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UNkulunkulu: God, a God or the First Ancestor? The Quest for a Supreme Deity in Zulu Religious Beliefs

Abstract

UNkulunkulu is a very important figure within Zulu pantheon but his nature is not really defined. Should he be considered God, a god or the first ancestor? The problem comes from Western (Christian) need to find and define a supreme deity within Zulu religious beliefs. In 2013, 2018 and 2019 I conducted thorough field-studies among South African sangomas and asked them about uNkulunkulu. This article aims to organise knowledge about uNkulunkulu and tries to place him within the deity stratum. Also, my research allows to show if searching for answers about uNkulunkulu is a Zulu problem or maybe just Western scholars'. Field studies that enabled writing this paper were sponsored by Polish National Science Centre, Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), project no.: 2017/25/N/HS1/02500.

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Introducing Christianity to the Zulus

When first Christian missionaries arrived to Zulu territories which are now part of the Republic of South Africa, they faced the problem of identifying gods pantheon. To introduce a new religion they needed to uproot old beliefs and what an easier way than to find a supreme deity and contrast it with the new God? And judging from a vast search for such a deity, missionaries tried hard but failed: Zulus seemed not to have a deity that could be placed against Yahve or Jesus. No Zeus, Jupiter or Odin-like figure to show how Yahve is better than the local god. In their search for the supreme deity, missionaries and academics encountered a dim figure of uNkulunkulu who could be – but not necessary was – the highest god in Zulu religious beliefs.

Christianity arrived in Port Natal in the mid-1830s with captain Allen Gardiner and Reverend Joseph Shooter. In 1855 they were followed by Anglican Bishop of Natal, John W. Colenso and Theophilus Shepstone, the Natal's Diplomatic Agent to the Native Tribes. They all devoted themselves to converting Zulus to Christianity; also they did a thorough field study among the Zulus and tried to identify Zulu supreme deity.¹ But they were not the first British on Zulus' land. In 1824 British lieutenants Farewell and King searched for new markets and obtained a permission for trading from Zulu king Shaka, who was especially interested in European medicine.² Though they were British and probably Christians, they did business with Zulus in the 1820s but they were not interested in converting Africans and the mutual relations had been good enough for king Mpande to later grant missionaries access to Zulu lands.³

Colenso arrived in Natal partly prepared: he read several articles about Africans and tried to distinguish Zulus from other Africans. With Shepstone he interviewed many Zulus to understand their religion. Christian missionaries needed to conceptualize the supreme deity so they sought similarities between uNkulunkulu and Christian God. Between 1862–1879 Colenso and Shepstone collected Zulu myths and decided that no Zulu god is an equivalent to Christian God but uNkulunkulu is the closest concept.⁴

The need to establish Zulu pantheon still seems to be actual. In 2013 and 2018 I conducted thorough field-studies among South African sangomas and I am in constant contact with them. This gives me the opportunity to compare the researches and conclusion of academics from last two centuries with contemporary beliefs. I also made an experiment of using Facebook as a research tool and asked about uNkulunkulu. I received answers from sangomas and 'ordinary' people. I could verify their attitude towards questions asked by Western scholars and discover if the idea of a supreme deity is or any importance to sangomas and Zulus in the 21st century.

First records of Zulu beliefs

Before missionaries and colonisers had arrived, Zulus believed in deities representing natural forces (sky, wind, water gods etc.). They also revered ancestral spirits but did not worship them.⁵ This is a very important difference and should be kept in mind when analysing Zulu beliefs. The religious system is so different to Christian one that first

¹ Maxwell Z. Shamase, *Relations between the Zulu people of Emperor Mpande and the Christian missionaries, c.1845-c.1871*, "Inkanyiso, Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences" 7(1), Boordfontein 2015, p. 6.

² Eileen Jensen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, Shuter & Shoter, Pietermaritzburg 1962, p. 15.

³ Shamase, "Relations between the Zulu people", p. 1.

⁴ David Chidester, *Savage System: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1996, p. 133.

⁵ It is a common misunderstanding that Zulus worship ancestors. Zulus do not worship or pray to ancestral spirits. They communicate with them, share their thoughts and food and seek their wisdom through speaking (*ukuthetha* – 'telling them everything') (Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, C. Hurst & Company, Uppsala 1976, p. 28).

researchers could not comprehend the system, which was concentrated within a homestead instead of temples (there are no Zulu temples and never have been). The kraal and the hut itself has always been the place of communication with spirits. There are some parts of the hut (and now often a flat or a house) when little offerings are left for ancestors and when people talk to them. Greater ceremonies can take place in a *makhozini*, an ancestral hut where sangomas work with spirits. I was invited to many *makhozinis* and I have never seen any symbol of uNkulunkulu. When asked, sangomas told me that there were no symbols to be put there and no reason to ask uNkulunkulu for help when ancestral spirits were around.

