



## BLACK TWIN, WHITE TWIN

**MICHAEL:** This book is about peacemaking and healing by two initiates in the healing and peacemaking tradition that lies at the headwaters of African-American culture: the Bantu tradition of the water spirits. It is about shamanic initiation and the alliance with Spirit and spirits that the shaman relies on to do healing. It is about sacred illness and sacred healing. It is about living the shamanic life in the modern world among the poor in Africa and in an American teaching hospital. It is about the borderland between Western medicine and shamanic practices. It is about living the life of compassion and the stripping down to the elemental truth of oneself that makes such a life possible. It is about the blessed vulnerability of meeting the “enemy” as friend and teacher. It is about all of these things within the memoirs of a black man and a white man who recognize each other as twin.

The story of the twins was born of blood and fire. Mandaza came of age into civil war in Africa, the black majority rising up against the brutal white colonial government: Rhodesia in the sixties and seventies. For myself, a biracial white boy of Mexican descent, coming of age was about racialized anguish: the mean streets of New Mexico and, ultimately, Los Angeles on fire.

Blood and fire. 1992. Four white policemen caught on videotape viciously beating a black motorist yet acquitted by an all-white jury. For days the streets were filled with enraged Angelenos. Some called it riot, some called it uprising; for myself, it was simply heartbreak.

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All my life I had lived within the insanity of race. I had just published my first book, *Dreaming the End of the World*, about the geography of apocalypse as revealed in apocalyptic dreams. I began to wonder: What might white and black people's dreams about each other tell us about the geography of race, that subterranean and unspoken world within and beneath every American city? I began collecting dreams.

So begins one way of telling the story of how the twins came to recognize each other, in fact, a very Western way. Blood and fire—are we not, if we tell the truth, all born of blood and fire? Blood and fire and the anguish of history. The tears of ethical choice, the ravaged heart of a young man who desires to be a peacemaker and healer—he responds by researching a book on dreams.

Why do I call this a Western way of telling the story? In Africa it is said that God speaks the story of our life. The truer story is born of the Incomprehensible and lived in relationship to the Mystery, and when we are initiated and when we die we relent fully to the Mystery that gave us birth.

I must say that before I was called to Africa for the sake of peacemaking I had no special attraction to African spirituality. My ignorance was fully equal to the ignorance of most people in the Europeanized world. Africa remained fully the “dark continent,” teeming with (presumably) noble savages. I knew nothing and was ignorant enough to not know how very ignorant I was.

I was raised Catholic but was also raised within my Buddhist father's library: Dogen Zenji, D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Krishnamurti, Annie Besant, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Sri Aurobindo and *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. The Tao Te Ching and the Bhagavad Gita. These texts conveyed the

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voices of the elders. These *were* the ancestors. By the time I was a young man I had a passing acquaintance with the “civilized” world’s religions, with a special interest in the monastic, the contemplative, and the mystical.

As a teenager I began to practice Buddhism, the rigor of returning again and again to silence. The quiet lucidity of Soto Zen remains my spiritual practice.

Not very African.

I was drawn to my twin not through spirituality but on a current of dreams.

As the ashes of the riot or uprising dampened with the winter rains I was deep in looking at the patterns in African-American dreams and trying to understand the scholarship on the origins of black American culture. My psyche was split open, and every night I dreamt blacks, dreamt Africa. In the days I reflected on my long history with African-Americans and my gratitude and confusion.

It was then that I first dreamt Mandaza, though at the time I didn’t know it was he. An African man pointed to an unseen presence in a corner of his room and observed, “She says, congratulations, you have made it. It was very hard to get here but you are home now.”

It would be four very hard years before I met Mandaza and he said those very words.

Upon hearing them, I knew I was indeed home.

The first afternoon we were together, Mandaza told me that, in his own dream, he had searched the hills of the holy land of Matopos looking for his white brother, and his wife, Simakuhle, had dreamt that one of the sons of the family would soon return. When I suggested to Mandaza that our ancestors seemed to be getting acquainted, he said, “Oh no. They have

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known each other since before we were born. They arranged this meeting.”

The following day we began initiating each other, calling each other forth. This mystery of mutual initiation seems to be the way two shamans work when they see each other as twins. It was very much a surprise to both of us!

Who are they, these spirits?

Contrary to old fantasies of “primitive” and “heathen,” tribal Africans are profoundly monotheistic. And yet for them the world is also inspirited, rich with spirits that mediate the sacred.

In one variation or another, this is the common belief from culture to culture the world over. The poetry of the One and the Many describes the rainbow that is the human tribe.

In Christianity, Christ mediates. Catholicism has its saints, Judaism has its angels, and in Islam the ninety-nine names of God bridge the gap from the Nameless One to us, the named. In the Immaculate Oneness of the Enlightened Mind, the Buddhist Heart Sutra chants: “Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form.” The numerous Bodhisattvas draw the mind to utter Presence.

