

Module # 5 - Component # 1



Trees - African Folklore

Introduction

The content that follows is written from transcribed tapes recorded by **Credo Mutwa**. Credo Mutwa is one of Southern Africa's most celebrated **Sangomas** or **witchdoctors**. The content therefore is not scientific but rather represent the feelings , beliefs and experiences of this exceptional man.

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These stories are written in precisely the same way that Credo Mutwa tells them , with all their original colloquialisms and styles.

The Language of the Trees

Here is an interesting question: Women amongst the peaks of the Andes Mountains know how to turn poisonous roots into edible ones. Who taught the same lesson to women in Africa? **Who taught the ancient women of America and Africa their secrets?**

I don't know, but our ancestors say that there was a time when **human beings could talk to trees and the trees would talk back to them.** In those days, the human being must have been gifted with deeper feelings than we have. The human being must have been a feeling animal. Oh, how rich our lives must have been at that time when you could sit next to a tree and share with it its deepest secrets; when you could sit next to a rock and share with it its deepest memories. **When man and the Earth around him was one!**

There are **trees** that our people believe **possess magical powers**, trees that you are **not allowed to cut down under any circumstances.** One of these trees is the **red ivory tree, umnqaka** in Zulu, a tree whose berries were eaten by the wives of our kings as a mild sedative and aphrodisiac, which is why the tree is called *umnqaka*, which means '**the calmer of the heart.**' There are others and others and others, and one day, hopefully, we shall talk more about this language of the trees.

There is the **baobab** tree for example, a tree that our people believe is the **tree of truth.** The baobab tree produces large pods that have a substance inside them, which you can grind into a **powder.** This substance has got a rather pleasant taste, and it was used **to find out the truth** from people accused of crime. How? You took the substance, you ground it into a fine powder, and then if a man was accused of stealing the property of a chief, you gave the substance to the man to swallow. If the man was guilty he would not be able to swallow the powder, and he would choke on it because there would be no saliva in his mouth. But if he were innocent, he would swallow it quite easily. So they call **the baobab umsenge, 'the one who milks out the truth.'**

There are trees that our people believe promote good luck. And there are those that our people believe promote bad luck. There are trees that we believe create beautiful dreams and join you to your ancestors. These trees we chew the roots of, and one of these is the beautiful *mpera* tree, a tree with a very, very black bark, which when you cut into it, is bright red, like uncooked meat inside. The Zulu people call this tree '**umpendulo,**' which means 'the one **who turns things around**' or 'the one who gives you an answer.' And if your ancestors no longer speak to you, you are advised to chew the red *umpendulo* root and spit it in four directions, slowly. Then you are to take the remaining root, roll it inside your pillow and sleep on it. And the *umpendulo* will answer every one of your questions.

There is another tree also known as **ukuku, 'the one who turns things around,'** which we use to make our ancestral spirits watch over us. Sometimes a root of the *ukuku* tree is carved into the resemblance of a

human being, to call back to your side the one you love. The sangoma carves a doll out of an *ukuku* root and then you name the doll after your runaway wife or husband. And each night you call upon your beloved one to come back, and you kiss the little doll. Incidentally, around the neck of that doll you must have tied hair from your beloved one's comb.

We will talk more about these strange mysteries.

Trees and Plants

Medicinal Plants & Extinction

Talking to a doctor one day, he remarked that he was worried about things **becoming extinct**; he said that human beings are heading for extinction. And I said to the doctor that the crisis of extinction has **begun already** and that some of the many plants, which have, become extinct in South Africa, have become extinct **within my lifetime**.

It has turned out that these plants are the most **precious**, most **powerful** herbal plants, which actually fight diseases such as AIDS. Now the first plant we spoke about is the most important and by far the strangest plant in South Africa, a plant which the anthropologists and other scientists don't know its true origin. The plant is called **African ginger**. Now African ginger was for many years carried by our people as a **protection** against **evil entities**. What is strange is that mothers didn't give the medicine to their child orally. The mother chewed a lump of African ginger and then sprayed it with her mouth at the back of the child's ears. And this enabled the child to have a good sleep.

Now today however a new use has been found for African ginger, a very important use. People with AIDS develop a white thing in their mouths, a sort of a thrush, which is very, very painful and it stops people from swallowing. And this thing can only be destroyed by African ginger, which has proven to be a **powerful fungicide**. Antibiotics can't fight it. Anti-fungicides do nothing against it but African ginger does. Now African ginger is one of the several plants that I feel should be brought back from extinction and should be planted throughout the country on a very wide scale indeed.

There are also other plants, one of them is a plant we call **Katazo**, which is a powerful **painkiller**. **Katazo** was used by our people against **influenza**, against **malaria** and other sicknesses which have **pain**... and it was quite effective. In the 1940's, just after the Second World War, and up to the middle 50's, you could buy a whole packet of this **Katazo**, but today you are lucky to find one little root of this vulnerable plant.

