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## VUSAMAZULU CREDO MUTWA – SANGOMA, AFRICAN SAGE, FRAUD OR A NEW AGE SHAMAN?

### **Abstract:**

Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa is a South African sangoma, a writer and artist, and a controversial 'expert' on UFO-related conspiracy theories. He considers himself an expert on South African, especially Zulu, cultures and religions. He is rejected by academics and often considered a self-imposed 'expert' and a fake whose version of Zulu religious beliefs has ventured so far from Zulu religion that they are hardly recognisable. Mutwa himself claims to be misunderstood and falsely judged. He calls himself a shaman, a 'Chosen One', a guardian of secret knowledge and an expert on esoteric African wisdom. In the article I present V.C. Mutwa's artistic accomplishments, his version of Zulu mythology and sangomas' work, and I compare his versions to known facts about Zulu culture. I also analyse Mutwa's popularity within New Age circles and try to assess the veracity of Mutwa's claims and place him within New Age rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Credo Mutwa, sangoma, shamanism, Zulu, New Age.

### 1 | INTRODUCTION

Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa is one the most controversial figures on South Africa's cultural firmament. With his claim to be a true depositor of the ancient Zulu and South African wisdom and tradition, he is rejected by scholars as a fake and self-imposing fraud<sup>1</sup>. Chidester denies him any authenticity and accuses him of propagating 'fake religion' and false knowledge of South African culture, knowledge "bearing no relation to any historical or ethnographic account, because he [Mutwa] invented

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<sup>1</sup> Academics who denied Mutwa African authenticity are, among others, D. Chidester (Chidester 2002: 65-85; 2004: 2-12; 2008:136-159), C. Blakney (1968: 122-125), A. Blount (1970: 206-210), C. Steyn (2009: 305).

them' [historical and religious]" (Chidester 2002: 79). These words are harsh and not entirely true, as many traditions, customs and religious rituals Mutwa presents accurately, especially those performed by sangomas.<sup>2</sup> During my field studies in RSA in 2013 and 2018<sup>3</sup> I spoke about Mutwa and his books with Zulu sangomas and most of them shared the academics' sentiments about Zulu myths but they agreed that the way he describes a sangoma's work and calling are accurate.

Evaluating the authenticity of Mutwa's myths and religious statements is difficult, though not impossible. Well documented Zulu mythology and religious beliefs and statements from my sangoma informants allow us to determine the areas in which Mutwa's version is congruent with Zulu or South African tradition. The aim of this article is to present Mutwa's activities in the fields of literature, culture and religious inheritance and evaluating African authenticity in Mutwa's writings, DVD films and interviews on the basis of academic research and information which I acquired from my sangoma informants. I also analyse Mutwa's co-operation with New Age circles because, with the passing of time, Mutwa's rhetoric has changed and he has adapted to the demands of late twentieth century esotericism represented by the New Age. This is a result of the social and political change in South Africa and New Age patronage of Mutwa's enterprises.

According to Mutwa, none of the scholars criticising Mutwa's books or public activities has interviewed him or asked how his ideas have evolved during the last several decades. I decided to visit him and check how he feels about his writings after so many years, which of his ideas have changed and evolved in the course of his life, and which he rejected. Mutwa told me I was the first academic who interviewed him about his life and writings. Some photos documenting the visit have been attached at the end of the paper.

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<sup>2</sup> Sangomas are diviners, clairvoyants, healers, exorcists, people who are believed to contact ancestral spirits in Nguni ethnic groups. They are believed to have abilities and perform duties similar or identical to shamans from different cultures of the world.

<sup>3</sup> The field study among South African sangomas in 2018 was financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), project no.: 2017/25/N/HS1/02500.

## 2 | THE PROBLEMS WITH DEFINITIONS

Sangomas' work is based on religious belief in the presence of spirits. Does it mean that sangomas are believers of a certain religion? No, not according to contemporary sangomas. Mutwa is a contemporary sangoma but he has been alive for almost a century and his calling started in a totally different reality than the twenty first century. He based his sangoma vocation on the Zulu belief system but his version of it is questionable. This also does not mean that the Zulu belief system presented by sangomas is a religion, especially today when Mutwa and many other sangomas are influenced by shamanic systems from other parts of the world and when Christianity and New Age create new syncretic values with native African beliefs.

Delineating definitions of religion in South African terms is one of the biggest problems for researchers. Religion in Southern Africa is such a fluent thing that even Christians may not be perceived as Christians by their counterparts in Europe. A good example is Roman Catholicism, which theoretically has strict rules: the celibacy of priests, their ability of dissolving sins during confession, baptism that cleanses a person of birth-sin. This does not apply in Africa, especially in cultures where the sangomas have a strong place. At the very beginning of a baby's life it can be baptised by a priest, but not be considered cleansed or blessed by many native Africans. The baby is often taken to a sangoma who contacts ancestral spirits and asks for their blessings and if he or she finds some threat around the baby (i.e. a bad spirit, a curse), a special ritual is made and sometimes it includes an animal sacrifice. For Catholics priests should be authorities, people who understand them, give absolution and set them free from sins. This also does not apply in the case of Africans. Priests do not have wives and children so for many Africans they cannot be considered an authority on family life. When there is a problem, Africans ask sangomas for help and it is estimated that about 80% of South Africans consult them at least once a year.<sup>4</sup> All my sangoma informants that I met

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<sup>4</sup> There are no specific statistical data for the number of people behaving this way but during both my field research and when I lived in RSA for 2,5 years, I heard such stories from almost every native family I met.

in the last ten years personally and over the Internet are adamant: most of their clients are Christians, among them Catholics. Also weddings are often blessed by sangomas and even if a couple marries in church only, their relatives believe that they should fulfil duties towards ancestors and ask sangomas for a ritual behind the newlyweds' backs.

