



A visit with author Credo Mutwa

Fransi Phillips

The problem with talking is where to start. There is a whole world, a whole eternity, that one can talk about. All things happen in circles, eternally repeating themselves ...

A few kilometres outside Mmabatho, one turns off at what seems to be a small game reserve, with a notice at the gate and a man in a hut keeping watch over visitors, creating the idea that Credo Mutwa has somehow been turned into a kind of curiosity. But instead of game, after a few hundred metres we come across strange stones in the grass, which, as we approach, gradually turn into a staggering collection of statues. Apart from a collection of creatures reminiscent of beings from outer space, there is also a colossal statue of a broad-hipped and big breasted woman sitting on a throne, as well as a strange frog-like creature being killed by an Induna of some kind. After another few hundred metres we come across some fascinating buildings: what seems like a Bushman-cave with a stone-wall built in front; a huge kraal surrounded by a wall. On top of the grass huts there are skulls of rhino, a variety of antelope and other animals. Still fur-

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ther there is a Ndebele Kraal with a collection of painted animals in front of one of the huts.

But if Mr Mutwa is supposed to be a curio, he definitely does not behave like one. He does not dance around in an effort to entertain tourists, nor does he make an effort to tell them what they would like to hear. When at last we reach what we think to be his home, it seems so deserted that I am for a moment afraid that he might have decided that the appointment did not suit him after all. But after a while an attractive, slender, middle-aged woman appears from the Ndebele hut.

'Mr Mutwa is expecting us?' I ask carefully.

'Yes,' she answers, 'but he is still asleep.'

We go back to the sculptures to take some photographs, and here the strange combination of archaic creatures and African science fiction gives one a feeling of timelessness. When I return to the house, the front door stands open, and through it I can see a painting which I immediately recognise as an illustration of 'The strange ones' in his *Indaba my Children*: a group of people, supposedly Phoenician, who came to Africa north of the Limpopo, in the vicinity of the Zambesi, many centuries before the first Portuguese navigators that Western history records.

The woman takes us to the back of the house, where Mr Mutwa, wearing a heavy rubber apron, is giving instructions to a younger man in what seems to be their workshop. At last he turns his head in my direction.

'I am prepared to talk, Ma'am. The problem with talking is where to start. There is a whole world, a whole eternity, that one can talk about. All things happen in circles, eternally repeating themselves ... In Zulu, we have an expression saying that it is useless to start skinning an elephant: it is such a big task that you can never get to its end. The problem with talking, is that it is useless. I have talked in 1939. I have talked in 1985. I am still talking, but no one is listening ...

'The problem is, now that the New South Africa is here, everybody seems to be satisfied. But the black man is still not free. He has never been further removed

from freedom than he is now. The black man has lost his traditions, his pride, his soul.'

'Do you think that one can talk about a kind of mental colonialism,' I ask. 'The white man forcing his values, his traditions (or lack of it), his idea of freedom and liberalism and his whole logical system on the black man?'

'Yes, Ma'am. That is exactly what I mean.'

'Who is responsible for doing this to the black man?'

He pauses for a while before answering. 'The Americans are making cultural slaves of the whole world. My children don't understand themselves any longer, they don't know anything about their past. They look like fools, trying to copy Michael Jackson's sister. The Americans are conquering the whole world in this cultural war. Now that people have the right to vote, the world is

satisfied that everything is fine in this country, ignoring the violence that is still going on because people have lost their souls. I predict that 1996 is going to be a very violent year, even though the world might prefer to ignore it. They have ignored me for a very long time.

'When my sculptures are exhibited, no one discusses them, because it is not the typical kind of art they expect from a black man to make for a white man's house. When a book of black culture in South Africa is published, I am not even included. Just wait a moment,

please ...' He disappears, to come back with two female figures moulded out of recycled cold-drink cans. One is painted gold and the other one silver. First he shows me the golden one: a round female figure with generous breasts and hips. 'This is my vision of a goddess,' he says proudly. And then, pointing to the silver figure with narrow hips and flat breasts hidden under a long dress, and a strange, insect-like face,