Plants are getting extinct even as we talk. Plants are getting fewer and fewer even as we sit here. I told this doctor that it is not a matter of the future; it is the matter of now. Now today, **traditional medicine** has got a very bad name to many scientists. That is not fair. Because what is killing our people where traditional medicine is concerned is not our ancient herbs, not at all. It is the **chemicals**, which our people are now using because real herbs have become almost extinct.

Now we have a terrible substance, which our people use. They call it **permanganate of potash**. Permanganate of potash was once a very popular antiseptic, which was used even by ambulance people during the Second

World War and after. Now permanganate of potash is one of the most abused substances in South Africa.

Then we have got **sulphur dichromate**, a very dangerous thing, which causes severe sores in the patient's bottom when they use an enema. We have got also **blue stone**, which is for tanning hides, which again our people are now using as an enema with disastrous results. As more and more plants become extinct, more and more do our people use dangerous chemical substitutes.

Sutherlandia, the plant, which is very effective in the fight against AIDS, is also on the **brink of extinction**. If this plant is so important I think that it should be planted on a wide scale on as many farms in South Africa as possible. There is more, much more and I don't know how the extinction of plant life in our country can be stalled.

Modern psychology talks of toxic herbs. Very few herbs are actually toxic and *Sutherlandia* prolongs the life of a human being incredibly. But let me tell you where the doctors are making mistakes today. Plants need to be **picked pure** from the garden, while they are **still fresh**. But the doctors are now making it into pills, which of course adds some things, additives, which make the pill solid. But it is best if you take it in its natural powder form with as much liquid as you can.

Some very scientific people are making **tinctures** out of *Sutherlandia*, which are very good. But I prefer directly from the garden because the **red flowers** of *Sutherlandia* are medically **more powerful** than the rest of the plant. Even more powerful are the **seeds** of the plant, which are small and tiny like little black insects on the hand.

Sometimes trees bring each other into extinction. For example the blue gum tree is a very jealous tree. In fact **sangomas** call it **jealous woman**.

Why? Because it stops other trees from growing under it. Some indigenous trees in South Africa you can see growing right at the feet of others but not the blue gum tree. It won't allow that. I don't know how he does it and why.

Now if you want to have your plants extinct on your farm just plant blue gum trees and you will see the disaster. Now then there is another tree, which is like the blue gum. That is the wattle tree. Plant wattle trees and they soon replace all the other indigenous trees in the area. Missionaries, because they had to tan leather themselves, used to plant wattle trees in Zululand. But now the wattle trees are **taking over** vast acres of the country. They grow and they **forbid** other plants from growing there too.

The Baobab Tree

The baobab is a tree that our people call ‘*Umsenge*’ in the Zulu language. The word *umsenge* has to do with milking - milking a cow. The word for milking is *senga* – *umsenge* means ‘the tree that was milked.’ It is believed by our people that in olden days baobab trees exuded a milk-like substance that could save human lives.

At one time our people believed that these ancient trees were children of the Tree of Life, the tree out of which all animals birds and fishes came. The Tree of Life was getting cold as it stood upon the empty plains of the early world. It is said that as it grew cold the Tree of Life ordered her daughters standing, growing at her feet, to go out and find firewood. But the little daughters were lazy and didn’t obey her mother. Instead they scattered all over the world and started playing, tumbling and somersaulting, instead of finding firewood to warm their mother, who was pregnant with living things. And then, as it grew colder the Tree of Life began to shiver. And she put a curse on her daughters for being disobedient and lazy, that they should stand for all time with roots facing the sky and their branches deep in the earth, because they had being somersaulting. To this day, we are told the baobab stand the wrong way up with their roots facing the sky and their branches deep in the earth.

It is said that the great cold was banished and the first baobab tree was saved from freezing to death by the coming of the sun. The sun sent its little sun, a red hawk, with feathers of fire to dispel the cold, the ice, and so save the Tree of Life.

The baobab tree once served many functions in ancient Africa. Holy men and women who died under tragic circumstances were often buried inside a hollow cut into the trunk of a baobab tree. During my travels, I saw a baobab tree carrying such a grave. There was a hollow in the tree that had been filled with rocks and clay, and over the centuries the stones had fallen inside the hollow. At the bottom were fragments of human bone.

The baobab tree is regarded as the holiest tree in Africa. It produces large green fruits covered with a velvety stuff. Inside these fruits there is a pinkish-white substance with a beautiful taste. This can be ground easily into a powder. It is a substance that our people used to eat as a sacrament especially after the death of a king, when a new king was about to be crowned.

