

# *Lightning Birds and Thunder Trees*

*by Adrian Koopman*

## **Introduction**

“**L**IGHTNING kills again”. “Lightning: Eight killed in Easter Cape”. “Donnybrook: mother and young son die in hut blaze after strike”. “Smoke attracts lightning”. “How to deal with a million bolts a month”. “Tornado and hailstorms ravage Free State”.

*The Witness* of Friday 11 March, 2011 had a headline reading “Lightning kills five members of one family”. The story noted that a 37-year-old mother died with four children in her arms in eMahlwazini village in the Bergville region. Three days later the Monday edition of *The Witness* had the headline, “Durban: Two killed by lightning”.

These are just a few of the headlines referring to storms and lightning in KwaZulu-Natal during the first part of

the summer of 2010/2011.<sup>1</sup> It was not that this specific summer was particularly characterised by fatal weather. Such storms occur every summer, and every summer a considerable number of people, especially in rural South Africa, are killed by lightning, while crops and infrastructures are ruined by vicious hailstorms and flooding. In a report in *The Witness* of 9 November 2010, Sanjeev Sewnarain of the South African Weather Service is quoted as saying that South Africa is a lightning-prone country and lightning-related deaths are about four times higher than the global average. A report in the *Mail & Guardian* of 28 January 2011 quotes Deon Terblanche, the Weather Services’ senior manager for research, as saying, “South Africa is well-known for the clustering of storms

... The combination of the density of strikes and the currents involved make us meteorologically high risk.” In yet another report, from the *Independent on Saturday* dated 8 January 2011, the Weather Service is quoted as saying that “South Africa has one of the highest lightning ground-flash densities in the world”, and that

At any one given time there are approximately 2 000 thunderstorms in progress around the world, producing anywhere from 30 to 100 cloud-to-ground flashes of lightning each second – up to five million flashes a day. South Africa can account for up to 10 percent of the global daily statistics.

The same *Mail & Guardian* report quoted above points out that that lightning flashes are not evenly distributed in South Africa:

The Western Cape has so few ground strikes that they are barely worth counting, while parts of densely populated Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal light up like a Christmas tree.

Every summer the number of fatal lightning strikes prompts newspapers and television producers to issue instructions and advice to people on how to protect themselves against lightning. “Do not shelter under trees”, “If caught in the open, avoid high places”, “Get out of water if there is a storm about”. Every year these warnings are issued, and every year people die from lightning strikes. In the first week of January 2011, lightning-related deaths had reached such a high that Nomsa Dube, the KwaZulu-Natal Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, promised that provincial government would talk to “the Department of Science and Technology on what is the cause of the lightning”. Although

the *Mail & Guardian* (28 January 2011) that reported her words said that wide derision followed her announcement, it also pointed out that there were a number of facts about lightning that were not generally known, such as the “gamma rays and antimatter produced by lightning storms”, “step potentials”, the “upward streamer effect”, and the difference between “classic negative-downward lightning” and “positive lightning”. The article concluded:

The only way to protect against such strikes is expensive: enclose everything in a grid of interconnected conductors, preferably a tight one, then connect as much of that grid as you can to conductors buried deep in the ground. Then cower inside any time a cloud comes within 100 km and you’re safe – at least until we learn something new about the nature of lightning.

Lightning has been a mortal danger to the Zulu community since time immemorial, and it goes without saying that although they have known nothing about gamma rays, antimatter, step potentials, and classic negative-downward strikes, they have always known that lightning can be fatal. And it is also true that although they may not have had the technology to “enclose everything in a grid of interconnected conductors” they have always known that steps should be taken for protection against lightning. Some idea of such steps comes from a very early description by R.U. Sayce, MA, a lecturer at the Natal University College:

A piece of dolerite, which appears to have been artificially shaped, was recently picked up, on the ridge on which the Natal University College stands, overlooking the town of Pietermaritzburg, by one of my

students. The stone was shown by Mr Edward Bird to one of his native servants ... who immediately described it as a 'lightning stone'.  
(1926:69)

Further investigation by Mr Sayce, aided by the well-known Zulu linguists of the time, Carl Faye and D. McK. Malcolm, shows a systematised approach to protection against the dangers of lightning:

Towards the end of winter, or in early spring, when the winter anti-cyclone is breaking up, and just before the first storms are expected, the natives take precautions to protect the huts from lightning, which is often of great severity, and is responsible every year for a considerable number of deaths. The Umgoma [*sic*], or witch doctor, is called in, and receives a preliminary fee of £1.

Sayce goes on to talk of the medicated pegs which are driven into the ground and encircle the huts. He gives details of their placing and the medicines with which they are smeared, and we will return to these later in the article.

This present article will look at various ways in which the Zulu community seek to protect themselves and their possessions against lightning, hail, and other adverse forms of weather. We will look at the role of the professional *inyanga yezulu* (the "heaven-herd" or "sky doctor") as well as the role of a number of indigenous plants as a source of protective charms against weather. The article will investigate the link between weather and evil, and consider beliefs that weather can be directed maliciously against enemies. Finally, we will attempt to identify the mysterious "lightning bird" and the even more mysterious "thunder tree".

## **Lightning in Zulu culture**

Callaway (1970)<sup>2</sup> and Berglund (1976) have much to say about Zulu fears relating to thunder-storms, with their potential threats of lightning and hail. There are strong suggestions that such storms are mentally linked with fears of unknown evil (*ubuthakathi* "witchcraft" and *ibhadi* "misfortune"). Callaway, for example, talks of people being "struck by terror" (*op.cit.*, 117) when thunder, lightning and "aerial changes" approach. He quotes a source (*op.cit.*, 375) as saying "*Isikqoto a s'ahlukene kakulu nonyazi; si ti kokubili ku impi yenkosi e si tshaywa ngayo lapa emhlabeni ...* [We do not make a great distinction between hail and lightning; we say, each is an army of the Lord who smites us in this world.]" A footnote here enlarges on the idea that the heavens intend to do evil on earth, and the resultant fear in the hearts of the people:

Heaven-herds are said to herd the heavens because when it is overcast, they at once see that the heaven is bad, and has ceased to be calm, and has gone out to do evil; and the hearts of the herds are kindled; they are no longer happy, are unable to swallow any food, and are struck by fear, as though an enemy was coming to kill them.

However, once the heaven-herds activate their professional training, they conquer their fear and go out to do battle with the elements:

At last they become brave when the lightning begins to flash. They quit their huts and drive it away, trying to make it return to whence it came; they forbid the hailstones to fall, because they know that they will destroy the food, the grass, and the trees. They are therefore herders who herd the heaven,

that it may not break out and do its will on the property of the people. They do not turn back the rain, for it is good; they turn back the lightning and the hail; they turn back the lightning from the village where they live.

Let us look a little more closely at the training of a “heaven-herd”, and the manner in which they attempt to control threatening weather.

