



Dreams of Gold

By Wayne Visser

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Langa grew up as most any African village-boy would. Days were spent on the grassy hill-slopes tending cattle and playing stick fights with the other boys. Nights, everyone gathered around the communal fire to share food, beat the drums, sing, dance and listen to my stories. Langa loved the stories best of all – tales of great gods and monsters, ancient battles, heroes' journeys and loves lost and found. His favourite was the one I used to tell about the Golden Age of his ancestors, long before the white man arrived in this part of Africa; long before this continent was even called Africa. In those, days, its name was *Tangawatu*, which means "the vine upon which humans grow". With fiery shadows flickering across my animated face, I would recall this glorious time:

"As the story goes, our ancestors, with their great skills in stone masonry, iron smelting, cattle rearing and food production, had built a magnificent empire in which many tribes lived peacefully united. At the heart of this ancient civilization were caves stretching deep into the Earth's belly, in which they had discovered the golden dust of creation. This sun-kissed metal was softer than iron, but of great shining beauty. Treating it with fire, the ancestors soon learned to fashion it into many magnificent shapes, which henceforth adorned the great kings and their palaces of that age.

"So precious was the gold that in trade with distance tribes, one tiny nugget exchanged for hundreds of cattle; and later, in trade with the white people from the Waterland, bought thousands of beads made from the rainbow itself. All this made the Great Village of Gold (as it became known far and wide) more prosperous and famous still. According some storytellers, for those who were initiated into its secrets, the gold also had magical powers of transformation."

At this point, I would usually pause and sigh deeply, concluding the tale with the haunting words that "no one knows for certain why or how the Golden Age came to an end. But it is said that some of the ancestors abused the power which the gold had unlocked and so unleashed the wrath of the great Sun King, who blazed his fires day and night for twelve long seasons, until nothing was left of the Empire of Gold, or its people, or the secret knowledge."

I suppose the story was especially attractive to young boys like Langa because our village was poor in the white man's money terms, which made life difficult. Many had ceased to believe that our race had ever been capable of having created the Golden Age, nor that we would ever manage such a feat again. The harsh reality of poverty and dependence was reflected in Langa's own family.

His father often had to travel many days to find work in the cities, sending back what he could of his wages and returning only after the rebirth of countless moons. When a crop failed in the village, his mother too would have to go away in search of a servant job on a white man's farm, or in a nearby town. There were many days when young Langa and his brothers and sisters would go without food





or parental solace, crying themselves to sleep for the aching pain in their stomachs and hearts.

Even when both of his parents were at home, they were often toiling beneath some strange invisible yoke. Although Langa didn't really understand this ghostly burden, he often heard them whispering in the night about the unjust oppression of the white man's government, of police raids and brutal beatings, even of his father being locked behind bars for not carrying his *dompas* identification papers.

But all these hardships simply strengthened Langa's resolve to one day become educated and rich, like the white man, so that his family would never be in need again. Exactly how he was going to achieve this passionate conviction, he had no idea. Until, that is, he reached the age of Initiation into Manhood.

As was customary for this rite of passage, Langa and the other boys of comparable ages were isolated from the main village and made to build themselves a remote grass shelter. There followed many days of precise instruction on their future rights and responsibilities and the customs and mythology of their tribe. Then came various tests of physical stamina and mental resilience. Finally, when all of these had been accomplished, I stood solemnly as the Initiation Elder before the boys and briefed them:

"In the past days, like the snake, you have shed the old skin of your childish ways; like the wild hunting dog, you have showed your tenacious endurance; like the lion, you have been courageous in the face of danger; and like the elephant, you have shown your mental savvy. Now, you will need all of these traits, plus the spirit of the eagle, to carry you through your final, most critical challenge. Each of you, alone and without food, will go out into the wilderness in search of a vision of your life's quest. It may come as a whisper in the wind, a formation of the rocks, a picture in the clouds, a dream or apparition, or a message from an animal. You will know its truth by the liberating flight that it gives to your soul. Go well, and be sure not to return without your gift from the gods."