Establishing a definition of religion or being religious in South African terms is a great challenge that may never be achieved. Unfortunately during the 2013 and 2017 censuses there were no questions about religion. I can only say that from my private conversations with sangomas, they do not see a contradiction in being Christians, Jews or Muslims and believing in spirits and their influence on the living. South Africans who practice only 'traditional' beliefs are in a minority as compared to Christians. As I discussed in my PhD thesis (Podolecka 2017b: 49) "the denomination 'traditional' is very imprecise and has been heavily criticised by R. Shaw as an invention of colonisers: they called African native beliefs 'traditional religions' as opposed to Christianity (Shaw 1990: 339). The same applies to 'traditional healers', 'traditional spiritual leaders', 'traditional style of life' etc. The term 'traditional' should be used with great care as sangoma traditions have "multiple roots that extend across time, cultures and languages, and derive partly from pre-colonial African systems of belief" (Thornton 2009: 17). Also "few sangomas today see their knowledge as the unmodified product of the past. No two sangomas appear to believe or do precisely the same thing. The knowledge they apply is constantly in circulation, producing a diversity of regional and even personal variants" (Thornton 2009: 23). Also when thinking about religion, should the believers have a god or God to worship? In the case of Zulus, this is an answerable question: they cannot decide if uNkulunkulu is their highest god or the first ancestor. One thing is certain: native South Africans are very religious people in terms of believing in having soul, souls turning to spirits and various rituals that have a religious background; they also have many superstitions based on religious beliefs.

Another problem with delineating the definition of religion in South African terms is: is it possible to have two religions at the same time? Is it possible to believe in Jesus as God and in the spirits of ancestors, nature and universe? While believing in spirits and contacting them stays in

opposition to Christianity, how is it possible that so many South Africans (including Christian sangomas) practice both Christianity and ‘traditional’ religious rituals. And this is precisely South African reality. As I will show in this article, Mutwa is an example of a person who was first Christian, then renounced this religion in favour to sangomahood and Zulu religious beliefs, then turned to New Age which combines both and many other religious and philosophical traditions.

### 3 | A LIFE ENTWINED WITH HISTORY

Presenting a fully credible biography of V.C. Mutwa is difficult because there are no written documents from his early years and all persons important in his life before he became a writer are now deceased. I find placing Mutwa within South African history important because history, political and social changes created the environment for turning points in Mutwa’s life. They have hugely influenced Mutwa’s thinking patterns and the goals he has set for himself over the last ninety seven years. The accounts Mutwa presents in certain periods of time and his political and moral opinions show the influence of the times he lived in; they show the changes in his views and perception of the world. He is not the only South African whose life was determined by historical changes and I emphasise this to help Western readers understand the importance of racial segregation and its influence on people. Till today all of my sangoma and non-sangoma informants live in the heritage of these times, even the young ones born after the collapse of apartheid. Skin colour makes no difference, white people felt superior for decades and had black or coloured workers, then suddenly in 1994 the situation changed and turned their world upside down: white people started having native managers, kids stopped being in white-only schools and were forced to learn native languages and in the case of white sangomas, they had to submit and be totally obedient to black teachers. Such situations had never been possible before and till this day provoke controversies. One must remember about white-only politics when analysing Mutwa’s heritage.

According to his father’s words, V.C. Mutwa was born on 21 July 1921 in Zululand in South Africa ([www.credomutwa.com/about/](http://www.credomutwa.com/about/)

biography-01). He was an illegitimate child of a Zulu woman coming from a family who never converted to Christianity and a Roman Catholic builder who then became a fanatic of the Christian Science Church. The religion of his father is important because his religious views almost led to Mutwa's death, when he fell seriously sick in 1937, and changed Mutwa's life forever. Mutwa's mother, Namabunu, came from a family practicing old Zulu religion, a family with many sangomas and healers (Mutwa 1999: 691). According to Mutwa, his grandfather was a medicine-man and a Bushman and he considered a relationship with a Christian a violation of tradition and religion and a highest dishonour. To take the disgrace away from the family Mutwa's grandfather ordered his daughter to give the child away to the father's family (www.mutwa.com, 2012). In this way C.V. Mutwa was separated not only from his mother but from Zulu culture as well.

