



swim your soul through the soul of a dolphin

Dr Jason Cressey, author of the upcoming book *Once Upon A Tide*, explores our ancient connection with dolphins and whales, from an African perspective.

For ancient peoples, the sea was a terrifying, mysterious and lonely place. If one sailed too far, there would be a strong chance of dropping off the edge of the world into the dark void beyond the horizon. Is it any surprise that marine companions on any ocean-going journey were therefore welcomed, and that colourful stories of these sea creatures would flow from the mouth of any homecoming sailor or fisherman?

African myths figure prominently in any exploration of our longstanding sacred connection with dolphins and whales. The bond is an ancient one: archaeologists working in the caves at the Klasies River mouth on the Tsitsikamma coast of South Africa found a stone depicting a man swimming alongside four dolphins, believed to date back to the 4th century BCE. But what of the origins of the first dolphins? One suggestion comes from a Swahili legend about King Sulemani, who ruled with justice and compassion. His vast power emanated from the ring he wore. So coveted was this powerful ring, however, that the Devil himself sought to possess it – and one night he assumed the form of the King, stole the ring, and assumed the throne. Soon becoming bored, he set out to tour his kingdom and instructed preparations for the royal boat to be prepared. Once out at sea, the waves became high and unsettled, and in the constant movement the ring slipped off the Devil's finger and into the watery depths. Allah, who had been watching these events unfold, created a special being to retrieve the ring from the depths – this was the first dolphin. To this day, all dolphin kind can be seen surfacing and then diving, still looking for

the King's magical and powerful ring.¹

Greek mythology is filled with stories of boys riding upon the backs of benevolent dolphins. There are also tales of 'whale riders', including the famous Maori story that gave rise to the popular 'Whale Rider' film from New Zealand in 2002. According to Credo Mutwa, a spiritual leader of the Zulu people, a 'great fish of the seas' carried on its back Amaruva (the Zulu earth goddess) and Odu (the creative impulse, or god of creation) out into the open sea when the empire of the red-skinned First People was destroyed, and thus enabled a second civilisation, the Second People to repopulate southern Africa by saving the two pivotal creation deities. In rituals that have been passed down in Zulu tradition, the great 'Fish of the Seas' is generally depicted with many teeth, a leathery-type skin and strong tail flukes. Moreover, it is decorated with fertility symbols – all of which fit the idea of this 'great fish' in actual fact depicting a dolphin or whale upon whose back the gods themselves journeyed and were saved from near oblivion.²

The close bond between cetacea and humans is not confined purely to the historical or mythological. A case of co-operative fishing between men and dolphins still continues to this day in Mauritania, on the western coast of northern Africa, south of Morocco. The Imragen tribe (meaning 'Gatherers of Life'), small in number at less than 500 and neither Arab nor Berber in descent, roam the desolate coastline at the southern end of the Banc d'Arguin National Park. They are nomadic, spending the months between September and March each year fishing for mullet in a most unusual way in the Bay of Timiris. For days, under the hot desert sun, the Imragen men sit and stare out to sea,

looking for a sign of the vast schools of mullet (detectable by dark-coloured patches in the light blue water) and the accompanying dolphins. The dolphins are believed to be Atlantic humpbacked dolphins, though observers have noted that more than one species is sometimes present (bottlenose dolphins often appear) and yet all the dolphins co-operate in the fishing, so it seems unlikely that any one pod – or even any one species – is the sole protagonist. Normally, dolphins are rarely seen along this barren stretch of coast, but during the few short months when the fishing takes place they can appear in great numbers.

When any dolphins are finally spotted (as many as a hundred can appear at one time) the men run into the water, waist deep, and begin slapping sticks on the surface to alert the dolphins to their presence. They unfold their nets, and within seconds a frenzied school of mullet are chased into the fishermen's nets, with still hundreds of thousands free to swim away, and some to be taken by the dolphins as part of the 'deal'. The entire process of fishing will rarely last more than 20-30 minutes once the dolphins begin chasing the mullet ashore, and this can happen several times a day or, sometimes, several days at a time may pass with no sign of the dolphins. Although the dolphins chase the fish into very shallow water, sometimes as shallow as 50cm or less, they almost never strand and seem entirely comfortable with the presence of the men close by, despite the vulnerability of finding themselves potentially beached.