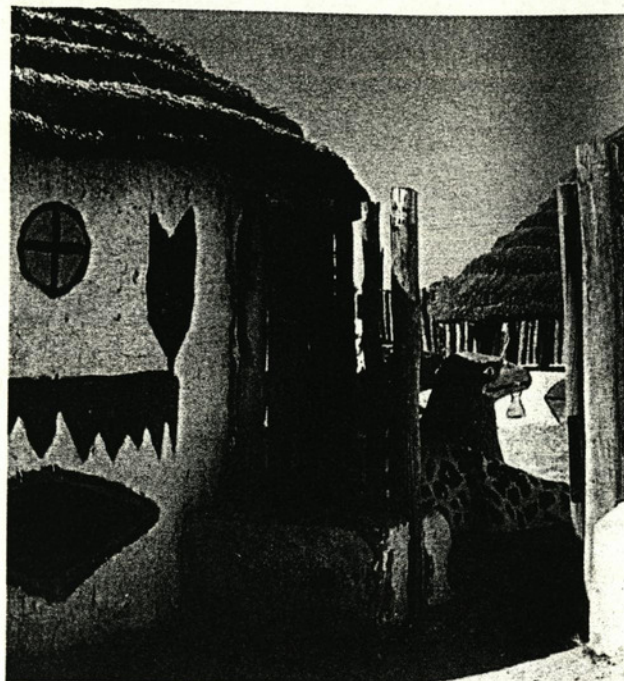
'But this gogga is what they want me to make ...'

'What would the solution be?'

'What we need, is a Renaissance. Why has Africa never had a Renaissance?' For a moment I get the impression that he has forgotten about me, but then he remembers the real world again. 'They don't want solutions, Ma'am. They simply want to destroy us. Even in the previous







homelands the traditional healers are being burnt to death.'

'I find the idea of a South African Renaissance very appealing.'

He decides to ignore my statement.

'Tell me, Sir, where does the information in your famous book *Indaba my Children* come from?'

'It is an oral tradition that has been handed down through the ages.'

'Would you prefer it to be described as history, or as mythology, or do you consider that a stupid question?'

'Yes, indeed, Ma'am. It is a stupid question. There is no distinction between history and myth.'

This statement suddenly makes me understand exactly how strange the scientific Western mind with its tendency to measure reality against so-called 'objective' measures, its obsession with classifying the world into what it perceives to be a logical system, must be to this colossal spirit, and to Africa as a whole. Suddenly I understand his frame of reference, his ancient logic according to which things are related by an underlying magic which makes it possible for a human being to be turned into a monster, and where the boundaries between reality and dream, past and future, and even life and death can be overcome.

'Who were "The strange ones" in *Indaba my Children*?'

'I don't know Ma'am. There are a great many artefacts that I have inherited from my family, that prove that there were Phoenicians, Jews, Egyptians and Arabs in South Africa before the whites recorded in history came here. Egypt has in ancient times been called the centre of magic, and people from all over the world went there. But that magic came from central Africa. In all the religions in the world, there are so many similarities. Deep, down, they are all the same. And that is the reason why I want people to rediscover their own most ancient tradi-

tions. In that way they will also discover the underlying similarities amongst all races.

'When Mr Mandela was inaugurated, I was glad. There all the cultures came together, each having its own place. I saw great beauty before my eyes. But now I see that it is not going to work like that. All the cultures are going to disappear, people are losing their souls, there is violence and hunger in my country.'

'I once heard you say on a television programme that there were beings from outer space in Africa some time before the whites came. Are the sculptures that I saw in the veld, examples of such beings?'