### **The role of the *inyanga yezulu***

The word *inyanga* (“traditional doctor”) is used in the same way as the word “doctor” in English, that is to say, unless specified to the contrary, a “doctor” is assumed to be a doctor of medicine. Western culture, however, also allows for a “Doctor of Literature”, a “Doctor of Divinity”, a “Doctor of Law”, and a “Doctor of Music”, to name just four of several disciplines in which one can achieve doctoral status. In the same way in Zulu culture, an *inyanga* is assumed to be a doctor of medicine (*inyanga yokwelapha*: “doctor of healing”), unless otherwise specified. One can, however, also be an *inyanga yensimbi* (“doctor of iron”, i.e. renowned smith), an *inyanga yokubumba* (“doctor of clay-moulding”, i.e. a famous and expert potter), or an *inyanga yengoma* (“doctor of song”, i.e. a highly regarded singer or musician). One of the most important doctoral specialists of this non-medical kind in Zulu society is the *inyanga yezulu* (“doctor of the sky”, “doctor of weather”).<sup>3</sup> Often translated directly into English as “sky-doctor”, Berglund (1976:46) prefers the term “heaven-herd”, which is itself a direct translation of the alternate Zulu term *umelusi wezulu* (“herd-boy of the sky”). Berglund (*ibid*) states that anyone can become a heaven-herd (and does not need to be “called” by the ancestral

shades as is the case with the *isangoma*, or diviner) but

... in practice it is required that a possible candidate be able to refer to some incident whereby he can prove that the sky has called him for service. A man who has seen lightning both enter and leave his hut without being killed is received for preparation to become a heaven-herd.

Berglund (1976:47-51) gives details of the initiation and training of a heaven-herd. At the time of the new moon a qualified *inyanga yezulu* takes a novice to the top of a mountain and after making incisions on the body of the apprentice, rubs these incisions with especially prepared medicines. For a fortnight after these initiatory rituals the novice receives intensive instruction on weather control, and receives medicinal horns and other objects for driving away storms and lightning. The horns must not be straight ones, and both horns and the medicines they contain must be black, the colour of storm clouds. The novice also receives a “broom” of black cattle tails attached to a stick, with ten black beads attached to them. Not all Berglund’s heaven-herd informants agree to the black symbolism. He quotes one as saying the cattle tails should be white “because lightning is white. So this white chases away another white thing”. The novice heaven-herd is also given a “very blunt spear, a stick of the *umunka* tree (*Maerua angolensis*), which is white, and a reed flute on which to blow when driving away storms”. After a fortnight of training, at the time of the full moon, the novice is expected to have absorbed all the knowledge necessary for controlling storms and, at the first possible opportunity, his skills are tested.

Berglund makes two important points about heaven-herds, both related to the metaphor of *umelusi wezulu*. Firstly, they must always be male, as it is only males who herd domestic animals. Secondly, no matter what the age of the heaven-herd, he is always referred to as a boy, for it is usually only boys who herd cattle.

During his training, the aspirant *inyanga yezulu* is introduced to the art of mixing medicines suitable for the driving away of storms. The ingredients must always number 10 (as with the 10 black beads attached to the cattle-tail broom), as

... there are 10 fingers which make a complete handful and which make a man able to work well ... so there must be 10 fingers in the medicine. Then they can work together to a full protection against the sky.

Berglund's list of ten ingredients is taken (as he acknowledges) from Krige's *Social System of the Zulus*, and it is as follows:

The first five ingredients consist of the fat of five different creatures. First on the list is the fat of the *inyoni yezulu* ("bird of the sky") also known as *impundulu*, a word to which we will return later in this article. Next are the fat of *umonya* (the Natal rock snake, *Python sebae*) and the fat of *imbulu*, the large land iguana *Varanus albigolaris*. To this mixture is added the fat of a black sheep (and it *must* be black), and then both the fat and the skin of *imbila* (the dassie or rock-rabbit *Hyrax capensis*). Next comes the skin of *umanzini* (the otter *Lutra capensis*). Ingredient number seven is the "feathers of a peacock" and one wonders whether "peacock" here refers to some indigenous bird, or whether it really was not too difficult for traditional heaven-herds to

acquire the plumes of this introduced ornamental fowl.<sup>4</sup> The eighth ingredient is the flesh of a tortoise, and the remaining two ingredients come from the world of plants: the crushed stem of the *umunka* tree (*Maerua angolensis*) and the crushed stem of the red Ifafa lily (*Cyrthanthus stenenthus Liliaceae* [sic]), in Zulu called *impingizana encane ebomvu* ("the little red impingizane"). Berglund's informants stressed that medicines must be prepared outside (i.e. not in the hut), on an overcast day "so the sky does not see what we are doing", and that apologies must be made to animals slaughtered to get the fats and skins described above, and to the trees and plants which provide the necessary crushed stems. His informants also explained the symbolism behind the choice of animals and plants used to prepare these medicines. Although Berglund does not say so, one assumes it is these medicines which are used to doctor the *izikonkwane*, the pegs which are placed around the homestead in order to protect it and its inhabitants from lightning, hail and other adverse weather.

It becomes apparent that in the manipulation of weather two opposing principles are used: "like attracts like", and "like repels like". The principle of "like attracts like" is seen when thunderstorms are gathering, and "everything white must be either covered up or removed" (Berglund, 1976:52). Light is claimed to be the colour of the sky and thus attracts lightning. To avoid this, water (seen as light) is thrown away some distance from the homestead, shiny tools and containers are brought indoors, white cloth covered with black cloth, mirrors covered up, white containers placed under an overturned black cooking pot, and white cattle,

goats, chickens, etc., driven away from the vicinity of the homestead. The other principle, of “like repels like”, is seen when a storm is imminent and a heaven-herd puts on his darkest and blackest clothing, and rubs black medicines over his white stick. Berglund explains that “black, being associated with the dark thunder-clouds, is adopted to drive off the ‘darkness of the thing that the sky is planning to do’.” (*ibid*). The heaven-herd, in attempting to divert the storm and its lightning, tells the weather to either go in the direction of the ocean, where there is much [white] water and much white sand, or to go in the direction of *eGoli* (Johannesburg), where there is much bright, light gold.

Hammond-Tooke gives much in-structive detail about the manner in which Bhaca society protects against lightning. The Bhaca people are close linguistic and cultural relatives of the Zulu people, having migrated into the Eastern Cape from the area now known as KwaZulu-Natal in the 1820s.

Hammond-Tooke (1962:268) states: “It appears that the services of herbalists are not much employed in field protection, but rather for protection against lightning.” It is not clear from Hammond-Tooke whether or not this is an *inyanga yokwelapha* (doctor of healing) or an *inyanga yezulu*.<sup>5</sup> [p. 271]:

The protection of huts is conducted during the summer months beginning in October, when the violent electrical storms break over the East Griqualand hills. The rites, known as *ukulungisa umti* (lit. to make the *umti* [homestead] right) are always performed by a professional herbalist and are done at night. The use of anti-lightning medicines is known as *ukubhethela*. The *inyanga*, on arrival, asks for a pig from the owner of the *umzi*, who slaughters it.<sup>6</sup>

Bits of pig-liver, fat, gall from the gall-bladder and blood mixed with a herb called *idabulitulu* (“cross the heavens”) are fried and eaten by the family. Other medicines are mixed in, and the whole blackened and then ground and mixed with more pig-fat to make the anti-lightning concoction. The *inyanga* then applies this in four ways:

- (1) rubbed into incisions made on the bodies of the members of the homestead;
- (2) dipping a broom into the mixture and flicking it into the air around the boundaries of the homestead;
- (3) the standard medication of wooden pegs placed around the homestead, with one being placed into the mud cap at the top of the roof of each hut; and
- (4) drawing a cross on the top of the doorways of the huts, inside and out.

This, however, is not the end of the procedure. On the next day an iron bar and a medicated peg must be buried far away from the homestead, in the direction from where the storms come. Any left-over medicine is left with the family head “to use it as long as it lasts” and he is also given a horn of powdered medicines so he can use it if lightning approaches (and presumably the *inyanga* is not able to make an emergency visit).

