

# **The Supernatural in Sindiwe Magona's *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle***

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- Heywood, Christopher. *A History of South African Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Irele, Abiola. *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na rozbor prvků nadpřirozena, které se objevují v románu *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle* napsaného jihoafrickou spisovatelkou Sindiwe Magona. První část práce pojednává o historickém a feministickém kontextu moderní jihoafrické literatury. Tato část dále obsahuje biografii autorky. Druhá část zahrnuje shrnutí děje a rozbor všech nadpřirozených nebo spirituálních jevů společně s interpretací a jejich zasazením do kontextu tradiční víry lidu Xhosa.

Klíčová slova: *Chasing the Tail of My Father's Cattle*, Sindiwe Magona, nadpřirozeno, spiritualita, Xhosa, duchové předků

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis is focused on the supernatural elements that appear in the novel *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle* written by the South African writer Sindiwe Magona. The first part of the thesis writes about a historical a feministic context of the modern South African literature. This section also includes a biography of the author. The second part features the summary of the plot and the analysis of all the supernatural and spiritual events along with their interpretation and their framing in the context of the beliefs of the Xhosa people.

Keywords: *Chasing the Tail of My Father's Cattle*, Sindiwe Magona, supernatural, spirituality, Xhosa, ancestral spirits

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's/Master's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

The belief that something greater than a human life, something that gives more meaning to those lives, that something like that exists has accompanied humanity before the concept of religion was even born – with the proof being hidden in the practice of burying the dead. This is a common practice in many, if not most cultures that is usually tied to religious beliefs but given the fact that the oldest known burial was performed around 120,000 years ago in various caves in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, its importance can simply be attributed to honouring the lives the loved ones and the ancestors in general which further ties into the overarching theme of this thesis. This concept is called *spirituality*, and it tends presented differently based on the specific culture or a religion. This thesis delves into this concept and how it appears in a novel written by Sindiwe Magona, *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle*. While Magona's works are mostly known for their feminist themes, the purpose of this thesis is to instead look at the supernatural elements contained in the narrative and analyse them as they are presented within context of the Xhosa culture. However, as Christianity is also one of the largest religious beliefs in South Africa, this thesis does also look at the same events with the those specific beliefs. The body of the work is split into two parts: one describing the historical context of the novel and the time that the story is set and the time period it was written in, along with additional contextual information about the book's author, Sindiwe Magona, while the second part is devoted to overviewing and interpreting the supernatural events that appear in the story by putting them into the context of the spiritual beliefs present in South Africa with a summary of the plot to help with the description of the events. Before moving to the main body of the work, I would like to mention the intent of the thesis. While a lot the seemingly supernatural events are presented in a rather mundane way, often only having a faint hint of supernatural that rely on the framing of the situation, the novel is still written with the supernatural as one of its' core themes. Religion and spiritualism are a vital part of African cultures, and this novel is a great representation of such beliefs, and the story presents them in a fantastical manner that is still rooted in the real-life South African spiritualism. All this will be further explored with the help of Duncan Brown's *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, Christopher Heywood's *A History of South African Literature* and Abiola Irele's *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. As for

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<sup>1</sup> "When did humans start burying their dead?" Live Science, accessed January 28, 2024, <https://www.livescience.com/archaeology/when-did-humans-start-burying-their-dead>.

Sindiwe Magona herself, her life is described a biography written by Dianne Shoher: *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*. With this brief introduction of the topic done, I will move onto the important terminology.

To follow up on the established term, spirituality by itself is a rather broad umbrella term which, even within the context of a specific culture, hides many different practices and beliefs underneath it as every culture does have their own understanding of what it truly means in the context of their own beliefs. Because of that, it should always be mentioned in this specific context as otherwise the reference to it might be too broad and vague. In this case, this thesis will work with the interpretation of spirituality that is seen in the traditional African societies. However, as there exist many various African cultures each with their own set of beliefs, the term *spirituality* needs to be further narrowed down to a specific culture. In this particular case, the spirituality here is described as the traditional beliefs of one of the ethnic groups of Africa, Xhosa. One of their prevalent practices in their culture is the honouring of the ancestors.<sup>2</sup> The result of that in the novel is the central theme of ancestral spirits influencing the lives of their children. And with their involvement, a new theme appears – the supernatural forces breaking the laws of nature. To give a few examples of other ideas of spirituality following the explanation: Christian spirituality exists with the core idea of God and one's spiritual unity with Him. In contrast, the spirituality of Buddhism revolves around the Four Noble Truths and achieving inner peace as Buddhism a religion without any gods. These two examples are here to provide the additional information and differing points of view to contrast the traditional African spirituality.

To elaborate on the theme mentioned in the previous paragraph, the definition of *supernatural* as presented by the Oxford Languages dictionary is as follows: “a manifestation or an event attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature” when used as an adjective. The noun version of the word means “manifestations or events considered to be of supernatural origin”. The definition then includes an example: a ghost. To add on to Oxford Dictionary's definition, some other sources (Merriam-Webster in this case) include a line that states they are “(forces) relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit or a devil” and the second definition further adds “ghost or spirit.”<sup>3</sup> And with this the mentioned overlap of themes is starting to be seen.

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<sup>2</sup> “Xhosa,” South African History Online, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/xhosa>.

<sup>3</sup> “Supernatural,” Merriam-Webster, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/supernatural>.

However, before continuing further, one thing that needs to be clarified: *spirituality* and *the supernatural* are often used interchangeably, but in reality, both words are generally unrelated to each other. While there are cases where a spiritual belief might carry supernatural elements, this once again hinges on the subjective, cultural understanding. Referring to the concept of ancestors watching over their family, deceased ancestors may return to the world of living with tangible influence, which would make them akin to the ghost or a spirit in western myths – which are rarely mentioned to be a part of a Christian spirituality. The same applies to the reverence of ancestors – while they are respected, they are not worshipped in the same way, nor do they have the explicit ability to appear and interact with the world of the living, though they are still believed have an effect on the traditional healers of the Xhosa.<sup>4</sup> So, in the case of Xhosa traditions, both spirituality and the supernatural are both valid terms as ancestral spirits, viewed through European lenses, do count as supernatural beings while existing as subjects of reverence in Africa. It was because of this duality of meanings that thesis opens with a definition of spirituality despite the name of the thesis mentioning the supernatural forces.

Aside from the established concepts, this thesis will also examine the beliefs of the novel's author, a renowned South African writer (among many other things) Sindiwe Magona who has a lifetime of experience with writing books that offer the reader a glimpse into the daily lives of African women - her books often feature African women as the protagonist, each carrying a part of her own story of growing up in Africa during the times of apartheid. Her autobiographies *To My Children's Children* and *Forced to Grow* then offer more insight into her own life and spirituality as she was raised with both Christianity and the traditional African beliefs, which bleed into the events her novels. Due to the choice of the protagonists, a very common theme of her books is womanhood and the general lives of women in Africa during those troubled times – this is presented in her other three novels: *Mother to Mother*, *Beauty's Gift* and *When the Village Sleeps*. This is further accompanied by the inseparable spirituality which permeates throughout her stories. Her bibliography does not end here as she has also written numerous children's books, essays, stage plays and various short stories. To top Sindiwe Magona's list of accomplishments off, her works earned her several awards: in 2007 Magona received 3 - the Grinzane Award, Molteno Gold Medal, and the Lifetime Achievement Award; in 2009 her second novel *Beauty's Gift* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in

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<sup>4</sup> Dianne Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher* (Cape Town: New Africa Books 2013), 27.

