

Soul Retrieval in Africa **by Serge Kahili King**

For my New Year's article, I decided to use an excerpt from our new book, *Yovo-Yovo: Adventures in Africa*, by Serge and Gloria King, which will be published in January in Kindle format. M'Bala was my African shaman mentor during the time we lived there. The "Bright Land" mentioned was M'Bala's name for the Inner World, or *Kahiki* as we call it in Hawaiian. The following event took place in Senegal, in June, 1970, shortly before we left.

"This was really the last time I saw M'Bala in the flesh. Early one morning a young boy came to my office and gave me a note from M'Bala, asking me to join him at the island of Fadiouth, about 90km/56m south of Dakar along what, for some reason, is called *La Petite Cote*—The Little Coast.

I had taken Gloria to see Fadiouth once, and it was very interesting. You first had to go to the fishing village of Joal, which was on a narrow peninsula, and from the tip of that you walked across a long, simple bridge to the island. What makes it interesting is that the whole island is made of shells and the people have lots of small pigs wandering around. So I went to meet my mentor.

M'Bala met me at the end of the bridge. After a brief greeting, he led me across the island to a second, much smaller shell island that we had to take a pirogue to get to. I never learned the name of this little island, if it had one. Basically, it was a cemetery, uneven, with a few baobab and other trees. No one else was on the island, and we ended up sitting in the shade of one of the baobabs. This was to be a lesson on soul retrieval.

Soul retrieval is a practice found among many shamanic communities. It is based on the assumption that certain people, under highly stressful or traumatic conditions, can lose a part of their soul, which a shaman can find and bring back. In some shamanic traditions there is a belief that a part of one's soul can be stolen by a sorcerer or an evil spirit and the shaman has to do battle to get it back, but that wasn't M'Bala's way.

The general idea is that when a person loses a part of one's soul or, to put it another way, part of the soul runs away to avoid the stress or trauma, the individual also loses his or her ability to recover. The shaman's role is to enter "the Bright Land," with or without a guide or companion, find the lost part, and persuade it to return. If the persuasion is successful, the shaman—following M'Bala's way—sucks up the soul part with a tube of some kind, blows it into an object of some kind that serves as a container (in the Bright Land still), returns from the shamanic trance state, uses a physical tube to suck the soul part out of a physical object and

blows it into the person's navel. The success of this endeavor would be shown by a change in the person's demeanor or behavior.

It sounded to me like a ritual designed to impress someone, a sort of psychosomatic placebo, but I was willing to give it a try. I mentioned that we didn't have anyone to try it on.

Without any expression, M'Bala raised his hand and pointed behind me. I turned and saw an old man coming across the cemetery toward us, practically stumbling on the rough shells. He was African, of course, one of the unhappiest men I have ever seen.

When the man was seated in front of me, M'Bala handed me two objects. One was a tube made of stone, about three inches long, half an inch thick in the middle and tapered at both ends. A neat hole had been made through the middle. It was very smooth, inside and out, as if it had been used for a long time. It looked to me like granite, with yellowish inclusions. The other was a roundish piece of amber, like I'd seen used as jewelry by African women.

M'Bala told me the man had lost his wife two years before and couldn't get over it. It came to me to ask what the man did for a living. M'Bala spoke to him and told me the man had been a wood carver, but could no longer use the knife properly.

I let M'Bala guide me into what may as well be called a shamanic trance. I found myself in the Bright Land at the foot of a mountain range, holding what would have to be called the spiritual equivalents of the stone tube and the amber container. Wondering what to do next, I was relieved to see a familiar black panther come up to lick my hand and head into the mountains. Assuming he had to be my guide, I followed. He trotted along a trail, sniffing as if trying to find something, and led me finally to a cave that resembled one we had seen near Tonboronkoto. At the far end I found a young man, huddled in a corner. I didn't know how to speak his language, so I gave him images of him carving objects to put on an altar for his wife, which was the best thing I could think of at the time. I don't know how long it lasted, but after a while the young man uncurled and actually smiled. I held up the amber and gave an image of him entering into it, sort of like a genie going into a bottle and he nodded.

Following instructions, I sucked him up with my spirit stone and blew him into the spirit amber. Then I let the panther lead me back to where we started.

I came out of the trance and everything looked just like it had when I began. I was still holding the physical stone and amber and allowed myself to believe they were connected somehow to the spirit ones. I put one end of the tube against the amber and sucked in. Then I looked at the old man and waited, with the stone pointed toward him. He seemed nervous, but he finally nodded, so I bent over and blew through the tube toward his navel, imagining that the young man spirit went

inside him. M'Bala softly suggested I rub the old man's navel as a sign that the man was whole again, and that I look into his eyes. When I did, I felt a great sense of peace come over me and watched as he sighed, relaxed, and looked at me with tears in his eyes. He said "*Jai muh jef*" over and over, which I recognized as "Thank you" in Wolof, and I replied in one of the few words I knew, "*Agsil*," which is something like "You're welcome."