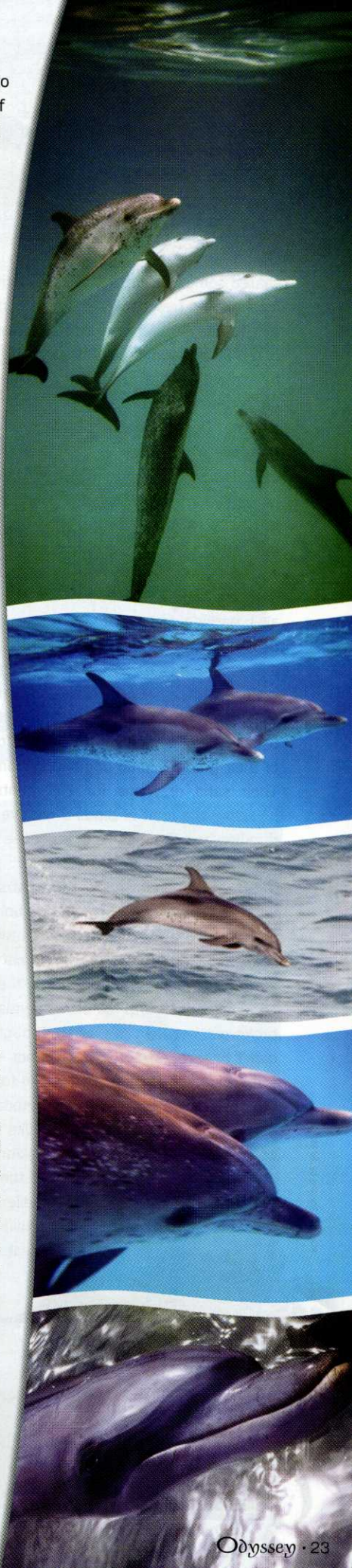
Without the dolphins, this fishing would be far less effective – perhaps non-existent – and this is the very thing, the only thing, on which these poor tribal people depend for food and for the meagre income they can gain by selling salted fish and roe at the market in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital. After a successful day's fishing, the Imragen regularly dance late into the night, in honour of their friends in the sea, cementing a partnership that was first reported by early Portuguese navigators over 700 years ago, though is almost certainly much, much older.³ This partnership, by implication, has not only been passed down from generation to generation of Imragen, but also down the line of successive dolphin generations. Observers – and there have been very few over the years, not least due to the remoteness of the fishing beach and also the Imragen's wariness of outsiders – have yet to identify what species of dolphin is taking part in this ritual. An intriguing suggestion by one team of researchers who watched the co-operative fishing take place is that there are at least two different species of

dolphins, often working simultaneously to drive the mullet into the fishermen's nets. If this is the case, then this is an exceptional case of three-way interspecies co-operation.

In the Zulu culture, dolphin and whale body parts have long played an important rôle in the medicinal remedies created by the *iziNyanga* (herbalists) and the *iZangoma* ('witch' doctors or spiritual healers). Although the Zulu people have no tradition of hunting marine mammals, they have always seized the opportunity of using cetacean body parts when a dead animal is found stranded or washed up on a beach. Cetaceans may have particular spiritual significance to the Zulu because of their aquatic origin (whence the First Mother originated in Zulu creation mythology) and, thus, the strong life force that water represents. Being neither a cetacean-hunting nor a sea-faring people, the Zulus have also long regarded the bodies of cetacea as rare, exotic and treasured discoveries – the sheer rarity of such an event imbuing the carcass with a sense of awe and magical power.

The heart, bones and blubber are particularly prized by the Zulu healers – and traditionally combined with herbs as a medicinal remedy. Dolphin (and sometimes whale) oil is used in a range of treatments, including laxatives and – interestingly – for coating sticks which are then buried around a homestead as a protection from damage by lightning. Alternatively, ingesting a small amount of sperm whale oil each year is believed to offer protection from the danger of electrical storms. Dried and ground dolphin heart is used in a variety of love potions, and is often added secretly to the food or drink of a lover or intended lover. Whale and dolphin bones are both crushed and burned, and are generally used to increase fertility (of people and cattle) and for protection.⁴

Dolphins and whales have long been linked with deities, or indeed been imbued with supernatural powers of deities. The Missili people in Angola traditionally believed whales to be powerful gods of the sea, and a large memorial service would be held, including incessant beating drums, to honour the passing of a great monarch. Everyone would then observe a period of mourning, and reflect on their reliance on the sea for fishing and transportation, for which deep reverence to these ocean deities was necessary. 'Yemanja' – mother of the waters and often depicted with a dolphin's tail – has African origins and is still worshipped in the Brazilian Macumba tradition as the Bakairi





Ocean Goddess. In classical times dolphins were linked to, and shared some qualities of, female deities and frequently appeared in mosaics and frescos beside them, such as that in El Djem, modern day Tunisia, where there exists a famous mosaic of a Nereid (one of the 50 sea-nymph daughters of the god of the sea) surrounded by dolphins and, according to legend, inhabitants of an underwater palace.