This powder-like substance was also used to find out whether a person accused of a crime was guilty or not. The substance was ground to a very fine powder and the accused was ordered to take a handful and to swallow it quickly. If he were guilty he would choke on the stuff, because there would be no saliva in his mouth. But if the person was not guilty, he would swallow easily because there would be a lot of saliva in his mouth. After the person had been made to swallow the stuff, he or she was subjected to yet another test. A lamp made of beeswax – like a candle – would be lighted and the accused person would be called upon to put out the light of this sacred beeswax lamp by spitting into it. If he was guilty, he would not produce enough spittle to put the light out, but if innocent he would do so! In this and other ways did our people try to prove guilt or innocence of person accused. And this guilt or innocence had to be proven beyond all doubt because many of the crimes for which a person could be accused in tribal society carried the death penalty. And it was stated that the death penalty was not intended to deter criminals but to prevent tribespeople from taking the law into their own hands, from starting deadly blood feuds between families, feuds that brought tribal structure crashing down.

A leaf from a babobo tree was sent by a lover to his/her lover as a pledge of undying loyalty and undying love. If a man was going far away to the gold fields of Johannesburg, a girl would send him 2 or 3 leaves from a babobo tree before he left his home and when he received these leaves he knew what they meant: that she was prepared to wait for him as long as he was away. I will love you no matter where you are and no matter for how long I shall wait for your return. Sometimes the man never returned, because there were great dangers that awaited an unwary man in the great city of Johannesburg and amongst the shanty towns of Kimberley.

Now we also believe that the baobab is the tree of **resurrection**. It is a tree, which in olden days used to be deliberately hollowed out by people. A man or a woman who **died** in a brave act such as somebody who got killed in a raging fire trying to save other people was taken and buried inside the baobab in the belief that he or she would come back to life.

Also it was a **tree of promise**. If two people loved each other very much and they were wanting to promise each other that they will stay with each other no matter what, they used to go under a baobab tree just when it was about to flower, because the flower of the baobab tree is a very, very beautiful and a very mysterious one. So the loving people will wait under the tree and then they will watch as the bud of the flower slowly opened.

Then they would run forward, take one of the petals and **tear it apart** and share it in **each other's mouth**. The men would put the petal into the women's mouth and the women would do the same to the men. And they will swear never to be parted by anyone. They will say:

“Our love will stand for as long as this baobab shall stand, which is always.”

The baobab tree was **medicinal** in that its bark was used to lower a child's fever if a little child had a **fever**. The bark was used in an enema preparation or in a **tea** preparation, which lowered the fever.

Red Ivory

Now let us come now to another tree. There is a tree in Zululand, a tree called *umNcaka* – this tree is a very sacred tree indeed. It is the tree known as Red Ivory. The tree has beautiful pinkish wood, which is remarkably hard. Out of this tree the sceptre of the Zulu king was made, as well as the handle or shaft for the Zulu king's battle-axe.

The older an item made of *umNcaka* was, the more durable and shinier it became. No one was allowed to make himself any item out of the sacred tree; only people of royal blood were allowed to possess wooden things made of this tree. You had to be a great expert indeed to be able to carve a spoon out of such a tree. It is a very difficult tree to carve and requires a very sharp carving instrument - almost a razor blade - to scrape away instead of chiselling, day after day until the royal object assumed shape.

This tree, the *umNcaka*, produced a fruit that our people ate on sacred occasions. And again, it wasn't eaten by anyone but people of royal blood.

There are trees that our people believe possess magical powers, trees that you are not allowed to cut down under any circumstances. One of these trees is the red ivory tree, umnqaka in Zulu, a tree whose berries were eaten by the wives of our kings as a mild sedative and aphrodisiac, which is why the tree is called umnqaka, which means 'the calmer of the heart.' There are others and others and others, and one day, hopefully, we shall talk more about this language of the trees.

There are trees that our people believe **promote good luck**. And there are those that our people believe **promote bad luck**. There are trees that we believe create beautiful dreams and join you to your ancestors. These trees we chew the roots of, and one of these is the beautiful *mpera* tree, a tree with a very, very black bark, which when you cut into it, is bright red, like uncooked meat inside. The Zulu people call this tree '*umpendulo*,' which means '**the one who turns things around**' or '**the one who gives you an answer**.' And if your ancestors no longer speak to you, you are advised to chew the red *umpendulo* root and spit it in **four directions**, slowly. Then you are to take the remaining root, roll it inside your pillow and sleep on it. And the *umpendulo* will answer every one of your questions.

There is another tree also known as *ukuku*, '**the one who turns things around**,' which we use to make our ancestral spirits watch over us. Sometimes a root of the *ukuku* tree is carved into the semblance of a human being, to call back to your side the one you love. The sangoma carves a doll out of an *ukuku* root and then you **name the doll** after your runaway wife or husband. And each night you call upon your beloved one to come back, and you kiss the little doll. Incidentally, around the neck of that doll you must have **tied hair** from your beloved one's comb.

Now, let me tell you, Africans believed for hundreds of years that you could **talk to trees** and that if you showed **love to a tree**, the tree would yield more fruit. Now, in Africa, we are taught to **gently talk to marula trees**, to flatter them and to even sing love songs to them. Marula trees have got beautiful love songs that are sung to them by men in the tribal communities and also by women. These marula trees yield beautiful fruits, which are used by the tribe's people to make **wine**, as well as **valuable cosmetic oil**.

