

# *'I travelled to other worlds'*

## **Introduction**

In November 1912, ANC founder John Dube, trying to organise resistance to the Union's impending anti-African legislation, harangued a gathering of Zululand chiefs at Eshowe for lack of unity in defence of their interests. Among his imprecations was one against 'ridiculous rumours among you about flying bodies coming through space' (Faye 1923: 87). This kind of tantalising pointer to evidence of African sightings of UFOs might well crop up in other official records, but until the recent American publication of the media-savvy *isangoma* or *isazi* (seer) Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa's *Song of the Stars* (1996), nothing in the nature of an account of extraterrestrial contact from a Zulu source has appeared in popular print.

Dube's question to the chiefs immediately following the above – 'What do your doctors say about these things?' – reveals his opinion as to which sphere of culture such matters rightly belong, and indeed considerable claims are made by *inyanga* Mutwa of contact, both firsthand and from hearsay. Although the formal ethnographic record may yield next to nothing in respect of diviners' utterances regarding the extraterrestrial<sup>1</sup>, one of the earliest indigenous voices – Canon Callaway's main informant Mpengula Mbanda – speaks quite plainly of 'the people who, we suppose, are on the other side of the heaven', which was conceived of as a blue rock encompassing the earth. Vague as he was regarding their location ('we do not know whether they are on the rock, or whether there is some little place which is earth on the other side), Mpengula was unequivocal about the reality of *abantu bezulu* (people of the sky). 'The one thing we know is this, that these heavenly men exist. Therefore we say there is a place for them, as this place is for us' (Callaway 1970a: 394). Callaway himself in his *Nursery Tales* says that 'so far as [he] know[s], every where among the people of all tribes, [there is] a belief in the existence of *heavenly men*' (1970b: 316, Appendix).

Today this tradition finds lavish – some would say opportunistic – expression in the latest offering from the reconstructed and nowadays warmly feted Mutwa<sup>2</sup>. His *Song of the Stars*, subtitled *Lore of a Zulu Shaman*, consists of transcriptions of his cosmogonic monologues by American admirers, and presents in an eponymous chapter what might be called an 'Afrocentric UFOlogy', in the shape of what he calls the 'mere outline' of a 'great story that tells of the extraterrestrial origins of humankind' (:125). This is just one part of a heritage of 'amazing knowledge of the cosmos, the solar system, and even dimensions unknown to man' once possessed by black South Africa (:123).

This body of lore exists, moreover, throughout the continent. When in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising, the urbane and well-travelled Mutwa found that an encounter with a 'gigantic disk' and its bright floating satellite globes left him considerably more agitated than some traditional Africans hard by in their 'skins and long robes' (:140). He details several other encounters (including an incident in Natal in which a 'hardened policeman' fired on a UFO!), in order to assert that 'black people of all tribes have a long tradition of dealing with things like these flying things from outside the Earth' (:141). It is only with reticence, however, that they disclose what they know: 'You come across a similar [uniform] mythology – though I think they won't tell it to strangers. (:133).

Notwithstanding this, in perhaps the best-known of South African UFO tales, *Beyond the Light Barrier*, author Elizabeth Klarer<sup>3</sup> implicitly claims that indigenous knowledge of otherworld civilisations was divulged to her, by *induna* 'Ladam' (Laduma?) during her girlhood on her family's Drakensberg farm: in Natal. His 'prophecy' allegedly included the somewhat startling assertion that Klarer's blonde hair would 'bring the Abelungu (white people) from the sky . . . . They are the sky gods who once lived in this world, but afterwards ascended . . . .' (:19)!<sup>4</sup> Though its protagonist was spared any such unsettling revelation, the present account would seem to constitute a like exception to any Africa-wide tradition of secrecy. It was imparted by an old-world, tribal Zulu, Maphelu Zungu, to a white woman, Nimba Lulla McAyre. I have been unable to discover who she was, much less how she came to obtain the account. Nor is it known whether she transcribed it in Zulu or English, and if the former, whether the translation too is her work, or that of the man who preserved the text – the long-serving Native Affairs Department interpreter Carl Faye<sup>5</sup>, in whose papers it is one among several oral history interview transcripts. Nor is there any date on the original typescript, or any ready way of establishing when the encounter took place, or when the account of it was transcribed<sup>6</sup>.