The Dogon people of Mali revere an ancient ancestor Nommo, whom they identify as coming from what modern astronomers know as the 'dog/wolf' star Sirius (in the constellation Canis Major). The Dogon say that Nommo brought civilisation to an ignorant and warring humanity, introducing not just language and mathematics, but culture, sciences and art. But who was this Nommo being? From sand-drawings made by Dogon tribe members, Nommo is an air-breathing creature that lives in the ocean, and has many dolphin-like characteristics such as opposing tail flukes. While it is easy to dismiss this as a fanciful tale, the modern observer is forced to pay attention when learning that Sirius B, in what astronomers have learned is a binary star system, is invisible to the naked eye – and yet the Dogon for generations have spoken of their great Nommo originating from a planet close to Sirius B. Their sand drawings for 20th century French anthropologists depicting the orbit of Sirius B relative to Sirius A, even its rotation duration and the relative mass of the star, were all later verified by astronomers.

In his seminal *Song of the Stars*, Credo Mutwa outlines some very similar beliefs in a Zulu creation myth. The story is very long and detailed and, according to Mutwa himself, 'can take up to two years of telling, each day, by a tribal storyteller'. The essence of the story states that, in ancient times, the very first humans were created and lived on a world full of red sands, not unlike Mars. A terrible war broke out between the sexes, though a few men and women – who didn't believe in fighting each other – escaped in a metallic craft that took them out of the solar system to a planet covered in oceans that orbited the nearby star we know today as Sirius.

Nommo, King of the dolphin-like beings that inhabited the waters of the world, welcomed the red-skinned survivors of the gender war. The humans settled on one of the small land-masses, and lived harmoniously with the water-dwellers until one of them committed the great sin of killing and eating a water being. A great war followed, and the humans

would have been entirely obliterated had Nommo not taken pity on them and sent his sons Wowane and Mpanku to save what was left of the people. The brothers flew the humans to a new home – which we know today as Earth – and though the older brother perished, Mpanku lived happily in the oceans of this planet, where he married a beautiful amphibious creature – some say a mermaid – and they had many children, which we know today as dolphins.⁵

The story goes on to say that a shark one day killed Mpanku. This loss is still mourned by today's Zulu. Mpanku's early teachings and guidance to the humans, however, laid the foundations for the subsequent arrival on Earth of his father, King Nommo and 12 of his companion 'dolphins', to instruct humans in the ways of civilisation. In time, Nommo left the Earth to return to his planet in the Sirius system, vowing to return when the basic feats of a civilised society – the eradication of disease and the establishment of a lasting global peace – had been accomplished. Upon so doing, we shall learn the art of interstellar travel, a skill humanity lost with the death of its former home world of Mars. And who can help us achieve such a task? None other than the cetaceans. After all, the Zulu word for dolphin is Hlengeto (sometimes written lhengethwa), meaning 'the one who saves', while the word for whale, Nkuma, is the same word for God.

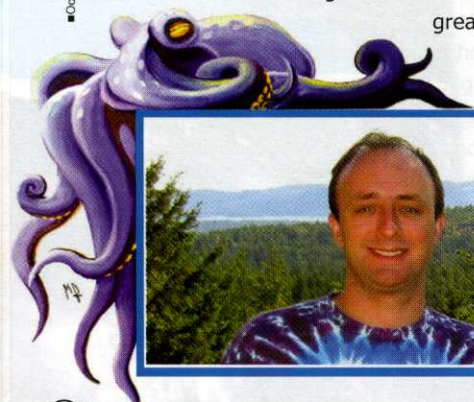
Mutwa recommends that all people, regardless of their background, enter a state of meditation, to imagine themselves as dolphins so that we may learn all we need to know. He encourages people to see the world and its oceans as if we were dolphins, for he states that 'the dolphin is the symbol to us of humanity's reconnection with nature, and therefore with God'. He has issued words of encouragement to 'swim your soul through the soul of a dolphin, and the dolphin in turn will swim his soul through you'.

It is through this process that we merge with the essence of the dolphin and see things through cetacean eyes. Only then can we hope to realise fully the interconnectedness of all life, and to truly understand the wisdom of the ancient mythological teachings about our friends in the ocean. ○

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¹ *Myths and Legends of the Swahili* by Jan Knappert; ² *Indaba My Children* by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa; ³ For a full account of an early expedition to view the Imragen ritual, see 'Dolphins' by Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Philippe Diolé; ⁴ 'Dolphins Make Magic' by Barbara von Etzdorf in *African Wildlife* (vol 51, nr 1: Jan/Feb 1997); ⁵ *The Song of the Stars* by Credo Mutwa.

■ Octopus painting by Jeff Murray



Dr Jason Cressey is a psychologist, motivational speaker and writer. He leads tours and experiential workshops around the world on the healing potential of dolphins and whales and our ancient link to the wisdom they share. He will be leading a dolphin-encounter weekend in Mozambique in March, and a weekend workshop in Cape Town on February 19 & 20. Visit people-oceans-dolphins.com or email canadaorca@hotmail.com and visit www.motivationinmind.com for more.