In **England** I saw an amazing barbaric action. Instead of gently communicating with their trees, some English farmers beat the living daylights out of their walnut trees in order to make them yield more.

Trees are used in a special way by **sangomas**. When a sangoma mixes *muti*, they must first **talk to the bulbs** that they are about to cut and boil. In fact, when a sangoma makes a *muti* from the bark of a particular tree, they first name that tree **after their patients**. If I have a patient called Samuel, I will name the tree with which I am going to heal Samuel, as "**Samuel**." And for as long as I'm treating Samuel, so shall I refer to the tree whose bark I am taking as "Samuel". And I must under no circumstances destroy the green Samuel, because by so doing, I will be killing the flesh and blood Samuel.

When you are treating an African chief, using the bark of a certain tree, you must take care **not**, repeat **not**, to ring bark that tree, because if so, you will be accused of having killed the chief.

When we treat people with medicine, we form an intimate link between those people and the medicine. Before you can treat a patient with herbal medicine you must **first introduce them to the plant that forms that medicine**. You must take a little piece of the plant and give it to the patient to chew. Only then should you make them drink the medicine made from that plant. Now this makes sense when you consider that some people are allergic to certain plants. When you introduce the patient to the plant (when they chew the flower, bark or leaves of that plant) you must afterwards keep him or her under **close observation** for about two days, to see that there are no allergic reactions in your patient.

There were few tribes in Southern Africa which were more conscious of the environment than the people of what is known today as **Botswana**. The **Batswanas** have got trees which no one is allowed to cut down. In every Batswana inhabited area you will see **large trees** growing here and there, long after the rest of the trees have become firewood. These are special trees - of a type known as the *musu*, which means 'dead-man-tree' and it is only used when a chief has died. This **acacia-type** tree grows very large and has bean-like pods as fruit.

A branch of such a tree is used to form the ritual fire, or the **watch-fire**, which is lit next to the hut of the dead chief, to light him on the way to the next world. Now, when a Batswana chief dies, this fire is lit **next to his home**, a fire consisting of, amongst other trees, a large branch of the *musu* tree.

One day while we were building a traditional living museum in **Bophuthatswana**, some of my fellow workmen, who were not Batswanas, trimmed a large branch off a *musu* tree so that we could build a hut, and immediately a crowd of chief's elders, as well as the chief's guards, surrounded us. They told us that we had cut down the branch of a *musu* tree and we were all summoned to appear before the *kgotla* or **council area** of the local chief. We appeared there, surrounded by angry tribes people. The tribe's people demanded of me, as the foreman, whether I wanted to kill the local chief.

I replied "*No, what has happened, please?*"

One of the elders said: "*You have cut down a musu tree.*"

I knew we were in **serious trouble** and I didn't know what to do. And then, fate came to our rescue. The chief, who was a Christian, told the elders that we had only made a **natural mistake**, and that he wanted us to build that village because it would bring money to his people. But the elders insisted that every one of us should be fined **R100**, which should be deducted from our pay. I agreed to this and the branch of the *musu* tree that we had sawn down was taken by tractor and trailer to the chief's village, and there it lay behind the chief's house until white ants and decay began to claim it.

Cancer Bush

The cancer bush is so named because it used to save many **Voortrekkers** who **had cancer**. It really helps. Now look, this plant used to be all over South Africa but now look where it has run away to.

Almost to the **Namib Desert** and out there where plenty of Bushmen are.

Why? Because what happened was there was this bird, which used to eat the seeds and it loved them. Then it went far away and the seeds then germinated.

But now the farmers are having a hard time to plant this thing. You've got to **scrape** each little seed **with sandpaper**, put it into a little "**blompot**", put sand in and pray to God that it grows. And then you wait. When the plant grows higher you take it and put it in a big garden.

The virtue of the plant extends to include **remedies** for colds, influenza, chickenpox, diabetes, varicose veins, piles, inflammation, liver problems, back ache and rheumatism. It is an all around medicine. But what I love about this plant, is that when you plant it in a big pot and you **bring it into the house**, it makes peace all around. I don't know why.

What we used to do if we were going to **negotiate the bride price**, you know the *labola*, where everybody loses his temper and starts punching each other, you put the thing there by the door and then you'll see it brings all the people to **start negotiating**. There will be no fighting, a lot of angry words yes but no real fighting.

The whole plant appeals to you. It asks you:

"Come and look at me".

The red flowers and the red little bags of seeds suggested to our people that it could be good for **liver complaints**, because it looked like a **gallbladder** of a human being.

If you have a look at this whole thing, the width of knowledge that involves trees and things, you find that scientists say it is trial and error, which is nonsense. How many trials and errors, and for what would you be looking for when you eat a gum like this? The truth is **communication** between the human beings and plant species as well as animal species is possible and it did happen.

