

A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS
A CULTURE OF PEACE

ELDER WILLIAM COMMANDA *and* THE SPIRIT OF UBUNTU

The 10th Anniversary of the South African Rainbow Association coincides very closely with Algonquin Elder William Commanda's linkages with South Africa. This article describes some of his work and outreach to South Africa and its peoples over the past decade.

By way of background, William Commanda is the ninety three year old Algonquin Elder from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, who for several decades has been working single handedly to create a global eco-community - *A Circle of All Nations* - entirely without funding, staff or organizational infrastructure. His priorities are and have always been the two core issues of our times: environmental stewardship and racial harmony and peace-building - in the words of his people, *Respect for Mother Earth*, and *We Are All Related*.

People from around the world are drawn to him, and daily new folk come to seek him out - why? I say because he embodies the spirit of UBUNTU in a larger way than most others, and in his love and engagement with all, he connects us with each other and the world of nature to which we all belong.

Now we could also be writing an article about William's linkage with France or Japan or some other country as easily, but because I myself was born in South Africa,



we have a very special relationship with her. This article highlights a few of the threads of the Indigenous elder's special connection with South Africa.

The seeds for this link were sown in the late 1990s, when Elder Commanda hosted annual March 21 activities at Victoria Island, in the heart of the capital city, or at his home, to celebrate the spring solstice, and to acknowledge the International Day for the Elimination of Racism and Xenophobia as well as the struggles and sacrifices of South Africans in setting such a global ideal.

In 1998, then, when Elder Commanda, and youth drummers from his community of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, joined others to welcome President Nelson Mandela to Canada, it was a very special moment for him - ever focused on the theme of forgiveness, he marveled at President Mandela's expression of forgiveness following his decades

of imprisonment and the oppression of his peoples. The old Native American Chief presented the African leader with an eagle feather, a symbol of the highest honour to Indigenous Peoples, in respect of both his fight against racism and the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation reflected in his personal and political ideals; instinctively, President Mandela put the feather to his head, and William Commanda wished he had made his a headband as well, for the proper crowning of a warrior of the highest caliber - perhaps that day will come yet!



Intriguingly enough, both men are connected by an unfunded grass roots Canadian initiative, **The Wolf Project** - which honours people who promote racial harmony - in 1997, President Mandela received the South Star Wolf (the wolves are named after celestial bodies), and it was presented to him by now Assembly of First Nations National Chief,

Phil Fontaine, then with the delegation of Manitoba Chiefs. In 1998, Elder Commanda himself was presented with his Wolf – the Corona Borealis (North Star). Over three hundred people joined him in celebrating the receipt of this award and his eight fifth birthday in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg – at a

special *Lighting Candles for a Vision of Peace / Racial Harmony Workshop* – very special indeed, because three of the key participants were Indigenous Prophecy Carriers – and carriers of prophecies at the times of their unfolding – William Commanda, carrier of the Seven Fires Prophecy, Hopi Elder Martin

Gashwaseoma, and Chief Arvol Looking Horse, Keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Woman's Pipe.

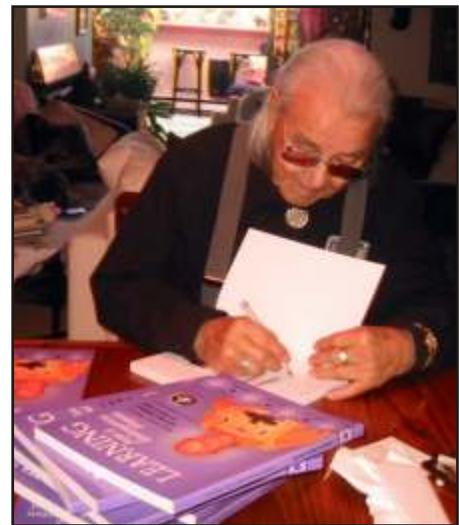
I shall take a moment to quote an excerpt on the Seven Fires Prophecy from our book on Elder Commanda, entitled, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*:

This is a prophecy that has been carried as a fundamental part of the oral history of his direct ancestors for at least six hundred years; it is also a well-known prophecy amongst the Ojibwe people and many other tribes across Turtle Island. But in fact, we have been told that the prophecy is even more broadly spread, including amongst Indigenous Peoples in Africa ...

