

BY J. H. BAKER

THE LONE LEOPARD

CONVERSATIONS WITH **JOHN LOCKLEY,**
XHOSA SANGOMA

I had a dream: a man came to me dressed in skins, and I could smell the herbs around him, and he had the most shiny black eyes. On my right was another man, a black man about my age. We were both naked and lying down, which is the traditional way of starting a sangoma training.

PETER MALSURRYI/PHOTOSTOCK.COM



THE EVENING

had closed in on the Bristol waterfront. Sitting in a dockside building once used by slave traders and now an upscale British pub, I was talking with John Lockley. He had long reddish blonde hair tied back into a ponytail. He had a thick, distinctive South African accent and an intent gaze. He was a taller man than I and had broad shoulders. I asked how he had been led to become a sangoma, a shamanic medicine man. As he talked, his soft voice was easily heard above the surrounding sounds of the pub. He said that looking back, there were many things that pointed in the direction of this path.

Lockley was born in South Africa in 1971. His Irish mother had been drawn to Africa to study wildlife. Shortly after she moved to South Africa she met John’s father, a third generation Zimbabwean of English descent. At birth John had a whitish mucous coating around his eyes that was striking. His mother said that he looked like an Australian “abo” or traditional aborigine. Many years later his teacher would see this as a mark of sangoma.

John said that in his teens he had very strong dreams. As he grew older he was drawn to helping people. In a deep sense he knew that to understand life he had to understand death. As is required in South Africa, he was conscripted into the South African military where he served as a medical assistant. During this time he saw death and great suffering. He listened carefully when a soldier from the Special Forces talked about dreams and how his people honor the visions and prophecies they receive through them. His own dreams were often intense and often about searching or trying to find something, but one was like a vision. He continued his story.

“This sangoma man had an animal on his arm and communicated by telepathy. Three times I asked him to teach me, and three times he kept quiet. Then he said, ‘I will teach you, but you must realize that there will be suffering.’ I knew suffering; I had seen much. I said to him, ‘If you don’t teach me, there is nothing more I can do with this life.’ He looked at me with those piercing eyes for a long moment. He agreed to teach me—and I awoke.”

Very soon after John had this dream he experienced one illness after another and one trauma after another including broken bones, being swept out to sea, and near death experiences. After each experience he would again get a vision in his dreams of this sangoma man. The illnesses and traumas continued for years, and his searching intensified. He understands now that this dream marked the start of the twelve years of sangoma initiation known in South Africa as the “Twaza.” At one point he traveled to Tibet to intensively study meditation and Buddhism, during which time he thought seriously about joining a monastery, but the African calling proved to be great. He returned to his South African home to study psychology at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

JB: How did you finally meet up with your teacher?

Lockley: During one class at the university, I was listening to a herbalist who knew the traditional ways of the Xhosa [pronounced “clo-za” with a click at the first syllable] indigenous people of South Africa. He made reference to the “ancestors under the river” and the “ancestors under the lakes” and said that these are the places where sangomas got some of their healing guidance. I was

stunned. Immediately after the class I asked him to arrange a consultation with a sangoma, a very good sangoma—one that he would send his own family to, and he agreed.

The day I walked into the village the herbalist sent me to I was the only white person among the people. We were in a township, and apartheid had just ended. I walked through the village to meet the sangoma. As I walked with my interpreter I towered over everyone, for the Xhosa are not tall people.

There at a hut was a short, very colorful woman. She was an elder and a revered sangoma of the Xhosa tribe. She told me later that when she saw me, fear came to her heart because she had had a very clear dream the previous night. She was shown a person from another culture whom she was to train to become a sangoma like herself. She told me that, as soon as she saw me, she knew I was the one, and I was a white man.

You know, typically a client goes to the

specialist and tells her his story, but during consultations with Xhosa sangomas, the client remains quiet and the sangoma describes the illness. I sat with her as she described my last seven years of illness and everything was accurate. She asked why I had not come sooner. I said, “Apartheid,” and tears came to her eyes. You see, apartheid went both ways. She accepted me at that time as her student and told me to return the next day. The following morning, I awoke to find a goat skin carefully placed at the front door where I was staying. This was remarkable because although it was fresh, the dogs had not taken it as they normally would. When I brought the skin to my new teacher and told her the story, she said it was a sign that the ancestors had accepted me for training.

