

The Ancient Wisdom in Africa

by
Patrick Bowen

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Spring, 1969) © World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

THAT Asia is the source from whence all philosophy sprang is a universally accepted belief; and that Europe is the custodian and preserver of the knowledge originated in the elder Continent will likewise be generally maintained. Few ever consider that Africa also was once the home of a learning as profound as any Asia can show; and few, if any, will believe that such learning remains alive today among the inhabitants of the Dark Continent. Yet that such is the truth, I assert, and shall endeavour to make clear in the following pages.

Many years ago, when I, a boy of ten or twelve years of age, followed my father's wagon through the wild Bushlands of the Northern Transvaal, Portuguese East Africa and Mashonaland, I met and gained the friendship of many Natives—principally Zulus—of the class known as Isanusi, a term, popularly but improperly interpreted as "Witch Doctor". Why those men, who with Europeans and even with their own people are always intensely reserved, should have favoured me with their confidence is something I do not, even now, clearly understand, yet they certainly did so. I recall a conversation with one of their number, by name, Mankanyezi (The Starry One), with whom I was particularly intimate, which impressed me deeply; so much so that I have never forgotten it. My father had declared his intention of placing me in care of a Missionary, in order that I might receive some education, and learn white men's ways. I repeated his words to Mankanyezi, who shook his head doubtfully on hearing them and said:

"Your teachers are doubtless learned men. But why do they strive to force their beliefs on us without first learning what our beliefs are? Not one of them, not even Sobantu,¹ knows anything of our real belief. They think that we worship the spirits of our ancestors; that we believe our spirits, when we die, enter the bodies of animals. They, without proof or without enquiry, condemn us, the Isanusi, as deluders of our more ignorant brethren; or else they declare us to be wicked wizards having dealings with evil spirits. To show how ignorant they are, I shall tell you what we teach the Common Man (ordinary Native). We teach that he has a body; that within that body is a soul; and within the soul is a spark or portion of something we call Itongo, which the Common Man interprets as the Universal Spirit of the Tribe. We teach that after death the soul (*Idhlozi*) after hovering for a space near the body departs to a place called *Esilweni* (Place of Beasts). This is a very different thing, as you can see, from entering the body of a beast. In *Esilweni*, the soul assumes a shape, part beast and part human. This is its true shape, for man's nature is very like that of the beast, save for that spark of something higher, of which Common Man knows but little. For a period which is long or short, according to the strength of the animal nature, the soul remains in *Esilweni*, but at last it throws aside its beast-like shape and moves onward to a place of rest. There it sleeps till a time comes when it *dreams* that something to do or to learn awaits it on earth, then it awakes and returns, through the Place of Beasts, to earth and is born again as a child. Again and

again—does the soul travel through the body, through the Place of Beasts, to its rest, dreams its dream and returns to the body; till at last the Man becomes true Man, and his soul when he dies goes straight to its rest, and thence, after a space, having ceased to dream of earth, moves on and becomes one with that from which it came—the Itongo. Then does the Man know that instead of being but himself, apart, he is truly all the tribe and the tribe is he. This is what we teach, I say, for this is the utmost the Common Man is capable of comprehending; indeed many have only a vague comprehension, even of this much. But the belief of us, Wiser Ones, is something far wider and greater, though similar. It is far too wide and great for Common Man's comprehension—or for yours, at present. But I may say this much, that we know that the Itongo is not the mere Spirit of the Tribe, but is the Spirit within and above all men—even all things ; and that at the end, all men being one in Spirit, all are brothers in the flesh".

Mankanyezi was a pure Zulu, of the royal blood. What his age might have been, I do not know, but certainly he was at least seventy, He was a tall, lean man, light chocolate in colour, of a distinctly Jewish cast of countenance, without a trace of the Negroid, with the exception of his snow-white hair which was frizzled. Both by the Natives and by the few white hunters who knew him he was regarded as a powerful magician, but only once did I get a glimpse of this side of his character.