The flimsy typescript certainly found its place in Faye's collection thanks to his long-standing relationship with its narrator and protagonist, Maphelu the son of Mkhosana kaSangqwana Zungu, who was cousin to Ngqumbazi, the concubine of King Cetshwayo who bore his successor Dinuzulu<sup>7</sup>. 'Maphelu and I', Faye says, 'knew each other for years', probably through the agency of Faye's mother-in-law Mrs Eileen Matthews, a granddaughter of Henry Francis Fynn (1803–61). Maphelu, whose birth is estimated by Faye as c.1853; died in about 1946. He had been in the service of Fynn's son, also Henry Francis (1846–1915) when the latter was British Resident Commissioner with Cetshwayo in Zululand north of the Mhlatuze. Consequently Maphelu heard much about the elder Fynn, and knew the *izibongo* of both men<sup>8</sup>.

Assuredly it was such connections, as well as his patrician birth, that made Maphelu Zungu a Native Affairs Department favourite in Zululand and Natal, such that Faye, when taking down his eyewitness account of Cetshwayo's capture<sup>9</sup>, prefaced it with an interesting biographical sketch, which is worth quoting at some length for the graphic impression it gives of the text's narrator:

In appearance Maphelu was a man of medium Zulu build and height, well-knit and wiry. He was of a restless disposition, had sharp eyes, was quick in movements, had somewhat thin lips for a Zulu, was inclined to speak rapidly and be repetitive and was apt to disregard details, but with all that, was openly friendly. He liked visiting, and would soon be off, slightly leaning forward, his gait typical of that of a Zulu on an errand. In advancing age he had a staff, *udondolo*, and when out walking he would put this across the small of his back, holding it with both hands crutched backwards. There was always an air of dignity about Maphelu.

He had fought at Isandlwana and Ulundi, and his 'gory life' included a coup-count of twenty-two of which Faye is 'certain', and the alleged murder of a missionary, for which he was apparently sentenced to death but subsequently pardoned. Most importantly for an appreciation of the present text, however, Faye stresses that Zungu had apparently reconciled himself to the fact of conquest:

[He] lived to see the extensive advance made in Zululand by the work of the whites, through their ever-increasing skills, and he had seen the benefits which this had brought to the inhabitants. The old warrior had seen that . . . the white man had diligently brought to the Zulus ever so much of the Abalumbi's (wonder-workers') knowledge, abilities, helpfulness, healing and soothing doctoring, money economy, and much else, and had shown the [Zulus] how to do useful and profitable work for themselves. The white man had as well brought 'quick machines' for doing work, also swift means of communication, all wizardry undreamt-of.

It is probably also helpful to mention here, for the benefit of readers sceptical of the account's authenticity, that a variant typescript of Faye's biographical note says 'the old warrior had noticed that . . . the white man had quietly brought to the Zulus ever so much of the white man's knowledge, abilities, enlightenment – "*even flying up into the sky*"' (p. 5, my emphasis). Even the title of the piece, such sceptics might argue, is strictly speaking unfitted to the events it relates, and smacks of little more than journalistic attention-grabbing. Those familiar with Zulu idiom might be able to judge whether the narrative rings true. If it has a contrived feel, they may choose to take Nimba McAyre for another Elizabeth Klarer, seeking to put on her personal cosmology the stamp of the singular brand of authentication afforded by a native voice or witness. Those on the other hand who are content to take the tale in the millennial spirit, may prefer to believe after all, with Mutwa, that indeed 'if you scratch below the surface, all our tribal people have stories about the stars' (:121).

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## ***I Travelled to Other Worlds***

by a Zulu

Much it is that I have seen in my time, but this . . . this is like a dream.