As Zulus did not have a writing system, they did not write down their myths and rituals. All religious knowledge was passed down the generations by elders and sangomas.⁶ They also had no need to ponder over the hierarchy of gods or to answer the questions of Europeans. According to Chidester first information about uNkulunkulu collected by missionaries were often contradictory. Some Zulus perceived him as the first ancestor who was born from the reeds. For others he was a god and the creator of the world, yet others admitted never to think about him before being interviewed by the colonisers – it was the first moment when Zulus were forced to conceptualise him at all. All knowledge we possess about uNkulunkulu today is somehow influenced by the fact that researchers pushed Zulus to define and characterise the deity and describe him in Christian terms. Another factor that influenced the concept of uNkulunkulu was the birth of an opposition against colonisation and Christianisation – organising religious tradition was supposed to help build a feeling of unity and resistance. Chidester believes that the concept of uNkulunkulu as the ancestor of the humankind, made uNkulunkulu ‘a Supreme Being that overarched the entire world’, God equal to the concept of Yahve – in this way uNkulunkulu started to be compared to God in contacts with Europeans, but even though uNkulunkulu was the highest god, one should not compare him with God in Abrahamic religions’ understanding.⁷ UNkulunkulu seems to become more and more important for Zulus with the beginning of the colonisation than before. Callaway’s main informant was surprised with the sudden importance of uNkulunkulu but one hundred years later Berglund’s informants admitted the existence of this god and the praise-names given to him by Zulus.⁸

First researchers’ attitude was highly Europocentric and seems to influence the answers of their informants. Colenso was the first one to publish a book on Zulu culture in 1860

⁶ Sangomas are South African healers, diviners, exorcists and holy persons playing an important role in Zulu society. To become a sangoma, a person is supposed to receive a calling from ancestral spirits, be trained and initiated by a fully-fledged sangoma (Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 136). Sangomas fill the roles of chiefs’ advisers, psychologists and priests with priestly duties and prerogatives; their duty is also to preserve clans’ history and traditions (my sangoma informants).

⁷ Chidester, *Savage System*, pp. 163–164.

⁸ Gitte Postel, ‘The Diviner’s Task: Confinement and Transformation through Myth and Ritual in Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*’, “Research in African Literatures” Vol. 38, No. 4, 2007, p. 53 and Berglund Axel-Ivar, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, C. Hurst&Company, Uppsala 1976, p. 35.

and he mentions uNkulunkulu in it. He reports that during the converting process he used the name uNkulunkulu as the other name for Yahve to explain Zulus the concept of almighty God.⁹ In opposition to Colenso is Callaway who says that Zulus do not have any ultimate divinity that could be called God (1870); at the same time he points to uNkulunkulu as the most important god.¹⁰ According to 19th century Christian missionary Robert Moffat, there was no God in native Africans' beliefs and uNkulunkulu was just the most ancient ancestor.¹¹ It could even be the first ancestor of a clan, not a deity.¹² In 1934 Burges reports beliefs in a god-creator called uNkulunkulu but emphasises that the prayers for guidance and prosperity do not go to him (like in Christianity) but to ancestors, the common misunderstanding of Zulus attitude towards ancestral spirits.¹³

Myths and the social system of Zulus became a subject of academic interest in the 20th century. Within the academia the first researcher was Eileen J. Krige, a South African anthropologist and a professor of the University of Durban. In 1936 she published *The Social System of the Zulu*. In 1940 A.T. Bryant, missionary and anthropologist and the author of *Zulu-English Dictionary*, published a thorough study *The Zulu People*, in which he describes the life and the religious beliefs of the Zulus.¹⁴ In 1975 prof. A-I. Berglund published his extensive research *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, a book that describes Zulu beliefs in Christianised, urbanised apartheid South Africa. All these authors lived in South Africa and did field studies among Zulus, Berglund was actually brought up with Zulu children.