In essence, the prophecy tells of the history of the Indigenous Peoples as it was to evolve over the years following the coming of the new peoples to their land. The prophecy was brought to the people by seven prophets, two of whom appeared together as one. These prophets described the major transformations that were to come into the lives of the people over different epochs of time.

Thus, the first prophet told of the time when the people were living a safe and secure life, the second warned of a danger that was coming to their lands; the third told how those who had not heeded the warning by taking precautions to move away from this danger would be destroyed; the fourth prophecy was delivered by two prophets, and theirs was the message of duality: they told of the coming of the light skinned race; one said they could appear as friends; the other warned that they could also be enemies under the disguise of friendship – again the people were warned to be on guard. The fifth prophet told of the false promise that could come under the guise of religion. The sixth prophet told of the pain and turmoil that would devastate the lives of the Indigenous Peoples who had turned away from their old values and ways of live with the coming of the newcomers. The seventh prophet talked about the time of choice-making for all – for continued exploitation of land and peoples, or for a renewed respect for Mother Earth and reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and the newcomers. The double diamond at the centre of this eight-diamond belt reflects this hope for unity to emerge out of the duality.

It is a rich, epic prophecy that appears to emphasize the importance of choice (and consequences) throughout – individual and communal choice – and this choice appears to be not more important than at this time. (pages 51-52)



In tracking our South African heritage, you might be interested to know what Zulu shaman and writer Credo Mutwa wrote about Prophecy in his book, *Song of the Stars The Lore of a Zulu Shaman : Prediction is a vital human power. It is an “Early warning device” that the gods placed within the human soul so that one can recognize future dangers.* (Page 177).

The workshop also served as occasion for acknowledgment of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Day, and Minnijean Brown Trickey, one of the Little Rock Nine, the young black students who took a stand against racial discrimination in Arkansas in the fifties, made a special presentation on Human Rights. The wolves were howling! – Chief Looking Horse and Ms. Trickey are also Wolf Project Award recipients. Minnijean went on to earn a Congressional Medal from President Clinton. Chief Looking Horse initiated June 21 Peace and Prayer Day activities across the world, and celebrated one year's launch in South Africa with Ms. Ela Gandhi. Another Wolf recipient, Ryan Hreljac, builds wells for water in Africa. All in all, a unique group of individuals making their own remarkable contributions to the world. In the late nineties, William Commanda joined Bea McTavish as Special Advisor to The Wolf Project, and he continues to link its work with his *Circle of All Nations*.

In 1999, in collaboration with the Wolf Project, Elder Commanda initiated a communications project with students from the Western Quebec School Board and the Eersterust Youth Development Outreach Project. In 2000, we brought two of the students to the *Millennium Circle of All Nations Peace Gathering* at Nepean Point in Ottawa.