A year or two subsequent to the talk above quoted, in company with a famous Boer hunter named Sarel Du Pont, I met Mankanyezi near the Limpopo River. "You go on a far journey", he said after some preliminary remarks.

"Only as far as the Zambezi", replied my companion.

Mankanyezi shook his head. "Much farther, I think. You will ere you again see this river visit the Great Lake of the North (Lake Nyassa). To the eastward of that lake, you will visit the springs of another river, and there you will meet one of my elder brothers".

"Indeed", said Du Pont, "if it should happen that we go so far, which is not our intention, how are we to know this brother of yours? I suppose he is not your brother in reality, but merely one in the Spirit, as you say all men are?"

"He is, as you say, not my brother in the flesh. I call him my elder brother because he is an Elder in the Family (Society) to which I belong, whose members are the guardians of the *Wisdom-which-comes-from-of-old*. There are many of us—one at least in every tribe and nation—throughout this great land. We are of many ranks, from the learner to the Master, and to those Higher Ones whose names may not be spoken, I am a common Brother; he of whom I speak is my Elder".

"But", I asked in some surprise, "how can you know this man, seeing you have often told me you have never travelled beyond the Zambezi?"

"I know him, because I have often seen him, though not in the flesh. Often have we spoken together. Do you think the mind of Man can travel only in the flesh? Do you think thought is limited by the power of the body? See this, and try to understand".

As he spoke he pointed to a lizard which basked in the sun, near by. Fixing his eyes upon it, he extended his hand, palm upward, towards it, and began to breathe slowly and regularly. In a few seconds, the beady eyes of the little reptile turned towards him. It took a little run forward, then stopped, its sides expanding and contracting, rhythmically. After

a few seconds' further pause, it again darted forward and settled itself upon the old man's open palm. He let it rest for a minute, then slid it gently among the leaves where it quickly concealed itself. He looked at us and smiled gently. "That is witchcraft (*ubutakati*) perhaps you will say", he said, "perhaps I sent an evil spirit to call the lizard to me. Or perhaps it is itself an evil spirit which serves me. If I tell you that my mind went out and entered its brain and our two minds became one, you will not believe. Some day, perhaps, you will understand".

Over a year later, near the source of the Rovuma River, to the east of Lake Nyassa, we put up at a Native village, and there met an old man (a Masai—not a Zulu) who greeted us as friends of his brother, Mankanyezi. From careful enquiries made by my companion, it became certain that this man and Mankanyezi could never have met. The one had certainly never been south of the Zambezi, and equally certainly the other had never been north of the river. Yet there was no question of their intimate knowledge of each other, a knowledge which could not have been gained second hand, for a thousand miles separated their dwelling places, and the tribes had no point of contact whatsoever.

About the time of Dr. Jameson's Raid on the Transvaal, I entered the service of the B.S.A. Co. (Chartered Company), and since then down to 1924, I was almost continually employed by one or other of the Colonial Administrations from the Equator to the Cape, always in some capacity which brought me in intimate contact with the Natives. Of the existence of the Society, mentioned by Mankanyezi, I received constant assurances, and once came in close touch with certain of its higher ranks.

Some years after the Boer War, I was engaged in work on behalf of the Natal Government, in a certain large Native Reserve,² in the course of which I was astonished to find occupying a remote, inaccessible valley, a small community of people—perhaps less than a hundred of all ages and both sexes—who were certainly not Zulus, nor, in fact, of an African Race I had ever seen. Had it not been for the fact that they lived the life of the Natives, and identified themselves in all respects with their Bantu neighbours, I should have said that they were members of some Southern European Race. In colour they varied a good deal, from the brown of a high caste Hindu to pure white. Their features were of pure European type, more uniformly classical indeed than is usual among Europeans.

The chief of this little community bore the Zulu name of Mandhla-langa (Strength of the Sun). He was a man of striking appearance, well over six feet in height, slight of figure, with wavy, snow-white hair, olive complexion and features which, with the exception of the cheek bones which were rather prominent, were almost pure Greek in type. Among the Zulus, he bore the reputation of being a supernatural being.