Defining uNkulunkulu

The complexity of uNkulunkulu is vast and European researchers asked numerous questions which had never been asked before by Zulus themselves: Is uNkulunkulu the first ancestor? Is he a human with a divine soul? If he is a god, then did his bodily form

⁹ John William Colenso, *First Steps of the Zulu Mission (October 1959)*, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, London 1860, pp. 116, 165.

¹⁰ Callaway mentions a Lord of Heaven several times as a vague idea on which the Zulus do not dwell; some of his informants report that when a lightning strikes, a heavenly lord is angry or when something significant happens in a village 'it was done by heaven'; Callaway's informants do not mention any worship of the deity. 19th century researchers portray the Zulus as a secularized society where the ancestors and witchcraft are important, but where belief in a high god or Lord of the Sky is non-existent. These are: N. Isaacs (*Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, 1836), A. Gardiner (*Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country*, 1836), William Holden (*The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races* 1868), Owen's Diary edited by Sir George Cory in 1926 and others (information based on: Irving Hexam 1981, Viewed 07 June 2020, <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~nurelweb/papers/irving/skyking.html#_ftn11>).

¹¹ Robert Moffat (1795–1883) – the establisher of the Kuruman Mission and the translator of the Bible to Tswana.

¹² David Chidester et al. (eds.), *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography*, Greenwood Press, London 1997, p. 228.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 224.

¹⁴ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, pp. 25–26.

appear only when he broke from the reeds or before? Was there any supreme divine being who created uNkulunkulu? If so, then is uNkulunkulu not a supreme god himself? Also if he is the first ancestor, why no myths recount stories about his offspring?

The myth that attests to the fact that uNkulunkulu was an important deity before Christianity is the story about chameleon sent by uNkulunkulu to inform people that they would not die. When the animal was lazy and slow, he send a lizard with the information that they would die. The first animal to reach humans was the one to announce their fate, and it was the lizard. This myth gives great God-like power to uNkulunkulu.¹⁵

The first big research on uNkulunkulu specifically was done by Colenso, who published his results in 1855. Apart from loose conversations, he asked well defined questions about the origins of uNkulunkulu, his participation in creating the world, humans, animals, law and death. The answers he received were inconclusive. Some respondents claimed that uNkulunkulu was the first ancestor but could not explain if he had any offspring, others were sure that he was unmarried and childless but still he was the first ancestor of humankind.¹⁶ Most Colenso's informants claimed that in their pantheon there was the 'king of above' but were not sure if it was uNkulunkulu; they were not even sure if this was his unique name as they also use the name for respected elders and ancestors. Asked about creation, most pointed to uNkulunkulu as the creator of people, animals and social order of the humankind.¹⁷ Here we can see that at the earliest stage of research, Zulus did not have consensus about uNkulunkulu. The later in history, the more the idea of him is influenced by Western and Christian studies.

Chidester recalls Colenso and Gordon (late 19th century), then Samuelson and Asmus (early 20th century), and their problems with finding God-figure within Zulu myths; they also had problems with establishing who uNkulunkulu really was. For those researchers' informants, uNkulunkulu was a prominent figure but he was usually understood as both a supreme god and as an ancestor.¹⁸ Other researchers report that the belief in a sky deity has always been central to Zulu religious thought: some of their informants call the supreme deity The Lord of Heavens and testify that he created uNkulunkulu – the first ancestor, others that The Lord of Heavens is too powerful to use his name at all.¹⁹

Farrer's informants call uNkulunkulu 'Lord of heaven', 'the king which is above', 'the Old-old-one', the first man – words used also by many informants of Colenso's. He is believed to create goodness and evil (when Zulus do something wrong they ask themselves why uNkulunkulu created evil). He created the universe and taught people

¹⁵ M.R. Masubelele, *Missionary Interventions in Zulu Religious Practices: the Term for the Supreme Being*, "Acta Theologica Supplementum" 12 (2009), p. 69.

¹⁶ Hexhan Irving, *Texts on Zulu Religion: Traditional Zulu Ideas about God*, E. Mellen Press, 1987, pp. 192–193.

¹⁷ Ibidem 1987 p. 193, 195–196.

¹⁸ Chidester et al., *African Traditional Religion*, p. 213.