Acorn Stew

If you go to many parts of the world you will find that somebody or something told our women what to do regarding **certain plants**.

When I came to the United States of America, a big motherly native American woman with thick, iron-grey hair tumbling in two great plaits down either side of her head, cooked me a meal that I have never forgotten to this day. She came out of the forest with a basket full of acorns (the seeds of oak trees). What was she going to do with this food, which we in South Africa used to give to pigs, I wondered?

I watched her very closely. I looked. She **poured water** into the **acorns** and washed them, then soaked them and then she **boiled** them.

She threw away the first water, put the acorns into **more water** and boiled it again.

Three times she boiled the acorns and then with the last boiling, that took two hours on an angry fire, she threw away that water. And then she poured more water in, for **the last time** and that is when **the stew began** because by now the acorns were nice and soft like beans; no more bitter taste, no more ugliness in the mouth.

And then she started to add flavours into this. She adds the fat of one of the ugliest animals I have ever seen on earth, an animal they call **a moose**. It's got a nose like an angry Arab and it's got horns like trees which have forgotten how to grow. However, it's got the **tastiest meat** you can come across. Putting a little into a an acorn stew; it is out of this world.

Some time later, this native American woman, smiling like the great mother goddess herself - her hooked fleshy nose covered with a film of sweat - **placed a dish** in front of my **astonished** eyes. Behind my glasses, my eyes must have grown as big as those of an owl when this lady said:

"You will eat. Is good food."

Ai, I got scared! And then she was watching me like an eagle. I took a spoon and I started eating. **I was eating acorns!** She had put spices in them and they had become like a pap (a beautiful stew), and my stomach received this alien food with a **loving rumble**. I ate, and ate, and ate and asked for some more. My father, a carpenter, would have had a stroke twenty times, had he seen me eating the seeds of what he called '**plank trees**'. But I tucked into

the acorns like a lost pilgrim, and I ate for many days to come - I was always asking for acorns.

Now in Africa women do the same thing with *Umdumbula*, a poisonous plant, which means '**the one who causes your stomach to swell.**' This plant is called **cassava**. African women detoxify this plant in an amazing process that proves to all thinking people that these women of ancient times possessed a knowledge of chemistry. They **boil the cassava** and then they throw away the first water. And then they boil it again and throw away the second water. Then, for safety sake, they boil it a third time and throw away that water, and then they dry the root and then **grind it into a flour**. By that time, the poisonous *umdumbula* - the plant that carelessly eaten can make your stomach swell and **cause you to die** - becomes an edible plant that can safely be eaten by even the weakest of babies and the frailest of old women and men.

Now, how did they know? There are so many mysteries in this world. The roots of certain trees are edible. They make a "pap", which can keep little children alive. How did they know? This implies that somewhere in the past, there were people who not only **knew the chemical characteristics** of this particular thing, but they knew **how to neutralise** the poisons inside the thing.

So **who** were they and **why** at a time if food was so plentiful did they do that?

When I visited South America, I found an incredible country, full of people who amazed me. On the shores of **Titikaka, the sacred lake, I visited Urubamba**, the place of gods. And there, I saw native American women, colourful creatures in crinoline skirts and strange hats and brightly coloured scarves and shawls. These women were cooking maize, and into each pot they dumped a handful of lime. Now, imagine that - I am a Zulu. I believe that dirt is dirt and food is food. I believe that soil should not be allowed to intrude into food - but here was an alien woman with high cheekbones, night-black hair, thin cruel lips and a dark-red skin, putting a **handful of ground lime** into maize which I was supposed to eat. Now, if my wife had done that, I would have fired her!

I ate the maize and then I asked the señora:

"Señora, can you please tell me, respectfully, why did you put lime (the material we use for building houses) into the maize?"

"It is to take away lagwera from the intrallang."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but she said she was telling me that putting lime into maize would make maize it into a peaceful food. The battle was taken away from maize by lime being added to maize. Then, some months later, I understood from the lips of a **scientist** who told me that what the Native Americans are doing is correct: It is **impossible** for the human stomach to **properly digest** maize. Therefore, to make this digestion

complete, and to draw out the benefits from this otherwise indigestible foodstuff, you have to put lime into the maize.

I asked her:

“How long have you done that for, senora?”

“Since the **days of my ancestress**”, she explains to me, rather hotly.

I thought South Africa was a crazy country but that country was a little crazier.

How did they know that maize is indigestible to the human stomach and that they have to add lime in order to make it digestible? And as we look into this world we must ask ourselves: **where** did this **knowledge** come from? And all of it is possessed by **women, not men**, women; from the technique of making fire to cooking techniques, techniques that made us what we are. But there is one thing that the Mexican lady forgot. It is that the most aggressive nations on this earth eat a lot of maize and meat.

Here is an interesting question: Women amongst the peaks of the **Andes Mountains** know how to turn poisonous roots into edible ones. Who taught the same lesson to women in **Africa**? Who taught the ancient women of America and Africa their secrets?

