

# Mlanjeni's war charms - Ikhubalo likaMlanjeni

*Pelargonium pulverulentum* and *Plumbago auriculata* were used by the Xhosa prophet Mlanjeni as war charms in the Eighth Frontier War 150 years ago, and both are still known as Mlanjeni's charms and are used medicinally and symbolically by amaXhosa to this day.

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Most South Africans are familiar with lucky charms such as the four leaved clover of European origin, the Hamsa Hand (Arabic) or Hamesh Hand (Hebrew), the Hindu lucky elephant representing Ganesha, son of Siva, or the African ikhubalo. Amakhubalo refer to charms, often of plant origin, that have magical powers to ward off danger or to bring good luck. Charm plants are used almost everywhere in the Eastern Cape to ensure health, luck and success in sporting events, business, courtship, legal proceedings, safety against accidents and crime and protection against jealousy and sorcery. A common example is the carrying of a pair of lucky beans in the wallet or pocket. These are the seeds of umkhokha, the luckybean creeper *Abrus precatorius*, usually bought from amayeza (muthi) stores for R20 a pair. Interestingly the species epithet is derived from the Latin *precari*, meaning 'to pray',

and refers to the use of the seeds in Catholic rosaries. Whereas umkhokha occurs from KwaZulu-Natal into East Africa, the common seeds of umsinti, the coral tree *Erythrina caffra*, despite being almost identical, are reportedly not lucky at all.

## War charms

War charms have been used on numerous occasions in colonial African situations very much like that of first-century Palestine where magic was deployed against the bullets of the white man. Similarly the Maji-Maji rebellion in East Africa against the Germans, using magic water to deflect bullets, went on for two years (1905-1907). Alice Lakawena, who led a revolt in Uganda in 1987, told her followers their rocks and sticks would explode like hand grenades, and magic ointment on their chests would protect them. In 2002 a band of Congolese rebels, call-

ing themselves the 'Ninjas' attacked a capital city airport wearing magic charms across their bare chests to ward off government bullets. A firefight erupted with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) soldiers who shredded any belief of magical protection for the Congolese rebels. Despite repeated and bloody empirical checks, in many cases followers never gave up their beliefs in the efficacy of such magic.

Like other Africans, the early Xhosa believed that war-doctors' application of medicines to warriors and weapons, known as ukukhafula, generated protective and supernatural powers. The deflection of bullets was not a great step from the deflection of spears and arrows. Xhosa missionary John Henderson Soga noted, 'In all tribal wars the presiding figure who prepares the army, and instills into it courage and a determination to conquer the enemy, is the war-doctor (itola).' Makhanda and Mlanjeni were such war-doctors of early Xhosa history.

Traditional healer Indlela Zimhlope (second from left) and his trainees carrying beaded symbolic staffs, called amaCamagu, made of *Plumbago auriculata* stems. The procession is at a ritual near Alice in the Eastern Cape, July 2005. Photo: Tony Dold.



## Mlanjeni

There were nine Frontier Wars, increasing in severity from 1779 to 1878. British policy became one of containing the Xhosa, and by the end of the series of wars, the Xhosa had lost much of its prime pastoral land. The Seventh and Eighth Frontier Wars were particularly bitter. After the Seventh Frontier War ('The War of the Axe' from 1846 to 1847), in 1850, a teenager by the name of Mlanjeni, son of Kala and a young commoner under chief Mqhayi, began to show signs of ukuthwasa – being called by the ancestors to train as an igqirha (prophet/doctor/traditional healer). He spent an extraordinary amount of time lying half submerged in a river, acquiring the name Mlanjeni ('In the River'), and preached that the Xhosa had to



forsake bloodshed, destroy sorcery and worship the sun as God. He was regarded as a prophet and medicine man by his own people but as a maniac or madman by missionaries and colonists.

With an increased imperial grip over the so-called 'British Kaffraria' (Western Xhosaland) the desperate Xhosa were particularly receptive to Mlanjeni's anti-witchcraft campaign and war-doctoring prophecies. Mlanjeni promised to root out witchcraft, use his medicines to render warriors invulnerable to white men's bullets, and to fill British guns with water. His message appealed especially to Xhosa chiefs Maqoma, Sandile and Sarhili (Hintsas's son), Mapasa of the Thembu and the Khoi leader Willem Uithaalder, as well as their subjects.

As war again loomed, Sandile, the 'Great Bull' in British Kaffraria, secured young Mlanjeni as a war-doctor. The Eighth Frontier War, known as 'Mlanjeni's War', began on Christmas Eve in 1850 and dragged on for three years. The biggest anti-colonial war in sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth century united Xhosa, Thembu and Khoi against British under Sir Harry Smith and Lord Charles Somerset and allied Mfengu.

Mlanjeni prepared the Xhosa nation for war with instructions on how to make themselves invulnerable to English bullets. This was to be achieved by rubbing on their bodies the juices from the root of a charm plant, *Pelargonium pulverulentum*, namely ikhubalo likaMlanjeni. Further to this, when attacking the enemy they were to chew on short

sticks of umthi kaMlanjeni (*Plumbago auriculata*), spit out the fibres and call on the ancestors and the prophet to bless them. Battlefield tragedy followed; hundreds were killed when the Riverman's protection was found to be non-existent. 'The guns of the Imperial troops did not shoot water, nor did the Xhosa warriors prove invulnerable to shot and shell...the battlefields were strewn with Mlanjeni's charm-sticks dyed with the blood of the true believers' (from J. Peires' book, *The House of Phalo*, written in 1981). By 1853, the Xhosa were exhausted by the British army and resistance came to an end.

#### Plants for health, life and spirit

One hundred and fifty years later *Pelargonium pulverulentum* is still well known as ikhubalo likaMlanjeni and quickly differentiated from other species of *Pelargonium*, several of which are called ikhubalo and are traded and used medicinally. *Plumbago auriculata* is still called umthi kaMlanjeni (umthi

means plant and hence also medicine) and remains closely associated with traditional healers (amagqirha) who always carry a small wooden symbolic wand made from a branch during their apprenticeship. The wand, called icamagu, is decorated with beads to indicate each successive stage of progress of their apprenticeship. Traditional healers also use a small forked branch of umthi kaMlanjeni as a whisk (ixhayi) to prepare medicines. Clearly the tradition of 'plants for health, life and spirit' persists well into the new millennium.

#### Bio-cultural diversity conservation

As the national (and international) conservation policy arena changes to incorporate concepts of cultural rights, as some formerly marginalized groups claim increasing power while others feel even more marginalized, the credibility of the conservation movement depends on its ability to deal with the complex relation between history, culture and conservation. ♾



BELOW: *Plumbago auriculata*, umthi kaMlanjeni, in the Fish River Valley. Photo: Tony Dold.



ABOVE: *Pelargonium pulverulentum*, ikhubalo likaMlanjeni, in karroid veld near Grahamstown. Photo: Tony Dold

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