¹⁹ Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, pp. 280–282, Issac Schapera, *The Bantu-speaking tribes of South Africa; an ethnographical survey*, G. Routledge & Sons 1937 p. 263; Edward William Smith, Edward Geoffrey Parrinder (eds), *African Ideas of God: a Symposium*, Edinburgh House Press 1950, pp. 33, 78; Callaway *Religious System of the Amazulu* 1870, p. 58, 90, John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Ibadan, Heinemann, London 1969, p. 34.

everything they needed to survive and evolve. That includes secret arts of divination and medicine, the use of sacrifice and prophetic dreams – the very skills attributed to sangomas. For Farrer, uNkulunkulu fills the place of Zulus' creator but he is not worshiped as God-creator is in Abrahamic religions.²⁰ Krige, after Callaway, repeats that Zulus asked about uNkulunkulu use the name for both deity and as a synonym of their first ancestor, the founder of the clan who lived long, long ago.²¹

Because the meaning of uNkulunkulu is all about greatness, his name was used in several translations of the Bible as a name of God. They are in fact used till today.²² This seems unjustified because the idea of uNkulunkulu is much older than the presence of Christianity in Southern Africa and also because the attributes of Christian God and uNkulunkulu are different.

Till today there is no agreement if uNkulunkulu should be treated as God or some form of a supreme god, or just a sacred ancestor. He seems to be all of it for the Zulus, and the perception of uNkulunkulu is often personal and influenced by time, the degree of Christianisation and individual attitude towards 'traditional' Zulu beliefs.²³ Berglund points to uNkulunkulu as The Lord-of-the-Sky and considers him the ultimate God and the creator of the world but at the same time reports that the name can be applicable to important spirits.²⁴ About a century after first researchers, some of Berglund's informants believe that uNkulunkulu is 'the same as worshiped in the church', 'the one who is above', meaning God.²⁵ This shows the influence the Christianity has had on Zulus and their perception of their own culture. Berglund also reports that when Zulus address God, they say uNkulunkulu, when spirits – iNkulunkulu (plural), though the form uNkulunkulu is also possible. Zulus rather tend not to pray to uNkulunkulu but to confide their worries and hopes in ancestral spirits. The spirits help people contact God, The Lord-of-the-Sky, and they take humans' prayers to him, then bring the answers back.²⁶ They can do it through dreams or via sangomas who have constant contact with the spiritual realm – explain my sangoma informants.²⁷

I tried to get a contemporary understanding of uNkulunkulu on Facebook. I asked if he was God, a god, a deity or the first ancestor and if anybody cared these days. It

²⁰ James Anson Farrer, *Zululand and the Zulus: their history, beliefs, customs, military system, home life, legends, etc., etc., and missions to them*, Kerby & Endean, London 1879, p. 130.

²¹ Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, p. 280.

²² Masubelele, "Missionary Interventions", p. 74.

²³ The term "traditional" was highly criticized by prof. Rosalind Shaw who finds it very imprecise and invented by colonisers: they called African native beliefs "traditional religions" in the contrary to Christianity. 'traditional' means unchanging but no culture, including Zulu, stays uninfluenced by changing conditions (Shaw Rosalind, *The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion*, "Religion" 1990, Vol. 20, p. 339). The same applies to 'traditional' healers, 'traditional' spiritual leaders, 'traditional' style of life etc.

²⁴ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, pp. 32, 36.

²⁵ Ibidem p. 36.

²⁶ Ibidem pp. 34, 36, 43.

²⁷ During my researches I interviewed over 100 Zulu sangomas.

turned out that Zulus cared but the answers I have received showed that no definition can be delineated. These are some examples:²⁸

‘What is god really? Or a deity? It is after all just a perception. So whether Nkulunkulu is “god” or not is not important here, the importance of it is that there is the greatest of great power that looks over and provides for us. It is not an ancestor. The word for ancestor is Ndlozi which translates more to “angel” in the western culture. However, one could also argue that Nkulunkulu is the Great Ancestor, the first being “ancestor” that led to our creation, which is also what could be called “god”, right?’ (sangoma trained in Zulu tradition)

‘It’s the Creator. I know that when people asked for help they always asked the ancestors to take the request to The Creator.’ (non-sangoma person)

‘To understand uNkulunkulu you just need to leap out the language box & think about meaning or translation in a different way. The ultimate, the unknowable, non religious, a state of consciousness beyond human body mind comprehension. Who can define wisdom? The world will do what it wants to do... But freedom to understand or choose, is awesome. Everyone can make up their own minds & hearts...’ (sangoma trained in Zulu tradition).

