



Wisdom of the Drum

By Wayne Visser

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I am Shado. I am called *sangoma* and *sanusi* by my people; *shaman* and mystic by others. I am the keeper of legends, the healer of disease, the voice of ancestors, the interpreter of dreams, the teller of stories. In days gone by, the people of my tribe – young and old, rich and poor, chief and beggar – would gather around a blazing fire under the star-beaded African sky, and listen to my stories. Today, my people are scattered by the winds, but my stories live on. Through the written word, I speak to a larger tribe, who live in places and listen at times that are unknown to me. Still, I think of them – of you, the reader – as seated around a common fire, which is the soul's yearning for meaning in an often-times bewildering world.

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This is a story about Mduduzi, a young man whose destiny conspired to cross his path with mine. Our meeting was inevitable from the instant that Mduduzi began to beat the drum, and something shifted deep inside of him. Unbeknown to him, in that profound moment of clarity, he set foot on a sacred path of knowledge known to the initiated as *The Wisdom of the Drum*. At the time, however, nothing could have been further from his mind. The whole experience was not only unexpected, it was uncalled for. So let me start the story at the beginning.

It was a cool autumn afternoon in the big African city. Mduduzi, or Dudu as his friends called him, was sitting in a circle with his work colleagues on the garden terrace of a luxury hotel, gathered for yet another team building exercise. To say that Dudu was sceptical would be an understatement. Surely their time could be far more productively spent, he muttered under his breath, as he thought of his desk piled high with paper and his email in-box jammed with unread messages. The fact that the exercise was drumming (it had been paintball and abseiling on two previous occasions) just added to his impatience – what could be more irrelevant?

Dudu was proud to be counted among the new generation of African executives – riding the wave of empowerment that followed political transformation in his country, and no longer shackled by what he regarded as the backward and superstitious ways of his ancestors. After generations of subservience by his people, he saw himself as a role model for Africa's future – a leader in the race by a continent to catch up with the rest of the world. He was confident in his abilities and comfortable with his new-world identity.

Not everyone shared his triumph. His parents seemed singularly unimpressed by his meteoric rise through the corporate ranks. They expressed their disapproval by endlessly repeating irritating proverbs, like "a tree without strong roots will not survive the storm" and "only an arrow launched by a sturdy bow flies straight and true". It was their way of chastising his casual dismissal of African cultural traditions. And though he found their lack of support and understanding hurtful, he would never admit it, nor would he let their antiquated attitudes hold him back. After all, what they regarded as a supportive web of ancient beliefs and rituals, he saw only as an outdated net of entangling taboos and restrictive rules.





In a high speed world of cutthroat global competition and 24-7 business trading, there was little time or use for role-playing quaint practices reminiscent of the very tribal customs that had kept his people in the dark for so long, while the rest of the world strode ahead into the age of enlightened progress and the information revolution.

It was in this belligerent frame of mind that Dudu sat in the drum circle that fateful afternoon, surrounded by his more gullible and eager contemporaries, all looking ridiculous dressed in suits while animal-skin drums were wedged awkwardly between their knees. His tepid expectations did not improve when a sloppily dressed man walked into the middle of the circle, wearing ripped jeans and a threadbare T-shirt. No wonder they don't take us blacks seriously, Dudu thought irritably. The man was cradling a drum that was suspended from his shoulders by two reggae-coloured nylon straps. This was obviously the person his company had hired to lead the drumming workshop – the circus ringmaster, Dudu mused wryly. What a waste of time and money! Dudu sighed heavily, waiting for the inevitable verbose self-adulating introductions he had become all too used to at these teambuilding events. He expected that it would be followed by a romanticised lecture about the importance of cultural heritage, or something similar.

What happened instead took him completely by surprise. It was the first of many surprises that would confound him that day and ultimately lead him to question so many beliefs he thought were unshakeable, not least his attitude towards his own culture, the nature of progress and what makes life worthwhile...

Boom. Boom. Boom. The hub-bub of the assembled group faded to silence. The steady base pulse continued. Boom. Boom. Boom. Smiles crept onto the expectant faces of the onlookers. A few uncertain twitters of laughter escaped. Boom. Boom. Boom. The sound was not loud, but Dudu felt it reverberate against his solar plexes. Boom. Boom. Boom. Looking at each other for support, first one, then more, and eventually the whole group, joined in, beating their drums in time to the simple rhythm. Boom. Boom. Boom.

At first, Dudu resisted joining in. He hated blind conformity. But as the sound enveloped him, he relaxed a little. The image of a moist, moss-covered rock dripping water floated into his consciousness. He closed his eyes and beat in time to the drip-drip-drip of the water. Softly at first. The beat was getting louder and the tempo quickening. In his mind's eye, the dripping water became a tumbling trickle. The rhythm changed, adding a lighter off-beat. The trickle cascaded to a bubbling stream. A dominant beat began to throb above the pitter-patter of syncopated secondary rhythms. The stream swelled to a raging torrent. Without warning, a rising crescendo of emotion was coursing through Dudu's body and gushing out through his hands. The division between sound and motion melted away. Gradually, he and the drum became one. Until, momentarily, the music transported him to a place of knowing, a state of being, that he could only describe feebly afterwards as the core of his soul.

Like a thunderstorm that has spent its fury, the experience ended as quickly as it had begun, petering out to a gentle tap-tap-tapping with a few fingers lightly on the rim of the drum. Then silence.

When Dudu opened his eyes, the sun's bright rays, sparkling rainbow-tinted through his misty gaze, seemed entirely appropriate, even numinous. As his focus returned to the physical world around him, he saw the drum leader looking directly at him, into him, and nodding a reassuring half-smile, as if he knew exactly what Dudu had just experienced; as if he wanted to let him know that it was alright, that although everything had changed in an instant, it was precisely how it should be.





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