This is what happened. I was on a journey from my home in the lowlands, to visit people in the highlands – a day’s walking distance. At last I got to the mountains, and edged upwards. In one part of the ascent the path is flanked by a sheer rocky rise, and at the foot of this towering place is flat grassy land, quite wide, crossed by the path. Below this haugh [sic] or shelf is a steep slope with boulders, where there are snakes and rock-rabbits, klipspringers and baboons.

There on the shelf I sat down to rest, and took out my snuff, and sniff-sniffed whiff-whiffed. I snuffed and looked around. Then I saw something odd, something I had never noticed before. It was a very big rock, smooth and egg-shaped, there right next to the precipice.

I asked myself audibly, ‘What is this?’

So I went to look at it, put my hand on it, and it was very slippery in all directions, like wet clay, but it was quite dry. Then I thought I felt it move, and off I cleared, lest it roll over me. At a safe distance I stopped, to watch.

The thing kept moving, slowly slowly, up up it moved. Away I ran at top speed, to the side of the flat ground where the foot-path enters, and there (stopped and) stood, because if it crashed from so high up it might do a lot of damage and leave nothing of me but bits and pieces.

As I was running I caught glimpses of my stomach. You see for yourself that it is a nice stomach, serving me well – it is of good capacity (*tapping it*). With the haste of running, the stomach was wobble-wabbling, yibble-yibbling, and I wondered whether it would ever serve me again for mabele (*Zulu beer*). Terrible.

There I stood, and asked myself, ‘*Hau*, are you then dreaming?’ I looked upward, but there was nothing at all to see now – the Thing wasn’t there – gone, clean gone.

I sat down. I looked at myself, and I was still really myself; I looked around, and it was just ordinary broad daylight, the sun was shining. I took out my snuff and tapped some out onto my palm, sniff, whiff, whiff, sneeff – ah. I said to myself, No, I will go ahead and make my visit to the people in the highlands.

So I started, meaning that when I had got to the top of the climb I would hasten onward, where the country was easier. But on getting within full view of the precipice at the side of the flat shelf, there the Thing was again, as I had first seen it.

This was scandalous – and now I became scared, mature though I be – properly scared: why should this happen to me, of all people?

A bearded man in his prime now appeared, coming from the Thing, but from nowhere that I could make out, and he walked with a stately gait toward me. It was a person unknown to me, but at any rate a person, so I waited. My heart told me to run for it, but I refused, for he was unarmed and I had my assegai.

He came up to me, and before I could greet him, in the usual way, he said something which sounded like ‘wufu-wufu’ in his beard. That beat me, and I just looked at him. Then he undid a small neatly plaited grass satchel from a necklace he was wearing, and took out a charm. He broke this in two, and put one piece into his mouth and started chewing. He put the other piece into my mouth. I found myself chewing too, and it was a bit bitter, but I swallowed. What else could I do?

He spoke again, and -marvel of marvels – I knew his speech language as well as my own.

The ‘wufu-wufu’ was really Zungu, my very family name. He said Zungu, you have been scared, but all this will do you no hurt. I have come here in that (pointing to the Thing), to see something, and my wife is with me, and our two children. All is good, harmless. I came to this spot because I thought it was secluded, and that nobody would notice anything. But now you are here, and you see this (again pointing to the Thing), and I have no choice but to show you inside – you have lighted on my secret errand, which can no longer be concealed from you. We are on a peaceful mission. Let me show you how we are travelling. Come and see inside.

With that he walked toward the Thing, and I followed close to him.

Just as we started walking, the lower part of the Thing began to raise itself, as a bird raises its wings, until it had mushroomed right out, but there was no split to be seen in the spread: the spread was complete, like an open umbrella.

I then saw that this base of the Thing was flat, and that it was standing upright on its flat.

A cleft appeared in the wall, and became a doorway. He walked in, and I too walked in, and we were both standing on an even floor.

The part of the floor where we were standing rose very gently, and above our heads the ceiling opened, and we passed through the ceiling into the upper apartment, and stopped there. We had been lifted. I had felt nothing.

