

## Hellinger in South Africa: a-story of the Zulu origins of Family Constellations

By Tanja Meyburgh, 2009

Once upon a time in South Africa: Bert Hellinger in Natal

I've often wondered why Bert Hellinger is so shy to talk of his time spent in South Africa, or of the traditional African origins of family constellations. He has never been forthcoming with information about his time spent here and has vowed that he will never return. Why has he left it behind? Why would he not talk about a place where he lived for 16 years? What did he give to this place, and what did he take?

I first experienced constellations in 2002, and went on to train as a facilitator and co-found the first training here. I feel constantly engaged with the mystery of Hellinger's time here through an ongoing need to honor the origins of my work. I have always felt that family constellations connect me on a deeper level to South Africa and its traditional people and cultures. How strange that I had to travel to Germany to study what feels inherently African.

The connection was obvious to me: the ancestral presence and the placing of the elements in the same way as the bones are thrown by the Sangoma (a traditional African ancestral healer). However, I felt there was something more: something that would shed light on the healing effect of family constellations.

My search for understanding the historical origins in South Africa has taken me from an outer search in the midlands of Kwazulu Natal, to searching in the experience and ideas of the local people, and finally to looking inwards to my own experience and what family constellations means to me. As I slowly weave my thoughts over the past 7 years of working locally as a facilitator and trainer, I am finding a story to tell.

All the information contained in this article is true to my best knowledge, and is based on my own experiences. I have done my best to ask questions and present my findings with respect of Bert Hellinger's privacy and to honor his legacy. I am aware that I am walking the fine line, and that my personal perspective is forever changing.

On a mission: Christianity and the African Ancestral Tradition meet in the African wilderness

It wasn't easy to find the actual place. In fact, there were three places over the 16 years. I literally stumbled into one, by following my intuition. Looking at the map & saying – let me start here. The huge red brick building is old and looks strange amongst the rural hills dotted with round mud huts. The place is eerie and dilapidated, but has signs of dedicated labour in a time where resources in the Christian church are few. A skeleton staff remains. I ask myself: what it was all for? What did the missions achieve? What must it have been like to arrive in the wild lands of Africa to save the local people from their “non-religious” ways?

“Sawbona” – “I see you”. I am greeted by a young black priest. He fills me in on their history: Trappist monks arriving in the 1800's, and later the missions that warned the locals to stay away from their own traditional beliefs in favor of the church. Today, but only since the 80's, he is proud to report that the missions support all forms of traditional beliefs that “promotes life” and healing. At the same time, every decision must still be passed through Rome, and “Rome takes a long time to decide”. It feels like a part of the past is standing still here. Some advances are evident in the way the priest has decorated his private study: an eclectic mix of Catholic and African iconography, spears and shields, bibles, traditional African cloths, crosses, lions and pictures of the lily white virgin Mary.

Hellinger arrived in South Africa in the conservative 1950's. I meet two grey-haired European priests who knew him. They don't say much: “He was a very gifted man”, “A very wise man” says the other. But, I sense there is more that is not said. I hear that Hellinger was “quite in the limelight” in his day and highly thought of by the African priests. He was fluent in Zulu and did all the text translations of the liturgy, “bringing the faith to the people in their own images and language”. He was responsible for building a church at his rural parish. He was considered a “white raven” – someone out of the ordinary. Someone special.

But not all reports are positive. He was “intolerant of old-fashioned ideas, which caused some difficulties within the hierarchy”. He often spoke the “harsh truth”, “and who is ready to hear the truth about yourselves”, said a sister. There were also harsh words, woundedness, and piercing analysis about the family life from which he came.

I visit the seminary where Hellinger taught. Its inhabited, but feels deserted. Another huge red brick box on the top of the hill in the middle of no-where. Leading down from the looming façade is a little pathway into a magical overgrown garden. There, nestled amongst the African thorn bushes and flaming aloes, stands Mother Mary. Mary in the jungle. There are signs of life, but no-body. Disturbed, I leave again.

Finally, at the secondary school where Hellinger was allegedly principal for a brief period, I find animation – people going about their business. Steve Biko was schooled here during the 60's – and many other important figures in the black consciousness movement. Did they know Hellinger? I'm excited and brimming with questions: What was his role? When did he become headmaster? Who were his students?

I meet an old friend of his, who finds these questions unimportant, but shares his soul and the deep love of Hellinger as priest and as man. I hear about the strengths and the weaknesses. I get an image of the same split he has around him today – deeply loving and hating of one man at the same time. Honey and poison. Once his confession is over, we sit together on the veranda in the afternoon sun lost in our own thoughts until it is time to leave.

I feel a bit disappointed at the end of my journey that I did not find out more about the Zulu influences and origins from “the source”, but do have a stronger “feeling” for Hellinger the man and controversy surrounding him wherever he goes. I decide I need more information from other sources and interview the African graduates of the facilitator training for clues.

To the horse's mouth: South African constellation graduates's thoughts on Family Constellations and Traditional African culture

After talking to the Zulu graduates, the two most obvious connections of Family Constellations to their Traditional African beliefs are confirmed. Firstly, the acknowledgement that our ancestors are vital for our wellbeing:

“The Zulu culture has a strong belief in Ancestors “Amadlozi” regarding connecting with them to appease or release or ask for certain things. They are regarded as our guides and are composed of people we know who have left this planet. Constellating an unresolved issue is similar to

doing a ceremony, talking to ancestor/s asking for forgiveness or connecting those who have left the planet in conflict.”