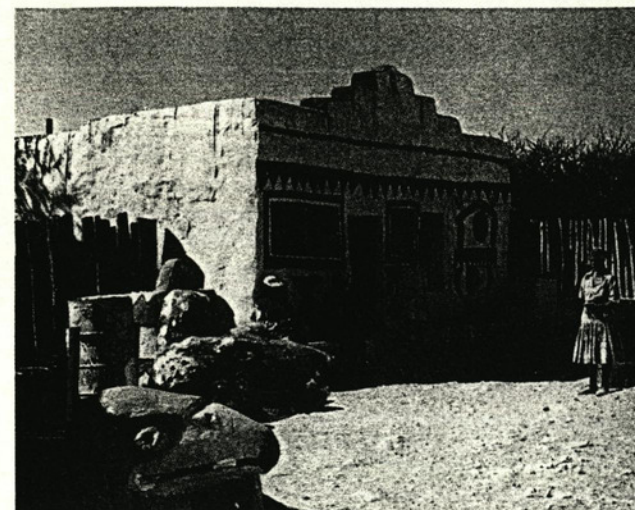
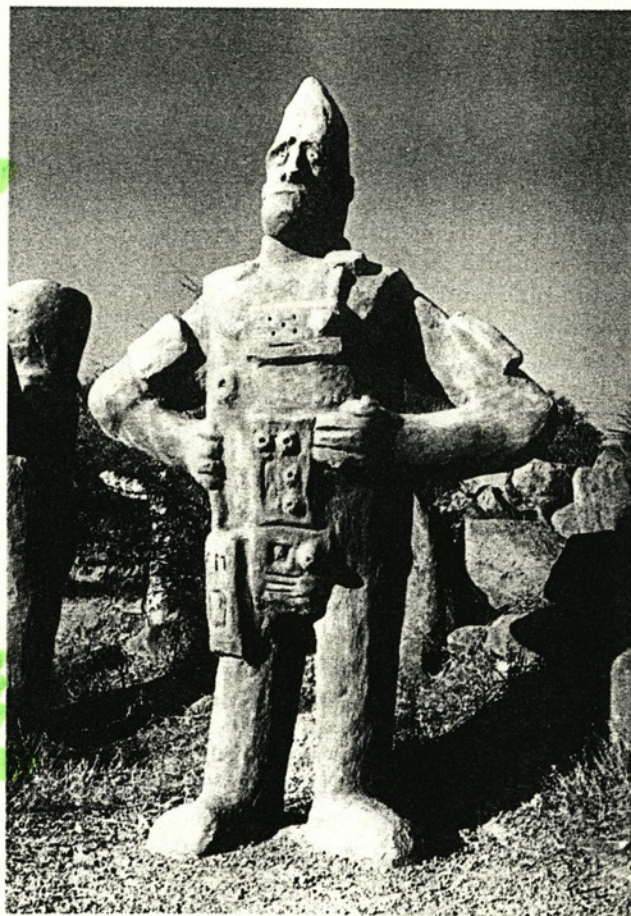
'Yes, they are. Even the African "tokkelossie" is a descendant of beings from outer space.'

'A Renaissance would mean to you some way of connecting the present, our present situation, with Africa's most remote past?'

'Yes, Ma'am, that is exactly right.'

'How far would you want us to go back into the past?'

'Very, very far. But that would never be possible ... I would like the world to go back to the Great Earth Mother - she who was worshipped when all people on earth were still one nation, all worshipping one and the same goddess. She was not the goddess of the Minoan Greeks or the blacks or any one single nation, she was the symbol of the earth. She gave life and she took life, in her life and death, night and day are all part of the same thing, she is both young and as old as eternity



itself. It is because they have forgotten her, that they are now killing our Mother Earth, and in the process killing themselves. Now that the Bushmen have practically been wiped off the face of the earth, the only remaining people remotely honouring the Earth Goddess, are the Gypsies. People honouring the Earth Goddess are nomads. After living in one place for some time, they move on again, to give the earth some time to rest.'

'Are you aware of the fact that there are at the moment groups in the Western world who share this belief in the Earth Goddess with you?'

Suddenly he is his old cynical self.

'Those poor fools can dream, Ma'am, but the Earth Goddess can never come back. It would cause the most bloody war the earth has ever seen. That is the reason why I hate Christianity. There are too many so-called believers in male gods who are keeping up capitalism, some of them even using Christianity to keep their power while they are actually atheists. They will never allow the Earth goddess to return. The worshippers of the Earth Goddess never even used money, they were only allowed to trade. The capitalists will never allow that, nor would the communists ...'

'So you don't think it is a very practical idea.'

'It is impossible. But as for me, the Earth Goddess is the only one I shall worship.'

'On a more practical level: Suppose you had the power, what would you do to improve the situation of your people in South Africa?'

'I had plans to turn this place into a village representing all the different tribes in South Africa. I wanted people to live here, to have children playing here. I wanted the people to plant corn and mealies and to trade, to make statues from our past in order to tell the world our story. But my activities were halted. Now it seems unlikely that my plans will be fulfilled.'

After a morning in the presence of this remarkable man, I leave with the sad impression that he has indeed been reduced to the status of a failed curio-artist. Failed, because he is too great to stay within the boundaries that were set for him.

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