That upper apartment was very nice and cosy. I was gazing around this, when a doorway opened, and there were the man’s wife and two children – a boy and a girl, the lad old enough to herd goats, and the girl to carry water. They sat down.

The mother busied herself with decorating a calabash milk-vessel, and the girl put down beads and did beadworking.

During this time the man had been talking to me. He asked, ‘Whither were you going?’ I told him, ‘To people on the highland, on my way from the lowland’. Thereupon he said, ‘Seeing you have thus been detained, through you having noticed this carrier of mine, I will lift you up in it and take you to near your destination. You will be there by sundown. There is no need for you to have any fear – you will feel nothing at all. Merely tell me how long it takes you to walk there, the direction from here, and what the home you are visiting is like, how many huts, the stock-fold, and what is to be seen growing there. Do you now’, he asked, ‘feel anything?’ ‘No’, I said, ‘I feel nothing’. He said, ‘You see, you feel nothing, and we are up in the air. Let me show you’.

With that he went to the side of the apartment, and something parted. He looked down, and beckoned to me, saying, ‘Come and see, and have no fear; this is for

seeing with the eyes only, and cannot make an open hole: it is like a window that is fixed firmly`.

I went, and looked.

How surprised I was! There, below, like a picture, was the country, a big expanse of it, lowland and highland, hills and herding cattle, and the smaller boys herding goats separately. Some of the bigger boys were playing stabbing the insema bulb [*a traditional boys' game*], hurled down a slope, bounding and bouncing like a buck whilst the competitors, in a row, threw their imitation assegais of sharpened thin sticks, others with leafy branches. I saw everything, and recognised homes I knew.

I said I was satisfied, and the view-giver closed.

Turning, I noticed that the man's small daughter was talking to herself as she was doing her beadwork, talking in the speech I knew. I listened.

She picked up a bead, and said, 'My heart is black because of you, and I don't like you any more'. Then she picked up a red one, and said, 'My heart is now red like blood, for you have made me cross'. So she was saying as she strung each bead. The green one: 'Now my heart is quietened, for I see the green grass, and the cattle are grazing'. A blue one: 'Now my heart is (quietened) glad again, for I see the blue sky on a clear day'. A straw-coloured bead: 'Here my heart is pleased, the grass is yellowing, and we shall reap, and we shall go out and cut thatching grass and make our homes snug'. A white one: 'Oh, I see only happiness!`.

Then the man spoke to me, saying 'You have been hearing my child as she strings beads. Now we are above cloud, and you have felt nothing`.

We went to the viewer, and it opened. There below, I saw a wonder: no land, everywhere white, all crimplly, different from what clouds are like from the earth. Away away up the dome of the sky was the half-moon, still aloft, all by itself there, as though flung on the sky and just stuck there. The sun was shining, but was obscured now by cloud. The viewer closed.

The man said, 'Now I shall take you down, to be in good time for your visit'. He said soon after, 'Come now to the seeing place, and direct me, for we are over the highland (homes) and homes are clear to the eye. I indicated to him, and we got near the home I wanted to visit. The viewer closed, and soon he said, 'We are down on the earth`. I had felt nothing – nothing.

He said, 'Come, and stand with me here on the alighting place`. Next we were on the ground, the two of us.

I had been half a day's foot journey without having waked at all, and here I was right close to my destination, and I saw people of the home I was visiting – but they took no notice, as if they did not see us.

The man said, 'Come back, forget not your assegai', and we went back. 'Where did you leave it?' he asked. I looked, but I saw no assegai. He put out his hand, and said, 'But here it is', and then I saw it, and he handed it back to me. 'Farewell', I said to his family, and we went out, he and I, to the ground.

On the ground he asked, 'When are you likely to go back to your home?' I replied, 'There is elsewhere I shall be going, but I shall pass here on the morning of the fourth day from today, homeward`.

I took him by the hand, and said 'Thank you`.

Then we parted, and I stood there watching him go, but somehow he just disappeared, as on the Thing.

I took my way home, all in wonder.

I had seen far more than swallows see from the air, perhaps as much as the vultures that vanish from sight up in the sky.