Africa, and she has also received the Order of Ikhamanga in Bronze Presidential Award in 2011. and she was a joint winner of the 2012 Mbokodo Award for South African women involved in art.

## **I. THEORY**

## 1 POST-APARTHEID LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview how the South African literature developed after the fall of the apartheid.

Apartheid was a system of a state enforced racial segregation that was present in South Africa from the year 1948 to 1990s. Even though the novel is set between the years 1939 and 1989, which places the events of the novel into the era of apartheid, the themes in the novel do not fully reflect this time period and are more closely aligned with date that the book was written in, which was long after apartheid had fallen. Written works from the post-apartheid era tend to carry themes focused on the contemporary situation and topics in South Africa, though some still include the apartheid themes as a reminder of the past and because of that, the works from these era can be very similar in their content.<sup>5</sup> To elaborate on these newly emerging themes, these are generally focused on identity, and they include topics like feminism, domestic violence and diversity.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, post-apartheid literary works have dystopic themes as the nation is still recovering. Another important theme to mention is self-discovery and life in a community, presented through various rites of passage. The Rite of Passage (*Les Rites de passage*) was a study conducted by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 that identified 7 stages of a person's life or the life of a community.<sup>7</sup> These stages were birth, entry into family life, entry into school, entry into fertility, entry into parenthood, exit from parenthood and exit from life.<sup>8</sup> Each and every one of these phases of a person's life has various customs attached to them.<sup>9</sup> These customs are often portrayed in the novel itself, allowing the reader to learn more about the traditional customs.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephane Serge Ibinga, "Post-Apartheid Literature Beyond Race," *This Century's Review* 4, no. 6, accessed April 30, 2024. [http://history.thiscenturysreview.com/post\\_apartheid.html](http://history.thiscenturysreview.com/post_apartheid.html).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Heywood, *A History of South African Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Xhosa," South African History Online, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/xhosa>.

## 2 FEMINISM IN SA LITERATURE

Another important concept to consider while talking about a South African literature (with some mentions of Africa as a whole) is feminism and the role of women both in the societies and among the writers. The importance of this topic was hinted at during the introduction as the novel was written by a woman with feminist ideas and features several strong female characters with two of them also existing as protagonists both in the early chapters, which are from the point of view of Shumikazi's mother and then from the point of view of Shumikazi herself. Female authors have always been present and influential regarding the South African novel, and it is because of so many female authors that made great contributions to the development of modern South African novel literature even despite the male-centric environment they live in, that we can see the literature flourishing in the present day. A lot of their early contributions were a result of changes within their societies.<sup>10</sup> And following the year 1976, they made up a large chunk of written prose.<sup>11</sup> As with many other written works of Sindiwe Magona, *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle* is very interesting in this regard as the novel puts a great emphasis on what it means to be a Xhosa woman growing up in a largely patriarchal society while subtly criticizing antiquated practices that are often still practiced – such as bridal kidnapping and rape. The theme of independence is present throughout the novel: from her expensive education that is paid for by her father Jojo to her being written as his heir with all of his cattle then belonging to her despite his brother's protests (though the latter act ends up being reversed as the novel continues). This further extends to the end of the novel where Shumikazi decides against marrying again and instead chooses to rebuild her old childhood home. And unsurprisingly, Sindiwe Magona is not the only writer heavily incorporating feminist themes into her works: examples include Ama Ata Adoo, Buchi Emecheta and Amma Darko.<sup>12</sup> But the exploration of feminine power was not limited to women only as some the pioneers of such literature were men, namely Ousmane Sembène and his 1960 novel *God's Bits of Wood*.<sup>13</sup> However, what is also interesting is that the term “feminism” is actually not very popular in Africa despite the themes of it appearing quite regularly.<sup>14</sup> There are several reasons for that: first, there is still a stigma – or rather a misconception – regarding

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<sup>10</sup> Irele, *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Heywood, *A History of South African Literature*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> Irele, *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Irele, *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 17

the idea itself. Susan Arndt states that feminism is often used interchangeably with radical feminism which makes many people (especially men) think that feminism is about hating men, rejecting the traditional African womanhood, and destroying the gender roles.<sup>15</sup> Therefore they are worried about their lives changing in a drastic new direction. However, even women are apprehensive about this belief. Not only it tries to change the status quo of the largely patriarchal society, it also threatens to deprive African women of some rather unique examples of power over their family that is rooted in tradition.<sup>16</sup> What is more, critics believe that African women do not need to be liberated at all as they have an important position in the society combined with the claims that the women are free as they are thanks to the strong personalities of many African women.<sup>17</sup> If anything, it was colonialism and the changes in culture that got rid of the traditional positions of power for African women – and therefore assigned them societal positions as caretakers while robbing them of their freedoms. Some of these elements can be seen in the novel, though it also shows some of the more patriarchal traits of the culture. The critics even believe that African women lived their lives in accordance with the feminist ideals long before the idea of a modern feminism appeared. Further arguments against feminism include a belief that the followers of it are just copying Western Feminists by following an ideology that aims to erase the idea of African nationality, especially since it originally came from the outside world.<sup>18</sup> However, even with these criticisms towards the form feminism takes, the idea itself is not unwelcome despite the western influence behind it, as it was at the very least inspired by the western movement.<sup>19</sup> Looking into the concept of feminism as the western culture knows it by now will reveal one of the glaring issues of White Western feminism: it does not quite cover all of the issues that African women face. Or rather, it does so in theory with a concept called “the triple oppression” which includes oppression based on gender, class, and race.<sup>20</sup> But while it exists, attempts at stopping the oppression of the “race” was never truly done in practice beyond some acknowledgements of the situation. That is not all, however, as the issue of race is commonly cited as one of the reasons of rejecting the White Western feminism: the ones “leading” this movement are also the ones

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<sup>15</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 25-26.

<sup>20</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 28.



directly benefiting from the systems that oppresses the people of Africa.<sup>21</sup> And because of this, the label of a feminist is often forgone in favour of more local variants that, while with a different name, do have the same goals – emancipation of women.

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<sup>21</sup> Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 29.

### 3 SINDIWE MAGONA

As was stated in the introduction, each of Magona's novels carry a part of her own life in them, thus making her biography important to the context of her literary works.

#### 3.1 Childhood, Education and Early Adulthood

Sindiwe Magona was born on August 27 in the year 1943, in a rural region called Transkei. Despite being born into relative poverty, her childhood was happy as she had the support of her entire family and also because her place of birth had the abundance of food.<sup>22</sup> While initially, mainly thanks to her rural home, she was unbothered by the racial segregation and the oppression that comes with it, did have an impact on her as her family later moved into a city. Her happy childhood is one of the more commonly recurring themes in her works and it also appears in this novel, though one would struggle to call the childhood of Shumikazi (the novel's protagonist) perfect. Magona was born into the Tolo clan, which is a name that appears in the novel as it is also the clan of Shumikazi's father. And the resemblance does not end there, as – just like in the early parts of novel – Magona's father spent more time in the mines than with his family.<sup>23</sup> In 1947, due to the illness of her mother and the passing away of her grandmother, the family was forced to move to Cape Town to get treatment for the illness.<sup>24</sup> Magona's own writings about this period of her childhood are scarce, it is certain that it was here that she first encountered oppression as this was during the times where the policies of apartheid became more prominent. After moving into the city, they moved into a rundown shack that further highlighted the poverty of rural Africans.