Mutwa returned to his roots after 1937 when he had become sick after an accident and his father refused any medical treatment as a follower of the Christian Science Church. On his website Mutwa says that he was seized and sodomised by a group of mine workers (www.mutwa.com, 2012). In *Zulu shaman* he gives a more benign version – he fainted and was found by school children passing by (Mutwa 2003: 2<sup>5</sup>). He was physically sick, extremely weak and he started having hallucinations and visions. He saw creatures he could not have known as a Christian, among them Amarava<sup>6</sup>, a supposed Zulu goddess, mother of all the people, and Zulu king Shaka who told him to take the name Vusamazulu, the 'Awakener of the Zulus'. Mutwa claims that he could see 'through' a person even before this person entered his hut, recognise the disease and heal it with his hands (Mutwa 2003: 4).

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<sup>5</sup> I use the shortened titles of Mutwa's books and the following editions of Mutwa's books: *Indaba, My Children* 1999 (written in 1964), *Africa is My Witness* 1966, *My People. The Writing of a Zulu Witch-Doctor* written in 1969, 1977 edition, *Let not my Country Die* 1986, *Zulu Shaman. Dreams, prophesies and Mysteries* 2003 (first published in 1996 under the title *Stars of the Stars*), *Isilwane, the Animal* 1996, *Kingdom of Forever* 2008 (cartoon published on the Internet).

<sup>6</sup> No scholar informs about such a deity, she is most probably Mutwa's creation or he heard about her in a story that was not a part of Zulu mythology.

When Mutwa finally could not rise from a mat, his father allowed his uncle Anthony to take him to live with his family in the slums of Cato Manor near Durban. When Western medicine had failed, Mutwa was taken to Zululand to his aunt Mynah, a sangoma, who recognised a sangoma's illness, the traditional calling by ancestors' spirits to become a sangoma. It was Mynah who explained to him that his sickness was a calling from ancestral spirits, something he could not refuse because it would kill him. She promised to cure him and – with the help from Mutwa's grandfather – teach him everything he need to know about sangomas and Zulu beliefs. The healing process was also the beginning of Mutwa's conversion from Christianity to the Zulu faith. He was initiated after two years and began his life as a sangoma<sup>7</sup>.

In spite of the apartheid regime and the limits on travelling for non-white citizens, in the 1950s Mutwa travelled a lot in Southern Africa for his employee, A.S. Watkins, the owner of a curio shop in Johannesburg, who relied on him to authenticate African artefacts. Mutwa used these travels to visit other sangomas and learn from them. He was an avid reader and working for Watkins helped him read world classics and contemporary books (Mutwa 1977: 12-13; Mutwa 2003: 10-11; www.mutwa.com, 2012). This reading passion is visible in Mutwa's writings: creating his characters he often uses inter-cultural symbols like the Tree of Life, or he cites the Bible and other religious texts.

Racial segregation obviously influenced Mutwa's life. He experienced all kinds of humiliation including imprisonment. In one of the riots in March 1960 a woman whom Mutwa loved was shot dead. Her family gathered around her coffin, cut off a lock of her hair and promised vengeance. It was another great turning point of his life. Mutwa states that he was so heartbroken that he understood that revenge and violence could not lead to understanding among people and to peace. He cut his vein, let his blood into his lover's wounded body and swore what he calls the Chief's Great Blood Oath but – in contradiction to her family – he swore to tell the truth about Bantu peoples and to do his best to make

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<sup>7</sup> Two years is the shortest time for training. All the sangomas I interviewed said that it usually takes three to six years to be initiated.

peace between the whites and the rest of the society (Mutwa 1977: 13, Mutwa 1999: xxi). This led him to writing *Indaba, my children* which was first published in 1964. This was not an easy act as it required funds but Mutwa turned to be an imaginative storyteller and convinced Watkins that his stories were true recounts of Zulu tribal history and religious beliefs. In 1964 Watkins and A.S. Brink (an academic in the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg) sponsored the publishing of *Indaba* and its sequel *Africa Is My Witness* in 1966 (Chidester 2002: 68).

Mutwa tried to promote African cultures through his next books *Africa is my Witness* and *My People* and by building “cultural villages” for tourists. They were destroyed and he was often accused of supporting apartheid and changing African legacy into a show, especially by his fellow Africans, though one “cultural village” near Johannesburg has been turned into a tourist attraction and still exists today. Mutwa’s dream about awakening people to understanding and mutual respect was just a mere dream before the fall of apartheid but once the system collapsed in the 1994, this dream suddenly resurfaced. History caused yet another turning point in his life: the freedom of movement, the possibility of practising a sangoma’s duties stigmatised by the apartheid law; also new technologies have allowed him easier access to potential clients and sponsors. When racial mixing became a social necessity, many white South Africans felt the need to learn at least basic facts about the people they governed and oppressed, though often without the consciousness of oppression. They were well aware that their children would soon go to school with native Africans and that their employees would soon demand equal treatment. *Indaba* was published again and it became a respected source of knowledge – indeed many white South Africans born during apartheid told me that Mutwa’s books were written in an easy fashion, and many also believe that Mutwa presents the true version of Zulu and other Bantu peoples’ mythology.