I learned the songs and dance very quickly and naturally—for a white person I was a good dancer! The news of my teacher taking a tall white man as a student spread quickly through the townships. With the taste of apartheid so fresh, there was some curiosity, some reluctance and some hostility. During one visit the atmosphere at a particular gathering was very negative towards me. It was so great that we were very concerned. Before I knew it, my teacher had turned to the people and, in a huge voice, stopped them, saying: “Listen to what I have to tell you! Under the river, we are all the same! Cut my arm—red blood flows! Cut John’s arm—red blood flows!” And the people understood her. She was, and is, a very powerful sangoma.

Many times I traveled around with her to villages and ceremonies. There was a time when I had just finished a very powerful dance at a ceremony in the township. An elder, who was a prophet, came to me with tears in his eyes and said, “Today I have seen something. Today I have realized something. Today I see that white people have spirit. I never knew this.”

JB: You mentioned that this path is, in many ways, part of your lineage?

Lockley: Yes. My grandmother in Dublin was a great dreamer and prophet. Her name was Mammy Kelly, and at times she could see glimpses of the future. But the old Irish line or lineage, as far as dreaming is concerned, had been broken. I now see that in order for

this lineage to survive, we had to go to a place where the dreams are respected. I feel that this is why my mother was called to Africa. Through my own dreams and training in shamanism I carry my family’s tradition forward.

JB: You have been doing work in the UK for a few years now. Could you describe that?

Lockley: I am instructed by my dreams and my visions to bring forth a particular way of working with plants, working with the ancestors and working in ceremony to help facilitate people’s movement toward their own ancestors and spirit guides. I’ve offered various workshops designed to guide people. The participants are offered a traditional herbal face wash made of a number of local plants and are shown some very basic techniques based on rhythm, song and trance dancing. These are techniques used by the Xhosa to develop contact with the ancestors. It is not to be confused with shamanic training.

We also focus on dreaming. In our tradition we are great dreamers. That is the way we journey. The dreams that we are talking about are the dreams where you connect with your ancestors, your spirit guides. Dreams are where you are shown. You are given visions about your destiny and about your job in the world, and that job is unique to you. You see, when you do the job that is unique to you, the Xhosa say that you “shine.” The job of the sangoma is to clean people so that they shine and find their true jobs in this world.

JB: Can you speak more about the ancestors?

Lockley: The Xhosa and Zulu word for ancestors is “Izinyanya” (eye-z-ahn-ia), which means “the silent, hidden ones.” The way we see it, every person has three sets of ancestors. The first two sets are your blood ancestors, those on your mother’s side and those on your father’s side. These two sets are the foundation of every human being. They literally run in your blood. We refer to the third set as the “adopted” ancestors. They are made up of the spirits and past peoples from the traditions that you are attracted to. They include various spirit beings, spirit guides, animal spirits or totems—really any group that you do not have a direct blood

connection to. In my case my ancestors on my mother’s side are Irish, on my father’s side English and my adopted ancestors are from the Xhosa and the Tibetan peoples.

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JB: You are showing people a pathway that is Xhosa in nature, and you are saying that regardless of the person’s background, this pathway may be used to connect with the ancestors of that individual.

Lockley: That’s correct. These teachings, as my teacher has pointed out, are beyond culture, religion and political persuasion.

JB: Could you talk more about the “people under the water?”

Lockley: The people under the water are a very deep part of our training. It is the place where sangomas go to receive their training. That world is similar to ours, but to get there you must go through a sacred doorway. You need to have a calling, an invitation and a teacher. I shall relate a story to you.

I am friends with a fellow sangoma. She is of the Zulu tradition. When her teacher was doing his final initiation as a Zulu sangoma, it was by the sea. The community was singing songs and walking toward the sea. Now, in the Zulu tradition if the trainee walks into the sea, the people are not to stop him or her. And they are not to follow. They are to turn around and wait. They are not to shed any tears. So, they were all singing and playing drums, and this man turned and walked into the waters—further and further, until they could see him no more. The people returned to the beach and set up camp, trusting in

the ancestral ways. They waited and waited.

After more than two hours had passed, he emerged from the sea with a sea snake draped around his neck. When the people asked what he had seen, he told them of the river world and the people that met him and instructed him. This man could see the future. He could connect with the ancestral world. He became a very famous sangoma with many trainees.

Sangomas must use their gifts wisely. And should sangomas forget, should they become arrogant or self-serving, the gifts will be taken away from them. You see, the people under the sea can give very powerful things. Every sango-ma has to be initiated by the people under the sea. We are known as diviners or people who work with water.

JB: For people who have studied other traditions what would you say about mixing parts and pieces of traditions?

