

VENOMOUS ANCESTORS

By Paul M. Riley MD, FACS

Koko (great grandmother) Magongo was too old to work in the fields. She lived in the low country of Swaziland. Her job was to baby sit her great grandchildren and give advice to her whole extended family. Her family believed that wisdom had been imparted to her by the Emadloti (ancestral spirits) who were believed to inhabit the homestead. Some of her great grandchildren attended a nearby school. The kraal (homestead) consisted of several huts first built by Koko's grandparents. Her grandparents, parents, and husband had died there, and had been buried in the isibaya (cattle corral). Now Koko's son, Mkhulu (grandfather), his wife Gogo (grandmother) and grandson, Mandla lived there. Mandla had three wives and twelve children. Whenever Koko's sons, or grandsons, who lived elsewhere, had to make an important decision they would return to the homestead and sit under the tree by the isibaya and confer with the Emadloti to make sure the ancestors agreed with their decisions. Koko's son, Mkhulu, was in charge of the kraal. The family worshipped the spirits of their ancestors. They listened to Koko's advice. They believed her voice was the voice of the ancestors. Her great grandchildren were fascinated by the stories she told. These children obeyed her much better than they obeyed their parents or grandparents. They knew she was very old and could die at any time. They believed that, when Koko died, her spirit would stay at the kraal and watch over them. If they were respectful and obedient, while Koko was still alive, her spirit would be kind to them and protect them better after she died. The men in the family worked plowing the fields, or worked on the nearby sugar cane plantation. The women were busy raising children, planting and tending the crops, gathering firewood, cooking, and fetching water from the river twice a day. The older boys would drive the cattle and goats from the isibaya to the grazing areas. Two boys watched the animals all day. The other two attended the school. After school, all four boys rounded up the animals, counted them, and then brought them home in the evening. A few cows were then milked. The boys were extra careful to keep cattle out of the cornfields. Some of them still had the scars from the switches that were used on them the last time they were negligent. They had been too busy hunting "imibiba" for their lunch and did not see their cattle straying into their neighbor's garden. These "edible" striped field mice were delicious skewered on a stick and roasted in the coals of a small fire.

Koko was not able to watch the two children of Mandla and Siphile, his third wife. They belonged to their maternal grandparents. These children were held hostage by their mother's parents. They had to do chores for these grandparents. There were often ugly words between the children's father and their maternal grandparents. By tribal law the children belonged to these grandparents since Mandla had not yet paid them all the "lobola" cattle for his wife. Mandla in turn demanded a refund because his wife only had two children. With the last baby, she had to have a Caesarian section. Now she was saying her abdominal scar was too painful for her to do all the work demanded by her husband and his two older wives! Her husband had to sell a cow to pay the hospital bill so he refused to pay any more cattle for his third wife. Wives came with an unwritten guarantee, from their parents, that they would be able to bear many

children and be able to work all day without complaining or getting too tired! The in-laws said it wasn't their fault. Their son-in-law must have offended his neighbor's ancestral spirits. It was his responsibility to go to the witch doctor, who would then roll his bones and "smell out" those responsible. Whenever there was a family celebration most of the adults would get drunk on the local brew and then there would be fights between Mandla and his father-in-law. These fights could sometimes result in deaths or serious injury. (At RFM Nazarene Hospital I had to build a new nose for a man who had his nose bitten off by his son-in-law! They had been drunk and fighting over cattle still owed by the victim's son-in-law!) Mandla's youngest wife was often overworked by the two older wives who had been very pleased when their husband married again. They expected the youngest wife to cook and brew beer for them and do all their unpleasant tasks. Siphile sometimes rebelled and fought with the two older women! (I recall having to rebuild noses and ears bitten off in fights between the younger and older wives! I also recall other injuries, as well as a few fatalities!)