In the descriptions above, control of the elements is left mainly to the trained professionals, who use their carefully mixed medicines and the symbolic power of black and white accessories to protect against lightning and other forms of extreme weather. But any ordinary householder, even without the training of the *inyanga yezulu*, can take steps to ensure that he and his family are protected from weather. To

do this, it is simply necessary to know which indigenous plants have the inbuilt power to affect weather, and this is where we now turn.

### **Use of plant species to protect against the weather**

A surprising number of plants are used in Zulu society to protect against adverse weather conditions. Just one source, Pooley's 1998 *Wildflowers of KwaZulu-Natal*, lists 39 plants used for this purpose. Of these 31 (79%) are used specifically for protection against lightning.

Some of the more than 30 of the plants recorded by Pooley as being used for protection against lightning are *Kniphofia caulescens* (Lesotho Red-hot Poker, *Z. umathunga*), "often grown around rural homesteads as a charm against lightning", *Aloe aristata* (Guinea Fowl Aloe, *Z. umathithibala*) "used ... as a protective charm against lightning", *Eriospermum mackeenii* (Yellow Fluffy-seed, *Z. insulansula*), "used as a charm to ward off lightning", *Aspalathus chortophila* (Tea Bush, *Z. impishimphishi*), "used traditionally for protection against lightning", and *Haworthia limifolia* (*Z. isihlakahle*, *umathithibala*), "used in traditional medicine ... as a protective charm, particularly against lightning".

Lightning protection goes hand-in-hand with other functions as well. Consider *Albuca setosa* (Small White Albuca), which is "used in ritual cleansing and as a protective charm against lightning, also to end quarrels between enemies", while *Lippia javanica* (Lemon Bush, *Z. umsuzwani*, *umswazi*) is "used for ritual cleansing after contact with a corpse and for protection against dogs, crocodiles, lightning". It is interesting that this

description apparently lists crocodiles and lightning as separate threats to the well-being of humans, because Boon (2010) lists a number of trees which are *combined* with crocodiles (in the form of their fat) as protection against lightning. These include *Celtis Africana* (White Stinkwood, *Z. indwandwakanzane*, *umvumvu*: "Wood reputed to have magical properties, used with crocodile fat against lightning"), *Strychnos decussata* (Cape-teak Bitterberry, *Z. umphathawenkosi*, *umphathawenkosi-omhlophe*, *umkhombazulu*, *umlahlankosi* : "used with crocodile fat for protection against lightning"), and *Halleria lucida* (Tree-fuchsia, *Z. iminza*, *ubutshwalabenyoni*, *unobhibhi*: "used ... as a charm against evil and with crocodile fat against lightning"). As we noted above, of the 10 ingredients used to concoct anti-lightning medicines, the first five were the fats of certain living creatures.

Further examples of plants that combine lightning protection with other functions are *Eriosema psoraleoides* (Shrubby Yellow Eriosema, *Z. uthongololo*), "used in traditional medicine to cure internal disorders and as a protection against lightning", *Xyrophyta retinervis* (Black-stick Lily, Monkey's Tail, *Z. isigqumana*, *isiphemba*), which is "used in traditional medicine to treat asthma and as a charm against lightning", and *Siphonochilus aethiopicus* (Wild Ginger, *Z. indungulo*, *isiphephetho*) which is "cultivated traditionally to provide protection from lightning and snakes".

Only in one of Pooley's entries are details given on how the plant is actually used as a protection against lightning, and I refer here to *Asclepius cultriformis* (with the intriguing English common name *Satellite-dish!*,<sup>7</sup> *Z. ishongwe-*

*limpofu*). Pooley explains that the “roots [are] collected in bundles, preserved in huts by smoke, [and] pieces [are] then burnt to ward off lightning” (1998:550). Other authors provide further details on the exact usage of plants as protection against lightning. For example, Roberts (1990:32) says that *Ziziphus mucronata* (Buffalo Thorn, *Z. umphafa*, *umlahlankosi*) should be grown near the house as it will ward off evil spirits and lightning. The Zulu and Tswana consider *Sansevieria hyacinthoides* (Mother-in-law’s-tongue, *Z. isikholokotho*, *isikhwendle*, *isitokotoko*) to be a protective plant and “drink a little of a cold infusion to protect themselves against lightning” (Roberts, 1990:131). Placing pegs (*izikhonkwane*) doctored with protective medicines around a homestead is the standard method used by *izinyanga zezulu* to protect it against lightning, and both Roberts (1990:157) and Palgrave (1977:571) agree that this is how *Grewia flava* (Velvet Raisin, *Z. umhlwampunzi*, *umhlalampunzi*) is used. Lightning frequently strikes the roofs of huts and so it makes sense to place protective plant material here. Roberts (1990:152) tells us of the *Plumbago auriculata* (Plumbago, *Z. umabophe*, *umasheshele*):

The Shangaans on the farm tie bundles of plumbago twigs and push them into the eaves of their houses or tie them in the roof to protect against lightning and to ward off evil.

In a similar fashion fresh leaves of *Hymenocardia acida* (Heart-fruit) are “placed in the roof of a house to protect it from lightning”<sup>8</sup> (Palgrave, 1977:405) and branches of the *Gardenia jovic-tonantis* (Large-leaved Transvaal Gardenia) are placed on the roof of a hut for the same purpose, and it was “for this

reason that Welwitsch dedicated the tree to Jove, the god of the heavens whose weapon was the thunderbolt” (Palgrave, 1977:856).

Yet another method was mentioned to James Stuart by one of his informants (JSA I:77):

When the clouds are dark and heavy, threatening a thunderstorm, heaps of grass will be taken above the kraal at the back and there set fire to ... the *umhlonitshwa* or *uhlambihlotshana* will be put in [the burning grass], not to prevent the rain, but to prevent lightning from striking the kraal.

### Other adverse weather

Lightning may well be the major weather-related threat to a comfortable and safe life in KwaZulu-Natal, but it is not the only one, if we are to go by other descriptions of plant usage. Hail is also seen as a very destructive meteorological phenomenon, high winds (especially in the form of tornados) can be equally destructive, and although rain is always welcome, too much rain causes floods and swollen rivers, also often causing loss of life both to humans and livestock. Of these, only hail seems to be the focus of concerted action to control it. And as we noted above, one of Callaway’s mid-nineteenth century informants pointed out, “We do not make a great distinction between hail and lightning; we say, each is an army of the Lord who smites us in this world.”

On the other hand, Hammond-Tooke says of the Bhaca (1962:273) that “protection against hail ... was the prerogative of the chief, and no rites to achieve this end were performed by herbalists or commoners”.

Pooley (1998) records seven plants which may be used to tackle other inclement and dangerous forms of weather: *Phygelius aequalis* (River Bell), “used ... as a charm against hail damage to crops”; *Ornithogalum juncifolium* (Grass-leaved Chinchinchee, *Z. indlolothe encane*) “used in traditional medicine against storms and evil”; *Eulophia speciosa* (*Z. umabelejongosi ompofu, umlungwe omhlophe*), “... an infusion of roots and stems [used] as a protective charm against storms”; *Disa stachyoides* (*Z. ihlamvu elimpofu lasenkangala*), “traditionally used to ward off evil spirits and storms”; *Dipcadi viride* (Dainty Green Bells, *Z. ikhakhakha eliluhlaza*), “used as a protective charm against storms”; *Centella glabrata* (*Z. isiwisa*), “used ... as a charm against hail”, and *Vernonia oligocephala* (Bicoloured-leaved Vernonia, *Z. ihlambihloshane, uhlunguhloshana*), “used ... to drive away hailstorms”. Of this last-mentioned, Roberts (1990:186) has some delightful detail:

Of all its uses the one I find most appealing is the African belief that if you tie a bunch of twigs to a stick and wave it in the direction of an approaching storm it will divert the hail. Every time I see a silverleafed vernonia [*Vernonia oligocephala*]<sup>9</sup> on the farm I make a mental note of where to find it when I need it, as where I live the hail is often devastating but after its flowering period the plant is difficult to relocate! The Tswana and Sotho also make a fire of it, the smoke of which is supposed to divert a hailstorm.