Another turning point was meeting and co-operating with Stephen Larson, a New Age writer and publisher. He published and promoted Mutwa’s book *Zulu Shaman*, in which Mutwa describes sangomas’ vocation and work, his version of Zulu mythology, ecological issues, a holistic



approach to life and health, and supposed contacts with UFO. New Age circles found Mutwa's myths ecologically inspiring and his messages about reincarnation, holistic life and pacifism in line with their life view; Mutwa's ideas fit New Age ideology perfectly.

#### 4 | THE CREATION OF THE SANGOMA

Mutwa calls himself a shaman and a sangoma. He grants himself the highest authority by the fact that he is a sangoma, *inyanga* (herbalist) and a high *sanusi* (a sage), a very respected person in South African society. Scholars agree with Mutwa that sangomas are very important figures in South African society and so are the other spiritual professions (Berglund 1976: 29-30; 106; Griffiths, Cheetham 1982: 959). Mutwa explains that a sangoma is a clairvoyant, a kind of prophet, a diviner who uses the drum to arouse the spirits to seek their help. Mutwa explains that an *inyanga* is a witch-doctor and a *sanusi* is a medicine-man but "higher than both of them – the one who causes things to ascend, the uplifter, or the pilot of that which ascends" (Mutwa 1999: 541, Mutwa 2003: 211).

Sangomas used to be diviners who could also heal by contacts with ancestral spirits. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, they are much more: healers, psychologists, tribal historians, psychopomps, exorcists and certainly diviners. They deal with everything that is connected to spirituality, a holistic approach to life and natural medicine. Many use the Internet and co-operate with healers from different cultures. Their importance is based on faith in spirits (both good and evil) and their presence in everyday life. According to Mutwa and all my informants in the last ten years, every living being has a soul and this soul can be protective and helpful or destroying and vengeful. Zulu and other South African peoples do not separate soul from body and mind and nor does Mutwa. "The mind, the brain, is matter in its purest form, and it is the hands and the feet and the wings of the soul. The mind is the link that connects the body with the soul, just as the handle links the iron head of the axe with the arm of the man wielding it" (Mutwa 1999: 611). When people learn to co-operate with their souls, they "will be able to do the most impossible things" because "the soul is a grain in the Structure

of God, as the single grain in the sandstone is a part of the mountain” (ibidem). The belief in the concept of soul and the ubiquitous presence of spirits, and the ancestral spirits’ guidance form the base for sangomas’ work. Sangomas, who co-operate with spirits, provide a way of locating misfortune and offer the possibility to repair the damage. Sangomas are also believed to be able to counteract the evil done by sorcerers and witches (Chidester 1992: 14, 16). Mutwa describes the fields of study of a sangoma: self-control, meditation, healing, *muti*-lore (medicines), the lore of soul, history and mythology, bone oracle and other means of divination (Mutwa 2003: 13-32).

When I did my field research in South Africa in 2013 and 2018 and then contacted my sources by phone and the Internet, I learnt that modalities can differ but their core remains the same: the well-being of patients is based on their relationships with spirits. While working with Xhosa sangomas in Western Cape Province in 2018 I learnt that traditionally they do not use bones for contacting spirits and divination; they get into a trance. This is done without hallucinogens and usually by drum beating, singing or simply reciting verses and calling spirits to come. However, their clients are not only Xhosas but also people of different cultural backgrounds, African and Western. Mutwa still uses bones but he also claims to read aura around people and see their chakras (an evident influence of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs).

To become a sangoma, a person needs to have a calling. Mutwa’s sickness that had almost killed him was recognised as a “sangoma sickness”, a phenomenon that all sangomas claim to go through which includes a weakness of the body, strange dreams and visions, and hearing voices. All of these are symptoms of the calling – a decision made by spirits to call a person to become a sangoma.<sup>8</sup> Mutwa explained to me that each sangoma had to go through a phase of “sangoma illness” or “sickness”, a kind of sickness that was common in most shamanic traditions. A sangoma’s calling means rejecting the ego and submitting to spirits, allowing

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<sup>8</sup> In Zulu the calling is called *ukwuma idlozi* which means ‘accepting the spirits’ (Berglund 1976: 142).

possession and co-operation with spirits. This can be done only through a tuition by a fully-fledged sangoma who will lead the apprentice from the world of *profanum* to the realm of *sacrum*. The healing process involves strange dreams and hallucinations and the process of understanding them. Mutwa told me that he called himself a shaman also because shamans go through a sickness like sangomas. Such sickness occurs in most shamanic cultures in the world: in Siberia, North and South America, Australia. Both shamans and their patients believe in the process and its results and the same applies to sangomas and their clients (Podolecka 2016: 151).

The training of a sangoma is called *ukutwasa* and the apprentice is called *twasa*; the tutor carefully chooses his or her *twasas*, or rather believes that ancestors chose for him or her. Mutwa was a *twasa* to his aunt Mynah. Mutwa describes the *twasa* stage as very difficult and tiring. He was trained by Mynah and his grandfather to refine his “skill of healing and divination and diagnosis of illness” (Mutwa 2003: xxiii, 26-27). There are a lot of fakes pretending to be sangomas and the factor that helps to distinguish the real ones is the hardship of the calling and training, which is all about crashing ego, learning utmost obedience towards their teachers and spirits and crashing the old personality to let the spirits build a new one on its ashes. This is a common belief among real sangomas and scholars.