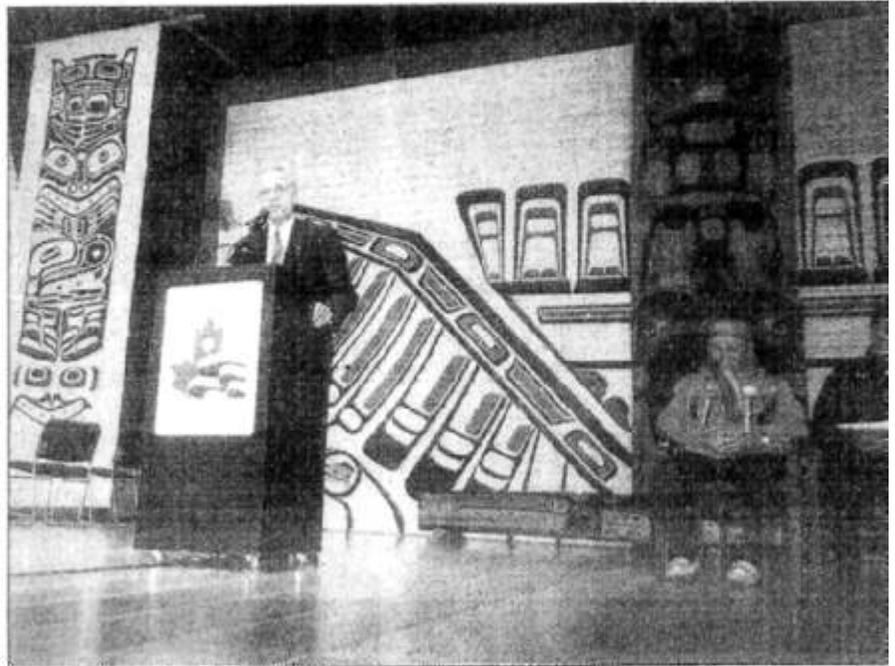
In fact, there were actually three other South Africans who were part of the delegation we sponsored to attend the Gathering – they represented the Ipopeng Youth Art Project from the South African “Making a Difference” Initiative, the Umtapo Peace Education Centre, and the National Association of Child Care Workers. I shall leave it to the words of one of the youth participants, Sharifa Moola to tell you what the experience was like for them:



The Circle of all Nations

This was a gathering in Ottawa, Canada organised by the First Nation's People, focusing primarily on the issues of peace, racial harmony, social justice and indigenous wisdom; engaging youth in ongoing education, action and leadership development in these areas; and, profiling art and creative expression as catalyzing forces of social regeneration. The purpose of the gathering was to promote the establishment of a Circle of All Nations, united by a vision of peace and indigenous wisdom, and committed to a just society for the rainbow people.

Sarifa Moola reports:



Dr Douglas Cardinal, architect, speaking at the Circle of all Nations gathering in Ottawa.

A Calling

The trip to Ottawa, Canada was definitely a *Calling*, one that encapsulated, and crystalised what I was going through as a young African woman and a peace activist. This was a journey of self-discovery, growth and the search for inner peace. It gave me insight and a positive perspective about myself, the importance of the environment and the work that I was doing.

From Belfast to Ottawa, rushing, a bit tired, anxious, excited and concerned about the interesting Gathering we were going to, one of its kind. Concerned for I wasn't quite sure what to expect or what was expected of me. However, these feelings of anxiety, concern were transformed by the warm welcome we received. This was the beginning of an amazing and enriching experience.

Right at the outset, from the opening ceremony, I knew that this was no talk show. Here were people who were open about their culture and heritage, proud of being the First Nations People, were caring towards their own and the environment and readily shared their vast wisdom. We always talk about reviving the spirit of UBUNTU; here were people who were living it. I have a deep admiration for the First Nations People of North America, who bring to mind images of simplicity, spirituality, humility, respect for mother Earth, and most important, forgiveness. These are people who have suffered brutality dehumanisation and cultural genocide at the

hands of the British like the Africans and Irish and yet they can still forgive their perpetrators.

We, at Umtapo, always speak of the importance of the individual internalising what s/he believes in and through the courage of their conviction, and by example, make a positive impact on their families, and with their support go out into the community and make a difference. This was evident in the families that were present, the support they gave each other and their ability to communicate with one voice. The most amazing thing for me was the humility, calmness that each one of them radiated, especially Elder William. Just his presence commanded respect and unconditional love from the people around him.

Part of the programme focused on the talking circles which I thought were extremely therapeutic for many who came forward and shared their life experiences. It was amazing to see men come forward and share their experiences and cry openly. This is something that we can learn where we come together in a circle and give people the opportunity to speak out: share their pain, anger, hatred, depression and whatever emotions they carry from their past, giving them a shoulder to cry on. Instead of restricting ourselves and only speaking if and when it is politically correct.