Referring to yet another method of applying “anti-weather” protection, Palgrave (1977:804) says that a branch of the tree *Ehretia rigid* is dragged round huts and gardens to protect them from a threatening hailstorm.

Plants used against destructive storms may have many other functions as well. Such an example is *Xysmalobium undulatum* (Milkwort, Uzura, *Z. ishongwe*), which is “used in traditional medicine to treat headaches, dysentery, colic and as charms to prevent poisoning, divert storms, and to make dogs keen hunters.” (Pooley, 1998:544). Another example is the tree *Capparis tomentosa* (Woolly Caper-bush, *Z. inkunzi-ebomvu, iqwaningi, umqoqolo, okhokhwana*), of which Hutchings (1996:110) says “unidentified parts are used to treat madness, as love charm emetics, and also as charms against lightning or misfortune”. Palgrave (1977:311) enlarges on this with:

This is one of the best-known trees among African peoples for its supposed magico-medicinal properties and has the reputation of curing a variety of complaints ranging from coughs and colds to barrenness and impotence. Moreover, if a stick is coated with a paste made from the powdered root and other ingredients and pointed towards storm clouds, it is believed to act as a safeguard against floods.

Floods can certainly be considered an example of “adverse weather conditions” but it is surprising that there is not more reference to drought conditions and the use of plants to alleviate this. There are, however, a few examples. Boon (2010:274) says, extremely briefly, of *Searsia divaricata* (Rusty-leaf Currant, Mountain Kuni-bush) that it is “used in rain-making”, and Pooley (1998:296) says of *Peucedanum thodei* (Mountain Wild Carrot, *Z. umphon-dovu*) that it is “reputed to be used by sangomas<sup>10</sup> to bring rain, but only in times of extreme drought”. Roberts (1990:133) says of *Solanum nigrum* (Black Nightshade) that “Interestingly, the ripe fruit is used by the Tswana and

Sotho rain doctors as an important part of their rain ritual, the black fruit symbolising the black storm clouds”, while it is Sotho “rain doctors” again who use the tree *Rhus erosa* (Broom karee), as Palgrave notes (1977:477) that “it features in ‘rain-making’ ceremonies in Lesotho”.

It is interesting to note that in colonial Natal, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government apparently tried to make rain-making illegal. One of James Stuart’s informants is quoted as saying (JSA Vol I: 69):

It is a great misfortune natives who can cause rain being directed not to attempt to do so. Now we are afraid of the Government for it does not allow this. We cannot understand this.

The same informant says later (op. cit:71): “... the heavens are to be feared and people cannot propitiate them. If we sprinkle medicine, people threaten to send us to gaol.”

### **The Lightning Bird and the Thunder Tree**

The “lightning bird”, in Zulu both *impundulu* and *inyoni yezulu* (“bird of the heavens”) appears to manifest in two distinct ways in Nguni culture.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, it manifests specifically as a bird associated with lightning; on the other hand as the familiar of a female witch, in which case it may change its shape frequently (often to that of a handsome young man), and is associated with evil and malice rather than lightning.

Let us look first at the association of the *impundulu* with lightning. Callaway (1970:119) presents us with some interesting detail:

“The bird of heaven” is a bird which is said to descend from the sky when

it thunders, and to be found in the neighbourhood of the place where the lightning has struck. The heaven-doctors place a large vessel of *amasi* mixed with various medicines near a pool such as is frequently met with at the top of hills; this is done to attract the lightning, that it might strike in that place. The doctor remains at hand watching, and when the lightning strikes the bird descends, and he rushes forward and kills it. It is said to have a red bill, red legs, and a short red tail like fire; its feathers are bright and dazzling, and it is very fat. The bird is boiled for the sake of the fat, which is mixed with other medicines and used by the heaven-doctors to puff on their bodies (*pepeta*) and to anoint their lightning rods, that they be able to act on the heavens without injury to themselves. The body is used for other purposes as medicine. A few years ago some peacocks’ feathers were sold at a great price among the natives of Natal, being supposed to be the feathers of this bird.

We have already seen earlier in this article that the fat of a lightning bird is an essential element in making the medicinal mixture used to doctor pegs used for lightning protection. Of interest is the symbolism of the pot of *amasi* (sour milk) used to attract the lightning to a distant hill-top, presumably well away from human habitation. This would of course appear to work very well, given that lightning is naturally attracted to high hill-tops. Hammond-Tooke points out (1962:273) that in the homestead itself calabashes of *amasi* and milk must be hidden.

Berglund (1976:39) tells of a young man who was present when lightning came into a hut and killed an old woman and two children. His perceptions of the strike were as follows:

Looking, I saw the thing. It was fearful to see and moved very quickly. But I saw it clearly. It was a bird. The feathers were white, burning. The beak and the legs were red with fire, and the tail was something else, like burning green or the colour of the sky. It ran quickly, saying nothing, simply snatching those whom it took. Then it touched the grass with fire.

According to a number of Berglund's heaven-herd sources, the lightning-bird is sent by the "Lord-of-the-Sky" when he "wishes to have a human" (*op.cit.*, 40). His sources go on to say that there is no mourning for someone killed by lightning, as this would be regarded "as an arrogant act of rebellion against the Lord-of-the-Sky". Nor, apparently, is there an *ukubuyisa* ritual<sup>12</sup> for one struck by lightning.

The "lightning-strike-as-bird" metaphor is continued in the belief that when lightning strikes, the bird is alighting to lay its eggs. This idea has an extra spin to it in the Bhaca belief

... that electricity is the excreta of the lightning bird and that White people chase the bird until it excretes an oil-like fat. This is electricity. The excreta is very fluid and everything it touches is burnt.

(Hammond-Tooke, 1960:282fn)

Hammond-Tooke agrees that for the Xhosa and Bhaca the lightning-bird (*impundulu*) is associated with lightning (1960:382):

The spectacular and dangerous properties of lightning have formed the basis of another Bhaca belief, that in the *intsaka yetulu*,<sup>13</sup> the "bird of heaven", called in Xhosa, *impundulu*. The *impundulu* is identified with the lightning; thunder is the beating of its wings, while the flash indicates the laying of its eggs that will hatch the following summer.

He goes a little further, though, on the relationship between lightning and evil, saying that the flicking of "muthi" around the borders of the homestead is "to drive away *imishologu* (evil influences, including the lightning) that encompass the kraal" (1960:272). This apparent relationship between lightning and evil leads us to the second manifestation of the lightning-bird, as a familiar, and Bhaca beliefs here clearly go way beyond what Berglund records about the *impundulu* in Zulu society. Hammond-Tooke begins (*op. cit.*, 279) by saying that "no one knows for certain who is a witch" and that "the submissive young bride, outwardly demure and obedient, might be the possessor of the dreaded lightning bird, whose kick can cause sickness and death." He continues (*op.cit.*, 282-283):

The bird may also be possessed by women as a familiar ... [It] comes to its mistress in the form of a beautiful young man, often white and dressed in a grey suit, who has sexual connexion with her.