Scholars and all my sangoma informants confirm Mutwa’s opinion about the complexity of the sangoma’s profession. They agree that a sangoma’s work is a combination of different kinds of healing which in the Western cultures are separate professions: doctors, psychologists, priests, psychopomps, exorcists – all those professions combined make sangomas very skilful healers. It is not only Mutwa who considers sangomas as healers, diviners, psychologists and protectors of the wellbeing of their community. Scholars also confirm Mutwa’s information about training stages though the training differs slightly according to region and local tradition. After their initiation sangomas are still obliged to learn and improve their skills (Gati 1962: 198, Berglund 1976: 147, 176, Chidester 1992: 18).

## 5 | THE CREATION OF THE WRITER

*Indaba* and then *Africa* are comprised of tales which Mutwa presents as indigenous African myths. Mutwa starts his narration with creation myths in which he emphasises the duality of all creation: the universe is a combination of light and darkness, humans are comprised of good and evil, male elements entwine with the feminine but never become one another, and even a soul is dual, made of two elements from which one goes on in a process of reincarnation and the other stays as an ancestral spirit to help the living (Mutwa 1999: 5-11; Mutwa 2003: 18-22). Mutwa tells the story of the first goddess, Ma, who is the mother of the First People; the father is the Tree of Life, a symbol present in numerous cultures. After the Great Deluge to purify the Earth of evil done by the First People and other creatures (another universal symbol), Mutwa writes a history of Amarava, the mother of the Second People, and Odu, a monster whom she was forced to marry by the gods. Those parents are the ancestors of all humans living in our times (Mutwa 1999: 7-68; Mutwa 1977: 15-32; Mutwa 2003: 33-67).

Mutwa states that he knew the publishing of *Indaba* was a violation of old tribal laws but he seems sure of his right intents and of his version of history and religious stories. This is a key-idea of his life and all of his cultural activities. No matter how much he is criticised and laughed out, no matter how other sangomas deny the authenticity of his myths, Mutwa insists with determination that his version of Zulu mythology is the only true one and that there are not enough initiated wise men to prove him wrong. Mutwa's aim was to help the Africans to learn "their own native heritage" and "to lay a foundation for better understanding between two different types of human beings" and to help foreigners understand the wisdom and beauty of African cultures (Mutwa 1999: 690, xviii, Mutwa 2000: 32). This understanding, Mutwa claims, is the foundation of all of his personal and professional activities. When I asked him about Amarava and other deities he describes in his books and when I mentioned that other sangomas I had met did not know these myths, Mutwa stood firm on his belief that he had always presented the truest version of Zulu beliefs and the way he chose to do it was the easiest one for foreigners to

understand. At the age of ninety two he told me the stories in the same way he told them in his books and ensured that I understood what he was saying (Mutwa 2013).

Mutwa calls his tales ‘myths’ in contrast to Chidester, Blackney and my sangoma informants. They consider Mutwa’s stories to be ‘tales’ as they are not proven by anyone to be Zulu or even African myths. Mutwa’s myths differ significantly from those collected by scholars and those which are known by my sangoma informants. Each literary culture has its own stock-figures who are easily recognised by the community. These can be gods, tricksters, animals, heroes, unfaithful wives or husbands etc. The stories with these figures reflect human dilemmas, hopes and worries which are explained and commented on in a way that is helpful to the listeners (Finnegan 1976: 351). The problem with analysing Mutwa’s myths and stories is that his stock-figures are not the ones known to Zulus. Mutwa does not refrain from well-known figures from the Zulu pantheon of deities like the most known and revered deity, uNkulunkulu, presented by scholars as a creator, great spirit or the first ancestor. He also recalls Tokoloshe, the evil creatures that are believed to make people misbehave and harm others, to make milk stale and cause bad accidents (Coote Lake 1960: 56-57). Krige’s informants describe Tokoloshe as a hairy “wicked dwarf who lives in deep pools or in the reeds”, steals milk and is more an animal than a man though he is “very fond of women (...) and is often guilty of cohabiting with women” (Krige 1962: 354). Tokoloshes are known to Zulus and other South African peoples but not the way Mutwa presents them. In his version of the myth he describes Tokoloshes as iron-made by a vengeful man and presents them as tools of killing the First People. This resulted in the gods’ wrath and the Deluge that cleansed the world. This version is entirely Mutwa’s creation and serves as a reminder that humans should not defy gods and should follow their instructions (Mutwa 1999: 24-29, Mutwa 2003: 41-44).

Other deities and creatures described by Mutwa are not known. The black sangomas I interviewed were all story-tellers, firmly set in their tribal and clan cultures, and they all emphasized the importance of passing down history and tribal culture. None of them recognised Mutwa’s stories of the goddesses Ma, Amarava, the Tree of Life or Kintu the Trickster. Hence, can we accept Mutwa’s decision to call his stories myths?