My question on Facebook also inspired several e-mails. Here are the explanations:

‘It does not matter how you understand uNkulunkulu. He is both ancestor and God. But because today we know that there is no physical heaven, we must understand that God is a spiritual concept and so is uNkulunkulu. It is rather a Universe that is mother and father and creator of everything and you can call it God.’²⁹

‘We never speak of uNkulunkulu and if we need a divine help, we can point the sky with our open palm and ask for help. What a difference if God is the first ancestor or the first ancestor is God? Isn’t it the same? God created us, he is our father in probably all religions which means that no matter if you are Zulu, Christian or Muslim, your God Father creator is automatically your ancestor.’³⁰

²⁸ The discussions took place on 29–30 April 2018.

²⁹ Private e-mail from a Zulu sangoma 30th April 2018.

³⁰ Private e-mail from a Zulu non-sangoma received on 30th April 2018.

Though using social media to discuss religious concept may seem an unconventional way of procuring information, I find it worth mentioning that the problem of uNkulunkulu still sparkles interest in the 21st century. The discussion also showed that there is no single answer to resolve the problem.

Origins of uNkulunkulu

The origins of uNkulunkulu are unclear. Is he the first to be born from something that existed before him or is he the first cause and being? M. Leach states that he was ‘the first man and there was nothing before him, yet he broke off from the source [reeds]’.³¹ UNkulunkulu is believed to be of a masculine gender, born from the first reed that covered the world before gods and men were created. Other people were born from the reeds as well.³² My sangoma informants all agree with the masculine gender of the deity. Berglund’s informants state that uMvelinqangi is a name given to men, so The Lord-of-the-Sky and that it is definitely masculine, while Earth is considered a mother. Hence the sky and earth are like man and wife.³³ What Berglund calls The Lord-of-the-Sky is also called uHlanga, which means reed. His informants recall a myth in which uHlanga brings all the people from the reeds, the very first one called uNkulunkulu. In some myths uNkulunkulu jumps from a reed and brings people and animals to life, in others it is uHlanga who sets uNkulunkulu free. The Lord-of-the-Sky created reeds so it is thank to him that humans and animals exist.³⁴

Famous and controversial Zulu sangoma, Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (born 1921), describes uNkulunkulu as the ‘Great Spirit’ and ‘the Spirit of Life’.³⁵ He offers no explanation where uNkulunkulu comes from or whether he existed before the creation of the universe or not. He only says that uNkulunkulu supervises the eternal battle between cold and heat, darkness and light – battles that cannot be won but must always be fought – and that he commanded the first goddess, Ma, to put Universe in order, to take it out from Chaos and to create the Earth a habitable place.³⁶ When I spoke to him, he identified uNkulunkulu with God, the concept of the supreme God praised in every monotheistic religion.³⁷ Mutwa’s opinion is unique and the concept of God who decides to divide darkness from light is clearly influenced by Christianity and not reported by any other known informant.

³¹ Leeming David (ed), *Creation Myths of the World*, ABC CLIO, Santa Barbara California, 2010, p. 297.

³² Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, p. 281.

³³ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, pp. 34, 36.

³⁴ Ibidem p. 35.

³⁵ Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, *Indaba my children*, Grove Press, New York 1999, p. 8.

³⁶ Ibidem p. 8, 35.

³⁷ Private conversation, March 2013.

Names of uNkulunkulu

Also the names of the supreme deity pose a problem. All sangomas I interviewed said the name of God is never spoken out loud and the sky should be rather pointed with an open palm then called by name. Other researchers agree with these statements and note that there are few situations when the names can be called and only in highly stressful situations like grave illness, epidemic or flood.³⁸ Addressing gods and deities or calling them by their names is alien to Zulu culture. It is a matter of *ukuhlonipha*, the custom of showing reverence.³⁹ It is against *ukuhlonipha* to use names of people who should be revered. The custom applies not only do gods but to everyday relations as well, for example wives should not address their husbands by their names nor do children with adults; also a king is never addressed by his name and in private conversations he shouldn't be called by name too.⁴⁰ My sangoma informants say that the situation changes now, especially in cities and among educated Zulus but in rural areas it is still common. Zulus generally do not see a reason to pray to uNkulunkulu, they ask sangomas for help in serious situations.