Clearly members of the Bhaca society must be very careful about how they deal with people even if they are "outwardly demure and obedient" for

The *intsaka yetulu* appears to a person in the form of a young man in a grey suit who asks why he is annoying its owner. There and then it turns into that old bird and kicks him until he dies.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that an *intsaka yetulu* may be sent to someone by letter. If you should open that letter, soon you will be visited by the same young man in a grey suit who will turn into a bird and kick you until you die.

Although there is no indication in the anthropological literature on the Zulus of this Protean bird which shifts easily

between the personable young man in the grey suit and the bird with a fatal kick, it is worth noting that Doke and Vilakazi (1957:513) say for the entry **impundulu** that this is a “bird supposed to be used by women in witchcraft”. They do not mention the link with lightning strikes. Bryant’s 1906 dictionary does not record the word *impundulu*, which makes me wonder if this is not a comparatively late adoptive into Zulu from Xhosa. There is a possible link between the word *impundulu* and the similar word *impundu* in Zulu. Doke and Vilakazi (1957:677) give three meanings for this word: “1) gate-post; 2) smaller lobe of beast’s liver; 3) species of plant, *Gasteria glabra*, whose bulbous roots are placed at the kraal-entrance to cause forgetfulness in would-be evil-doers”, and say it is derived from the verb *phundula* (“lead astray, mislead, puzzle, confuse, frustrate”). Bryant (1906:516) says the same, but in more detail:

**impundu**: one of the posts standing on either side of the entrance to the *isibaya* (not kraal); the smaller lobe of a beast’s liver, said to make a man forgetful if he eats it, therefore the requisite of the old women; a certain plant whose bulbous root is stuck at the entrance to kraals in order to make the *abatakati* forgetful of their evil practices.

Both Hutchings (1996:35) and Pool-ey (1998:342,430) recognise *impundu* as a Zulu name for various species of *Gasteria*, with Hutchings saying of *Gasteria croucheri* that the leaf infusions are used as protective sprinkling charms and that the plant is cultivated on hut roofs as protective charms against lightning.

Before we move on to the “thunder tree”, it is interesting to note other bird species linked to lightning and other

forms of weather. Hammond-Tooke (1960:288) tells us that

... if the *uthekwane* [Hamerkop] or *indlazanyoni* [Speckled Mousebird] flies over a kraal or alights on it, it is said that lightning will strike the homestead, but if the bird is killed or driven away the evil will be averted

and that

The owl (*isikhova*) is also considered a bird of ill-omen, for if it hoots round a kraal someone will become sick, or lightning will strike the stock.

Krige (1950:315) tells us that

The commonest fat used as an ingredient in this [anti-lightning] peg-medicine is that of the *Ngqungqulu* bird (*Helotarsus ecaudatus*) [Bateleur Eagle] which, when flying quickly, makes a noise like thunder, and to this is sometime added fat of a “peacock” which is said to cry and ruffle its feathers before thunder.

Krige also associates the Bateleur Eagle, as well as the Ground Hornbill, with rain (*op.cit.*, 321):

The *insingizi* bird [Ground Hornbill] is closely associated with heaven and the rain, for if many *izinsingizi* walk in the open country and cry, it is an omen that it will rain. Another heaven-bird, for the death of which the heavens will mourn, is the *iNgqungqulu* [Bateleur] ... it, too, is killed for rain. If this bird cries while flying it foretells rain.

Woodward and Woodward (1899:97) noted much earlier of the Ground Hornbill, “It is generally heard crying before rain, from which the natives think it has the power of bringing rain ...”, and although they do not mention it, Burchell’s Coucal (*Z. ufukwe*) is also known by the colloquial name “the Rain Bird”.

## The Thunder Tree

Krige (1950:315) introduces us to the idea of a Zulu “thunder tree”:

The heaven-herd is able to protect the huts in a village from lightning ... An important ingredient is the bark of the *umVithi* tree, the thunder tree of the Zulus ... This tree is a protection against lightning, and for this reason is not cut down, but left standing, especially inside the villages.<sup>15</sup>

Krige does not give a reference for the term “the thunder tree of the Zulus”, and while it is possible that this idea was coined by Lugg, her footnote reference to “Lugg, Ms” does not allow us to check this. As we saw above, Berglund (1976: 39) quotes his heaven-herd informant Laduma Madela of Ceza in explaining how he killed a lightning bird with a special stick (“I was on it with this stick”). Berglund thinks it is possible that the “special stick” was a branch of *umVithi*, *Maerua angolensis*, and referred to by Doke and Vilakazi as *umuNka*”.<sup>16</sup> And indeed Doke and Vilakazi (1957:574) give “**umunka** – The thunder tree, *Maerua angolensis*”. They do not explain the origin of the term “thunder tree” and Bryant’s 1906 Dictionary does not recognise the word *umunka*. Nor is it recognised by any of the published authors who list the Zulu names of plants: Bews (1921), Gerstner (1938, 1939, 1941), Moll (1981), Poolley (1998), Hutchings (1996) and Boon (2010). So there is a double mystery: where does the idea of a Zulu thunder tree come from, and where do Doke and Vilakazi get the word *umunka* from?

In the appendix to this article I give details of my search for the identity of “the Zulu Thunder Tree”. After being led in circles by various reference

books, I instead try to track down the identity of the “thunder tree” by following up Krige’s description of it:

... the thunder tree of the Zulus. It has a single stem with large umbrella-shaped head, “switchy” branches not unlike a willow and is noted for a vile smell when in bloom. It has a long thorn, and exudes a red sap said to resemble blood. This tree is a protection against lightning, and for this reason is not cut down, but left standing especially inside the villages.<sup>17</sup>

I finally conclude that the most likely candidates are: **Shepherd’s Tree** (*Boscia albitrunca*), **Tugela Shepherd’s Tree** (*Boscia foetida* subsp *longipedicellata*), and **Bead-bean Tree** (*Maerua angolensis*), and end my search with the words:

Just as the evidence of the names was not conclusive, so also the evidence of the supposed characteristics of the thunder tree is not conclusive. The closest candidate, perhaps, is the Tugela Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia foetida*) with its smelly flowers, its reputation of being used as a charm against lightning, and its Zulu name **umvithi**.

This, unfortunately, is as far as I have been able to go. If any readers of this volume of *Natalia* have any further information on the “Zulu thunder tree”, I would be very glad if they would communicate with me.

## Completing a matrix

So, research into Zulu beliefs has shown that there is a “Thunder Tree” (albeit somewhat difficult to pin down), and a “Lightning Bird” (*inyoni yezulu* or *impundulu*).

To add to these, Smith (1966:324) reveals the existence of a “Lightning Bush”:

**Lightning bush** *Clutia pulchella*  
See WEERLIGBOS. “The plants are often infested with a caterpillar with stinging hairs, the sting of which feels “like an electric shock” ..., and it has been suggested that the vernacular name has been derived from this fact. The more probable origin is that the natives use the plant as a charm against lightning.

“Lightning bushes” come in a wide variety (Boon, 228, 232, 234):

*Andrachne ovalis*: False Lightning-bush

*Clutia abyssinica*: Large Lightning-bush

*Clutia affinis*: Water Lightning-bush

*Clutia pulchella*: Wart-fruit Lightning-bush

There is perhaps some mild humour in the fact that it is only the “false” lightning bush that Boon records as “used as a hedge to protect houses against lightning”. For the apparently “true lightning bushes”, no such use is recorded.

