

Excerpt from the Introduction  
Black Twin, White Twin  
*Mapatya*

**TWIN FROM ANOTHER TRIBE  
THE STORY OF TWO SHAMANIC HEALERS  
IN AFRICA AND NORTH AMERICA**

**MICHAEL ORTIZ HILL and MANDAZA AUGUSTINE KANDEMWA**

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 *ngoma* (tradition) of the water spirits. It is about shamanic initiation and the alliance with Spirit and spirits that the shaman relies on to heal. 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 the practices of the shaman. 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 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, the black majority rising up against the brutal white minority government: Rhodesia in the sixties and seventies. Myself, a biracial white boy of Mexican descent coming of

age within 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.

All my life I’d 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 it was revealed in apocalyptic dreams. 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 collected 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 begins by researching a book.

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 stories are born of the Incomprehensible, are 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. The Collected Works of C.G. Jung and Sri Aurobindo. The Tao Te Ching and the Bhagavad Gita.* These texts conveyed the 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 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.

But I was drawn to my twin on a current of dreams.

As the ashes of the riot, the 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 of gratitude and confusion with African-Americans.

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. “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 would say those very words.

I was indeed home.

Mandaza had searched the hills of the holy land of Matopo in a dream 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 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. 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 by his people, OK? the Shona tribe, *midzimu*. 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.

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, that elephant over there bear flesh and beauty, but

**This is copyrighted material**

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, and they come again and again in the daily life of the *nganga*, as shamans are called.

For an initiated healer the Divine lives in the activity of healing. "Let me be God's hands!" prays Mandaza. In Bantu, 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* 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 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 *nganga* relies on his prayers, his implicit trust in Spirit, the old songs, an attentive ear to the initiate's dreams, his ritual imagination and 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 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. “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.”

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

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 be African-American culture. About forty percent of these sold in the slave ports of the American South were Bantu. Winfred Vass 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 two centuries before and after Emancipation blacks were the majority in Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Mississippi.

I write all this in shorthand, the long sweep of history always rich with the unknowable. From Egypt, singing to water from oasis to oasis, to Nigeria, south to Central Africa, keeping cattle, working metal, initiating the boys, the girls, and those who are 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 it 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.

**This is copyrighted material**