Most scholars recall more than one name for uNkulunkulu. His other names are uMsondo or uSomandla.⁴¹ Berglund adds the name uMninimandla, the word *amandla* meaning wisdom, knowledge.⁴² Krige translates uNkulunkulu as 'the Old One' or 'the Creator' or 'First Cause'.⁴³ Berglund translates uNkulunkulu as The Lord-of-the-Sky.⁴⁴ Sundkler translates uNkulunkulu as 'the great, great one' or 'the old, old one' and gives other names of 'the Creator or the First Cause': nMvelinqangi ('the one who emerged first') and uHlanga ('bed of reeds' from which mankind emerged), and warns against comparing the god with God in Christian sense.⁴⁵ Other names used for the supreme deity are: iNkosi yezulu or iNkosi phezulu which mean 'Lord of Heaven', a god who resides in the sky and is particularly connected with lightning and thunder.⁴⁶ Colenso even tried to compare the duplicity in naming Zulu deity to Hebrew double name of God: Elohim and Yahve, the concept not adapted by other researchers.⁴⁷

³⁸ The name Umsondo is used in expressions like 'How hard it is, the earth of Umsondo' or 'How the heavens of Umsondo rains' in case of floods (Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, p. 281). See also Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 36.

³⁹ *Ukuhlonipha* is engraved into Zulu consciousness. Every person within a social stratum reveres those who are above in the hierarchy and deserve praising and it certainly applies to deities. As a result Zulus invented elaborate epithets to describe not only gods but also people whom they revere. These praises are called *izibongo* (Liz Gunner, Gwala Mafika, *Musho! Zulu popular praises*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 1991 pp. 1–3).

⁴⁰ Farrer, *Zululand and the Zulus*, p. 126; Gunner, Gwala, *Musho!*, pp. 1–3.

⁴¹ Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, 1962 p. 281.

⁴² Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 36.

⁴³ Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, 1962 p. 281.

⁴⁴ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Bengt G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1964, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁶ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Chidester, *Savage System*, p. 133.

Responsibilities of uNkulunkulu

The responsibilities of uNkulunkulu are also problematic to establish. Farrer's informants told him that uNkulunkulu was said to exist before time in human understanding (before uNkulunkulu, there was no time, there was no one to count time) and was said to be the creator of all living beings who came out of reeds that existed on earth before him. He is therefore the first ancestor, the one thanks to whom all people exist.⁴⁸ UNkulunkulu is also believed to have hidden himself from people and has no influence on their lives, he is just the first human who plays no role in worldly affairs.⁴⁹ According to some Zulu informants, uNkulunkulu did not establish any laws and regulations to be followed, leaving ethics to be created by humans themselves. This is what differs him from Christian concept of God. The other difference is the idea of the Judgement Day: uNkulunkulu will not punish people for wrong behaviour at any "end of the world".⁵⁰ Some Berglund's informants believe uNkulunkulu is responsible for rain and natural disasters, i.e. thunders are the result of his bad humour.⁵¹

My research among sangomas and other Zulus has proved that even among sangomas the concept of God and deity is more philosophical than simply religious. In the 21st century sangomas do not define God and heaven in literary means but rather perceive them as spiritual concepts. Hence defining uNkulunkulu and his responsibilities seem as impossible as establishing the responsibilities of God in monotheistic religions from the philosophical point of view. I have never met a person in South Africa who would believe in any deity that could be responsible for rain or drought, not even among those who did not have a modern Western education (though Christian churches organise prayers at the end of dry season to encourage rain to come). Literary treatment of uNkulunkulu and heaven seems to dissolve into more fluid concepts.

Summary

Academics have tried to make one coherent view of who uNkulunkulu really is but the fact is that even among sangomas, who are the protectors of religious knowledge, there are different opinions. My contacts with sangomas and 'average' Zulus show that their attitude towards uNkulunkulu has not changed in last two hundred years. They were forced to define uNkulunkulu for Westerners but showed no interest in perusing the subject themselves. UNkulunkulu remains a dim figure; there is no unified knowledge

⁴⁸ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Leeming, *Creation Myths*, p. 297.

⁵⁰ Ana Maria Monteiro-Ferreira, *Reevaluating Zulu Religion: An Afrocentric Analysis*, *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 35, No. 3, Jan., 2005, p. 356; Postel, *The Diviner's Task*, p. 53.

⁵¹ Berglund's informants told him that Zulus believe lightnings are some kinds of birds coming to earth and claiming what they want. A person killed by a lightning is not considered a shade (as Berglund calls spirits). He is 'taken from the earth' to kneel before The Lord-of-the-Sky (Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, p. 38).

about him, neither written by Zulus nor told scholars by their informants. In my opinion, it is a problem of Western academics not Zulus. The question if uNkulunkulu is God, a god or the first ancestor remains open not only for academics but for Zulus themselves.

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