We can now set up a partial matrix based on thunder versus lightning, and plants versus birds:

	PLANTS	BIRDS
LIGHTNING	The “lightning bush” (False, Large, Wart-fruit, etc.)	The “lightning bird” <i>impundulu, inyoni yezulu intsaka yetulu</i>
THUNDER	The “thunder tree”: <i>umvithi, umunka</i> ; other candidates?	??

The only thing missing to complete the matrix would be a “Thunder Bird”, and such a creature is not to be found in the relevant South African literature. (Not in Bryant, Krige, Berglund or any

other dictionary or ethnographic work. Nor in MacLean’s *Roberts Birds* or in the Woodward’s *Natal Birds*.)

We need, in fact, to go outside South Africa to complete our matrix: In Armstrong’s 1958 *The Folklore of Birds* there is a whole chapter on “The Thunderbird” (pages 94 to 112). The title is a little misleading, for the first several pages trace the role of the Green Woodpecker (and a few other woodpecker species) in the myths and legends of several cultures both modern and ancient, and link this bird to rain. Like the Ground Hornbill and the *ufukwe*, the woodpecker is commonly believed to call strongly just before rain. Only on p.104 are we told of a Cretan tradition which links the woodpecker to Zeus and, moreover, links the bird to “Zeus’s special tree, the oak ...”. A footnote here suggests [it does not state this clearly] that the oak tree was known as “the thunder tree”.

### Conclusion

Lightning and other forms of extreme weather (but particularly lightning) have long been a mortal threat to Nguni societies. Long before modern science worked out the specific nature of threats and came up with solutions involving lightning rods and grids of intercon-

nected conductors, Nguni societies had worked out an extensive preventive system involving trained professionals, the symbolic use of light and dark objects, the fats and other by-products of

a number of different animals, reptiles and birds, and the deployment of a wide variety of plants.

Despite the best efforts of the *izinyanga zezulu*; despite the pegs medicated with the fat of the lightning bird, and the energetic thrustings of thunder

tree wands in the directions of the storm, lightning continues to strike, and continues to kill. Each summer the inhabitants of the very lightning-prone corner of the world must expect yet another visit from the “army of the Lord who smites us in this world”.

## APPENDIX: ON THE TRAIL OF THE ZULU THUNDER TREE

Not everybody combines an interest in botany with an interest in the Zulu language. Those who do may find the following tale of botanico-linguistic sleuthing of some interest.

As we saw in the article, it is Krige (1950:315) who introduces us to the idea of the “Zulu thunder tree” when she says of the protection of a homestead against lightning that “an important ingredient is the bark of the *umVithi* tree, the thunder tree of the Zulus” and makes reference to an unspecified manuscript by Lugg.

We have also mentioned above Berglund’s recounting of how heaven-herd Laduma Madela of Ceza killed a lightning bird with a stick (1976:39): “...it is possible the stick was a branch of *umVithi*, *Maerua angolensis*, and referred to by Doke and Vilakazi as *umuNka*”. Berglund’s footnote reference to Doke and Vilakazi (1957:574) leads us to the entry “**umunka** – The thunder tree, *Maerua angolensis*”. [Bryant’s Dictionary, though, does not record **umunka**.] But where does the word “umunka” come from? It is not recognised by Bryant (1906), Moll (1981), Hutchings (1996), Pooley (1993, 1998), or Boon (2010).

We are forced, then, to ask ourselves, “What is ‘the Zulu Thunder tree’?”

It sounds as if it would be fairly easy to establish the identity of this tree beyond doubt: we have a botanical name – *Maerua angolensis* – and two Zulu

names (**umunka** and **umvithi**). And we have, in addition to the three reliable sources already mentioned (Krige, Berglund and Doke and Vilakazi), books by Moll, Hutchings, Pooley and Boon, all of whom give both Zulu names and botanical names for trees.

Boon (2010) is the most recent source, so let us start with him, and look up both **umvithi** and *Maerua angolensis* in his index. This gives the following result:

Boon 112: **umvithi** = Zulu name of *Boscia albitrunca* (Shepherd’s Tree) and *Boscia foetida* (Tugela Shepherd’s Tree) “used medicinally and magically”.

Boon 360: **umvithi** = Xhosa name of *Ochna arborea* (Cape Plane) “regarded as a charm to drive evil spirits away from the home and the cattle kraals”.

Boon 118: **umvitsi** = Swazi name of *Maerua angolensis*. Zulu names are **umgodithi** and **umenywayo**. No mention of protective charms or lightning.

This is very tantalising. Krige and Berglund have averred that **umvithi** is the “Zulu Thunder tree *Maerua angolensis*”, but Boon says **umvithi** is the Zulu name for *Boscia albitrunca*, but that **umvitsi** (an exact cognate<sup>18</sup>) is the Swazi name for *Maerua angolensis*. If we follow the Zulu name as a lead, then *Boscia albitrunca* is the Zulu “Thunder Tree”, and seeing that the “Thunder tree” is a tree used by “heaven-herds”, the English common name *Shepherd’s Tree* may well be appropriate. On the

other hand, if we follow the botanical, scientific, name *Maerua angolensis*, it may well be that this is a “Swazi Thunder Tree” rather than a Zulu one. It seems clear that we need more evidence.

Berglund says that Doke and Vilakazi refer to the “Zulu thunder tree” as *umunka*, and sure enough their entry on page 574 has “**umunka** – The thunder tree, *Maerua angolensis*”. What, then, do Doke and Vilakazi say for the word **umvithi**? They give two meanings (836): “1) sp. of grass, *Eragrostis plana*, used for rope-making; 2) sp. of large, shady tree”. The first meaning is clearly irrelevant if we are looking for a “thunder tree”, and the second meaning is too vague. Doke and Vilakazi clearly get this second meaning from Bryant’s Dictionary (1905:682) which gives the meaning of **umvithi** as “large shady tree”. Bryant does say, however, that an alternative name for this tree is **umtshiki**, but if we check this possible lead in Doke and Vilakazi, we find that they give the meaning of **umtshiki** as “species of grass, *Eragrostis plana*, used for plaiting rope” (p. 821). The mystery deepens ...

Bryant, Doke and Vilakazi’s “large, shady tree” might well be the Wild Peach (*Kiggelaria africana*), for a very early source of Zulu plant names – namely Bews’ 1921 list – says that the Zulu name **umViti** is used for both the grass *Eragrostis plana* and for the tree *Kiggelaria dregeana*, which I take to be an earlier synonym for *Kiggelaria africana*. Boon (2010:374) does not give **umvithi** as a Zulu name for the Wild Peach, but one of his six Xhosa names – **umveti** – is suggestive.

Hutchings recognises **umvithi** as the name of both *Boscia albitrunca* and *B. foetida* (p. 111) as well as the grass

*Eragrostis plana* (p. 20). She offers two intriguing leads: the alternative name **inyokiziphinda** for *B albitrunca* and the alternative **umlalampisi** for *B. foetida*. Unfortunately, Doke and Vilakazi recognise neither of these names. They are, however, suggestive: **inyokiziphinda** has the structure **inyo-ka + i + zi + phinda** (“the snake returns on itself”) which suggests a protection against snakebite; **umlalampisi** is a compound of **lala** “sleep, lie down” and **impisi** “hyena”, which could mean a tree under which hyenas like to sleep, but could equally be a tree used to make protective medicines against hyenas. But certainly neither of these two alternatives offered by Hutchings suggests “Thunder Tree”, so we will have to look elsewhere.