The community of spirits that Mandaza and I serve are called *midzimu* by his people, the Shona. Usually *midzimu* is translated as “ancestor,” which is accurate enough if one understands that in Africa ancestors are not merely genealogical, not merely a matter of bloodline, race, DNA, or even species. Ambuya Bwebwe, Grandmother Spider, is a *midzimu* to which Mandaza and I are intimately grateful. Mandlovu, the Elephant, has shaped our fate. These two come through in the activities of healing and make family and community across cultural and racial lines possible.

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Like the Holy Spirit that possesses a Pentacostal who speaks in tongues, like Christ appearing to St. Francis in the form of a leper, like Manjusri the Bodhisattva, fierce and precise with his sword that cuts through the delusive mind, the *midzimu* are Invisibles. Yes, this particular spider here, that elephant over there bear flesh and beauty, but the spirits of Spider and Elephant are met in initiation when one finds one's way into the village of the *midzimu*. They call, one answers and makes alliances. They come again and again in the daily life of the *nganga*, as a shaman is called.

For an initiated healer the Divine lives in the activity of healing. "Let me be God's hands!" prays Mandaza. In the Bantu languages, *God* is most certainly a verb. Not "Spirit" but the movement of Spirit. Not "spirits" but the activity of the *midzimu*.

The ritual tradition that Mandaza initiated me into, the *ngoma* (tradition) of the water spirits, is what anthropologists call a cult of affliction. The water spirits are the oldest layer of the ancestral world, long preceding the arrival of humans. Mandaza, quite literate in Christianity because of his missionary education under apartheid, says these spirits were born when the wind of God spread across the endless waters at the beginning: Genesis. They are the spirits closest to God, and they call the hapless to the practice of healing through sacred disease. The only cure for water spirit illness is initiation. Much of this book speaks of the twins being undone in Africa and America by sacred illness and being healed by reconciliation with the spirits that caused the illness. This reconciliation is one way to describe the initiation of a healer.

Initiation is commonly understood as an induction into a new society or state of being by special rites and ceremonies.

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In the African tradition, the initiation to become a healer is about reconciliation with Spirit so one's whole life might be hospitable to Spirit, so one's life might be a vehicle for Spirit in healing an anguished world. The Africans believe that it is not other people who are guiding the initiate, but the spirits. Other people simply mediate; and, in this ritual tradition, the initiate himself learns to become a mediator between the spirit world and the human world—or “the village,” as the Africans put it.

In this initiatory process, the *nganga* is the mediator. She or he relies on prayers, an implicit trust in Spirit, the old songs, an attentive ear to the initiate's dreams, a ritual imagination and a feeling heart to help cut the path for the initiate to find an authentic life of service. All cultures bear shadows. In America the shadow seems to be narcissism, the blind greed of “me first.” In Africa one is initiated for the sake of the world.

Several years before I met Mandaza, I stumbled onto the underground connection between Africa and America in the dream life of black Americans. In the introduction to my book *The Village of the Water Spirits* (Spring Press, 2006), in which Mandaza helps me understand black people's dreams about white people, I write of the night I began seeing African patterns in the dreams of a Mr. Cary, a prisoner incarcerated in upstate New York.

That long night I was riven with astonishment and perplexity as I shuffled between dreams and sheaves of xeroxed manuscripts on Bantu culture, and although I could not grasp the implications it was irrefutable that Mr. Cary was dreaming whites in exactly the same fashion that Bantu people have understood whiteness since the Portuguese first made contact with the kingdom of the Kongo in the fifteenth century. In

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other words, Africa has kept faith with African-American soul, in spite of the bitter historic realities of separation upon separation upon separation, black culture in America is an undeniably African culture even, if not especially, in the intimate matters of the heart.

“Bantu” is not an ethnicity but a language group. Bantu culture originated in the Nok region of Nigeria about 2,500 years ago. It then spread over a very large swath of the African continent from Cameroon to Kenya, from the Cape of Good Hope to Uganda. As I say in *The Village of the Water Spirits*, “Likely shaped by ancient Egyptian culture across the Sahel and the Sahara, there are many Bantu languages and many Bantu cultures, and at the same time, they make a fairly coherent whole. They are certainly united around the sacredness of water, and I know of no Bantu culture where water does not play a central role.”

The way blacks carried this coherence and the primacy of water to America through the transatlantic slave trade seems now both a mystery and an inevitability.

In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Melville Herskovits was the first to note, in 1941, that “the primary ritual in black Baptist culture in America, full immersion baptism, was African in origin.” Herskovits continues: “The intransigence of the priests of the river cult was so marked that, more than any other group of holy men, they were sold into slavery to rid the conquerors of troublesome leaders. In all parts of the New World where African religious beliefs have persisted, moreover, the river cult or in broader terms, the cult of the water spirits, holds an important place.”

The understanding of current scholars is that Bantu culture had an overwhelming influence on what was to become

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African-American culture. About forty percent of those sold in the slave ports of the American South were Bantu. Winifred K. Vass, in *The Bantu Speaking Heritage of the United States*, writes: "Bantu speaking slaves from central Africa enjoyed a linguistic unity and ability to communicate with their fellow captives that slaves of West Africa did not share." For the century before and the century after Emancipation, blacks were the majority in Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Mississippi.