Gogo reported seeing a black mamba curled around a rafter pole in the roof of her hut. The snake was later seen in other huts. Koko told the rest of her family that this was a dead ancestor returning to give the family an important message. She sent her son to Sangoma, a female witch doctor. Sangoma said that she had to have a goat to sacrifice in order to get the attention of the spirits. After all her conditions were met, Sangoma then gave Mkhulu the message. The black mamba was the spirit of Koko's dead husband. He was calling Koko to the spirit world. The family had to cooperate and make sure Koko would die as soon as possible. After Koko was dead, then Siphile would be able to have more children. Mkhulu was told to always put a bowl of amasi (clabbered milk) on top of the wall of the hut where the mamba last appeared. This would help appease the ancestral spirits. Koko knew her days were numbered. Her dead husband wanted her. She was anxious to join him in the spirit world.

One morning twelve year old great granddaughter, Nomsa, called for Koko. She had seen the mamba in the hut where she slept with several other girls. The great grandmother quickly poured some amasi into the bowl made from a gourd and took it to the hut. Nomsa showed her the place on the wall where she had last seen the snake. As Koko stood on a log and placed the bowl on the wall she felt a sting on her thumb then a searing pain going up her arm towards her heart. Then she saw the snake crawling up the pole towards the peak of the roof. She sat down on the floor mat and saw two bleeding puncture marks on the base of her right thumb. She realized she had been bitten by the black mamba and would soon die.

Nomsa remembered the first aid class given at her school by a Red Cross nurse. She tied two handkerchiefs above Koko's wrist, then put a stick under the lower one and twisted the stick. Later, when the tourniquet became too painful she would tighten the upper one and release the other, then keep moving the tourniquets slowly up the arm. She told her ten year old sister to stay with Koko and keep her quiet while she got help. She ran to the dirt road going to the sugar cane plantation. She stood in the middle of the road when she saw a cloud of dust coming towards her. A pickup truck from the Sugar Mill stopped. When she told the driver that Koko had been bitten by a black mamba, he quickly drove to the kraal and Koko was loaded into the

bed of the truck. The patient was rushed to Balekane Nazarene Clinic. Nurse Miriam had recently treated a school teacher's son bitten in the school garden by a mamba. He had gone to another hospital where he was given inadequate doses of antivenom and had died in respiratory failure. The nurse would not let them move Koko from the truck when she saw that the patient's eyelids were drooping and there was muscle weakness. Koko was given two injections of polyvalent antivenom in her thigh muscles, then more was injected in her forearm above the wrist. Nurse Miriam told Nomsa how to manage the patient who was then rushed to the hospital. She then phoned Dr. Paul Sutherland at RFM Hospital thirty miles away and told him that the patient was being brought in with a black mamba bite. The doctor got the crash cart, IVs, and antivenom ready for Koko.

When Koko was wheeled into the emergency room she could not speak or open her eyes. Her lips and tongue were blue. She was quickly intubated and given oxygen. Several ampoules of antivenom were given slowly intravenously then twelve ampoules were added to her IV bottle and given in a slow drip. Koko then opened her eyes and started breathing on her own. When her breathing got shallow and her eyelids started drooping, the IV was sped up. All the antitoxin in the hospital was used up. More was obtained from Mbabane Hospital twenty-six miles away. Arrangements were made for more to be shipped by air from Johannesburg.

On the fourth day the antivenom was stopped. All the paralyzing venom in her body had finally been neutralized. Word was sent to her family that she could go home in three more days. Mkhulu sold an ox to Mr. Ries, the butcher, so he could pay the hospital bill. Mr. Ries was known to the Swazis as Masengula because he loved to drink amasi that had been fermented in a calabash! Mkhulu was scared. He knew that the black mamba was his ancestor calling Koko home. He was away when Koko was bitten, otherwise he would have kept his mother from being taken to the clinic or the hospital. Now the ancestors would really be angry! Somehow he must appease the ancestors; otherwise his entire family would face serious consequences. He needed Sangoma's help, so he took her another goat.