In her childhood, Sindiwe Magona was also influenced by the blend of the traditional ancestral worship with Christianity. She witnessed the clashing beliefs along with their coexistence. She states that when her aunt died, her mother blamed it on the witchcraft while believing that God would punish those, who were responsible.<sup>25</sup> Magona herself claims to be closer to Christianity as her father was described was a preacher of the Anglican church, though she also gives an example of a traditional Xhosa treatment that is supposed to ward off illness, which was performed on her by the wish of her father.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 68.

While Magona initially failed her high school in Form Three, her parents were able to get enough money to send her to the Catholic boarding school of Lourde, which also makes an appearance in the novel.<sup>27</sup> Following the successful finishing of this school, she moved onto the St. Matthew's Teaching College to obtain a certificate that would allow her to teach in primary school.<sup>28</sup> However, while she was successful in this endeavour, she was unable to go straight into teaching and she was forced to take up a menial job in a fishery. Despite this rough start of a working life, Magona was soon able to start teaching in a woefully underfunded and overcrowded Hlensiga Higher School in Nyanga.<sup>29</sup> Her career was cut short, however, when she got pregnant with poor labourer called Luthando. She quit her job, and she was forced to marry the man. Soon after giving birth to her first child, she tried to find a new employment in a different field as, because of the fact that the traditional marriage ceremonies were not recognized by the state and thus the child that was legally born outside of marriage, she was unable to return to teaching. Once more Magona returned to manual labour, this time as a domestic worker.<sup>30</sup>

Once Magona got pregnant with a second child, she and Luthando got officially married in a civil ceremony, though this marriage does not last long as Luthando went to visit his family for three weeks only to not return after the time elapsed.<sup>31</sup> Instead, he started sending letters that claimed that he was working in Johannesburg mines, though he never sent any money back. It was after this abandonment that Sindiwe Magona turned to the Christian faith, allowing it to rekindle her hopes.<sup>32</sup> Now with 3 children, the entire village of Guguletu helped her take care of them. And to top it all off, she once again found employment in education at Fezeka Secondary School.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.2 America and the Early Writings

Sindiwe Magona's next major milestone was the opportunity to teach at a prestigious Herschel Girls School, located in a white suburb. In 1978, she was also selected for a visit of the United States for 6 weeks.<sup>34</sup> 3 years later, she would return to the States, but this visit

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<sup>27</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 81.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 143.

would be a long-lasting one. She received her Master's degree at Columbia University in New York City and after a fraudulent employment offer that promised a post in East London back in her home country of South Africa, she was offered a job back in the United States – and it was a job under the United Nations.<sup>35</sup> This position allowed her to continue with her anti-apartheid activism and, what was equally as important, it allowed her to write.

Her first written work is an autobiography called *To My Children's Children*, which was written in 1990. As with many other autobiographies written before 1994, Magona's autobiography is about taking ownership of one's life and finding a personal identity through the writing.<sup>36</sup> Her next piece of writing was a short story *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* that was published in 1991. It was followed by a second autobiography of hers, *Forced to Grow*, which was published in 1992. She is also responsible for the Xhosa translation of her first autobiography and the translation of one of her children's books, *The Dove*.<sup>37</sup> Her other works include Xhosa textbooks *Teach Yourself Xhosa* and *Clicking with Xhosa: A Xhosa Textbook* written in 1999 and 2001 with her next narrative driven work being a collection of short stories called *Push-Push!* However, her next major project was the novel *Mother to Mother*, as the events of the book are based on what happened to her childhood friend as one of her sons murdered a white student.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.3 Return to South Africa

Sindiwe Magona returned to South Africa in 2003 after 20 years of living in the United States and she hopes to help transform the newly changed nation.<sup>39</sup> Ever since her return, she has written several new books in both English and Xhosa and saw some of her literary works to be translated into Italian.

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<sup>35</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 178.

<sup>38</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 210.

## **II. ANALYSIS**

## 4 THE STORY OF SHUMIKAZI

Now that the historical context relevant to the novel has been introduced, the importance of feministic themes and the perception of it explained, and the author properly this thesis will now move onto the main course – the novel and its' themes. As was stated in the introduction, beyond the frequent feminist themes, the novel puts a great emphasis on religion, spirituality and superstition that sometimes clash with the explicit supernatural elements.

Since not everyone may be familiar with this novel, I will now include a summary of the events that happen in the story.

### 4.1 The Quick Summary of the Plot

The first narratively important part of the book is the prologue, which presented by an internal monologue from the point of view of the protagonist Shumikazi as she returns to her childhood village of Zenzele, thinking about what was taken from her and what an internal monologue of Shumikazi's mother Miseka thinking about her 10th pregnancy. This mainly serves to establish Shumikazi as a child that was long waited for all the previous children died young with Miseka hoping that this time would be different. During this section, Sindiwe Magona explains first pieces of Xhosa traditions with names of the deceased becoming forbidden to be uttered or used again, as its' usage implies that the person calling out the name was connected to the passing. During the introductory chapter 'Cluck,' the reader gets a glimpse of the village life in South Africa while learning about the first hints of supernatural connected with the ancestors – the rumours spread by the villagers as to why is Miseka so unlucky regarding her pregnancies. They are sure that such suffering can only be caused by either the unhappy Ancestors or by a curse. Her husband Jojo also returns from his work in the mines to stay with his pregnant wife. Miseka eventually gives birth to their daughter named Shumikazi. However, Miseka dies soon after the birth, entrusting the child to Jojo who raises the girl with the help of Miseka's own mother Manala, partially because he must leave for the mines again. To the surprise of the village, Manala is able to breastfeed the child, which she claims is a gift from the ancestors. At one point, Shumikazi is taken by some of the other children from the village to a nearby dam that they are forbidden to swim in as it is deeper than it appears. In this outing, Shumikazi nearly drowns and is only saved when a nearby woman notices her while washing the laundry and tries to save her. While she manages to do so, she unfortunately drowns herself, which prompts the villagers to connect her survival to

what happened when she was born, speculating that she either has some unnatural protection or is accompanied by an evil spirit. Every year (and later every 6 months) the family is visited by Jojo. During one of his stays, he notices that when Shumikazi was playing with her dolls and pretending to feed them, one of the dolls was not fed and only had some food smeared around the mouth, which unsettles Jojo. His fears are justified as one day, when Manala leaves the house, her daughters-in-law decide to cook some of Manala's chickens without her knowledge nor approval. They give very little to Shumikazi and only smear some of the fat around her mouth to make it look like she was given something during their feast, which makes her cry and run away to hide in the hut. To their surprise, Manala comes back earlier than expected and chastises them, not believing their claims of giving some meat to Shumikazi. During the following night, the three children that were fed die, presumably because of the meat they ate. When Jojo visits next, he is horrified by that and decides to leave his work to live off the land instead, taking his daughter with him. He also makes the decision to fund Shumikazi's tuition, allowing her to study further despite the protests of his brothers. Sometime after this, Jojo's sister Funiwe returns from an abusive marriage and while the brothers are reluctant to accept her back into the household, both Jojo and Shumi do so anyway along with bringing up the case of her abuse to the Great Palace, which they win. What also happens roughly during these events is that Jojo decides to transfer the ownership of his cattle to his daughter, which spurns many men into courting her. Shumikazi's uneasiness turns into fear as during one of the trips up into the hills with some of the women from the village she is stopped by a rockfall along with what appears to be a spirit of her mother, urging her not to go there. She does not go and later finds out that one of the women there was kidnapped to be a bride. Shumikazi visits her grandmother; however, she leaves very soon as one of her uncles tries to get her together with one of the boys, which angers Shumikazi. She returns the following week as her grandmother has fallen ill. They spend her last night together talking about her childhood. Soon, Shumikazi starts attending the prestigious Christian boarding school of Lourde while returning during the holidays. One night in the latter part of the school year, Shumikazi gets a vision she initially believes is a memory of her mother's wedding, however she recognizes that the man in the dream is not Jojo and wonders about who that was. After she returns in December, she learns that her father has grown ill because of his past work in the mine. The family is visited by a group from the Ncembe village as one of the young men from there, Sandile, is looking for a wife. Jojo tells them to come next week along with the man himself to talk about the proposal. The

