

After the calling dream

White sangoma John Lockley chats to LINDY TIMM about his series of workshops taking place in the UK on ancient Xhosa teachings.

JOHN Lockley's calling dream came while he was on retreat in the Tzaneen Mountains. "I was approached by a Xhosa sangoma dressed in the traditional sangoma dress. Sitting on my right was another sangoma apprentice, a Xhosa man, and we were both lying face down and naked. I asked the sangoma to teach me about suffering and nature. I asked him three times and after the third time, he told me that I should be aware that I would suffer greatly in order to understand suffering. I told him that I had already seen and experienced suffering."

When John woke up the next morning, he had contracted tick bite fever, the first of a series of illnesses and events which plagued him for seven years. John says he was going through the *thwasa* - the illness that afflicts initiates in order to direct them to a teacher who will heal and train them.

Almost twenty years on, John has found his direction and his teacher, and is a fully fledged senior Xhosa sangoma - reputedly one of the first white Xhosa sangomas in recent history to be initiated. Choosing this path has subjected him to skepticism and ridicule.

"I face massive discrimination and prejudice being, on the one side, a traditional South African healer and, on the other side, white," says John.

"It's very sad that African healers are not respected on the world stage and that their beliefs are relegated to superstition. It's a problem that needs to be rectified and I believe it can be rectified by getting more information out there and clearing up misconceptions about sangomas."

To clear up mistaken beliefs and disseminate the core principles of Xhosa shamanism, John is currently running workshops in the UK, where he says he faces a different kind of prejudice. "People in the UK are mainly familiar with North American shamans and they have a perception that African medicine men are witchdoctors or practice voodoo."

"In the Zulu language the word 'sangoma' actually means 'people of the song' because we

use songs, rhythm and dance to go into trance. Our job is to lift the energy of the people up. There is no word in Xhosa or Zulu for depression, only the expression *umoya phansi* which means *spirit energy down*. As sangomas we try to lift the spirit energy up - *umoya phezulu* - through prayer and ceremonies.

"There is the misconception that sangomas can bring people bad luck. But the job of a sangoma is to bring communities together and bring them closer to their ancestors and *uThixo*, 'the Great Spirit'. Those who misuse their spiritual gifts are misrepresenting sangomas."

John is the first sangoma to carry the ancient Xhosa teachings out of South Africa to be taught.

"There is a disharmony among people and through using Xhosa core principles, I can help Western people reconnect with their ancestors"

While John considers this a privilege, he is also aware that it comes with responsibility.

"It's a massive responsibility so I'm very clear with the people I teach that they need to respect the ancestors and the Xhosa people who have given me the authority to teach them."

Through the workshops John teaches sacred Xhosa healings and the principles of *ubuntu ubunzulu* - the depth of humanity - in an attempt to help Britons reconnect with their ancestors.

"There is a disharmony among people and through using Xhosa core principles, I can help Western people reconnect with their ancestors. All the old shamanic healing traditions have been broken and people are suffering from self-esteem issues and depression because they don't know where they're from."

"It doesn't involve worshipping the



ancestors, which is a common misconception. It's about respecting your blood and where you come from."

The workshops have been received with enthusiasm and John reports that people have started to dream about their ancestors and have achieved a new-found sense of direction.

"People misunderstand sangoma dreams. Visions are often represented as hocus-pocus, superstitious mumbo-jumbo. But sangoma dreams are more about feeling a dream and seeing its manifestation in reality. There's a clarity to visionary and prophetic dreams which is different to normal dreams and which many Westerners don't understand."

John says that when he begins a workshop session, he speaks about his race openly to clear the air. "I point out to the people at my workshops that Mandela is a top advocate and that Desmond Tutu is an Archbishop in the Anglican Church. Both of them are Xhosa but both have entered the Western world and have been accepted. They've been through a number of initiations which

have given them credibility. So, if it's okay for African people to move from one culture into another, then it must be okay for white people to enter an African traditional world. I too have gone through training and initiation and I am a legitimate senior Xhosa sangoma. The fact that I'm white shouldn't be a problem."

For John, if there's one point that he wishes to get across through these workshops, it is that the commonality that runs through all human beings ties them together and to a shared ancestry.

"When my teacher was getting a lot of flak about me from the community she would say 'When you cut my arm, red blood flows. When you cut John's arm, red blood flows. We are all the same, we are all human beings. When John dreams, he sometimes dreams of Xhosa ancestors. When I dream, I sometimes dream of white ancestors. Under the river, we are all the same.'"

For more information about John and his 'Ubuntu' work in the UK please see his website www.african-shaman.com

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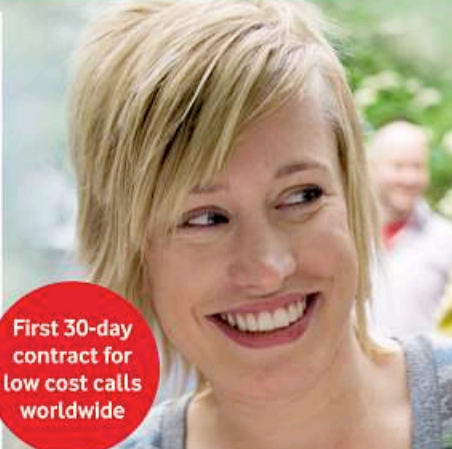
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