Sangoma gave Mkhulu bad news. The only way he could appease the spirits would be to kill his mother. She gave him a small gourd of poison she had mixed up from poisonous plants. His mother must die in the hospital. The spirits at the kraal must not know that she was still alive. When Koko was dead Mkhulu must return for further instructions.

With tears in his eyes, Mkhulu took the bus to Manzini. He sneaked into the female medical ward when the nurse wasn't present. He explained to his mother that her ancestors demanded that she drink the mixture then quickly left. After drinking most of the mixture Koko screamed for the nurse saying she had been poisoned. In a few minutes Koko was dead. Dr. Sutherland was called. He collected the rest of the poison and called the police. An autopsy was ordered and the poison was sent to the police toxicology lab in Johannesburg. Mkhulu made sure Koko was dead, then returned to see Sangoma.

Sangoma said that since Koko died in the hospital her spirit would remain there. Since she was

the last ancestor to die, her spirit would now be responsible for the welfare of the family. If her spirit was not brought home, the children would misbehave and would have no one to protect them or guide them when the adults were absent. The adults would start making bad decisions. Family members would become ill! Crops would fail. In the next thunderstorm, huts would be struck by lightning. Now Mkhulu would have to give her a cow so she could bring Koko's spirit back to the kraal. Also Mkhulu must hire a small pick-up truck.

The next day a small Toyota truck parked at the hospital. Sangoma and Mkhulu entered the Female Medical Ward. Sangoma reached inside a tin can and dropped a pinch of yellow powder just inside the door, then again at the gate of the hospital. She sat in the bed of the truck and told the driver to drive slowly back to Koko's kraal. At intervals, she would toss a pinch of the "magic" powder behind the truck to lead Koko's spirit back home. When they arrived at the Kraal, Sangoma put some powder in a hollow reed and blew it into the air inside each hut. She then looked inside each hut and said Koko's spirit was now back home! Koko's spirit was now in control of the kraal! After the autopsy, the truck then returned to the hospital to bring Koko's body home to be buried in the isibaya beside her husband and her ancestors.

As usual, the autopsy was inconclusive. The "poison" contained very complex alkaloids that couldn't be identified. The family felt safe again. Nothing bad could happen with Koko's spirit watching over them. Nothing that happened in the Kraal could be hidden from Koko's spirit! She would make sure that all offenders would be punished! Absent family members could return and get Koko's "advice" before they made any important decision. The snake reappeared from time to time. This reassured the family that Koko was watching over them! When Siphile's parents were told that Koko's spirit now inhabited the kraal, they finally agreed with Mandla saying he had paid enough for Siphile. Their two children now belonged to their parents. No longer were they the property of Siphile's parents. There was harmony in the family again. Mandla's three wives stopped fighting out of fear of Koko's spirit! The children were obedient at all times. Siphile soon became pregnant and delivered a healthy boy at home. Nurse Mirriam had told her that she could rupture her uterus and tried to send her to the hospital but the family had refused. They felt safer at home with Koko's spirit watching over Siphile and her baby!

NOTE: The part about the old lady being bitten by a black mamba and being poisoned by her family after she recovered from the snake bite is true. Why would anybody want to kill the most loved and respected member of his family? The rest of the story is based on traditional practices, customs and beliefs, to try to explain why this woman was killed. Families want their elders to die at home. Otherwise it would be very costly to hire a witchdoctor to bring the spirit back home! Some Swazis who said they were Christians, continued to secretly practice tribal customs and beliefs and consult witchdoctors. Only those who surrender their lives completely to Jesus Christ are freed from the Evils of their past life. These Christians burn all good luck charms and witchcraft paraphernalia and trust God for guidance and protection. Africans make the best Christians, but they also can make the worst sinners! Only the leadership of these Christians can save African people from themselves. These Christians must continue to be trained to be leaders of their countries! However, tribal society and traditions must not be destroyed unless the people can be given something better. It is important that missionaries understand the evil forces that can bind these people and cause their destruction. Unfortunately, some of these evils have been imported from so called Christian countries!