men from Ncembe agree with the condition that Shumikazi will finish her studies first before marriage and they set a date for another meeting where they will bring cattle to be given to Shumikazi's family. She then meets with Sandile and realizes that he is the man from the dream, thus foreseeing her own wedding. Shumikazi returns to her school, though she is concerned about her father's failing health and proposes transferring to a school that is not as far, an idea that Jojo refuses. His health worsens in a span of 4 months but not wanting to distract his daughter from her studies, he does not tell Shumikazi about it. She is only notified when he is on the deathbed, passing away soon after her arrival. She returns to the school after the mourning period is over and is comforted by the Mother Superior, Sister Ainè. During their talks, Shumikazi envisions the Sister as her mother while praying. Thanks to this encouragement she manages to successfully pass her exams, however her education is cut short when the two families decide to have the marriage now instead of later. Before the ceremony happens, Shumikazi makes the decision to transfer the cattle so that it stays in the Tolo family instead of bringing it to the new family she is about to be married into, which displeases the new family – aside from her husband and his father. She is given the name No-orenji. The marriage ends up being a happy and a successful one as Shumikazi and Sindile proceed to have several children (a daughter and two sons), which earns her the respect of the family. Their plans for a fourth child are ruined when tragedy strikes – Sindile dies in a mine accident. Few months later, her parents-in-law propose that she marries their youngest son Sondlo. She tells them to wait as she thinks about it, deciding to go back to her childhood home of Zenzele instead while leaving her children behind for the moment. Before she returns, she learns of the betrayal of her uncle Welile that has kept a letter from the Lourde as a secret, as this letter would allow Shumikazi to return to the boarding school free of charge. Upon returning, she finds Jojo's homestead barren and in ruins, her uncles uncooperative, having lost most of the cattle. She has to rebuild, and she does so with the help of the entire village that is happy to see her, soon restoring the farm to its' former glory.

## 4.2 The Supernatural Elements

*Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle* is a story that incorporates elements of traditional Xhosa religion into the narrative, portraying a story that is both grounded and fantastical. This chapter is divided into 3 sections as focuses on a specific element that within the traditional Xhosa religion. These will also be accompanied with quotes from the book that portray such events along with the interpretation of these events. Furthermore, I will



include a description of the related Xhosa custom that is associated with it. These 3 sections are named as follows: **The Influence of Ancestors, Healers and Witchcraft**, and **Sangoma's Visions**. The main belief that appears with a supernatural twist is the belief in ancestral spirits, therefore the first section will cover the way they are presented and in the novel. The second section will delve deeper into the concept of the traditional healers of Xhosa. And the third elaborates on the previous section by covering the abilities of these healers.

#### 4.2.1 The Influence of Ancestors

Beginning with arguably the most important part of the Xhosa folklore that is also one of the more commonly appearing themes of the novel: the Ancestors and their power over the living. In the novel, this mainly manifests in the form of Miseka (and possibly more members of her family) that seemingly shield her daughter from harm on several occasions and overall acting in her benefit. The novel itself only ever refers to Miseka as the leading example of the ancestral force besides one other mention of an ancestral visit, this time from the side of Jojo's ancestors. It can therefore be said that the mother's love for her child has transcended the boundaries of the living world and that she now assists her daughter even from beyond the grave. However, even though the novel presents most of the appearance of ancestral influence throughout the story in a positive light, it also offers mentions of their influence having the ability to be detrimental. The very first mention of the ancestors and the power that they can have can be even seen in the first chapter 'Cluck', where the potentially harmful disposition is shown through the quote: "Suffering was the woman's lot, and such consistent, unforgiving loss surely pointed to some custom neglected; Ancestors unappeased or witchery,"<sup>40</sup> Here, the ancestors are mentioned as one of the possible causes of the deaths of Miseka's children. Since the novel does not elaborate on what has previously happened in her life that would warrant such a reaction from her ancestors, the true cause of these deaths is left open. The only present indicator of something that the ancestors could be displeased is the fact that Miseka was a Christian, which was something that even her own mother Manala often criticised. This appears in the novel through the dichotomy of the representatives of the two faiths that are present in the village. The Red Women, who represent the traditional Xhosa beliefs on one side with the devout followers of Christ on the other, who are also referred to as "the pierced ones."

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<sup>40</sup> Sindiwe Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle* (Cape Town: Seriti sa Sechaba, 2016), prologue, Kindle.

This is somewhat supported by the fact that, upon learning about Miseka's pregnancy, the Red Women came to help her with household chores as opposed to the church women who only came to offer prayers and to feast on the food that Miseka prepared for them. The Red Women, who were not even aware of any of the Commandments that would enforce their behaviour, helped Miseka when they noticed that she was pregnant. The reason for their actions was the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which Magona describes as the philosophy of "being human."<sup>41</sup> The word *ubuntu* stands for 'truth, love and humanity' and the philosophy itself functions as a foundation of South African identity.<sup>42</sup> The theme of religion and how it influences the lives of people also plays a role in the novel – religion has a great impact on Shumikazi's life and how her identity is presented.

The biggest representation of ancestral influence can however be seen after Shumikazi is born and Miseka dies during the birth. Throughout her life, Shumikazi got into several potentially life-threatening situations, all of which she miraculously survives unharmed. These situations are an important part of the narrative as they shape how her aunts see her. The perception of this "protection" evolves throughout the book as it keeps happening, as initially the cause behind these events is vague and unclear and the villagers (specifically the daughters-in-law of Shumikazi's grandmother) believe that they are caused by an evil spirit rather than any positive force. This belief makes them resent Shumikazi even more, which - given some of the events later – could be the catalyst for further acts of her ancestors. These superstitious beliefs were then the cause of more misfortune of both the mundane and supernatural sort, especially since women represent superstition at its' worst. The majority of the supernatural situations that happen in the novel fall under the umbrella of 'ancestral influence' and they will be listed as such.

As was stated in the introduction of this section, the most commonly appearing act of ancestral influence is the protection of Shumikazi from harm, since it happens several times during the novel. However, the first chapter gives the reader insight into the beliefs of Miseka and how she feels about losing so many children. As the thesis established that Miseka was a Christian, the possibility of her being tested by her God arises as, some time before she gives birth to her daughter, she makes a prayer to God: "Dear God, ever merciful Hear the prayer of your humble servant girl. Nothing is beyond your might; you part seas and Cause water to gush out of rock; deserts to bear sweet, juicy fruit. Bless my

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<sup>41</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 1.