Cycad

The cycad is the oldest tree on earth – and also one of the rarest trees found in South Africa. It is a tree that our people believe has the power to resurrect the dead. Just like the baobab, holy men and women who died under tragic circumstances were often buried inside a hollow cut into the trunk of a cycad.

The cycad is a tree that our people call the tree of resurrection. The Zulus call it *isigligi somkovu* – ‘the wooden chair made for a zombie.’ It was believed that a person who had died and then buried in a hollow made in the trunk of a cycad would remain alive indefinitely as long as he did not stray too far from the tree in which he had been buried. He would come to life at night and walk about and work for whoever had made him his captive, slave, but he had to stay within a certain distance of the tree, otherwise he would fall and return to dust.

Marula

Now let me speak about another tree that is surrounded by a shimmering aura of reverence by our people throughout sub-Saharan Africa where this tree is found. This tree is the marula. The word *marula* means the 'pick me up and stretch my body gently' tree. It comes from the verb *roola* - to pick up an injured person, to rub him and gently pull his or her joints back into shape.

In the language of the Zulus, the marula tree is called *umGanu* – it has to do with marriage. If a woman marries a man it is called *ukugana* in Zulu. Why is the marula called 'the marriage tree'? Because out of marulas we make a powerful tonic that is also a potent aphrodisiac. Our people used to grind marulas on a wood grindstone - pips, skin and all - and then they used to pour this mash into a clay pot. They would then add several honeycombs into the mess and then boil it. This created a powerful tonic, which was given to people who had been weakened by sickness. It was also given to little babies and grown children who were sickly by nature. The fruit of the marula is shaped roughly like the scrotum of a young man. And in the pip of each marula is a powerful substance which scientists tell me is rich in vitamins.

Africans of all tribes used to make wine out of the fruit of the marula, a wine that was very uplifting when drunk while still fresh. Make no mistake, marula wine when fully fermented can make one as drunk as if as one has filled several glasses of gin or whiskey! Women who had just given birth under very difficult circumstances were given marula wine to return their strength. And they were also given the tonic described above. Sometimes into this tonic the wise men and women who prepared it used to add several other herbs such as the *umwele* herb, sutherlandia fruit essence. By adding this herb to the marula tonic, the people added a powerful antidepressant and also a powerful booster for bodily energy.

Women who wanted to give birth to boy children were advised to eat a lot of marulas when this fruit was in season. And old men whose sexual power was seen to be flagging were not only given marula wine to drink but they were given rich and fatty chicken broth in which *umwele* had been mixed like a powerful spice. This is why they say in Zulu: "The old goat whose walking stick is becoming flaccid should eat a lot of chicken soup with bitter herbs." It sounds long stated in English but in the African language it is shorter, to the point and very funny.

In old Zululand, it was very disgraceful for a man to lose his power of manhood even when his hair was white. There are many amusing proverbs that stress this point. One of them is this: “He who dies with a soft penis will come back to earth as a stupid tortoise.” In other words, a man who dies impotent will be reincarnated as a tortoise!

Wild Fig

Now we come to another tree: a very sacred tree indeed. It is the wild fig tree, known as *umKhiwane* by the Zulu people. Like the marula, the wild fig tree produces fruits that are shaped like the scrotum of a man. And because of this our people attached great sanctity to this tree and its fruits. It was the type of tree whose leaves young people wore around their waists on special occasions as they danced under the full moon during the first fruits festivals, which was the African equivalent of Christmas. Girls and boys wore garlands of leaves of this tree on their heads and they wore waist strings to which were tied leaves of the *umKhiwane* tree. By this dance they showed their determination to serve the tribe truthfully and even to sacrifice their lives in the process. Because the wild fig tree was a tree of self-sacrifice.

In olden days in Africa no person was ever forcibly sacrificed to the ancestral spirits during difficult times. A person had to volunteer to be sacrificed. Incredible as it may seem, a forced sacrifice was unacceptable to the gods. The person had to volunteer. It was in fact a form of ritual suicide. Now, one of the forms of self sacrifice that was performed was the following: A young man who had proven himself to be a brave and fearless hunter or warrior would volunteer to be sacrificed in the event of a severe drought overtaking the tribe. Especially, if the drought was accompanied by an epidemic of cattle disease or by an epidemic of disease that was killing many people.

The young man to be sacrificed was taken to the river and bathed thoroughly from head to toe. Then his body was smeared from head to toe in fragrant herbs and then dressed in a crown of *umKhiwane* leaves and in the soft loinskin made out of several dassie or rabbit skins. He would be led up the hill to where he was to be sacrificed and there he was hung from the branch of a wild fig tree and then he was pierced in the chest or in the side with a spear made not of iron but of bronze. Sometimes even a spear of gold was used. But this was only for a very highborn person, child of an emperor. The young man was supposed to sing and not to scream as his blood flowed

down his legs to the ground. When he was dead, he was buried ceremoniously facing not the east but the west. Then his grave was totally obliterated so that no one afterwards would be able to know that a holy person was buried here.

