

## ZULUS ON THE RAND

VALENTINE WOOD, O.P.

RECENTLY I was standing on a bridge crossing the main approach to the new railway station in Johannesburg: below, the last touches were being given to the fifteen new platforms, while gangs of natives were busy with pneumatic drills, cranes and trucks, already demolishing the old station, and singing shanties as they worked. In the skyscraper flats all round thousands more natives were busy cooking their masters' dinners on electric stoves: others were handling goods in the warehouses, working as pump-boys at filling stations, setting up linotype for tomorrow's edition of *The Bantu World*, or, several thousand feet underground, were manning mechanical plant, and lashing the reef rock from a gold mine.

In all outward appearances, South Africa is as modern, progressive, and industrialised as any country in Europe or America. But it is also a country of contrasts and seeming contradictions, of bright lights, hard outlines, cruelty, and laughter. As soon as the observer says Chicago has nothing on Johannesburg, he must immediately ask himself, is this not in truth darkest Africa? To ignore that question would be almost as foolish as to ignore the question, whether Paris could have a culture which was independent of neon lighting.

For the thousands of Africans who are riding bicycles, delivering refrigerators and patent medicines, who, in a word, are caught up in the techniques and efficiency of our mass-producing age, have roots in an older culture whose coherence and whose hold on them are only just crumbling. The good old days of law and order and of values they could understand are still there in the reserves, even if clouds presage the approach of night.

Jim delivers medicines with a patronising smile, still fairly confident that his medicine-man at home can give him something far stronger, if only he can get there in time. But just one small thought perplexes him: time is getting short. This is the generation of the uprooted. Johannesburg is not Jim's home, though it is where he will live and die. And his children will be even further from home, they will be born here, spend their childhood in the

back-yard of their location house, will only know by hearsay a world where there are no sky-scrapers, no street-gangs, no pass laws, and no pick-up vans. They will be told the old tribal tales, learn something of their secrets, and will dream of home, just as Jim still dreams of it. Only of course they will read and write (what a fine thing it would be if Jim's daughter could be a teacher), and go to church on Sundays, for the priest in his own way seems to have certain powers against some of the bad spirits that are now abroad in the white man's land. But they will dream of home, if there is still a home—or has time run out?

*O Fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro.*

Just below a high peak, from which most of Zululand can be seen, a spring breaks through flowering mosses on the edge of the Nkandla Forest. Inside the forest it is cold and silent, but for the screeching of baboons, and there are few tracks through the hills and valleys which it covers. To the South (the Zulu word for which is 'Many Cannibals') and immensely far off, lie the high ranges of Basutoland; eastwards and straight ahead, the country falls away in thick folds to a blue line which is the Indian Ocean, while to the North lie more mountains and plains covered in bush, which form the heart of Zululand. Here, a hundred years ago, the fiercest and noblest tribe of Southern Africa paid homage to its kings. A few miles away is the Precipice of the Eagles, so-called because Tshaka marched hundreds of his enemies over its brink, and it is said that even today bones can sometimes be found below. War, debauchery, and witchcraft are part of the centuries-old tradition of the land, while many a mountain cave still shows the paintings of the earlier inhabitants, the Bushmen. Quotations from a diary may perhaps best illustrate present conditions in the homeland of Jim's dreams:

'Here a boy met me, among the rocks which are covered in flowers, and led me through the fringes of the forest, curling round the mountain sides until we dropped down the steep hill into the valley of Vungwini. Here it was that Fr C. found three clay pipes, at the end of one of which were a few drops of metal. Fr C. is of the opinion that they were originally bellows and were used for smelting metal. No living Zulu knows how to smelt, and the art has been lost, but Vungwini (Whirlwind), a deep valley where no wind blows, presumably got its name from the noise of the bellows at the forge.

'The catechist's kraal was perched among some trees and banana plants, a couple of hundred feet above the stream. There were two huts of the beehive type, in which slept the women and the men, a third hut for cooking, several small store huts, and a rondavel for me.

'In the evening we talked about the old times. Makwaza said that they were bad, in that the women did all the work, while the men sat around and drank beer, but now both men and women worked. But again the old times were good in that people did not drink shimiyané (a potent locust drink, containing methylated spirits and carbide), nor did they kill or steal, except in honest warfare.