<sup>42</sup> Duncan Brown, *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 237.

womb and the fruit thereof, this time, Lord, I beseech you And know this is granted for you are a faithful God!”<sup>43</sup> Because of this, Maseka might have chosen to give her life so that her child could live. The focus on Christianity remains even after that as, while growing up, Shumikazi is stuck between the two faiths – with her father representing Christianity and her grandmother the traditional pagan spirituality. And this divide is represented by the two different names that Shumikazi is known as. While she is with her grandmother, she is named Nokufa as Manala refuses to use the other name of Shumikazi that was given to her during the baptism. “Manala spat ... a long strong jet ... from between her incisors, right to the hut’s skirt, where wall meets floor, then she hissed: ‘To me, her name is Nokufa.’” She then explains why she calls her Nokufa: “‘She came with death, through death, by death: Nokufa.’” Nokufa is a name that follows the Xhosa custom of a name being given with relation to current events.<sup>44</sup> In this case the meaning is “death.” She rejects the name that was given to her by Jojo – Shumikazi – as she considers it an abomination of a name due to its’ meaning. The name Shumikazi means a “ten of cattle.” In this scenario, Manala is displeased with the name as it implies that all of the (now deceased) children were being counted and that Shumikazi is expected to join them: “‘Nibala ntoni, kanene? You both counting what, exactly?’”<sup>45</sup> And Magona explains why she feels that way: “Several times, loudly, she clapped her hands and remarked, ‘Yho-o! Yhoo! Yhoo! There is an abomination. When did people start counting graves? Counting graves and adding the living with the dead!’ And Jojo saw how the name appeared in the eyes of his mother-in-law. Was that how it would look in the eyes of the whole village: counting the living among the dead – abomination or omen?”<sup>46</sup> This quote then could explain the animosity of Manala’s village towards the child as it too was a sign of death, which would only add to the gossiping.

The contrasting beliefs of the two primary faiths in Xhosa can also be seen in the chapter ‘Bring the pail,’ where Manala is revealed to have been breastfeeding the little Shumikazi during her stay. Manala considers it a blessing from her ancestors so that she can she take care of her now motherless grandchild: “With her daughter dead, her breast remembered the ancient art of life giving. For this Manala thanked the Ancestors.” However, her daughters-in-law do not share the same opinion about this curious situation

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<sup>43</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 1.

<sup>44</sup> Dianne Shober, *Climbing Higher*, 70

<sup>45</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 2.

<sup>46</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 2.

as for them, it is a sign of evil: “But to her makotis, it was a thing unheard of, and clearly evil.”<sup>47</sup> The makotis (daughters-in-law) even go as far as to call it witchcraft. This then creates a parallel with the first chapter of the novel as the pagan Red Women were the ones that helped Miseka. And now it is the heathen Manala who is able to take care of the child while the daughters-in-law only make things more difficult for the child with their superstition.

The same chapter features an additional showcase Xhosa spiritual belief with Christian undertones, though more subtle than the previous example: Shumikazi finds a snake while in the hut, prompting one of the daughters-in-laws, Siziwe, to scream. Once Manala arrives on the scene, she is immediately concerned for both her granddaughter and the snake as she identifies the snake as a mole snake, an *inkwakha*. Believing it to be an ancestor visiting its’ kin, she realizes that it was there for Shumikazi. Xhosa clans do have their own clan (or totem) animals that represent their ancestors and recognizes the snake as the clan animal of the clan Ngwanya that is related to Shumikazi’s father Jojo. Indeed, the snake does not do anything to harm the child and is in fact consoled by the praises of the clan Ngwanya that Manala is repeatedly singing. This familial connection is confirmed in the next chapter, ‘The Call of Home,’ as Manala tells Jojo of the visit. His reaction to that can be seen in this quote: “His daughter had been singled out for the honour of a visit by the totem of his grandmother’s clan. Jojo batted back tears, quite overwhelmed by the honour the Ancestors had paid him through his daughter. He must give a feast, acknowledge their blessing. This child was surely a child of the Old.”<sup>48</sup> The ‘Old’ that is present here refers to the ancestors. However, when this situation is put into the perspective of Christianity, snakes are an animal that is most often connected with the Devil, which would make this appearance a sign of danger. Keeping that in mind, this ancestral visit may then very well a sign of how the traditional ancestral beliefs are starting to stick with Shumikazi, considering that she is not afraid of the snake at all – perhaps hinting the gradual acceptance of the traditional spirituality at the cost of “losing” her Christian self. And since the described animal is a snake, this portrayal makes this interpretation much more believable.

The theme of superstition and its’ negative consequences, which border on supernatural, are greatly presented in the chapter ‘Apron Strings,’ where the public perception of Shumikazi turns to worse. Referring to the theme of protection and avoiding

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<sup>47</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 3.

<sup>48</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 4.

harm, the next time Shumikazi was in danger, during a moment where the little Shumikazi followed the rest of the children to a nearby dam that they were forbidden from swimming in. Shumikazi is saved by a nearby woman while dying herself. This accident further fuels the superstitious views of the villagers as they once again theorize that she is accompanied by an evil spirit – or is on herself – while once more bringing up her mother’s passing at birth. Here, the supernatural element is more focused on what the villagers believe than what has happened in the reality, given the fact that are repeating the same arguments as with her mother’s passing.

And during the same chapter, perhaps the first true display of Shumikazi’s ancestral protection can be seen - or at least that would be one interpretation, based on the framing of this chapter. While once again the earlier occurrence is largely framed as an act of whatever evil entity that is associated with Shumikazi (as seen in the quote “What manner of child was this that killed her mother in her birthing? Look now! Look how she drowns another who saves her from drowning? What manner of child is this? Child or something else, something far from good? Evil incarnate?”<sup>49</sup>), the following event introduces the idea of a direct involvement of supernatural forces into the mix of possible explanations as now there is one specific interpretation that is offering itself to the reader. What is also interesting about the scene in the narrative context is that it is preceded by a different situation that foreshadows what will happen, though this will be explained in their own sections later. Referring to the events described in the summary, three children die after eating the meat from a chicken that their mothers cooked. The only surviving child was Shumikazi as she was not fed at all. While this could be attributed to a simple accident as in the previous case, the framing of this situation – with the victims being the children of the women who mistreated Shumikazi and bad-mouthed Manala behind her back while slaughtering the chicken without her permission – along with her grandmother coming back and then feeding her granddaughter some meat does give the whole situation a feeling of retribution. Especially since their mothers survived eating the meat unharmed, the interpretation of this occurrence being a divine (or rather ancestral) punishment for mistreating the small child becomes far more pronounced. However, that punishment only worsens the overall mood towards Shumikazi as once again she has once again avoided death while somebody else died as well. This is shown through more gossiping between the villagers: “Yes, the village remembered all the incidents in which Nokufa cheated

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<sup>49</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 5.

death by a hair's breadth. The death of her mother, a woman not a primipara; the drowning of Nhinhi, a grown woman trying to save a toddler from drowning; and now everyone gets sick, the little ones die, all except one. The littlest of them all. She lives. And who is that? Why, the same one who always seems one step, one leap, a mere blink of eye ahead of death."<sup>50</sup> But, given the fact that the last few chapters put a great emphasis on superstitious beliefs, the best explanation here is simple – it was an accident, and because of Shumikazi's reputation, the blame was put on her.

