

Palin as an Autoimmune Disease

Michael Ortiz Hill

I did not expect to meet Sarah Palin in Africa, least of all at the culmination of deeper initiation into the tribal medicine of Bantu people in Zimbabwe. Was I surprised?

Quite.

And also, no.

I long thought that I'd write an article about Palin and Africa ever since her star rose in her vice presidential run and it was revealed that she thought Africa was a country. In my imaginary monologues I'd tell her, "Of course, Sarah, it's really a little island off the coast of Spain. Isn't it amazing that all those black Americans came from such a speck of dust?" I decided not to suggest that Africa was where those poor suckers decided to rise up on two legs and be human because if I brought up the evolution thing I might lose credibility as a guy who knows a little about Africa.

What provoked me to write of Palin was not waxing schoolmarmish about world geography but the stories about the Kenyan pastor and witch hunter, Reverend Thomas Murthee, fighting witches on her behalf at the Wasilla Assembly of God Church. I know too much about those who fight witches in Africa which makes Salem seem a quaint and parochial affair. If you are a medicine man who practices the way of the ancestors you take for granted that someone somewhere will accuse you of witchcraft. Mandaza Kandemwa, who initiated me as a medicine man in the *ngoma* of the water spirits has had his life threatened by witch hunters.

African-American culture went through a vast epistemological shift from 1930 to 1960 with the Great Migration from the rural south to the urban north. Previous to 1930 "Africanisms" pervaded the south – root doctors, 'hands' also known as *mojo* (or in the Kongo '*nkisi*'), full immersion baptism like the *ngoma* of the water spirits, etc. These old ways, profound and wise, began to be diabolized. Matters African became "*hoodoo*"—hexing.

When a culture is under assault, witchcraft accusation proliferates and the ones who honor the way of the ancestors are especially endangered. I've seen this with the Navajo in Arizona, the Garifuna in Belize and the Maya in Guatemala. This is the success of Christianized imperialism. It sets up traditional ways to autocannibalize themselves. The witches – in Zimbabwe they are called *varozi* – are said to gather secretly in the forest to eat people souls. Witchcraft accusation effectively eats the souls of very old traditions.

In Zimbabwe there is a 30% HIV rate. The life expectancy when I was first initiated in 1996 was 59 years. Now it's 29 years. Moreover AIDS has a symptomatology very

much like witchcraft disease. One might well go to a preacher like Muthee who makes a living fighting witches.

Muthee had been to Palins church several times before he publically prayed for her political success. Here's what he said while praying that she be freed of the ministrations of witches and the devil in her efforts to be governor of Alaska.

"In the name of Jesus. Father, we thank you today. We come in the hindrance of the enemy, standing in her way to there. In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus! Every form of witchcraft, it will be rebuked in the name of Jesus. Father, make her way now. In Jesus' name, Amen."

In Africa there is a very dark context to such a prayer.

When Christian imperialism spread west through Europe some estimate fifteen million "witches" were burnt at the stake for following the old ways of ritual, healing and celebration. In contemporary Zimbabwe this is very contemporary as it is in Kenya and the rest of Africa fanning out into the diaspora.

Likewise in contemporary Kenya and Zimbabwe fire is the preferred way of dealing with "witches." This is footage from Murthees Kenya:

http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=dae_1236854361

This is the deep background, the world view behind Murthees gathering the good white folk of Wasilla to chase away the witches that would impede Palins political ambitions. And this was the invisible *mise en scene* that called Sarah to my rite of initiation in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

It had been ten years since I was with the Shona and Ndebele (Zulu) people who received me as a *nganga* (shaman). The traditional understanding is that one makes an alliance with the spirit that afflicts and that spirit initiates you into a deeper understanding of practicing medicine. My first initiation was through water spirit disease but when I returned from Africa I soon began losing full use of my legs.

Eventually I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and these years I'd been away had been engrossed in a fierce and generous apprenticeship with the spirit of that disease.

As an RN I found myself relying more on African medicine than western allopathy as the healing modality of choice. A couple of years ago I spent two months alone in the forest offering over MS and when I left the forest a MRI confirmed what I knew: I was healed.

I had been faithful in my listening.

I knew it was time to take my next step into the ancestral ground of this sacred disease.

Western medicine and tribal medicine both speak of ancestors but DNA is not *midzimu*. The *midzimu* are the invisibles that accompany us through our lives. They inspire this body. Though the *midzimu* are ancestors they are very contemporary. Our diseases live in the paradigms defined by their anguish and not a small part of being initiated as a *nganga* is the healing of the ancestors.

I'd taken my MS diagnosis to be at least two centuries thick – back to when my fathers forebears held Bantu (Gullah) slaves in Virginia. Indeed I know an African-American woman with MS whose father was a Hill and family was from Virginia. I suspect we are genetically kin.

But this initiation began with a dream that spoke of the wound of the maternal line.

I was standing before *la santa cruz* – the holy cross – and suspended in the air was the question: What is the crucifixion between Catholic and Jew and what is the resurrection?