Myths manifest the important issues of human lives, and myth-makers and myth-tellers strive to explain the works of nature and social rules. The context of myths may vary but there are certain similarities which distinguish myths from other forms of narration: myths give information about the most important, creative, divine forces that create and rule the universe and show people their place. Myths sacralise taboos and religious beliefs. They are codes of life and they are represented through ritual and in this way make a sacred past present in human lives (Honko 1972: 10-12).

African mythology is a combination of the myth-makers' observation of the natural environment, historical events, calamities like great floods and the philosophical explanation of them on two levels: exoteric – an understood by everyone explanation of social order, law, clan and authority system, and esoteric – more philosophical and spiritual, explaining life force and divinity, understood only by initiates (Piłaszewicz 2000: 28). Mutwa's aim follows the above patterns: retells fears in parables, makes creation myths that are present in every culture and religion and explains human bravery and goodness but also faults, misdeeds and their results that bring some kind of punishment or reward.

In his tales Mutwa follows the pattern and includes all of these subjects, therefore I would accept his claim to call his stories myths, though not Zulu ones. I would even call his ecological tales “eco-myths”. There are many allegorical stories about human life where animals are used, i.e. *Panchatantra*, Aesop or La Fontaine's tales, and nobody treats them as myths. However, in the case of Mutwa, one can do so, as in the forward to these stories (especially in *Isilwane, the Animal*) Mutwa clearly states that his animal myths can be treated as allegories and metaphors. The myths presented in *Isilwane* may be read as myths or children's tales but they are marketed by Mutwa and his publisher as an ecological manifesto – in the preface Mutwa reminds people that they are equal to other parts of Nature<sup>9</sup>, not the supreme rulers.

In spite of constructing tales as myths, they cannot be considered Zulu myths. All sangomas I interviewed in 2013 and 2018 claim they

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<sup>9</sup> When I write “Nature” with capital “N” I am referring to the New Age attitude towards nature. They perceive it as Mother Nature.

have never heard such versions of Zulu myths and none of the academics has ever reported such myths. I am in no position to decide if Mutwa truly believed in what he wrote decades ago but till today he is adamant that his version is true and he learnt it from the goddess Amarava.

Mutwa has become a writer as a result of his blood oath and the need to change the position of native Africans. He considers himself a writer and he gladly cooperates with other authors. Keeney studied the Bushmen culture, first scientifically then from the New Age perspective and was initiated as the first white Bushman shaman. Having problems in his country (USA), he sought refuge in South Africa with Mutwa. Mutwa took him to Mynah, his aunt who initiated him as a sangoma and who agreed to teach Keeney. Keeney described his experience with Mutwa's family in his books *Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa: Zulu High Sanusi* (2002) and *Bushman shaman. Awakening the spirit through ecstatic dance* (2005). Keeney calls Mutwa 'the Pope among Africans' though he admits that some people call him a fake and 'a scoundrel' and states that he understands this point of view (Keeney 2005: 92). Mutwa also wrote a preface to *Mystery of the White Lions: Children of the Sun God* by Linda Tucker and allowed her to publish a lengthy interview she made with him (Tucker 2005).

## 6 | THE CREATION OF THE NEW AGE SHAMAN

Mutwa has been artistically active for about seventy years. He has tried to adapt to historical and political situations, to new technologies and new demands. His ideology has partially changed and so has his rhetoric, for example his attitude towards women: from quarrelsome creatures who should be obedient to their fathers and then husbands to equal to men in rights and even more intuitive and better suited for the sangoma vocation than men. Today, Mutwa emphasises the mutual influence of men and women in relationships and says that reciprocal respect make them better parents (Mutwa 1966: 207, March 2013). This narrative shows the evolution of his thinking patterns and his adaptation to twenty first century expectations.

New generations have posed new possibilities for him, especially New Agers. When Mutwa wrote his first four books in the 1960s and 1980s, he was not aware of the existence of New Age. However, he was discovered by New Age publishers in the 1990s and his ideas were incorporated within this esoteric ideology. New Agers, who are usually Westerners refusing Christianity and seeking alternative spirituality, pay attention to certain aspects present in Mutwa's books, websites and interviews: soul migration, a holistic approach to life and health, ecology, common roots and unity of all people and the belief in extra-terrestrial life. New Age is a global phenomenon which draws from all religions and so-called "ethnic" cultures, especially shamanism. New Agers try to find "truth" in life, though there is no binding definition of what this "truth" is. New Agers believe in an energy or soul that resides in every living being and migrates to another life after the death of the body. They also believe in karma which means that what people experience is the result of previous lives. They are ecologically aware, pacifists and believe in the equality of all humans, no matter what race or religion. All of those elements Mutwa explains plainly and in an easy way in his books, especially in *Zulu Shaman*, and his publishers and co-operators make them widely known via the Internet.

