with those common among African traditional healers. Nonetheless, the ideology of assigning derogatory terms or describing indigenous knowledge practices negatively is not a new phenomenon. However, that there is "uneasy co-existence of traditional beliefs and Christianity and other modern beliefs within the postcolonial subjects is underlined by the fact that the former is posited as a site of primitiveness and atavism and the latter a site of modernity and progress, a consequence of the "other" of African belief and knowledge systems dating back to the colonial era (Mutekwa 2010, 161). However, in order to negotiate these beliefs and identities, and compromise required to move forward, African beliefs may need to assert themselves over Christianity and modernity (Mutekwa 2010, 161). Outside that, Africans adherent to Christianity can be Christians during the day, but herbalists and divine healers, and attend cultural rituals at night (cf. Mafico 1986, 400–409). The argument for the comparison in some instances is further cemented by the fact that in the Bible one reads that God created everything, including the plants (Gen 1:11; 2:9; see also Mulemfo 1995, 352). According to the Bible, as Mulemfo reaffirms, the plants were created so that they might be considered to be food by the human race (Gen 1:29; Ezek 47:12) and also to serve as medicine (Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2).

Conclusions

This essay has shown that divination and oracle-speech were common in ANE cultures. Examples drawn from Mesopotamian and ancient Israelite societies attest to this view. The prophetic utterances and sacrosanct healing practices performed by biblical

prophets were actually traditional and cultural in character, probably borrowed by the Israelites from other cultures in the ANE through trade or cultural exchange as people migrated from one place to another. It was shown that healing campaigns and miraculous signs performed by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, for example, were practices that were common among numerous ANE societies.

It was argued that comparison between prophecy in ancient Israel and divination among African societies is striking. In a future study, one would want to explore further in order to establish whether this comparison could have been influenced in some way by migration during ancient times. Most Africans believe in ancestors; and that the spirit world of the forefathers (ancestors) plays a crucial role in the lives of those still living in a postmodern world. Examples of African cultural practices, divination and oracle speech were drawn from Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. It was illustrated that a divine/traditional healer plays a key role in the cultural life of most Africans. A divine healer in an African society is an expert who makes it feasible and plausible for an individual to access a dialogue with the spiritual world of the ancestors. Tools (e.g., bones) used by the divine healer are also trusted by the consulter to have the potency to explain the mystery of the spirit world of the ancestors who quite often are believed can play a leading role in resolving crises faced by the living. Among African societies, 'prayer' is usually relayed to the creator (God) through a divine healer or the spirit medium in which a ritual is performed.

The essay also demonstrated that divination and oracle-speech are common practices among African societies, although very little has been written about African cultures and their religiosity. Nevertheless, the influence of colonialism and missionary enterprise on colonised peoples and their cultures was also noted. Hence, it was critiqued that colonial legacy and post-apartheid telepathy played a negative role in creating a skewed perspective of African cultural belief systems. Of particular note is that the reinterpretation of African cultures, divination, and oracle speech was not only made from the outsider's perspective but was also grossly misrepresented. Although some examples of ancestral practices and divination among other (southern) African cultures were highlighted, the study delved much into the comparison between prophecy in ancient Israel and divination and oracle-speech in South Africa.

Acknowledgement

This essay is a reworked version of a paper presented at the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA)/Southern African Society of Near Eastern Studies (SASNES) Annual Conference, 2–4 September 2015.

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