Langa was sent off in a westerly direction into the barren bushveld. Immediately, he began to apply his knowledge of bush lore, which he'd been taught since a young child. What was the spoor telling him about animal life in the area? Which edible and medicinal plants grew here? What was the flight of the insects signalling about nearby sources of water? What were the calls of the birds saying about the presence of danger?

By nightfall, he had found a suitable place for building a shelter, raised above the lie of the land, with partial protection from an overhanging rock and close to a trickling stream. The shelter was a simple construction of supple sapling sticks woven together and laced with green leaves, providing adequate relief from the stinging rain and the baking sun that he was likely to encounter in the long days ahead. Alongside, Langa had stacked wood to feed the fire during the night, to keep him warm while warding off unwelcome predators.

The days which followed were a mental battle – to prevent boredom and depression from setting in, to disregard the pangs of hunger and other physical discomforts, and to deal with hurtful and nostalgic memories that seemed to rage like rabid crocodiles within him. Most difficult of all, however, was the anxiety of





the vision quest itself, especially the self-doubt that increased with each unyielding passing hour.

Langa tried desperately hard to maintain an attitude of openness to inspiration, to tune his senses to be aware of esoteric subtleties and covert signs, but all seemingly in vain. By the fifth night, feeling weak, tired and defeated, Langa had reached his threshold of tolerance. "At sunrise", he reasoned with himself, "I will bury my deep shame and return to the Initiation Elder, conceding with whatever dignity I can still muster, that I am not yet ready to pass over this watershed into Manhood." This resolution being made, he immediately felt great pressure ease from his temples and he drifted easily to sleep. And into a dream:

A dank, earthy smell filled Langa's nostrils. Crouched in semi-darkness, his hands traced the jagged, cool wetness of underground rock. Great thunder boomed and echoed all around him, shaking the uneven ground beneath his feet. A light from his forehead dimly illuminated the snaking stonewalls of a narrow tunnel. Veins of glittering gold caught in the beam of light and flashed back at him. He caught his breath!

In the distance, a strange looking cart was filled with rubble and gliding magically away from him. When he followed the cart, he came to a place where the tunnel was intersected by a vertical bottomless black shaft. Suspended in the shaft was a large box, which took to flight as he stepped into it. When it came to rest again, he strode out into blinding, brilliant sunlight. Through the glare, he could see a large wheel towering over him against an horizon of strange looking conical hills. As he stared in confusion, the chant of men's voices drifted up the eerie hole. Langa could just barely make out the words:

*"Diggers and dreamers are we
Slaving that we might be free
Meanwhile our Mother Earth bleeds
To satisfy men's hungry greed
For riches and glory and power."*

With the last line of the chorus still echoing in his ears, Langa awoke with a start. He immediately knew that the dream was his gift from the gods, and though he did not understand its meaning, he rose with the sun, feeling that his soul had indeed taken flight like an eagle. Without hesitation or delay, he began his journey back to the original grass shelter, where myself and the other boys awaited him expectantly.

That night, around a fire that seemed unusually warm and homely, each boy recounted his vision and I, in consultation with the Elders of the Tribe, offered an interpretation. When it came to Langa's turn, he recalled the unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells of his dream world experience and waited in suspense for an explanation of its significance. The meaning was immediately apparent, and after a brief interval of whispering and nodding between myself and the Elders, I delivered the simple verdict:

"We believe this is a literal dream that foretells your destiny amidst the gold mines of South Africa. But it speaks also a warning about the seductive power of wealth and the harmful exploitation of nature. Therefore, you would do well to remember the reverent relationship that our ancestral gold diggers cultivated





with our living *Ma* and her sacred shiny seed. *Hamba kahle* – go well in your life’s journey!”

Langa could hardly contain the excitement and anticipation that he felt as his dream was being deciphered. In one grand sweep, his escape path from poverty and deprivation had been revealed. I could see in his eyes that he was thinking: Soon, I will be rich! I didn’t have the heart to shatter his illusion. He so desperately wanted to save his family from the indignity of their sparse existence. As winter turned to spring and the daisies ignited into a blazing carpet of technicolour, Langa turned his back on his birthplace, his youth and his family. I stood on the hill and watched as he set out on the long journey to the Highveld, to the place they call iGoli, which means “place of gold”.



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