Each speaker had an important experience and message that they shared with the group. Elder William

Commanda's messages were so simple yet so accurate and with so much of passion. The most important points that were emphasised was the need to care for the environment that is quickly being destroyed because of greed and other human fallibilities. Elder William constantly emphasised the power and ability that each one of us has to forgive, understanding the power and responsibility that we have as agents of change to transform the negatives into positives and to maintain the equilibrium. Other messages that I will remember were about the importance of the individual and s/he recognising the power and energy that each one has. How we should have the ability to judge the action and not the person.

There was one message that I could identify with coming from Umtapo and to say that is what we are doing, is to be unreasonable about one's commitment, take your stance and follow it through. This is one of the things I had learnt at Umtapo, that if you strongly believe in something then you should



Sarifa Moola with Elder William Commanda.

If you strongly believe in something then you should be able to see it succeed.

be able to see it succeed.

The messages that came out of the panel discussions together with the ceremonies, rituals, dreams that I had, and the sweat lodge made a positive impact on my life. It reminded me of the importance of the Elders in our communities and homes. Their vast wisdom are our guide and education through life's journey. Also, that education can be rich through experience and the knowledge of the Elders.

I must also say that this experience was even better because of the wonderful people that I traveled with. Their caring, support and understanding made this trip more pleasurable. To Zeni, Renee, Franco and Lebo, I am very grateful for the experience as well as the challenge. Representing the different "race" groups in South Africa we

came together as one family. Here I was able to confront whatever prejudices that I still harboured, negative attitudes and transform these into positive attitudes and actions towards the development and growth of myself, our new friendship, and our country.

Scholarship for Umtapo Staff Member

Sarifa Moola, assistant programmes officer at Umtapo Centre and youth coordinator, has left Umtapo (that is physical) only after an association that she started around 1994 when she was a 14 year old, started to struggle in her formal schooling. Having gone through various leadership programmes at Umtapo and assisting as a volunteer for a few years, Sarifa began as a part-time staff member in 1997. She was required to be a co-ordinator of Civics Africa, the regional component of the World Civil Society Alliance, which was temporarily based at Umtapo Centre. In this position, she gained vast experience with civil society projects and initiatives as well as globally. Sarifa represented Umtapo Centre at forums throughout the

world: from the indigenous peoples' gathering in Canada, the world conference of the United Nations of Youth Foundation in the Hague, the Global Meeting of Generations in Washington, to heading a youth delegation to Belfast, Northern Ireland.

In August this year, she was awarded a scholarship to do her Masters Degree in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, England.

Sarifa epitomised Umtapo's contribution to the growth and empowerment of young people in South Africa. She is a dedicated and committed peace and anti-racism activist who will be sorely missed, but will surely be back to continue the struggle for peace and socio-economic justice in South Africa.



It was at this point that Elder Commanda's official connection with SARA commenced. SARA hosted a tea and talking circle with our South African guests and I remember Fatima Ameen and Harold Head playing a key role in that welcome. Since then, Harold in particular has attended many activities coordinated by Elder Commanda, and we value this expression of support of the Indigenous Peoples in Canada very much.

In 1998, Elder Commanda hosted a workshop to promote racial harmony, and several SARA members participated. We also have a photograph of two employees of the South African High Commission (SAHC) receiving their *Circle of All Nations* teeshirts. Over the following years, Elder Commanda continued to connect with the SAHC: In 2001, High Commissioner Andre Jaquet, after making a particular point of paying his respects to the Indigenous leader, also participated in the 2001 *Circle of All Nations* Annual Gathering at his home in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, and he is featured in a documentary on the event; Elder Commanda welcomed High Commissioner Teresa Soloman at her inauguration on a South African Freedom Day celebration, noting,