From the first, Mandhlalanga was extremely friendly towards me, and showed a desire to win my confidence. He gave me invaluable aid in the work upon which I was engaged, and that, eventually, I completed it successfully was largely owing to him. As regards himself, he remained for a time rather reserved, however. He and his people, he gave me to understand were Berbers, or rather Khabyles (he pronounced the name Kha-beel-ya, the "Kh" he pronounced as a guttural), from North Africa. But what they were doing five thousand miles from their native habitat, or why they chose to identify themselves with the Zulus, he did not explain.

Time, however, brought about a change in his attitude. One day I was speaking of the inexplicable manner in which news of distant happenings spreads among the Natives, when suddenly he said:

"Thought is speedier than the electric spark and needs no wires for its conveyance. All it requires is a brain to despatch it and another to receive it. Would you believe if I told you that I and others of the Brotherhood to which I belong can transmit our thoughts one to the other, no matter how far apart our bodies may be?"

This was a rather startling statement, but I recalled what I had learned from Mankanyezi. I replied, "Yes, I think I might believe that, but I should be more sure if you explained how it is done".

"To attempt to explain our science to you", he said, smiling, "would be rather like trying to explain the differential calculus to a child who is ignorant of simple addition. However, I am satisfied that you have a mind unclouded by the average European's prejudices and preconceptions, so, if you will, I will take you as a pupil and teach you the simple addition of our lore. Whether you ever reach knowledge of the differential calculus, will depend entirely on yourself. I can teach, but I cannot guarantee that you can learn".

After some consideration I agreed to become Mandhlalanga's pupil, and for a year continued under his instruction. Then circumstances arose which led to my abandoning my studies and quitting this portion of the country. I never again encountered my teacher, nor for some considerable time afterwards did I ever receive a communication from him. With another of his fellows, however, whom I met at that period, I have several times been in contact, and have received from him communications at infrequent, though regular intervals.

The sum of the information I gained from Mandhlalanga, during that year, is not very large, and I am so far from clear concerning its exact significance that I shall make no attempt at explaining it. I shall content myself here with certain extracts from the copious notes I made of his discourses at the time they were delivered and allow the reader to interpret them as he sees fit.

Mandhlalanga, I may explain, is a master, or teacher in the Brotherhood mentioned by Mankanyezi. He has travelled in Europe, Asia and America. He speaks English and other European languages perfectly, but his talks with me were conducted in the secret Bantu tongue, which to the ordinary Native has been dead for ages, and of the continued existence of which few Europeans are aware. In the following quotations, the reader must realise that many obscurities are probably due to the difficulty of rendering in English the exact shades of meaning.

Mandhlalanga deals as follows with: "The Riddle of Existence".

"The *Itongo* (Universal Spirit) is ALL that ever was, is, or ever shall be, conceivable or inconceivable. The *Itongo* is ALL things, all things are of IT; but the sum of all things is not the *Itongo*. The *Itongo* is ALL the power there is, all power is of it; but all power, perceivable or conceivable, is not the *Itongo*. The *Itongo* is ALL the wisdom there is, all wisdom is of IT; but all wisdom conceivable is not the *Itongo*. ALL substance, ALL power, ALL wisdom is of IT, and IT is in them and manifest through them, but IT is also

above them and beyond them, eternally unmanifest.

Man who is of the *Itongo* can never know the *Itongo* while he is man. All he can know of IT are certain manifestations which come within the range of his perceptions.

The pupil is generally taught that the manifestations are three in number. Namely:

1. Universal Mind.
2. Universal Force.
3. Universal Substance or Matter.

But really there are but two manifestations, Mind and Matter. What we call Force is not a separate manifestation. It is simply certain of the lowest, or grosser grades of Mind. *Force is simply that portion of Mind which endows Matter with Form.* It is that portion of mind which transmits the idea of Form to the higher grades where Consciousness dwells. Let the pupil think and he must see that this is so. Colour, size, shape, what are they? Simply light vibrations which when passed on to the Consciousness give the idea of Form. And what is vibration? It is Force. Heat, cold, hardness, softness, varieties of taste and smell are all vibrations, and therefore also Force. If you make Force a separate manifestation, then also must you make those planes of Mind which transfer the ideas of passion or emotion separate manifestations.