Mutwa explains that each plant, animal and human being have immortal souls, they "are all parts of God, just as each one of the hairs on your head"; also the sun, moon and stars are "an infinitesimal part" of God who has no end and not believing in "the existence of God is the greatest form of madness there can ever be" (Mutwa 1999: 561-562). In *Zulu Shaman* Mutwa reminds the readers that all people have souls and without a healthy soul a body is sick. According to him, souls were created when God created himself and they are an integral part of God' and life on Earth exists 'because God exists, and our souls are fragments of this Universal soul' (Mutwa 2003: 18). Mutwa is a strong believer in the idea of soul migration. He claims that most of the wisdom about soul migration is reserved for the chosen ones but in *Indaba* he decides to share this wisdom (Mutwa 1999: 560). Since *Indaba* Mutwa has been emphasising the equality of all souls; for him it means the equality of all living beings: "All souls are the same, and Man is but one of the many



forms, or re-incarnations that a soul must pass through” (Mutwa 1999: 565). Ideas presented forty years ago resurface and are embraced by many New Agers.

Mutwa also believes that all religions and cultures have the same roots and finds it “a tremendous unifying force, because it means we are all brothers and sisters, not only in our dreams, but in our mythologies and our very origins” (Mutwa 2003: 156). Perceiving humans as particles of God and Nature as a divine being, and accepting the unity of all people are important components of New Age ideology and Mutwa fits the profile perfectly (Steyn 2009: 308). The peaceful co-existence of all nations and cultures is one of the key ideas of New Age and New Age Internet websites spread Mutwa’s ideas.

As I mentioned before, contemporary sangomas are open to clients from all cultures and they do not try to convert them to any religion. Also, they often combine Christianity and sangoma traditions and they cannot tell when one starts and the other begins. In February 2018 over twenty sangomas told me that there was no difference which religion people followed as long as they are good people. Mutwa’s idea of seeing the same core in all religions (divinity, soul, goodness, love) was close to their hearts. In this case, they respected Mutwa’s ideology.

Also, many holistic healing centres use Mutwa’s authority to strengthen their credibility.<sup>10</sup> Like Mutwa, New Agers perceive the human being as an equal combination of body, spirit and mind and believe that only the balance between the three can make a person healthy and happy. They perceive sickness as an imbalance of this unity. Mutwa consciously uses New Age key-words like energy, Mother Nature, holistic healing, and shamanism in his interviews to target this group of readers. He agreed to change the title of his book to gain attraction in the New Age market: Larsen changed *Song of the Stars* to *Zulu Shaman. Dreams, Prophecies, and Mysteries*. Mutwa has no problem with co-operating with New Age

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<sup>10</sup> Selected websites promoting Mutwa’s ideas: <http://davecumeshealer.blogspot.com/2014/08/this-weeks-blog-continues-on-some-basic.html>; <http://www.examiner.com/article/meditation-and-indigenous-africa>; [http://www.shamanportal.org/shamanism\\_african.php](http://www.shamanportal.org/shamanism_african.php), <https://ourdivinemedicine.wordpress.com/tag/khomani-bushmen-kalahari-credo-mutwa-sacred-journeys-south-africa-indigenous-ancient-healing/>

writers and enthusiasts. His message was spread by Kenney (2001), Tucker (2010) and David Icke who used Mutwa's conceptions about aliens visiting Earth to make three dvd films distributed as *Reptilian Agenda* (Mutwa believes that aliens inhabiting the Earth look like big reptiles).<sup>11</sup>

Mutwa surely could not have predicted that the myths written in *Indaba, Africa is My Witness* or *My People* would one day be used to promote ecological awareness and would become a part of Mother Nature rhetoric. He wrote them as Zulu myths, not allegories or metaphors. Mutwa told me also that he had not expected to witness sangomas registered as professional healers, and being paid by national insurance in South Africa. Several decades ago Mutwa could not have perceived that holistic healing – so typical for South African cultures – would permeate many trends in Western societies and would be used alongside Western medicine (March 2013). Even though Mutwa's books were published abroad before New Age took an interest in them, their real popularity started with Mutwa's co-operation with New Age publisher Stephen Larsen who published *Zulu Shaman* and marketed Mutwa's ideas as indigenous African wisdom combined with all the aspects important for New Agers: eco-friendly mythology, a holistic approach to life, reincarnation and UFO conspiracy theories.

The co-operation with New Age propagators resulted in the growth of Mutwa's popularity and ended up fulfilling some of his dreams: his pacifist message is globally-known and his cultural village is considered by international communities as a serious place of healing and a means to develop a spiritual quest. In his house in Kuruman on the outskirts of the Kalahari Desert, the Mutwas built the Temple of Peace<sup>12</sup> sponsored largely by New

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<sup>11</sup> Selected New Age websites promoting the *Reptilian Agenda* and Mutwa's views on aliens' presence of Earth: <http://www.new-age-of-aquarius.com/reptilian-agenda.html>; <https://lindasmithinspiration.wordpress.com/blog/>. Selected (or, Some, 'a few, etc.) films with Mutwa speaking about aliens, their presence on Earth and their help in creating humankind: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iez0tDqNBC4>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1l8bojbgI5I>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJq2qVpI6BU>.