by the way, that he was happy to be joining in the celebration of the freedom of South Africans on his land and was hopeful that his people too would one day be able to experience that deep sense of freedom and empowerment in their own land. I wonder how many South Africans know that the apartheid system was modeled on the Indian Act and the racist treatment of the Native People in this country by the colonial leaders of the day. Elder Commanda participated in the planting of a tree with the SAHC in commemoration of a global unity on the banks over the Ottawa River. He was also pleased to welcome various SAHC staff to his home – Wendy Mayimele and Super Moloji come to mind – and greet visiting South Africans such as Minister Geraldine Frazer Moleketi; and welcome the new High Commissioner Dr. Nkomo and his wife on their arrival in Canada. He was honoured that musician and poet Zolina Mokiva made a special point of seeking him out for a blessing, harkening to a deep call for connection with an older wisdom, and Ms Noweto Luti was very gracious in arranging that. I myself have been particularly grateful that South Africa has taken this stand of outreach to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada – too many foreign

embassies are only preoccupied with the issues of their homeland, little realizing that the resources of Canada are really the heritage of William's people who remain marginalized in the land of their ancestors. The warmth of the South African outreach helps heal such as yet unaddressed realities.

In 2001, Elder William Commanda supported the Government of Canada's preparations for the World Conference against Racism held in South Africa. Later, he himself participated in peace building efforts in South Africa, not as an official representative of the Government of Canada, but entirely at his own expense, because of his profound commitment to the promotion of racial harmony. This is rather an irony, in my opinion, because despite the Canadian support of the huge delegation from here to South Africa, and despite the SAHC support of Elder Commanda as an official representative, the one person who in his own personal efforts actively advanced racial harmony and the creation of *A Circle of All Nations* was overlooked, nay rejected, by the Government of Canada in its selection of participants. – The deeper irony: the Wolf Project had been endorsed by the United Nations as a non-government



organization promoting racial harmony. We still don't entirely understand what lay behind this response – perhaps the Gods were protecting Elder Commanda from official participation in a global event that only saw its worst nightmare emerge – 9/11.

Anyway, we received our own message that he would be heading to South Africa – after his August *Circle of All Nations* Gathering, I found a guinea fowl feather on his grounds! Mother Nature spoke! (Intriguingly enough, Mother Nature remembered the Elder when he was actually in South Africa – he noted ten minutes before he left Durban that he had not seen any monkeys – and what do you know, within moments, they came to visit him! Mother Nature spoke recently as well, when Elder Commanda was made guardian of the skin of a South African gazelle – now past the stage of animals as trophies, we are beginning to honour the spirit of the animal, and this creature rests with the elder till it reaches its final home.)

At the age of 88, William Commanda headed to Africa – a global traveler who had over the years visited and taken his prayers to the west, north and east, across the Americas, to Europe and the east (Japan) – now it was time to connect with the south. He participated in

the Racism Conference activities, made presentations at the *Smashing Myths and Stereotypes: Putting Anti Racism to Work Conference*, Umtapo Peace Education and National Association of Friendship Centres and Brahma Kumaris workshops and the Steve Biko Awards Presentation. (We were pleased to see Kessie Moodley, younger brother of activist Strini Moodley, who served time in Robben Island with President Mandela, who died last year on Freedom Day, and who himself expressed the spirit of UBUNTU, building bridges between the Indians and Africans and Europeans in South Africa, wearing a Wolf Teeshirt there! – In some strange way, Strini's shadow appears in the photograph of Elder Commanda in South Africa in his *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout Book*).

Elder Commanda had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Biko – she was particularly interested in his workshop on forgiveness, her own life and that of her family's having been entirely marked by the struggle of the victim, who in contributing to the fight for justice, is then condemned to relive the pain of unimaginable abuse repeatedly – and for whom, then, while the human search for forgiveness and peace is compelling, it can also often be painfully elusive. Of course the experience of the Biko

family is so much more complex than that of others, being symbolic representatives of a cause and movement, as well as individuals coming to terms with personal grief. It was a very moving discussion – few realize how personally William and other Aboriginal peoples are engaged in personal and communal struggles, and few realize how taxing and demanding that can be. Yet, he has managed to find a way beyond despair and bitterness and that I suppose is why people all over the world are so attracted to him.