This chapter is also the one that goes more in depth about the other suspected reason behind her ability to avoid harm as Jojo thinks about what has happened. Moving past the more "worldly" part of his thoughts, he once again dwells on the correlation between her history and the names that she is known by: both Nokufa, Mother of Death and Shumikazi, the tenth child that is the only one to survive while causing her mother's death. This is summarized in two quotes that represent the superstitious gossip around her: "She is not alone, but walks with what cannot be seen. Some spirit so strong that she is protected from what kills others. Could it be that spirit wills the dying? Will the dying from which it protects this child?"<sup>51</sup> and "She is not alone. But walks in the company of some spirit, some evil spirit."<sup>52</sup> It is because of this that Manala considers giving up on raising Shumikazi as she is worried that the villagers would harm her due to her reputation. Jojo meanwhile keeps in mind the request Miska made on her deathbed: "*Please, look after my baby.*" However, it appears that it was Jojo's entire ancestral line that protects Shumikazi – the appearance of the mole snake seemingly aligned with clan Ngwanya along with the many times that she had cheated death may be the proof of that.

While many of these situations are framed like the spirits are the ones reaching out of their own volition, Shumikazi herself has a great connection with the ancestral spirits, namely with the spirit of her mother. On numerous occasions in the novel, Shumikazi claims that she can see or even communicate with her mother. The first instance of that happening is in the chapter 'Our Sister's Keeper,' where she says that her mother is happy that they are reunited, which unsettles Jojo. "I see her," she said quietly. "What?" "She talks to me, tells me things." The girl saw the shadow that crossed her father's face. "Don't be sad, Tata," she continued. "She is happy where she is." Eyes clouding, Jojo said, "You never got the chance to know her." The voice was heavy with sorrow. Shumikazi stood. A

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<sup>50</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

few rapid steps brought her before her father. Smiling, she took his hand and said, ‘But she’s always with me!’ It was a declaration.”<sup>53</sup> Jojo initially tries to reason it away with a thought that it was something the children were talking about in the school, though he quickly discards the idea. However, more of these situations follow. One of these scenes happens once Jojo’s sister Funiwe gets beaten up by her husband as Shumikazi comforts her father with a claim that she will be alright, prompting Jojo to remember talking with Manala about Shumikazi’s supernatural clairvoyance: “Jojo remembered. He remembered that which had so scared him so that, unconsciously, he had buried it deep down in his memory where recall was nigh impossible. But what Shumi had just told him had unearthed that buried fear and brought it up to the rude surface of the now. Manala had once, in a roundabout way, hinted at the child perhaps being fey, said she believed Shumi was clairvoyant. Shumi had also said things to him, he reminded himself: ‘Mama is always with me,’ she had said. And another time, ‘I see her.’”<sup>54</sup> This talk gets a follow up in the next chapter ‘I Accuse Our Brother,’ however this will be explained in the section **Healers and Witchcraft**.

The chapter ‘A Promise of Rain’ then proves Shumikazi’s claim to be true – and it adds a new layer of supernatural. As the group of ten women was ascending to the top of the hill while gathering wild spinach, Shumikazi – the last one in the group - is showered by a rain of pebbles. This also happens in waves: it stops when she stops, and it resumes when she does. The book states: “Up the mountains the maidens went; Ten in number. Halfway up, pebbles came flying down Sofly, gently but insistent, they came Shumi halted. She looked up, halted. When the climb she resumed Behind the others she had fallen But the higher she went, the more furiously The pebbles rained on her. Again she stopped – halted.”<sup>55</sup> Shumikazi realizes that these stones were not caused by a natural landslide – they were hurled. She realizes that it is a warning and looks up the hill: “Up, she looked. Up and and saw her Saw her mother Clear as clear can be. The mother looked down on her She looked up Looking at Mother – looking at her.”<sup>56</sup> Both Shumikazi and Miseka, her mother, were crying and the daughter does not follow the rest of the group up the hill. This turns out to be the right choice as a group of men ambush the women there to carry off one of them in an act named *thwalwa* – bridal kidnapping. As Shumikazi did not

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<sup>53</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 7.

<sup>54</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 7.

<sup>55</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

go there, she was safe and the villagers of Zenzele soon take note of that and start gossiping again: “But she, she who had not even climbed halfway up the mountain, knew. She knew. What had made her stop halfway and not go up with the others? The whole village wondered.”<sup>57</sup> Their talks include a phrase – *akayedwa*, ‘she is not alone.’ “‘They say that she had foreseen it and had turned away.’ ‘She was the only one nowhere near danger.’ ‘Akayedwa.’”<sup>58</sup> And they ultimately conclude that she is not: “‘Well, she didn’t eat what killed the other children’ ‘What did they eat? Has anyone ever said what exactly killed those children?’ ‘And how did she avoid what they ate?’ ‘How did she avoid being where a girl could be thwalwa’d?’ ‘Awu, it is true. She is not alone.’ And she wasn’t.”<sup>59</sup> And she indeed was not, as Miseka’s spirit now starts to play a larger role in the narrative, appearing multiple times in the following chapters.

However, this scene has another symbolic layer – it bears a striking resemblance to Shumikazi’s birth. It begins with 10 women (mirroring the 10 children of Miseka) ascending the hill and it ends with only a single one coming back safe thanks to her mother. 9 other women were walking before her and none of them was stopped. Only the tenth one was stopped – Shumikazi, who returns and whose mother turns away and does not follow.

Returning to the significance of her mother, the novel subsequently features more appearances of Miseka, who now fully embodies s Shumikazi’s guardian spirit and is her faithful companion. She continues to communicate with her on numerous occasions and sometimes even speaks through her: the same chapter shows a chat between Jojo and his daughter about a dress that Manala has given her. During this chat, Jojo reminisces about his wife, and he surprises himself by mentioning that he misses her: “Silence. Jojo felt weak at the knees. ‘Of course, that’s up to you,’ he said. Then went on, heard himself go on, say, ‘I miss her.’ Then surprise made him look up. What he saw then ... in her eyes, opened the eyes of his soul. Suddenly he knew. The eyes that looked back at him, her eyes ... her eyes! ‘I’m sure she misses you too,’ the girl who stood there and wore her eyes, Miseka’s eyes, said. ‘Know that she does.’”<sup>60</sup> And Miseka wants to visit her own mother, Shumikazi’s grandmother Manala: “‘She wants me to go see her ... see her mother.’”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