<sup>12</sup> The Temple of Peace is a building built opposite Mutwa's house in Kuruman. It fills a role of a multi-religious temple, hospital and recovery centre for the sick. On the other side of Mutwa's house, his wife Virginia built a set of buildings which form her

Agers. It is built in the Kuruman township and consists of Mutwa's house, the Temple of Peace, a Christian chapel and hospital buildings. Mutwa sculpted deities from many religions to make everyone feel welcome and at ease. Building all of these facilities was possible thanks to Ringing Rock Foundation<sup>13</sup> which offered Mutwa a lifelong stipend to enable him in 'his creative work' accessed in May 2003, the will of the local chief and the support of Icke and New Age donors ([www.ringingrocks.org](http://www.ringingrocks.org); Chidester 2002: 72; March 2013). The ceremony of laying down the corner stone was led by Mutwa and Icke. The speeches focused on the need for peace and unity among all people.<sup>14</sup> The temple serves as a spiritual centre and a children's hospital "because traditional South Africans care both for children's minds and souls; Western hospitals do not. (...) This is why you can see toys here. And the hammock is important: it is proved that if you put a child on a hammock and place salted water underneath and let it evaporate, a child will get healthy quicker. I helped a lot of children in this way" (March 2013). When I asked Mutwa why he chose Icke, Teash, Tucker, Smith and other New Agers for co-operation, he said: "because they seek the truth, their hearts are ones and clear" (March 2013). He believes in their honesty and is happy that they propagate his teachings.

As I mentioned before, shamanism is one of the most popular phenomena within New Age circles. New Agers perceive shamans as depositors of ancient traditions and wisdom. Most New Agers do not study shamanism from the academic perspective but adopt those aspects which are supposed to enhance their spirituality. There are many aspects in shamanic practices that interest New Agers: communication with Nature, soul-lore, holistic medicine, spiritual guidance. From the New Age perspective, shamans are people who work with energy, use elements and other natural environment's energies to help people and to broaden

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hospital. Credo and Virginia want to diagnose patients and Virginia and a nurse trained in Western medicine can treat patients there.

<sup>13</sup> Ringing Rock Foundation, Pennsylvania, claims to explore, document and preserve indigenous cultures and their healing practices; it offers spiritual counselling, guidance and healing. Details: [www.ringingrocks.org](http://www.ringingrocks.org)

<sup>14</sup> The ceremony of laying down the corner stone can be seen on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSJF0z5-CJg>.

their comprehension of the Universe, Nature, human nature and human spiritual life. For New Agers, Mutwa is a shaman and in my opinion, New Agers and Mutwa's calling himself 'a shaman' is justified. Mutwa fulfills duties very similar to Siberian and other shamans; he is believed to have the abilities that shamans possess, and his work is partly in-line with academic views on shamanism. At the same time, his work with energy and the whole vocabulary connected with energy work and a holistic approach to life make him a shaman in the New Age meaning.

## 7 | SUMMARY

During his ninety seven years of life and over seventy years of working as a sangoma and an artist Mutwa has proved to be an outsider, a person who walks his own path and who does not give up his beliefs, though he has managed to accommodate in order to market needs. He has adapted himself to the demands of new markets, he answers New Agers' needs and he does not see a contradiction in being a sangoma, a shaman and a New Age authority. Mutwa is a practising sangoma and sangomas fulfil the same duties as shamans – they have the same abilities and play the same social role. Mutwa is also a New Age shaman always ready to share his wisdom and methods on how to live a holistic life. For New Agers the authenticity of "African wisdom" comes secondary to Mutwa's pacifist and holistic message which inspires thousands of people around the world.

Mutwa is an innovative and ever-changing artist. One cannot perceive him as mainly a sangoma or mainly a writer as he became the writer because he had already been the sangoma. As an expert on Zulu mythology, Mutwa is an unreliable source of information for academics but I would not call him a fraud. He keeps to his beliefs and after spending some time with him and interviewing him, I think he believes in what he says. He may truly believe that a strange woman from his hallucinations is Amarava and that he heard all of the stories and myths he wrote from this goddess. He is reliable as a sangoma; he offers insight into sangomas' work and he can be treated as a good source, usually in accordance with other sangomas' statements. Difficult to be classified, Mutwa remains a person and an artist full of contradictions and impossible to be unravelled: a sangoma, an inventive writer, an artist and a New Age shaman.



PHOTO 1: Vusamazulu Credo and Virginia Mutwa in front of the Temple of Peace. The sculpture on the right hand side is a 2,5 metre high goddess. There are many religious symbols in front of the temple including Egyptian cross, a symbol of Baal and the image of the goddess Ma whom Mutwa describes in his books.



PHOTO 2: A chapel for people of all religions who wish to pray or meditate before or after meeting the Mutwas. In front, a Christian cross and black Mary with Jesus.



PHOTO 3: Toys carved by V.C. Mutwa for children. He said that children could not be bored because then they felt bad and slowed the healing process; they had to be occupied to get healthy.

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