I write all this in shorthand, the long sweep of history itself always rich with the unknowable. From Egypt, singing to water from oasis to oasis, to Nigeria and south to Central Africa, keeping cattle, working metal, initiating the boys, the girls, and those who were called to medicine. Then the sweep to the multiple cultures that were enslaved, Mandaza's Shona people at the eastern end of the Zambezi Triangle through the diaspora from the Congo and Angola to Charleston, New Orleans, Detroit, St. Louis, and south-central L.A.

By the time of our second initiation, Mandaza and I had entered into the eloquent give-and-take of the dance: initiation through dialogue. For one rite I would be his *nganga*, and for another he'd call on the spirits to initiate me.

"Remember, Michael, human beings cannot initiate other human beings. It is the spirits that do the initiation."

How to truly tell the story of twins born to different mothers, different races, altogether different worlds? How to wade into the mystery of twinship itself, to make clearer what is utterly mysterious? Utterly Mysterious.

Once Mandaza took me to the village of his spirits, deep in the rainforest alongside the Zambezi River. The village was a

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small grove of trees, a haven of monkeys and centipedes, certainly never a place of human habitation. I sang a song of gratitude for being welcomed; Mandaza left a little sacred snuff as an offering of “food” for the spirits and placed in my palm a pinch to inhale. Feeding the spirits: inner and outer were now apiece. “This is the village where the spirits of the twins were born.”

Being a new initiate, I relied on Mandaza’s eyes. I could not see the village and so inquired of the Tarot what God was wanting to convey here. The knight of swords imaged as the Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces, the warrior twins born to the mortal Leda and the father of the gods, Zeus. Gemini. One being human and the other a god, yet they were inseparable. When Polydeuces died, it was arranged that they would alternate, one day together among the gods of Olympus, the next day in the invisible world of Hades where those who have passed from this life live.

Mandaza received this old Greek story as if it were African: the visible and invisible interfused, twinned and twined.

The Dioscuri are the *midzimu* (or as a Jungian might say, the archetypes) that inform this book. The attentive reader will note the edge between Mandaza’s life and mine, the shimmering frontier where we connect and separate. She will note the edges between each of us and the Invisibles, also shimmering. The story is an intimately personal one, but this shimmering is not us. It is the presence of the Dioscuri.

Although Mandaza and I are twinned, it would be silly to impose an artificial symmetry between his story and mine or, more accurately, between his way of telling his story and my very Western memoir. Symmetry is immediately broken by

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the fact that autobiography is not a traditional African form. It took some effort to get my dear *mapatya*, my twin, to sit still and talk into my minicassette recorder. The fact that Mandaza's story is composed on the tongue while mine is sifted through the various layers of self-consciousness within which the written word thrives illustrates something of the cultural distance across which we recognized our essential twinship.

The Bantu shaman, or *nganga*, is a master of the word, and Mandaza is eloquent and charismatic in both Shona and English. The translucent direct statement is highly valued among Bantu people. One's cards are laid out on the table, nothing hidden. From that translucency a *nganga* like Mandaza evaluates his life in relationship to "the others"—those spirits that have called him to the practice of healing. And so his story proceeds not so much asking "What is inside of me?" but "What is the community of the living and the dead that I am inside of, that I serve?" As his apprentice, I have learned much from the agility with which Mandaza moves between various ethnic worlds—Shona, Ndebele, Bushmen, Tonga, Native American, European, Chinese, Hindu, and the worlds of the living and the dead.

My story is written from a different angle, the heart of the narrative asking "What is inside of me?" and "How is it that this vagrant soul became an African *nganga*?" I am an alumnus of psychoanalysis. The very years when Mandaza was being initiated by an old shaman of the nearby Ndebele tribe, I was writhing on the analytic couch beneath the benevolent gaze of Dr. John Seeley. The shamanic rite that is the heart of true psychoanalysis is a terrible descent by way of storytelling to the true stuff of one's interior life. Such a rite is not African, and becoming a *nganga* has not made me an African man.

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One of my pleasures with Mandaza has been the rich exchange between two different ways of knowing, two different ways of telling a story.

All this being said, we are twinned, from the nearly fatal infections we both acquired in our navels when we were babies to the displacements of our childhoods, from our Christian educations and later rejections of Christianity to our political awakenings during times of historical turmoil, from the ferocious ordeals that made us healers to that radiant moment when lives lived apart and parallel suddenly came together on the banks of the Zambezi. It would have been so much easier to write a book about Mandaza's life story or my own, but it seems that those twin brothers in the village of the ancestors who brought the two of us together have their own story to tell. Mandaza's story and my own interweave chapter by chapter so that between the two stories perhaps one story can be heard, a story that belongs to neither him nor me but comes from the spirits we serve.

This book is crafted as a gift to a world divided by race. That is its intent. Mandaza and I know the power of twinship across tribes because we are living it.

I imagine that you join us now at the side of the Zambezi River. As the sun goes down we gather dry elephant dung and driftwood to start a fire to keep the lions away. The green flicker of fireflies delights us, and the roar of Moziyatunya—Victoria Falls—is softened by distance. A long night of telling the twins' story is before us.

Thank you for accompanying us to this sacred place.