I was raised Mexican Catholic (*todos los mejicanos son catolico, que no?*) but from the time I was a teenager I knew I was Jewish. Watching *Fiddler on the Roof* with my White Anglo-Saxon Buddhist father I burst into tears when Tevya's daughter lit the Sabbath candle. I wanted to be *yeshiva bucher* that I was. I wrote the *shema* (the Jewish declaration of faith) in Hebrew on my 10th grade notebook.

In the nineties, the Sephardic background of *Hispano* New Mexicans was beginning to become clear. Poor Mexicans performing kosher butchering. A Saint Esther. And yes – lighting the Friday night candle often not knowing why.

Genetically – that word again – confirmed. My Latino ancestors were Jewish on both of my grandparents' line. *Converso* – or less politely *marrano* (pig) – becoming Catholic to escape the wrath of the inquisition, fleeing Spain to Mexico City. And when the inquisition arrived in Mexico fled north to northern border of New Spain in 1690.

Santa Fe.

To be *converso* is to be everybody's heretic. To the Jew, you have betrayed the faith. To the Catholic, you are inexpugnably Jewish and not to be trusted. A generation before my ancestors fled north, the Inquisition had a massive *auto de fe'* of suspected *judaizers* in Mexico City. Like those who dare to practice the old ways in 21st century Africa or Medieval Europe, to be burnt alive is time honored.

No surprise that it took five hundred years before Sephardic Catholics began speaking the truth – often even to themselves.

Western Bantu say, “the stitch of pain leads to the village of initiation,” which is to say, the village of the ancestors. The autoimmune disease, multiple sclerosis, was my path.

The brilliance of African medicine is that personal affliction is not for a moment personal. It partakes of the wounds of history and in healing those wounds one steps out of the paradigm that is forever unconscious and so forever finds new ways to repeat itself.

The details of falling through the cracks of the *converso* wound are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that at the climax of initiation – ritual death – I lost full use of my legs like the bad old days of multiple sclerosis exacerbation and had to have Mandaza support me as I walked a couple of miles. And then, two hours later, I regained my capacity to walk independently. A couple of weeks after that, when I was still trying to comprehend what had happened, Sarah Palin arrived, inimitably herself.

Sarah was singing a little ditty about her presidential campaign. McCain was her running mate. This was in the basement of an auto shop that was working on her car. Although the song was pretty imbecilic, I was most polite.

The mechanic, a thug with a thick eastern European accent, wanted to rape her and it was mine to protect Sarah from being violated. I thumped my chest and said, “I am her husband and if you lay one finger on her I will kill you.”

I didn’t for a moment believe I was Sarah husband but I figured if I was fierce enough he’d back off – which he momentarily did. Sarah and I climbed into her car and I hit the gas. “If that jerk tries to stop us I’ll run him over,” I assured her.

When I awoke and told Mandaza this dream he asked what I made of it. “It’s a *ngozi* dream, pure and simple,” I said.

“Exactly,” he replied. “That one is the spirit of multiple sclerosis and its time we cast it out once and for all.”

Sarah Pallin as a virus? I was at first skeptical but the Mandaza was initiating me so I conceded to his authority.

Ngozi are the spirits of people who have died prematurely, a suicide or victim of violence, like being burnt. They can be passed through the ancestral line for generations if not centuries. They will manifest in dreams as anything that you are frightened of and in our book on the dreams of African-Americans *ngozi* sometimes appear as white people. When I travelled in Vietnam with American veterans it became clear that in Bantu medicine what is called PTSD is a matter of *ngozi*.

Because of the war against apartheid and the violence since independence much of what Mandaza does as a medicine man is to cast out *ngozi*.

I knew that acknowledging the presense of *ngozi* I was to be exorcized of Sarah Palin and her would be rapist. This exorcism in fact completed a rigorous and true initiation.

But why Sarah Palin and why then?

As an author who works with dreams from various angles I could see this visitation through a Gestalt frame – “I” am all three figures: Sarah, the rapist and this fellow Michael who claims to be her husband. While I suppose there is some virtue in getting in touch with my inner Republican, I’m more intrigued by thinking of Sarah as the spirit of an autoimmune disease.

With an autoimmune disease the self attacks the self. One is physically allergic to the substance of oneself. The *converso* is not only a heretic to Catholic and Jewish nature, he is heretical to his Sephardic Catholic self. Somaticizing this was for me MS exacerbation.

Meltdown.

What is the virus that disguises itself as Palin? As I write this, John McCain has just announced he never claimed he was a maverick. A noble madman, McCain, who *never* was a maverick actually -- but to deny your BRAND smells a bit of Palinitis.

The Queen of the teabaggers is pushing the political discourse in America right into incoherence -- *right* off the cliff. And her alliance with an African witch hunter who is pushing traditional African culture under the bus? There is a theme here: the ancestral affliction that was the Jewish/ Catholic schism, and the schism between my black and white kin manifested, in this life, as multiple sclerosis.

Mandaza cast out this spirit of multiple sclerosis – as is usual with exorcisms, quite dramatic and quite a relief – and my body is whole.

Most effective that Sarah is eroding the neurological system of the right wing but the question beckons – how do we exorcize her from the body politic?

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