The desired visit includes more of Miseka's appearances as her grandmother shares the tale of Shumikazi's childhood – and this tale is brought to life by the will of her mother's spirit: "It was as though she were then that person, and whoever Manala mentioned was also there. Listening with her new ears Shumikazi heard with her grandmother's then ears. She also saw with her then eyes. Manala's voice had induced a kind of hypnotic state and Shumikazi swam the seas of time, effortlessly gliding from now to then and back again ... not at will but guided by benevolence of spirit. Her mother."<sup>62</sup> And it is here, in this retelling of her early life, that she hears her mother's promise: "'I will always be by your side,' the mother whispers to the new arrival in the heart in Jojo's chest. 'The greater your need, the nearer I'll be.' The whispers are immediate, sincere, and they are believable. 'I will never leave you alone – not when there is need or danger of any kind.'"<sup>63</sup> And this promise was kept as Miseka stayed with her daughter as a guardian spirit – or an angel, if we take into consideration the fact that they were both Christian and that the angels are supposed to carry unconditional love towards their wards in their hearts. And since the same is expected from the parents, Miseka is a fit for the role no matter which faith is to be represented here. Manala laments that she has no photos of Miseka to show Shumikazi, but her granddaughter reveals that she knows how she looks due to their spiritual connection, mentioning that she can see her. This revelation is followed by her mother making an appearance: "'I see her.' Manala frowned. She looked at her granddaughter, her eyes asking the questions her tongue could not. 'Not always ... but I do see her.' Just then, her mother shows herself. She is wearing the dress. Manala looks at Shumikazi looking at her mother, wearing the dress she'd come wearing that very morning. Manala smiles, cheeks dimpling, eyes twinkling, she smiles. 'Come here.' The old woman pats a spot next to where she sits on her isicamba."<sup>64</sup> They spend the night in an embrace just like in the times of Shumikazi's childhood. And during this night, Manala passes away. This contextualizes Miseka's wish to visit Manala as she seemingly knew that her end was coming. She wanted her own mother to pass away while surrounded by her family – and to allow her to see her daughter one last time before moving on.

Her mother is also with her when Shumikazi learns of Jojo's death. As the event shocked her so much, the Mother Superior of the Catholic school Shumikazi is attending, Sister Ainè, invites her to her office to console the young woman by speaking about her

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<sup>62</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

faith. She then starts talking about the God and his love, which she describes as such: ““A love that never changes, never dies.””<sup>65</sup> This is reminiscent of the promise her mother gave her, about always being with her. And as if to prove this claim, her mother appears in the place of the Mother Superior: “The eyes were first to change, blue-grey suddenly an unwavering brown. Then, right before her eyes, bit by bit, the figure of the nun filled, from old, hard and scrawny to a little plump, round and soft. The last to change was skin. Like that of a chameleon, Sister Ainè’s complexion slowly turned from light rose to berry brown.”<sup>66</sup> Miseka comforts her, and this gives Shumikazi the will to continue her studies and to finish her exams. The symbolism in this scene is centred on the role of a mother – just as the parents should be there to help their children, the religious Mother should follow the example given by the Christian faith to comfort those in need. This then gets combined with the spirit of Miseka manifesting to provide solace for her daughter.

Her mother is also with her when she decides to move back into Zenzele after the death of her husband. As Shumikazi (in this scene she is named No-orenji) is about to spend her first night in the ruined home, the spirit of Miseka appears before her to approve of this decision: “That night, No-orenji slept in her old hut on one of the izicamba she’d brought. She was not long in her blankets when she saw her mother who, smiling, nodded approvingly. The dream-awake made No-orenji happy. She was happy during it and happy waking up the next morning. She was certain she was on the right path, for it showed her mother pleased.”<sup>67</sup> The next day, Shumikazi visits the graves of her parents and asks them for help, which also includes her grandmother Manala. And the help comes in the form of the entire village (aside from her uncles) coming together in helping with rebuilding the farm, once more adhering to the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Miseka also confirms her presence during the meeting with her remaining family, after she starts feeling isolated: “She was all alone. Quite alone. And then, in a flash, she was there. *Never! You are never alone. Did I not tell you that? But you have to know, believe, that I am with you, feel my presence. Know what to do. Fight the good fight ... using your brain ... your mind.*”<sup>68</sup> Not only she has her mother with her, but the villagers are also here to help Shumikazi with rebuilding her life.

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<sup>65</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 12.

<sup>66</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 12.

<sup>67</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 16.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.2.2 Healers and Witchcraft

South African cultures have a long-lasting tradition of what is referred to as witchcraft that has only partially changed in the modern times – mainly by the appearance of Christianity which has labelled some of African traditions as witchcraft, promoting violence against those practicing those beliefs on account of superstition – something that can be seen in the novel itself, as was presented in the previous chapter. This is also contrasted by the surge of the modern “witch” movement of Wicca, which tries to push the perception of this belief into a different direction that is closer to how the traditional Xhosa healers are treated.<sup>69</sup> These come in two variations based on their area of expertise: herbalists known as *izinyanga* (or *nyanga*) and diviners, referred with the Xhosa name of *isangoma*. While the novel occasionally uses the term “witchdoctor,” it is not the only name for them that can be used as, for instance, Duncan Brown calls them “folk-healers.”<sup>70</sup> This thesis also uses a different term introduced in the novel – *sangoma*, though it is only slightly different and does refer to the same brand of a traditional healer. These doctors are commonplace even in modern day South Africa, where they coexist on a legal level and are often a viable alternative to those who want it.<sup>71</sup> So even though the term “witchcraft” carries a negative connotation that has been present even before the arrival of Christianity and refers to harmful practices, due to the name used by Sindiwe Magona, these traditional healers will be included in this chapter as their existence withing the traditional Xhosa spiritual beliefs plays a vital role both in the narrative and also in Shumikazi’s life. Some of these concepts pertaining to ancestors have already been mentioned in the earlier chapter, so the purpose of this section is to further elaborate on the concept of spiritual healers present within the Xhosa culture as these do play a relatively large role in the story.

The very first mention of witchcraft – specifically harmful kind - appears in the first chapter of the book, where it is provided as an alternative cause of Miseka’s long streak of dying children, which was already shown in the previous chapter of this thesis. The next time the novel brings one of these traditions up is right after Shumikazi is saved from drowning, where the reader is first introduced to the term *sangoma* as the family of the drowned woman visited a *sangoma* to inquire about the exact circumstances of her passing. This is accompanied by Manala attending the girls’ funeral in attempt to prove that her family did not use any witchcraft to harm their deceased daughter. Her reasoning is

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<sup>69</sup> Brown, *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, 133.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, 127.,

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, 2.

explained as such: “Her family was now bound to Nhinhi’s family by the tragedy of her drowning. They would no doubt consult a sangoma a day or two after the funeral, but she had to go to the funeral to dispel any suspicion her family had anything to do with the drowning – that is, anything underhand, such as witchcraft.”<sup>72</sup> The meeting with the *isangoma* herself is described in the novel from her point of view, allowing the reader to understand more about this specific kind of the traditional healers, who are also known as ‘the ones who know’<sup>73</sup> or ‘the ones who see.’ Interestingly, while Sindiwe Magona opens this section with Madlamini (the *sangoma* in question) sensing the approaching men and thus emphasises the supernatural abilities, the process of the ritual is described as something almost entirely devoid of supernatural – it is reduced to a pure guessing game as Madlamini is trying to piece together what happened based on the reaction of visiting men: “‘You have come because of a sad event,’ the sangoma says. ‘Siyavuma! Siyavuma!’ the men chant, clapping hands twice to accompany the word, swiftly repeated so that it sounds like a single double-barrelled word. The response is enthusiastic when what the sangoma says seems to them in the vein of their trouble. ‘It is about a beast, something you keep and value.’ The response is less than lukewarm. ‘No! No! No! Camagu!’ the sangoma now shrieks as one surprised or upset.”<sup>74</sup> This is further confirmed in the following quote: “She goes on, sometimes off the mark, but mostly on track. Finally, from her words, the men drink deeply. They are satisfied with her summation.”<sup>75</sup> The uncertainty behind this description is also highlighted by the choice of words in the sentence “‘‘Ukufa kusembizeni! Death is in the pot!’’, the visitors believe, are fully convinced, that she has ‘seen’ the evil that lurks somewhere about the family of the Krilas.”<sup>76</sup> Both the usage of ‘believe,’ ‘are fully convinced’ and the single quotation marks give the utterance an appearance of uncertainty. This is then contrasted with, as seen in the same quote, Madlamini making a genuine prediction that ends up being true: “Death is in the pot!” This prediction is related to the scene where the 3 children die after eating the meat from the chicken. However, she eventually comes to the “correct” conclusion, with or without the ancestral guidance. The concept of a *sangoma* is also explained with more details in this chapter a Magona describes the customs surrounding the visiting of a *sangoma* and what it entails: “As always, she lived three villages away. No one in his or her right mind goes to a

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<sup>72</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 5.