The elder was invited to offer his prayers to the land on several occasions. He conducted a Pipe Ceremony for the Full Moon at the Durban Beach – he still talks with awe about the great golden grandmother moving on the waves – and he completed the cycle with a Pipe Ceremony for the New Moon at the Valley of a Thousand Hills – an incredibly different face of a sacred landscape. He attended an evening Full Moon ceremony on the beach conducted by indigenous African healers – how little I understood of African spirituality when I was growing up amongst the Zulu peoples on the Tugela River and what a sad loss, I think now, the South African of East Indian origins with a Hindu father and an Anglican priest grandfather!

The elder also visited a beautiful



retreat centre outside Johannesburg. When asked what he thought about it, I was surprised by his abrupt response – he did not like it. But his hosts understood. We learned that it was the site of a former prison/concentration camp, and a hundred years ago, many people had been tortured and killed there. So, immediately he set his foot on the soil, he felt the agony held within the earth. He was asked to do a prayer, and a half a dozen people joined him under a circle of trees. We suddenly heard a noise – a deep thump. After his prayer, he said, *Did you hear that? He thumped me on my back and almost pushed me over.* It was not a fearful experience for him – he felt the ancestral energies on the land were thanking him for his prayer and for putting them to rest.

Then, another intriguing experience – William was having tea one day in the outside café at the Sandton Centre, when all of a sudden the wind whipped up and the leaves blew around furiously, and the Elder said to his friend Savo Tufegdvic, *Something bad has happened to the world!* Later we learned the twin towers were down in New York. Somehow, Mother Earth had communicated a message to him about a pivotal activity in his

hometown, North America – for him, the turning point in the *Seven Fires Prophecy* – today, few will deny that 9/11 and the response to it has been the greatest change in our collective lives – and our lives have not grown easier since, far from it.

In our book, Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout, we note that William is seen by many to be the carrier of this sacred wampum belt (of the Seven Fires Prophecy) at the time of the unfolding of the seventh prophecy. Will we come together to light the eighth fire of peace and reconciliation with each other and Mother Earth? He states that on September 11, 2001, the light skinned race were given a choice between the roads to peace and reconciliation or destruction; he notes daily that the path taken by many has plunged the world into ever increasing war and blood shed – and that the balance of life has been irrevocably shifted. (page 52)

The Racism Conference, as Wendy Mayimele had feared, had failed to launch a new era in global human relationships, despite its birthing on the soils of the Motherland.

Over the years, I had acquired many fascinating books written by Zulu

shaman Credo Mutwa, and in 2000, I saw a painting of a belt with eight diamonds on the invitation the Usiko exhibition of African beadwork, at a function of the SAHC; I knew at that moment, Grandfather Commanda, carrier of the Sacred Seven Fires Prophecy Wampum Belt, would one day meet the artist, Credo Mutwa. High Commissioner Andre Jaquet gave me his email address, and when I went to South Africa I tried to track him down, to no avail. In 2001, on the evening of the African Full Moon ceremony on the beach, I talked to a stranger – a woman from Canada – who had Credo Mutwa's cell phone number! So, we were now able to track him down.

