Unkulunkulu Encyclopedia Article

Unkulunkulu

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Unkulunkulu

UNKULUNKULU is a mythic figure among the Zulu people, a large ethnic group in South Africa. Properly speaking, uNkulunkulu, a name meaning "the old, old one," is not a deity (the Zulu had a weakly developed pantheon) but is rather the "first man." One oral tradition identifies uNkulunkulu as a man and a woman (often identified as uThlanga), but the common myth holds that uNkulunkulu is the first man. He appeared, or was created, by the "breaking off" of reeds—it is said of him that he "came out of, or broke off from, a bed of reeds." Thus, he is also called uMvelinqangi ("the first outcomer," i. e., "the ancestor of all"). All humans are derived from him and from his design and plan. It is also thought by some that uNkulunkulu was merely an early ancestral figure, understood as the ancestor of the Zulu, who was later believed—perhaps under the influence of Christianity—to have been the creator. There is a possibility, from the early sources, that uNkulunkulu was originally thought of purely as an ancestor and human being.

Because uNkulunkulu has no identifiable children there are no ancestral rites or specific families that can claim to be descended from him. Nonetheless, he created humanity and even gave humans their social institutions, such as marriage and chieftainship. In addition, he gave them spirits (of the dead), diviners to discover the past and the future, and doctors to treat various diseases.

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