<sup>73</sup> Shoher, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father’s Cattle*, chapter 5.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

sangoma in his own village or in a neighbouring one. How can one trust the sangoma's truth? She or he may just be giving the visitors hearsay. No, common sense dictates that when trouble besets a family to the extent that its members need enlightenment, they travel as far away from home as possible."<sup>77</sup> As is apparent from the quote, only by visiting a *sangoma* living in a different place can somebody guarantee a truthful response. The quote also mentions how a person becomes a *sangoma* and why they should be trusted: they speak for the Ancestors. "What the sangoma tells them can then be trusted, a revelation from the Ancestors according to whose powers and under whose protection she does divination, for she or he has been chosen. This is not work one chooses. A sangoma is chosen, her powers bestowed on her, unasked, by the Ancestors who hold all power and knowledge hidden from mere mortals."<sup>78</sup> Being chosen by the ancestors is referred to as *calling*, or *ukuthwasa*, and it does play a minor role in the narrative in the novel. This section will now follow up on talk mentioned on the page 24: the talk about Shumikazi's supernatural gifts and what they might mean. Manala says this: "Something makes me wonder about our daughter.' 'Yes?' 'I hope she's not being called.' Jojo was silent for a while. Then, shaking his head, his eyes on the faraway Tsolo Mountains toward which they were riding, he said, 'I do hope that is not the case.' He wouldn't wish that on his daughter, of that he was certain. Being a witchdoctor was one of the hardest of fates possible. And for someone who did not even have a mother ... who would be there to see to all the ins and outs of that? 'I really hope that is not so,' he reiterated."<sup>79</sup> This is what gives additional meaning to all the supernatural occurrences that happen throughout the novel – Shumikazi may have been chosen by the ancestors to become a *sangoma* – specifically *isangoma*, the diviner.

### 4.2.3 Sangoma's Visions

The abilities of *isangoma* are many, however all of them could be summarized as the manifestation of ancestral influence. This section serves as a short elaboration on and justification of the claim that Shumikazi was chosen to become an *isangoma* by matching these abilities with the narrative situations.

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<sup>77</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 8.

Shumikazi's strange abilities to sense certain events that are coming, and her unnatural knowledge is established very early on in the story, in the chapter 'Apron Strings;' the former with her knowing that her father was coming home: "What the little one seemed to know, sense or feel was the coming of her father. Each time Jojo came to see her, the night before she was restless, crying and fretting. By and by, Manala came to see the pattern, clear as the new moon on a cloudless spring night."<sup>80</sup> Another occurrence is also related to the latter as, during her time in school, Shumikazi is able to predict a visit from the school inspector while possessing knowledge of things that she was not taught at school nor at home: "The next morning she told the teacher, 'Monday, the inspectors will come to school.' 'Oh?' the amazed teacher asked. 'Who told you that?' For once, Nokufa was stuck for an answer."<sup>81</sup> These feelings of anticipation only intensify throughout her life, later blooming into visions of the future. The best example of these is the dream-like vision of someone's that she gets once she is back in the school. This vision, accompanied by a feeling of a great weight being piled up on her with a voice of her mother telling her not to fight it. In the vision, she foresees her own wedding, though she initially believes it to be a vision of the past instead of the future as she did not realize that the person in the vision was herself and not her mother. This proves that not all visions of the *sangoma* are. Additionally, in most cases, these visions happen before or during sleep – the only exception is the strange "vision" Shumikazi receives near the end of chapter 'Wife' that, when compared to the other cases of seeing into the future, was no vision in the traditional sense – not only it was happening while Shumikazi awake, but it was also focused on an inanimate object. Quoting the novel: "It was the middle of an extraordinarily hot summer, rains so scarce that many whispered that the region would soon face drought. But one morning No-orenji noticed that on the bodice of her mother's dress, where it hung on a wire hanger from a crooked nail in pride of place facing the door, were two wet stripes."<sup>82</sup> It is said that, during a time of great drought, the dress has wet spots. And these spots are located exactly under the places where would be: "However, faithfully, come morning each day thereafter, the dress would show two distinct stripes of wet, on each breast, in line with where – had there been a face above the neckline – the eyes would have overflowed, would have spilt."<sup>83</sup> Shumikazi understands that her mother is trying to tell her something

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<sup>80</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 5.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Magona, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, chapter 13.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

and that whatever the information is, it is related to her. This is proven true as her husband dies – therefore these tears were a representation of her own incoming tears.

### 4.3 The Importance of Ancestors in Xhosa

The evaluation of supernatural events that are present in the novel points out several common threads between them and the Xhosa (or even South African as a whole) culture: the ancestors and their significance in the lives of the next generations. Here, these effects are presented in a more supernatural manner than they appear in the real life, though these represent the general beliefs of the people even in the modern day South Africa, where Christianity is a religion that is followed by the majority – roughly 80% of the population is said to be Christian.<sup>84</sup> Based on data from the year 2001 and 2011, this appears to be a consistent trend.<sup>85</sup> However, this does not stop these people from believing in the power of the ancestral spirits.<sup>86</sup> This, along with the fact that the traditional healers are legally recognized by the government, shows that their old traditions still hold strong. However, this does occasionally include practices that would be considered barbaric.<sup>87</sup> Their ancestors are an example of how a life should be lived, what is acceptable and what is not, they are their guides through their *sangoma*, and they tend to leave a lasting impression on the outsiders of the family, often making it so that their children are recognized by the things the ancestor has done.

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<sup>84</sup> Brown, *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> “Pocket Guide to South Africa 2011,” The Government Communication and Information System, accessed May 1, 2024, [https://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/resourcecentre/pocketguide/004\\_saspeople.pdf](https://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/resourcecentre/pocketguide/004_saspeople.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Shober, *Sindiwe Magona: Climbing Higher*, 69.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis was both about the supernatural elements present in *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle*, but also about the critique of superstition that drives many of the events present in the novel. It was about the clashing beliefs of the two most prominent religious beliefs and how they interact with each other. It is an expertly told tale with many layers, a tale of a woman whose life shaped was by both the old and the Xhosa traditions and expectations of her extended family. It showcases how no one is ever alone as it puts emphasis familial ties, one's community and even the presence of a higher being, be it a deceased loved one or a God, though it also shows that nothing is ever perfect as it carries hints of the dystopian situation in South Africa. But even with this, the supernatural elements are strong enough to truly carry the idea of a benevolent spirit watching over her child while allowing the reader to catch a glimpse of the Xhosa cultural intricacies: the traditional healthcare, the justice system and the customs while putting them at odds with Christianity that also has strong roots in the region. However, it does not provide preferential treatment to either of these beliefs as both are shown with their positive and even negative sides.



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