'A voice, old and cracked, emerged from a mat behind me: had I ever seen an aeroplane? Yes, I said, I had even been in one. Someone else said his friend in Durban had seen one, and it was like a house. Rubbish, said the Voice, it is far too small. Then, doubtfully, surely people could not sit in an aeroplane? I said Yes, even thirty people could sit in it, and they cooked tea there. Unbelieving silence. Then I gave a demonstration of how the earth moves round the sun, but the old woman said even if I spoke fairly, they could see for themselves that this was not so. And what about the moon, anyway?

'That night, I saw strange lights on the mountains, which were certainly neither lanterns nor fires. The valley is full of stories of evil spirits, and next morning I was kept busy blessing bottles of holy water, which the catechist explained to the Christians as possessing great power for the warding off of evil spirits.

'Early on Monday morning we left the valley of the metalworkers, crossed over the mountain, and rode for two hours up the valley of the Umhlatuze river to another Christian kraal, where Mass was said. On the journey through this remote country, we were met by a man dressed in skins, and carrying a shield—a Zulu of the Zulus. I greeted him and spoke in Zulu. He answered in Fanakalo, the "language" of the mines and the kitchens. How long can Zulu culture survive? The gramophone swings dangerously at the feast of the Bantu Damocles. Not only in Zululand, but in native reserves from the Southern Cape to the Rhodesias, Nyasaland, Angola, and Tanganyika, the churches and the country are peopled by women, children, and old men, for the young ones are away in Durban or the City of Gold. Losing

their own language, and their own culture, and adopting cheap substitutes for both from the white man. Fanakalo—white and black both speak it, but both are ashamed of the parentage, and each fathers it on the other.

‘And that of course is the problem of the missionary. Is the black man to learn real Christianity, or is he going to absorb and manufacture a “Fanakalo” version for himself? Are we going to be content to give him simply a muddled code of behaviour, where the ten commandments are mixed up with Sunday clothes, or are we going to be able to enter into his mind, and show him Christ’s message as a message to all men, a message therefore to the Zulus?’

‘One of the catechisms, when dealing with the dispositions necessary for Communion, says that recipients must be fasting from midnight, and must be *well-dressed*. Which means cast-off European clothes, and when, they are torn beyond hope of mending, Ernest can no longer go to church, because a new pair of trousers would mean no food for the family for a week. Back on the Rand, I have been asked by a flashily dressed housegirl how it is these savages who work on the mines can come to Mass, wearing only dirty trousers and a vest.

‘I remembered a funeral last month in the heart of the Reserve, where the customs and the traditional way of life seemed untouched. Most of the huts in the kraal were pagan, with a quiet dignity and simplicity of their own. In the deceased Christian’s hut, as well as the mats and calabashes, were a brass and iron bedstead, two alarm clocks, cheap prints, and medicine-bottles.’

Zululand is a country of mountains and river, and soil erosion, of irresponsible farming and lean cattle, and of those curious twins, poverty and waste. The people are lovable, simple, improvident, gay and inconstant, with sudden passions, dull sufferings, a quick sense of humour and stupidity, with a shrewd store of proverbs and a strong sense of fatality, which teaches that human failings are there and cannot be helped. ‘God does not want me to start being good yet.’ But it is not quite as Jim dreams of it. It is a country of confusion, dreaming of the towns, just as Jim in his turn dreams of the country, though the future lies neither in the European dreams of the rural native, nor in the atavistic dreams of town dwellers, but possibly in an amalgamation of the two.

In the new culture which will one day appear, however, Jim's dreams will play their part. And the missionary too must recognise that fact, if he is to contribute to the forming of a new culture. It will not be enough to equate Johannesburg with London or Chicago, because Jim's dreams and memories will be an important factor. At present most of our African literature, most of our sermons, though verbally translated into another tongue, are suitable to people who have been brought up in the local Graeco-Roman traditions of Europe. With a few brilliant exceptions, we do not as a rule take the trouble of acquiring an African background, so that our words, as well as being in the *language* of the audience, should be also adapted to the ways of thinking, and to the cultural setting. Humanly speaking, the spread of the Gospel in Africa demands a readiness on the part of missionaries to forego many worthy traditions and customs of their own culture, in which the gospel has become enshrined, so that the Bantu may receive it into their own new culture, and may learn at once the universality and the individual appeal of the truth that the Word became flesh.



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