Lockley: You know, I started work with the Zen tradition, and I still practice, but I have honored the Xhosa tradition by only working and studying with my teacher. When you focus on one specific tradition, it builds up spiritual ability and power. I have met people who work with one person one weekend and somebody else the next; then three weekends later they do another workshop.

All I can say is that my work is to wash or clean peoples’ spirits. In that way people can move, or begin to move, towards their ancestors or towards their spirit guides. For instance, people may dream they must work with a Tibetan teacher or with a Huichol or Lakota teacher. Then I feel that I have done my job.

If they dream of a teacher, then they should work with that person, and they should honor that relationship. You see, these workshops are showing a simple technique to deepen the connection to your dreams and ancestors. They are to help you find your path. If people are searching for their directions, this might help. And I will say that, as the lessons from their dreams start to deepen, they need to honor the teachings and guidance that they are getting, wherever they may lead.

JB: For a variety of reasons, some cultures are reluctant to share their teachings. How

do the Xhosa feel about your sharing your understanding of dream work?

Lockley: I have discussed this in depth with my teacher, Mum Gwevu, and her husband, Tata Sukhwini, who is a clan leader and tribal elder. As my teacher has said, even to her own people, “In our bodies, we are all the same,” and so they are very supportive of using these Xhosa techniques to help open the doorway for Westerners to connect to their ancestors. I have also talked with the local community of sangomas and they are supportive as well. My teacher points out that if this is what my ancestors are asking me to do, then it is what I must do. This is sacred work, and it may be that one day I will ask people to help with work in the townships of the Xhosa people.

I might add that I am not sharing deep sacred information. Yes, these are core principles; however, it is not shamanic training. In this culture the teacher does not make a person a sangoma. The ancestors make a person a sangoma. My teacher told me, “John, I will teach you 20 percent; the other 80 percent will be shown to you in dreams.” Even though I asked many questions at the beginning, my teacher never gave me answers. She has always waited for me to come to her with a dream. It is the dream that opens the door. When she could see that the ancestors had given me certain information, then she knew that she could talk of these things. It is the ancestors that open the door.

JB: Is there a difference between shamans and sangomas?

Lockley: It is interesting. I am known as a traditional African shaman. The word sangoma is a Zulu word that literally means “people of the song” because we use rhythm and song to go into trance and to connect with the ancestors, the ancient ones, the spirit guides in this world and in the next. Actually, the Xhosa word for sangoma is slightly different from the Zulu. It is

a term that means “the one who holds the lightning rod.” The lightning rod is what conveys the power of the ancestors. And too, the Xhosa way of doing divination is slightly different in that we get visions and “see” what’s happening with people.

Because of my path, I was instructed to learn the Zulu method of throwing bones as



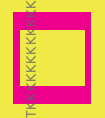
JOHN LOCKLEY conducts “Ubuntu” workshops and maintains his healing practice in England. He will be conducting workshops in the United States in the fall of 2010. www.african-shaman.com.

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well. The reason for this is that I am known as a “Lone Leopard.” Leopards are solitary, and many sangomas have the term in their given name. My Zulu sangoma name literally means “House of the Leopard,” and my job is to go into the wilderness where there is not much spirit, where people do not know the ancestors and do not know how to connect with them.

THE EVENING HAD TURNED TO DARK, and the pub was loud and less inviting. As John and I walked beside the waters of the old port, home to merchant ships of the slave trade, I reflected on the path that this man had been led to. From his familial stock of ancestors, it seemed clear that he was to play a role in the healing of communities that were reeling from the effects of apartheid, as well as to bring some of the indigenous wisdom of those proud people back to these distant lands. For this work the title “Lone Leopard” sounded about right.

THE KKKKKK KKKKKK



Mokasiya lives with his divine partner in the driftless area of southwest Wisconsin where he carves pipestone, creates outdoor art and is composing his next poetry book, *The Shaman’s Dream*.

There is little time left now
for sharing your nights drama

rest the pain
the sorrow of your thoughts

on a cloud of unconscious forgiveness

stop trying so hard to be fully aware
of conscious suffering

digging out the old broken weapons
of guilt, blame, betrayal, and shame

share the star field
of your singing voice

write love poems
to grasshoppers, frogs and sunspots

dance barefoot on the earth
spinning, spinning,

until you know nothing about the illusion of gravity

then anoint your neighbors feet
with the brush stroke of your hair

paint passion fruit
in the heart of Mystery

and laugh, laugh,
laugh your way
back home.