“Africa’s sacred images are mainly ancestor spirits. God is the creator, the spirit force responsible for all life on earth, including the ancestors, but he is too remote to hear the prayers of ordinary mortals. Dead ancestors, being spirits, communicate with God, mediating between him and humanity”

“The belief in ancestors is rooted in the need or desire to preserve the memory of known past generations and known or unknown lineages. The emphasis of acknowledging the excluded is the foundation of the cure for various ailments, like bodily discomfort, spiritual discord or common need to wade off misfortune or a curse that will be seen to be projected by malevolent spirits. The good spirits are acknowledged and given gratitude through ceremonies or cleansing rituals. For example, a person will consult a traditional healer who will facilitate the session of finding a solution or a root cause of the trouble. This is often done through throwing the bones in order to constellate the wider family picture”

The other parallel drawn in the interviews is the use of divination by traditional African healers to receive the messages of the ancestors through “the throwing of the bones”. The bones consist of symbolic elements for various family members as well as symbolic elements relating to a person’s life: money, love, power, body organs, life force etc. Once the bones are cast, the healer considers the arrangements carefully, including how the bones are facing, the distance between the bones, configurations or patterns.

“The bones will fall to show the presence of spirits around the sick person, resentful ancestral spirits, offended nature or malevolent spirits. This gives the healer the picture of how the cause of the illness came about and what is needed as a remedy. Therapies can include animal sacrifices, rituals, massage, herbal teas, salves, snuffs, poultices, roots and herbs. African diviners play the role of spiritual leaders of ancient times and are diagnosers of both illness and mental problems.”

Still after these interviews, I'm left with the feeling that there is a secret – something that I'm not being let in on. Could it be some kind of secret or sacred knowledge that is protected? Perhaps something that is feared to be shared? One of the students confirms this:

“I experience fear (with family constellations) that I am tampering with something that is very sacred by talking about my ancestors, selling out a secret when in fact ancestors as spirit is a medium that is meant to be out there and need reverence than be tempered with. Given the effect of respecting elders, and negative connotation of authority and the unseen, it becomes even more scary to tamper with that one cannot touch if one has not done healing work. This could be as a result of superstition that is rife in my cultural upbringing or the influence of Christianity that has tainted the ancestors as something one needs to abolish...”

This same student also considers that sources of the knowledge behind the development of constellations that are not being adequately acknowledged:

“ I would think that there is an element of intellectual property that is ignored or not taken into account thus shielding the role African spiritualism might have impacted on this development”

I'm left wondering if perhaps the connection between the two has not been openly acknowledged on purpose, as a way of respecting the tradition and sacred customs from which it stems. What did Hellinger learn from local spiritual leaders at a time when he was expected to convert them to his own beliefs? Into what knowledge was he initiated? Was he requested to honor the secrets of African tradition?

A personal experience: following the calling of my South African and German ancestors

Before I first encountered family constellations in 2002, I was told that I am called to become a “Sangoma”, a traditional African healer. I had over the years since adolescence been plagued by repeated symptoms of chronic fatigue, heavy arms, and illnesses of unknown origin. In passing conversation someone mentioned that these afflictions could be the work of my ancestors to whom I was “not listening” and I should consult a traditional African healer to hear what my ancestors might want of me.

What followed was a huge conflict – to continue my studies as a psychologist, or to follow the calling to become a Sangoma through a cultural tradition that had very little to do with my own ancestors. When I discovered family constellations however, there was an instant “fit”. I could do ancestral work, but remain true to the experiences and knowledge of both my South African and German ancestors.

What followed was seven years of intense training and working in family constellations, completing psychology qualifications, and an ongoing journey through African bone throwing, ritual and ceremony with my teacher and guide – a white African traditional healer. As I pull these strands together, my understanding of the origin of family constellation work in African culture has been deepened and enriched. I am “hearing my ancestors” through my work and am no longer required to be initiated in the traditional sense. Family constellations has been my initiation and I am healthy now.

I still debate with myself how much the healing effect of Family Constellations is spirit, and how much is science, but what I do know is that, with a skilled facilitator, it works. We can do the research and scientifically validate that it does work, but finding proof of “how” it works – by western or African explanations seems impossible. Perhaps this is the sacred knowledge that remains hidden in traditional initiations and mystery schools. Perhaps this is the protected knowledge that we can only “know” but not speak of or explain. Or perhaps it is access to the part of the soul that what we cannot know for sure, but can feel or intuit when we work with constellations. So, I try to find a simple summary for myself for the state of being that constellation supports and through this state can bring healing. When I remove the Christian religious, the traditional African, and the psychological systems of knowledge and thought, and distill it to the essence I perceive. In the end I am left with:

I am not alone.

I am part of something greater.

I am connected to my source through my ancestors.

I have (seen and unseen) resources that are always available to me.

For many people from individualized and western cultures this is a new discovery when they experience constellations for the first time. Beyond what the constellation can reveal, this is the first step towards healing and a feeling of wholeness. When I personally come to stillness in this place, I feel centered, supported and at peace.