1. Introduction

In my ongoing research into the urban therapeutic scene in Francistown, a rapidly growing town in northeastern Botswana, I set out to contrast (van Binsbergen 1990a) the symbolic and organizational features of two dominant religious expressions: churches of the spirit, and mediumistic sangoma cult lodges. Tracing the biographical and therapeutic trajectory of a number of inhabitants of Francistown, it turns out that the social and psycho-somatic complaints of patients in both types of therapy are very similar. However, 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, adorcism (de Heusch's term; cf. Lewis 1990) of ancestors and continuity with the past—persuading them to embrace a traditional worldview that until then may hardly have been part of their adult consciousness. A minority of the patients become permanent adepts of the sangoma cult, swelling the ranks of the lodge membership which, in addition to recruited patients, comprises selected members of the consanguineal and affinal kin of the lodge leader. Through the person of their leader, each lodge is tributary to the region's dominant territorial cult of Mwali or Ngwali.\(^2\) By contrast, the Christian idiom emphasizes personal rupture via-à-vis the rural-based kin group, exorcism of ancestral and other rural-associated spirits (foremost the *Shumba* or *Lion* cult), and reinforces the clients as participants in an urban capitalist economy experienced by them as painful, meaningless, yet attractive. Thus my project is situated in a fast growing body of recent literature on healing and socio-cultural transformation in Southern Africa.\(^3\) To me as a European researcher, Francistown
proved a painfully difficult environment to explore questions of historical African religion, even when such religion was evidently a major component in the urbanites' consciousness. The present paper describes how I struggled to solve this research problem, and in the process became so involved with the sangoma cult that the purpose of the field-work itself had to be reconsidered—not to say was defeated.

Botswana is the fourth place in Africa where, since 1968, I have conducted field-work on religion and therapy. Those familiar with my work have seen me pass through a rather rapid succession of paradigms: from the positivist collection of quantitative data on the recruitment of spirit mediums (faqir, pl. juqra) in the highlands of northwestern Tunisia, via Marxist reductionism explaining away cults of affliction (particularly the Bituma cult) in western Zambia as a local idiom expressing the articulation of modes of production, to a symbolically somewhat more sensitive exploration of the convergence of bodily and territorial symbolism in Manjak oracular cults in Guinea Bissau.

In my first Tunisian field-work I remained an observing outsider, encountering the shocking directness of the epiphany of the sacred through ecstatic religion for the first time in my life. Parallel to the professional fuqra sessions as staged publicly at saints' festivals as well as in the relative privacy of a homestead, those who were not eligible for faqir-hood (or who had dropped out of that status because of its socio-political marginality) would frequently, as part of an evening's musical entertainment among kinsmen, friends and neighbours, stage perfect imitations of the fuqras' art, and it was on those occasions that I learned the bodily movements, singing and respiratory techniques attributed to the initiates. In 1970, during a 'genuine' session, I was allowed to dance along not just with the imitators but with the fuqras themselves; I entered into an incipient trance, but was immediately called back, primarily by my first wife who was present. The restrictive brand of social anthropology I was reading in the Netherlands at the time did not stimulate any further analytical explorations into the ecstatic experience itself, and only two decades later a long novel written in the non-academic intimacy of my mother tongue (van Binsbergen 1988) was to serve as the outlet for what I had not been able to capture and come to terms with in scholarly discourse; as much of my other literary work has been moulded out of the spill-over of field-