Let us return to Boon’s entry for *Maerua angolensis*, Berglund’s original for “Thunder Tree”. We remember that although he gives **umvitsi** as the Swazi name for this tree, he does not recognise the Zulu name **umvithi**. He does, however, give the Zulu names **umenywayo** and **ugodithi**. Bryant, Doke and Vilakazi, and Hutchings recognise neither of these names, but it is possible that “ugodithi” is a mis-spelling (or “mis-hearing”) of Doke and Vilakazi’s **ugodide**, which they give (252) as “sp. of small veldt plant *Jatropha hirsuta*, whose bulbous root is used as a charm against lightning”. The reference to the use of this plant as a charm against lightning is certainly suggestive, but under no circumstances can a “small veldt plant” be a “Thunder Tree”. The word **umenywayo** means “that which is called” (from the passive form of the verb *mema* “to call”), and (perhaps stretching a point a little) this could be related to the *inyanga yezulu* calling on the sky to desist from destructive action.

We may have to try *Boscia albitrunca* again, remembering that this is the tree that Boon identified as an **umvithi**. We won't go any further now with **umvithi**, as last time we ended up with a species of grass used for plaiting ropes. So let us try Boon's alternative name for *B. albitrunca*, namely **isinama**, which Moll also gives (88) as an alternative for this tree. Despite Boon and Moll insisting that **isinama** is a tree, Doke and Vilakazi will only recognise it as a grass (again!), this time "... [the] grass *Setaria verticillata* ... whose spiky seeds cling to clothing" (521). Hutchings, however, recognises **isinama** as a tree, but not *Boscia albitrunca* and not as a "thunder tree", but as *Cassine papillosa*, the Common Saffron. These trees, according to Hutchings (186), are "believed to have powerful magical properties and are used to blunt the effects of evil spirits". When the Zulu name **isinama** is qualified with the word **sehlathi** ("of the forest"), says Hutchings (88), this then refers to the plant *Achyranthes aspera*, which likewise is "used as charms against evil spirits". Given that many sources explaining Zulu thought patterns equate lightning with evil, in that both are seen as the manifestation of malicious intentions, these trees could also be linked with the control of lightning.

Let us go back to Berglund's statement that "Doke and Vilakazi refer to the 'Zulu thunder tree as umunka'." As we saw earlier, Doke and Vilakazi do indeed identify **umunka** as "the Zulu thunder tree" and further give its botanical identity as *Maerua angolensis*. We have tried hard earlier to establish that *Maerua angolensis*, the Bead-bean, is the true identity of the mysterious thunder tree, but were not successful. Perhaps we need to see what can be done

with "umunka". It is strange that Doke and Vilakazi's Dictionary is the only source that gives this word. Bryant does not have it, and Pooley, Moll, Hutchings and Boon do not know it at all. There is a possibility that "umunka" has been confused with **umunga**, a well-known Zulu tree name which refers to various species of acacia (*A. natalitia*, *A. karroo*, etc.). The problem is that Doke and Vilakazi readily recognise this word; indeed it appears to be one of the older words for a tree species, for they give an Ur-Bantu root – **yungga**. So with Doke and Vilakazi making clear distinctions between **umunka** and **umunga**, and all other authorities apparently unaware of the word "umunka", it seems there is very little we can do with this possibility.

There are, however, two more leads we can follow up, one being the Natal Mahogany (*Trichilia emetica*) and the other being the African Almond (*Prunus africana*, also known as Red Stinkwood or Rooi-essehout).

It is Smith (1966:461) who introduces us to the candidacy of the Natal Mahogany in his entry:

**thunder tree** *Trichilia emetica* see ROOI-ESSEHOUT. The vernacular name is probably a translation of some native name assigned to the species through some superstition (?)<sup>19</sup>

This entry of Smith's leads us nowhere. There is no indication in any other source of the use of this tree in the control of thunder and or lightning. However, it is worth noting that Esmé Hennessy, a retired professor of botany, who grew up in the rural uMzinto area on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast,<sup>20</sup> tells me (personal communication, 10.07.2011) that her fluent Zulu-speaking father and various

Zulu informants told her that the name **umkhuhlu** (referring to both *Trichilia emetica* and *Trichilia dregeana*) “meant ‘thunder tree’ because the shape of the trees resembled a dark thunder cloud”. She adds: “Nothing was ever said to me about any supposed magical properties or uses.”

The “wild almond” (also given elsewhere as “bitter almond”, “African almond”, and “Red-stinkwood”) enters the picture through an entry in Bews (1921:457), simply as “Dumizulu, *Pygeum africanum*”. The qualification for entry here is in the underlying constituents of “dumizulu”, namely *duma* (“to thunder”) + *izulu* (“sky, heavens”). Gerstner (1938, 12(4): 335) picks up Bews’ entry and gives us “Dumizulu, according to Bews, *Pygeum africanus*, the Wild Almond Tree”.

The closest Bryant comes to this word in his Dictionary is (1905:121): “**i-nDumezulu**: any immensely big, extensive thing, as field, forest, hut, noise, etc. .... **emDumezulu**: name of one of Mpande’s kraals.”

Doke and Vilakazi (1957:173) have the same as Bryant, but add “**umdumezulu** [*< duma + i(li)zulu*] 1. species of tree, *Pygeum africanum*, the Bitter Almond.”

Hutchings (1996:118) tells us that *Pygeum africanum* is an earlier synonym for *Prunus africana* and gives us the English vernacular names “bitter almond” and “red stinkwood”. She offers the Zulu names **inyazangoma-elimnyama**, **umdumezulu**, **umdu-mizula** and says “fruit is reputed to be used in witchcraft”.

Gerstner’s “Wild Almond”, changed by Doke and Vilakazi to “Bitter Almond” and copied as such to Hutchings, becomes “African Almond” in Boon (2010:130), with the alternative

vernacular identity “Red-stinkwood”: He gives the Zulu name **umdumezulu** and says the tree is “reputed to have magical properties”.

Hutchings’ “inyazangoma-elimnyama” is further suggestive, as the first part of this name is *unyazi* (“lightning”) + (*isa*)*ngoma* (“diviner”), so we have a tree with two Zulu names, one with the underlying meaning “thunder [of] the heavens” and the other “lightning [of] the diviner”. In terms of underlying semantics, at least, the Bitter Wild African Almond certainly has excellent credentials to be the “Zulu thunder tree”. But unfortunately, that is as far as we can take it.

### Using a description of the tree

Attempts to correlate Zulu names with botanical names have not established the identity of Berglund and Doke and Vilakazi’s “thunder tree”. The strongest candidates have been the Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia albitrunca*), the Tugela (or Smelly) Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia foetida*), and the Bead-bean (*Maerua angolensis*), and perhaps our last candidate, the Almond, but there is insufficient evidence of the use of the trees in the controlling of thunder, storms or lightning. Indeed, the closest we have come to this is a suggestion that one of Boon’s alternative names for *Maerua angolensis* – **ugodithi** – may have been confused with the name of a small veld plant whose “bulbous root is used as a charm against lightning”.

As a last resort in establishing the identity of this mystery tree, I go back to Krige’s actual description of the tree. As we remember, she (315) tells us (1950):

... the thunder tree of the Zulus. It has a single stem with large umbrella-shaped head, “switchy” branches not unlike a willow and is noted for

a vile smell when in bloom. It has a long thorn, and exudes a red sap said to resemble blood. This tree is a protection against lightning, and for this reason is not cut down, but left standing especially inside the villages.