The 9/11 crisis meant our stay in South Africa was unexpectedly delayed, and we were able to meet the controversial shaman and writer – controversial because not all understand his passion to share portions of his heritage, nor his healing practices with the world. We were in awe of his enormous creativity – one needs to watch the *Bleep* documentary to understand a little bit of what he and other like wisdom keepers are preoccupied with, and what Western thinkers like Karl Gustav Jung and Joseph

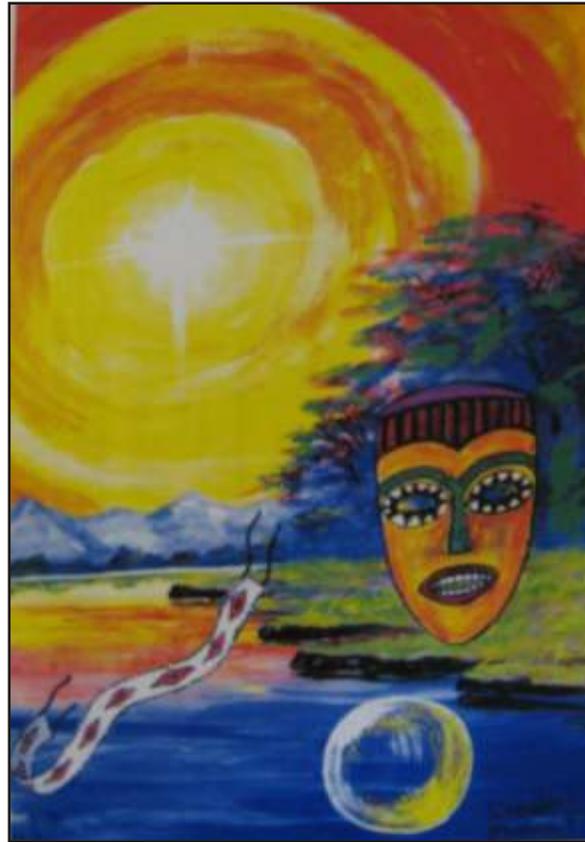




Campbell have learned from, as they have been called, “the primitives”. As William Commanda started to relate the story of the Sacred Seven Fires Prophecy Wampum Belt, Credo Mutwa said, *You hardly need to tell me, I know it already; it is there in the legends of my people too.*

It was a very special meeting, and the very minimal (in time) relationship between the two shaman deepened to another level when William sent him an eagle feather through a common African American friend Blue, and when Credo Mutwa called for William's prayers during a period of illness.

It is this, and other like expressions of the spirit of UBUNTU that lies at the heart of William Commanda's *Circle of All Nations* work.

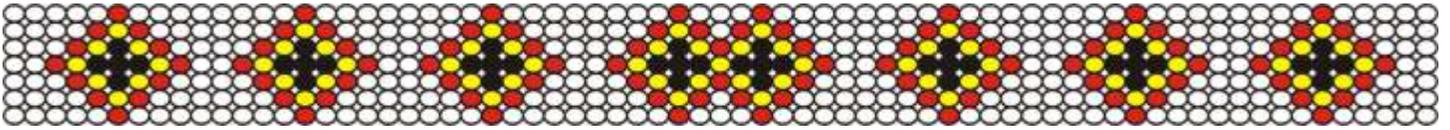


Indigenous prophecies have talked about the coming of the Rainbow Warriors to create a new age of peace; the South African Rainbow Nation, with its singular emergence

from strife and oppression to hope has a big role to play in this global evolution, in a world largely bereft of ideas for a harmonious future for humanity. North American prophecies have foretold of the time when all the peoples of the world would find their place under the Sacred Tree in North America, *Turtle Island*, but we will all only occupy our rightful places when the Indigenous Peoples of this land can celebrate and consecrate theirs. We hope you will all become a part of Grandfather William Commanda's *Circle of All Nations – Culture of Peace*, and play a pivotal role in the vision for *Asinabka*, an international healing and peace-building centre for reconciliation with Mother

Earth and each other, here in the heart of the capital city of Canada, the territory of the Algonquin Nation. Surely this must be South Africa's destiny too.





For more information on Dr. William Commanda's work, please check his websites:

<http://web.mac.com/circleofallnations> - Grandfather's Blog Page

<http://www.circleofallnations.ca> - General Information

<http://www.cercledetouteslesnations.org> - Au Francais

<http://www.asinabka.com> - Sacred Chaudière Site



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