In the beginning of a Cosmic Cycle the *Itongo* first manifested in all the many grades of mind, downward into all the grades of Matter. But at first both Mind and Matter were unindividualised. When, how, or why, only the *Itongo* can know. Individuality began in the highest planes of Mind—those planes which touch on pure Spirit. Understanding of what occurred is best gained by the following conception. Think of the Cosmos, just before Individuality began, as a vast, amorphous ocean of Mind and Matter, its surface ripples and upper reaches, those planes of Mind which touch on Spirit; growing denser and denser, downward till matter, in Etheric form, is reached: downward till Ether becomes Gas, which may be likened to the mineral-charged lower strata of the ocean; downward till gases become liquids (muddy water); finally into solids (thick mud).

The beginning of Individuality in this Cosmic Ocean may be likened to the starting of myriads of tiny "whirlpools" among the ripples of the surface (the Spiritualised Mind). These "whirlpools" under the force of a growing flood-tide, extended deeper and deeper, till at last all strata were involved in the swirl. Thus we have Individuality set up, extending from Spiritual Mind to the Physical Plane. The "whirlpool" on the surface represents the birth of the Soul. Its extension to the muddy depths represents the Soul's descent into matter. In matter the Soul has reached the aphelion of its cycle, and now it begins its long, slow return journey. By the process of evolution it climbs slowly upward, from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, from animal to man; through all grades and states of human development, shaking off, slowly and painfully as it climbs, the gross accretions gathered during its descent; up through the lower mind to the higher, it climbs, till at last, its cycle complete, it merges with its source, the *Itongo*, and ceases to be Individual, being one with the ALL."

On Man and his destiny, Mandhlalanga discoursed thus:

Man is an individual, having in him, as has everything on the physical plane, all the attributes of the Cosmic Ocean of which he is an individualised portion. He has reached

on his upward journey the stage of personal consciousness. I speak of Man in general. There are undeveloped men whose personal consciousness is but rudimentary as there are others who have transcended personality and *know* their real Selves—that immortal portion first individualised from the lofty planes of the Spiritual Mind.

Man is on a journey, the goal of which is union with the source of his being—the *Itongo*. To reach that goal he must first pass through all experience the Cosmos affords, and must shake off all accretions accumulated on his descent from individualised Spiritual Mind into grossest Matter. To do this, he is born and born again, for his physical body dies, as do his lower mental principles; only his higher mental principles which are akin with the *Itongo* survive individuality bestowed upon them at its opening.

These are the Principles of Man:

- (1) The Physical body (*Umzimba*).
- (2) The Etheric Body (*Isitunzi*). This is merely the etheric counterpart of the physical body, and not really a separate principle, normally. But in certain abnormal states it is partially separable from the physical body. It is the medium through which the Lower Mind (or Force) functions.
- (3) The Etheric Body (*Isitunzi*). That portion of the Mind which shows as Life-force and other forms of what we call Energy.
- (4) The Animal Mind (*Utiwesilo*). The planes of Mind which manifest as passions, emotions, and instincts.
- (5) Human Mind (*Utiwomuntu*). The planes of Mind which manifest as human consciousness, Intellect, higher emotions, etc.
- (6) Spiritual Mind (*Utiwetongo*). The higher planes manifesting Spiritual Consciousness.
- (7) *Itongo* The Ray, or spark of Universal Spirit which informs all lower manifestations.

My teacher gave the following account of the Brotherhood in which he holds the rank of Master.

We call our Brotherhood, *Bonaabakulu abasekhemu*, using the ancient Bantu speech which is the mother-tongue of the most widespread group of languages in the Continent. The name may be tendered in English as *The Brotherhood of the Higher Ones of Egypt*.

The Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in the reign of the Pharaoh Cheops; its founder being a priest of Isis. It has as its objects the spreading of the *Wisdom which comes from of Old* among all races and tribes in Africa, and the study and practice by its members of what we call *Ukwazikwesithabango*, which means that science which depends on the power of thought. It is the only true science there is.

These are the grades of the Brotherhood and some of the powers and functions they

exercise.

- (1) The Pupil. The Pupil is one under probation which lasts from one to three years. During this time he is under instruction by a Master and subjects himself to certain disciplines. If found worthy he enters the Brotherhood as a Disciple, at the end of his period of probation. If unworthy he is dismissed back to the world.
- (2) The Disciple. The Disciple is an avowed member of the Brotherhood and subject to its disciplines. Under instruction he develops certain powers. That which in English is called "Mesmerism", is usually one of the earliest to develop.
- (3) The Brother. A full member of the Order with many developed powers, of which I may mention, only, power of communication by thought with those of equal or higher development, and what European occultists term *astral consciousness*.
- (4) The Elder. An advanced Brother.
- (5) The Master. The teacher of all lower grades. The Master has many developed powers (clairvoyance and clairaudience on the Etheric Plane, and control in a certain degree of Master, among many others). Mastership can be attained only by one who in a past life has reached Elderbrotherhood.
- (6) Those who know (*Isangoma*). Of these it is not permitted to speak save to say they have attained consciousness on the Plane of the Real Self. Only one who has reached Mastership in a previous life can gain Isangomanship.

Besides the above, we have lay Disciples and lay Brothers. They are men who are prevented by circumstances from becoming vowed to the Brotherhood. They are subject only to self-imposed disciplines and receive but such teaching as can be given from afar. We have many lay Disciples, not merely in Africa but in Asia, Europe and America. Lay Brothers, however, are but few, for without direct instruction from a Master few can reach this grade without incurring grave dangers. We constantly warn all unavowed Disciples against the danger of attempting to attain a brother's powers, unaided by the direct instruction of a Master.

Let it not be thought that our Isangoma, elevated though they be, represent the supreme development possible to Man on the Physical Plane. It is not so. There are others, not of any Brotherhood, save the Brotherhood of All. We call them Abakulubantu (that is, Supreme Ones, or Perfect Men). These are men for whom the necessity for rebirth has ceased. They dwell on earth in physical form by their own will, and can retain or relinquish that form as they choose. I speak of them but to assure the Pupil of their existence. Few, below the Grade of Master, have ever seen one in the flesh, though all, from Disciple upward, may meet them in the spirit."

Of the occult powers wielded by Mandhlalanga and his fellow Master, I saw several examples, but of these I do not feel at liberty to speak here. The reader has had, already, sufficient food for thought. I shall conclude with a rather cryptic quotation from Mandhlalanga on *The Source of the Brothers' Power*.

"Of the source of the power we wield, the Pupil can learn but little until he attains Discipleship. But let him ponder this much. I have likened Individuality to whirlpools in the Cosmic Ocean. But all that Ocean has not been cast into individuality. Between the "whirlpools", myriad though they be, stretch wide, smooth spaces, identical with them in composition. Now it can well be conceived that a "whirlpool" by setting up minor vibrations within itself may send out ripples through the smooth spaces which will strike upon and affect in some degree other "whirlpools". All the "whirlpools" are constantly doing this. Now suppose a "whirlpool" to have gained power to control its internal vibrations and to send them pulsating through the Ocean towards whatever objective it desires, can you not see that it may produce upon that objective whatever effect it desires? Now think of the "whirlpool" as being a Man. Is it not clear that by getting full control of the vibrations of his higher planes, he may despatch through the Cosmic Ocean of which he is a part, ripples of various kinds and intensities, which, according to their nature and strength, will produce effects on all strata, from the highest, which is of course the most sensitive, even down to the "slime" and "mud" of the depths. I give you this as food for thought, and bid you digest it well.

¹ Sobantu, Bishop Colenso—a great authority on Native Tongues.

² The confidential nature of the work upon which I was engaged and other circumstances makes it necessary for me to be vague concerning dates and places.