Berglund acknowledges Krige as a source of information, but also adds information from a heaven-herd, and his picture (pg 51) is as follows:

The Thunder tree, *umunka*, ... “is white inside the bark just like the heavens is white (lit. light) inside with no darkness”. When its thorns are broken off, a red sap comes out said to resemble blood. ...it is not cut down even if it grows in fields...

If we add Krige and Berglund together, we have a tree that is used as protection against lightning, has a single stem with a large umbrella-shaped head, “switchy branches”, smells vile when in bloom, has long thorns, is white inside the bark, has red sap resembling blood, and is not cut down. It should surely be possible to identify this tree beyond doubt.

Let us check these characteristics against the Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia albitrunca*), the Tugela Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia foetida* subsp *longipedicellata*), and the Bead-bean Tree (*Maerua angolensis*), using both Boon and Palgrave.

**Shepherd’s Tree** (*Boscia albitrunca*): Boon (2010:112): No mention of white inner bark, of smelly flowers, of thorns, of red sap, or of not being cut down. “Used medicinally and magically”. Zulu name **umvithi**.

Palgrave (1977:186): “stiffly branched with a well-rounded crown”. No mention of white inner bark, flowers have a “sweet, heavy scent”, no mention of thorns or red sap, no mention of use against lightning, but “Many African

peoples hold these trees in such deep regard that their destruction is forbidden” and “These trees feature also in the folklore and superstitions of many African peoples ...”.

**Tugela Shepherd’s Tree** (*Boscia foetida* subsp *longipedicellata*)

Boon pg 112: no mention of white inner bark, of thorns or of red sap. Flowers are “foul-smelling”. “Traditionally used for protection against lightning”. No mention of not being cut down. Zulu name **umvithi**.

Palgrave (pg 187) “Smelly Shepherd’s Tree”: shape of crown apparently not significant, but “in Natal it invariably has a single pale stem”, no mention of white inner bark, “flowers and the freshly cut wood have an intense and very unpleasant smell”, no mention of thorns, red sap, of protection against lightning, or of being not cut down.

**Bead-bean Tree** (*Maerua angolensis*) Boon pg 118: no mention of white inner bark, thorns or red sap. Flowers are “sweetly scented”. No mention of not being cut down or as being used against lightning. Indeed, no ethno-botanical or medico-magical use reported at all. Swazi name **umvitsi**.

Palgrave 193: no mention of white inner bark, thorns, smelly flowers, or red sap. No mention of not being cut down, indeed, no ethno-botanical or medico-magical use reported at all.

Just on the off-chance that *Acacia karroo* aka *A natalitia* (Sweet Thorn, **umunga**) might be our thunder tree:

Boon 178: *Acacia karroo*: no mention of white inner bark or smelly flowers; tree has large spines; no mention of red sap, use as protection against lightning, or of not being cut down. Zulu name **umunga**.

Boon 182: *Acacia natalitia* (“formerly part of the *karroo* complex”): details as for *A. karroo*. Zulu name **umunga**.

Palgrave 240: *Acacia karroo* = *A. natalitia*: no mention of white inner bark (indeed, inner bark is red), spines “severe, dark-tipped, straight, stout”, flowers are sweetly scented, trees yield a clear golden or red gum. No mention of use against lightning, or of not being cut down.

The 1921 suggestion of Professor Bews, namely that the Wild Peach (*Kiggelaria africana/dregeana*) goes by the Zulu name “umViti”, is a red herring, difficult as it may be to visualise a wild peach as a red herring. The Wild Peach fails all the tests we have enumerated above.

## Conclusion

Just as the evidence of the names was not conclusive, so also the evidence of the supposed characteristics of the thunder tree is not conclusive. The closest candidate, perhaps, is the Tugela Shepherd’s Tree (*Boscia foetida*) with its single stem, its smelly flowers, its reputation of being used as a charm against lightning, and its Zulu name **umvithi**. But with the lack of any further and more substantial evidence, the exact identity of the “Zulu thunder tree” must remain a mystery.

## NOTES

- 1 The seriousness of the number of deaths caused by lightning did not prevent newspaper sub-editors from their favourite pastime of punning in headlines. The front page of the *Mail & Guardian* of 28.01.2011 carried the headline “LIGHTNING: Shocking new statistics”.
- 2 Facsimile reprint of publication dated 1868.
- 3 Note: not, as Sayce has it, an “Umgoma or witch doctor” (for which we would say today an *isangoma* or “diviner”).
- 4 Hammond-Tooke (1962:283) states that a

- trader at Liyengweni in the Eastern Cape kept a couple of peacocks who were looked on by the Bhaca as *iintsaka zetulu* (“birds of the sky”).
- 5 In a footnote on pg 282, Hammond-Tooke refers to “an *inyanga* who specialised in lightning medicines”.
- 6 Hammond-Tooke notes in a footnote here that the fat of a pig is regarded as having great protective properties. He suggests that this may have something to do with the belief that “a pig will not die of snakebite”.
- 7 In traditional Zulu thought-patterns, a satellite dish would be seen as an open invitation to the heavens to smite that particular house (to which the satellite dish is attached) with lightning. There is thus a certain paradox in a plant with this name (albeit in English) to *protect* the house against lightning.
- 8 This is presumably the custom of the Shona people, as the distribution map of this species shows it as occurring only in the eastern part of Zimbabwe and neighbouring north-west Mozambique.
- 9 Roberts says “Silverleafed Vernonia”; Pooley says “Bicoloured-leaved Vernonia”. The common names for plants differ from author to author. Indeed, the botanical names also frequently differ from author to author.
- 10 The mention of *izangoma* here is surprising. One might have thought that the *inyanga yezulu* (“sky doctor”, “heaven-herd”) would have been the one to attempt to make rain.
- 11 I am using the term “Nguni” here specifically to cover Zulu, Xhosa and Bhaca cultures.
- 12 The ritual for bringing back to his home place the spirit of the departed, one year after his death.
- 13 “intsaka yetulu” is linguistically interesting: it equates to the Zulu *inyoni yezulu* (“bird of the heavens”), but uses the Xhosa word for “bird” – *intaka*. However, where a Xhosa speaker would say *intaka yezulu*, the Bhacas pronounce this in the fashion of the Swazi language, turning /t/ into /ts/ and /z/ into /t/, showing that, at least where lightning birds are concerned, the Bhaca language lies midway between Xhosa and Swazi.
- 14 The lightning bird which manifests as a young man in a suit appeared to residents of Steylerville in the Karoo during April 2011. Reports in *The Witness* of 23 and 26 April tell of a “shape-shifting creature” that appeared to a number of residents initially as a man wearing a suit, and then variously changed into a dog, a monkey, a pig, and a bat. According to the newspaper reports, “there are rumours

that the monster can fly". There were no indications that the creature attempted to kick anyone to death; indeed, "although some locals were frightened of it, the creature has not brought harm to any person or livestock".

- 15 A footnote reference at this point in Krige refers to "Lugg, Ms".
- 16 A footnote reference at this point in Berglund refers to Doke and Vilakazi's *Dictionary* p. 574.
- 17 A footnote at this point in Krige again refers to a Lugg manuscript, making it reasonably certain that Lugg is at the base of the "thunder tree mystery".
- 18 Swazi is Zulu's closest linguistic relative; in fact many linguists consider Zulu and Swazi to be dialects of the same language. The Zulu word-ending **-thi** is invariably **-tsi** in Swazi so **umvithi** and **umvitsi** are effectively the same word.
- 19 The question mark is Smith's.
- 20 See her article "Memories of a country doctor's daughter" in *Natalia* 30 (2000: 31-37).

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