The following year, when wild figs appeared upon the branches of the sacrificial tree, the family of the dead young man was notified and dressed in their finest skins and bangles. They would walk up the hillside and would appear before the sacrificial tree and ask its permission to eat of the fruits that were believed to contain the soul of the sacrificed young man. No one else was allowed to eat the figs that grew on the tree. Every one of them would be eaten by the members of the victim's family. Only on the following year the year following the eating of the fruits would other people be allowed to eat the fruits of the tree of sacrifice.

Zulu people use the wild fig as the subject of many wise sayings and proverbs. One of these proverbs is: "The best looking wild fig is the one which, on being torn open, is found to be fullest of worms." In other words, beautiful people are often the most corrupt.

The wild fig tree was used as a medicine. Its leaves were used as an enema to combat stomach problems. A tea made of them was boiled and injected into the rectum of a sick person, with the assistance of a pierced cow's horn. The bark of this sacred tree, like that of the baobab and the marula, was often used in mixtures that were used in traditional sauna baths. Like the Native Americans, Africans had sweat lodges, which were built strong and lasted several years. They were built of cakes of mud mixed with rocks, and fluids in which the barks of certain trees had been boiled were used to create steam in these sacred sauna baths. Sometimes the leaves of fragrant trees were used for this purpose.

Umhlebe

The Shangaan tribe could not beat the Zulus in battle so they used a more subtle type of warfare: raw poison. A tree that grows in Mozambique was known as the *umhlebe* tree – this is a tree that exudes a blood-like sap, a tree whose wood is hard but if you use the wood to roast your meat it will be the last mistake you make. If meat is roasted on fire built of that wood, the result would be poisoned meat.

Now Shangaans of great courage used to allow themselves to be captured by the Zulus. And once captured, would be put to forced labour by the warriors, carrying their wood and other equipment. The Shangaans used to carefully discard all other wood and carry bundles of the *umhlebe* wood. And when the Zulus camped, Shangaan slaves would build the fires and the Zulus would roast meat on these fires with very fatal results. My grandfather, while still a boy was in one such regiment of Zulus – and it was wiped out to almost a handful of men in this way.

People talk of germ warfare and other nasty things of this day and age; they should remember that there is nothing new under the sun.

Trees and Healing

Now, let me tell you, Africans believed for hundreds of years that you could **talk to trees and that if you showed love to a tree, the tree would yield more fruit.** Now, in Africa, we are taught to gently talk to marula trees, to flatter them and to even sing love songs to them. Marula trees have got beautiful love songs that are sung to them by men in the tribal communities and also by women. These marula trees yield beautiful fruits, which are used to make wine, as well as valuable cosmetic oil, by the tribe's people.

In England I saw an amazing barbaric action. Instead of gently communicating with their trees, some English farmers beat the living daylights out of their walnut trees in order to make them yield more.

Trees are used in a special way by sangomas. When a sangoma mixes *muti*, they must first talk to the bulbs that they are about to cut and boil. In fact, when a sangoma makes a *muti* from the bark of a particular tree, they first name that tree after their patients. If I have a patient called Samuel, I will name the tree with which I am going to heal Samuel, as "Samuel." And for as long as I'm treating Samuel, so shall I refer to the tree whose bark I am taking as "Samuel". And I must under no circumstances destroy the green Samuel, because by so doing, I will be killing the flesh and blood Samuel.

When you are treating an African chief, using the bark of a certain tree, you must take care **not**, repeat **not**, to ring bark that tree, because if so, you will be accused of having killed the chief.

When we treat people with medicine, we form an intimate link between those people and the medicine. Before you can treat a patient with herbal medicine you must first **introduce them to the plant that forms that medicine.** You must take a little piece of the plant and give it to the patient to chew. Only then should you make them drink the medicine made from that plant. Now this makes sense when you consider that some people are allergic to certain plants. When you **introduce the patient to the plant** (when they chew the flower, bark or leaves of that plant) you must afterwards keep him or her under close observation for about two days, to see that there are no allergic reactions in your patient.

There were few tribes in Southern Africa which were more conscious of the environment than the people of what is known today as Botswana. The Batswanas have got trees which no one is allowed to cut down. In every Batswana inhabited area you will see large trees growing here and there, long after the rest of the trees have become firewood. These are special trees - of a type known as the ***musu***, which means 'dead-man-tree' and it is only used when a chief has died. This acacia-type tree grows very large, bean-like pods as fruit.

A **branch** of such a tree is used to **form the ritual fire**, or the watch-fire, which is lit next to the hut of the dead chief, to light him on the way to the next world. Now, when a Batswana chief dies, this fire is lit next to his home, a fire consisting of, amongst other trees, a large branch of the *musu* tree.