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## NOTES

1. Notably, in the most recent publication by Katesa Schlosser (1997), who has documented extensively the mythographies of the late Ceza lightning-doctor Laduma Madela, there is nothing in all Madela’s rich theogony which could be construed as UFO-related.
2. Mutwa’s image has had quite a makeover since the days when the liberation movement blacklisted him as a reactionary force propagating ‘false consciousness’. He has become the de facto spokesman for all things mythical and antiquarian in the African renaissance, and his controversial writings have come to inspire many, including young South African filmmakers. (For a recent example, see *the Weekly Mail and Guardian* 9 – 15 October 1998, Friday supplement, p4).
3. In *Beyond the Light Barrier*, set in the mid-’50s, a humanoid alien named Akon from the planet Meton near Alpha Centauri, fathers a son on the author as one of ‘only a few . . . chosen for breeding purposes from beyond [Akon’s] solar system, to infuse new blood into our ancient race’ (:135). Mutwa mentions having recently met and prayed with Klarer ‘to the extraterrestrials on behalf of the people of Africa’. He finds ‘nothing unusual or so unearthly about Madame Klarer’s story. There have been many women throughout Africa in various centuries who have attested to the fact that they have been fertilized by strange creatures from somewhere’ (:152).
4. Some might feel that this introduces an unsavoury ambiguity into a book whose underlying sentiments may be told from the author’s assertion that her hybrid offspring ‘will not be born in this planet, where a racialistic outlook submerges all sane and intellectual thought’ (:127). A milder dose of ethnocentrism also enters into the present account. Although no direct reference is made to the physiognomy or ‘ethnicity’ of the aliens, their shipboard domestic pursuits (notably beadwork) reflect directly the culture of the narrator.
5. Faye was sworn in as Interpreter before the Natal Supreme Court in 1919, and two years later entered in the Union Civil Service List (Faye 1923: 6, 90, 9). Having at the age of seventeen met James Stuart, the archetype of the Zuluphile he himself was to become in the course of his career, he became right-hand man of Chief Native Commissioner, Harry Lugg, in the 1930s, and at all important functions interpreted for the royal house and leaders of the Zulu establishment.
6. The title is followed by ‘World copyright reserved by Outspan’, but there is no further detail, and no date – setting the somewhat daunting task of searching an un-indexed weekly magazine published from 1927 to 1957, throughout which entire period the piece may (or may not) have actually appeared in print.

Furthermore it can only be inferred from the occurrence of the name Zungu in the text that he was its author. Nowhere in the document is it explicitly stated, but in view of the man's status, and his relation with Faye, the assumption seems fair.

7. Maphelu's father Mkhosana was therefore closely linked to the royal house, and it was at his homestead kwaNdasa (Place of Thriving) in the Ngome Forest that an English search party at last caught up with and captured Cetshwayo following his flight after the Battle of Ulundi. Maphelu was present and gave Faye an account of the event, titled "When the English Took Cetywayo – The Story of Mapela Zungu" (Faye: Papers Box 7).
8. Faye makes much of Maphelu's 'oldentime Zuluness': he mentions his first encounter with 'the "magic" of amakhandlela, candles', and how '[when] once Mapelu stayed as a guest at my home, occupying a comfortable outbuilding of brick, with all the facilities he needed . . . (h)e had no wish to sleep on a bed "upon the air", as he said, and preferred a mattress on the floor, near the fireplace'.
9. Faye clearly understood this event as having great symbolic importance for Zulu history, as he took down two further accounts – one, on 6 May 1927, from an eyewitness on the 'other side' – the Zulu linguist Martin Oftebro, youngest son of the Norwegian missionary Ommund Oftebro ('uMondi'), and a friend of Faye's; the other on 6 July 1928 from Chief Zinema Mzimela-Mnguni of Mthunzini (Faye, Papers Box 7). It is worth noting that another Zulu account of this episode has appeared recently, from one of the King's handmaidens, Paulina Dlamini (Filter & Bourquin).

ROBERT PAPINI