Introduction: ‘Calling NGOMA’

In September of 1992 the Associated Press ran a release from Johannesburg reporting that the most frequent users of the new South African caller-charge telephone system—TIM Service, akin to the ‘900’ networks in North America—were the clients of sangoma diviners. The sangoma, those who do (sa) ngoma, had seized the opportunity of the new technology and billing arrangement, which transfers funds from the caller to the recipient of the call, to enhance their divining business. Telephone consultation of sangoma was already practiced a decade ago or longer, representing the same infusion of electronic media technology that has permeated communities and organizational lines elsewhere in the world. The writer of the AP release of course found this ‘curious’, and ‘quaint’, condescendingly noting that only in Africa, of course, would ‘witchdoctors’ reap the benefits of high-technology. Why would clients want to spend their money in this manner anyway?

Yet this instance is merely the latest in the continuing line of clever adaptations of this ancient ritual healing institution to changing circumstances and opportunities in Central and Southern Africa. Here I shall focus on the Southern African settings where I studied ngoma: Guguleto township of Capetown, and between the twin cities of Mbabane and Manzini in Swaziland. Well before the advent of modern electronic communications media, ngoma served as a trans-regional, trans-ethnic and more recently a trans-racial channel for the articulation of experience and knowledge about misfortune, as well as about the very basis of society and literally anything else under the sun.

The institution of ngoma thus fittingly illuminates the problem-
atic of the transregional culture and local practice in Southern Africa3 in the way it reveals cultural meaning and structure, and the manner in which change occurs, in its own structural sense, at individual, community, and mass cultural levels, and how they interconnect. Through comparative local ethnographic research of this institution, we can observe ways in which the cultural construction of meaning and symbol is both embedded in local practices and mediated through broader processes of regional and international politics and economics. Its cultural symbols are thus seen to be more than isolated practices; they become illustrative of the dynamics of cultural hegemony and resistance in colonial and post-colonial Southern African societies. They manifest instances of the construction of personal historical consciousness in relation to the impersonal global technological, economic and political forces.

Within this broader problematic, I wish here to focus on one particular issue that emerged in my research, and was raised in my book Ngoma. Namely, why does ngoma in South Africa reveal a single modality or consciousness, despite the extensive ethnic pluralism of the country, whereas in neighboring regions as well as in Central Africa, it is manifested through thematic as well as ethnic particularism and heterogeneity? That is, in Southern Africa, more than anywhere else where ngoma is represented, it operates as one 'denomination', with participation across ethnic (and recently, racial) lines. The most dramatic illustration of this was in the townships of the Western Cape. It was also in effect in the Northern Nguni setting of Swaziland, where spirit identities reflected differing ethnic nationalities and diverse thematic articulations; yet all this was organized by diviner-mediums within a single hybrid format. In the early 1930s, Junod described ngoma among the Thonga of Mozambique in very similar terms.4

By contrast, most ngoma activity in regions northward, and increasingly so in a broad belt across Central Africa, may be characterized by far greater disparateness of organization, both ethnically and thematically. Across the middle belt of Central Africa, ngoma is usually manifested as a series of multiple orders, each specialized upon a particular thematic focus or misfortune or dilemma. In Turner's Ndembu world, there are twenty-three zingoma;5 in Hans Cory's depiction of ngoma among the Sukuma, there is similar multiplicity of ngoma expression.6 In Nsemi Isaac's classic Kongo setting, there are twelve min'kisi of which about five