One day while we were building a traditional living museum in Bophuthatswana, some of my fellow workmen, who were not Batswanas, trimmed a large branch off a *musu* tree so that we could build a hut, and immediately a crowd of chief's elders, as well as the chief's guards, surrounded us. They told us that we had down cut the branch of a *musu* tree and we were all summoned to appear before the *kgotla* or council area of the local chief. We appeared there, surrounded by angry tribes people. The tribe's people demanded of me, as the foreman, whether I wanted to kill the local chief.

I replied "No, what has happened, please?"

One of the elders said: "You have cut down a *musu* tree."

I knew we were in serious trouble and I didn't know what to do. And then, fate came to our rescue. The chief, who was a Christian, told the elders that we had only made a natural mistake, and that he wanted us to build that village because it would bring money to his people. But the elders insisted that every one of us should be fined R100, which should be deducted from our pay. I agreed to this and the branch of the *musu* tree that we had sawn down was taken by tractor and trailer to the chief's village, and there it lay behind the chief's house until white ants and decay began to claim it.

Trees across Continents

Our forefathers say that in olden days human beings could **talk to trees**, and trees could tell them whether they were edible or poisonous. Man could talk to plants and be told by them whether they were **good to eat or not**. It is incredible, but if you look very, very closely at what goes on amongst many native communities throughout the world, you will find that something was talking to people in ancient times. Were these the gods? Maybe. Were these creatures from the stars? Maybe. But there is another “person” about whom we don’t talk when we talk about things like this - the earth itself. The earth is an intelligent, living, pain-feeling and love-acknowledging entity. The earth is not just a dirty ball of matter tumbling through space like a mad projectile. No, the earth is more than that! And I feel that people who believe that the earth is alive are **not** superstitious savages, but rather they are people more advanced, mentally and spiritually, than we are.

Consider this: who taught women amongst the peaks of the Andes Mountains how to turn poisonous roots into edible ones? Who taught the same lesson to woman in Africa?

In Africa there is a poisonous plant, which we call *Umdumbula*, which means ‘**the one who causes your stomach to swell.**’ This plant is called **cassava**. African women detoxify this plant in an amazing process that proves to all thinking people that these women of ancient times possessed a knowledge of chemistry. They boil the cassava and then they throw away the first water. And then they boil it again and throw away the second water. Then, for safety sake, they boil it a third time and throw away that water, and then they dry the root and then grind it into a flour. By that time, the **poisonous umdumbula** - the plant that carelessly eaten can make your stomach swell and **cause you to die** - becomes an edible plant that can safely be eaten by even the weakest of babies and the frailest of old women and men.

When I came to the United States of America, a big motherly native American woman with thick, iron-grey hair tumbling in two great plaits down either side of her head, cooked me a meal that I have never forgotten to this day. She came out of the forest with a basket full of acorns (the seeds of oak trees). **What was she going to do with this food**, which we in South Africa used to give to pigs, I wondered?

She **boiled the acorns** after grinding them, threw away the water, boiled them **again**, threw away the water and Credo Mutwa lost interest. Some time later, this native American woman, smiling like the great mother goddess herself - her hooked fleshy nose covered with a film of sweat - placed a dish in front of my astonished eyes. Behind my glasses, my eyes must have grown as big as those of an owl when this lady said: "You will eat. Is good food."

Ai, I got scared! And then she was watching me like an eagle. I took a spoon and **I started eating**. I was eating acorns! She had put spices in them and they had become like a pap (a beautiful stew), and my stomach received this alien food with a loving rumble. I ate, and ate, and ate and asked for some more. My father, a carpenter, would have had a stroke twenty times, had he seen me eating the seeds of what he called 'plank trees'. But I tucked into the acorns like a lost pilgrim, and I ate for many days to come - I was always asking for acorns.

When I visited South America, I found an incredible country, full of people who amazed me. On the shores of Titikaka, the sacred lake, I visited **Urubamba, the place of gods**. And there, I saw native American women, colourful creatures in crinoline skirts and strange hats and brightly coloured scarves and shawls. These women were cooking maize, and into each pot they dumped a handful of lime. Now, imagine that - I am a Zulu. I believe that dirt is dirt and food is food. I believe that soil should not be allowed to intrude into food - but here was an alien woman with high cheekbones, night-black hair, thin cruel lips and a dark-red skin, putting a handful of ground lime into maize which I was supposed to eat.

I ate the maize and then I asked the señora: "Señora, can you please tell me, respectfully, why did you put lime (the material we use for building houses) into the maize?"

"It is to **take away lagwera from the intrallang.**"

I didn't know what she was talking about, but she said she was telling me that putting lime into maize would make it into a peaceful food. The battle was taken away from maize by lime being added to maize. Then, some months later, I understood from the lips of a scientist who told me that what the Native Americans are doing is correct: It is impossible for the human stomach to properly digest maize. Therefore, to make this digestion complete, and to draw out the benefits from this otherwise indigestible foodstuff, you have to put lime into the maize.

