

Indians vs. Africans

from Ibo by Tom Bullough

The 'Traditional Village' at the 12th-century ruins of Great Zimbabwe – pride of the Shona people and the most significant pre-colonial stone buildings in sub-Saharan Africa – consisted of a smooth, wooden-walled area where men and women dressed in skins, beads and feathers were going about their business under the scrutiny of Western tourists. Having just left the famous Great Enclosure, its conical tower and elliptical wall, I had arrived at the gate wondering what the difference was between a Shona village of the medieval period and a Shona village today – aside, presumably, from the aid-agency T-shirts – and, as I was engaged in an effort to be cultural, I decided to try and find out.

Inside, the huts were, indeed, indistinguishable from the mud and thatch cylinders that you found everywhere else in the country, although the ground was marginally less clean and there were no wandering goats or chickens. The only person in evidence was an old man, his face concealed beneath a tall feather head-dress and his goatskins jangling with little strips of metal.

"Hello," I said, catching up with him beneath a tree, where there were several squares of hardwood, a short stretch of railway track and numerous keys belonging to an mbira: the traditional Shona instrument normally described as a 'thumb piano'. "Do you mind if I watch you for a moment?"

"I am a traditional thumb piano-maker," the old man told me.

"I see," I said.

I crouched down beside him, watching as he placed one strip after another on the railway track, deftly hammering them to the breadth and thickness of particular notes.

"Tell me," I asked. "The metal you're using. Where does it come from?"

"Soh var," said the mbira-maker, solemnly.

"Sorry?"

"Soh var," he repeated. He put down his hammer, got to his feet and reached into the branches of the tree, handing me a pile of old sofa springs. "Like these."

"But..." I said, determined to get some sort of cultural insight out of this encounter. "I mean, how did the Shona smelt metal traditionally?"

“Perhaps you would like a photograph with me?” the mbira-maker suggested. “Only five dollars. Or perhaps you would like to buy an mbira? I have very, very many of them.”

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Dodging a crowd of Americans, who had just arrived on one of the ‘overland’ trucks that would sometimes materialise in a shroud of dust and internal politics in places of this sort, I abandoned the traditional village in favour of the museum, where all was quiet and the famous soapstone birds of Great Zimbabwe sat in an air-conditioned room: part eagle and part human, their faces proud and disdainful in a way that their ancestor on the Zimbabwean flag never quite seemed to manage. For centuries they had faced one another in the forest, until, predictably enough, a gang of Europeans had turned up to steal them in the late 19th century, and not all of the birds had been returned even now. The top half of one, said a sign, was in a museum in South Africa while, for some reason, the Germans were refusing to relinquish the bottom.

In pride of place was the straight-necked bird of the Central Enclosure, a crocodile with fat hands clinging to its pedestal.

“Excuse me,” I asked a woman, who was passing with a tray of red-brown soil. “Do you know anything about that crocodile, please?”

The woman paused and looked at me. She was plump, with shiny cheeks and a dismissive expression.

“The crocodile symbolises women,” she informed me, “who used to respect their husbands.”

“Oh...?” I said. “Are you a curator here?”

“I’m an archaeologist,” she said, warming slightly. “We’ve been digging here for the past few weeks.”

“Have you made any discoveries?”

“We’ve been trying to establish the pattern of agriculture between 1100 and 1500, when Great Zimbabwe was occupied. From what we can tell, it looks as if the fields were divided into three areas. The first was for grazing cattle, which were the primary food as well as a valuable currency. The second was for maize, and while there is some evidence of maize as food it seems that the maize grown here was used overwhelmingly in the preparation of beer.”

“And the third?” I asked.

“The third was for cultivating marijuana.”

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The track that led away from Great Zimbabwe was red and deserted except for a few groups of very small boys, who would occasionally leap from a bush, strike a pose and demand money, then disperse quite happily when I refused. Slogging uphill in the afternoon sunshine, I came, after a time, to a road where several salesmen and the unexplained bodies that seemed to compose most of the Zimbabwean population were asleep among batiks, ranks of soapstone birds and hundreds of amorphous, semi-human sculptures.

Aside from the stirring of the batiks, not a great deal was going on. The pace at which things moved in Zimbabwe, it was a wonder sometimes that anything ever happened at all, and for over an hour I sat on the sandy verge while the large white clouds drifted peaceably north, the sun drifted peaceably west, and the only traffic of any kind was a woman with a red and green bundle on her head, her children following her in descending order of size. You could hear the strains of their singing long before they appeared, and long after they had vanished again.

It was only when a large brown Mercedes arrived on my right that I scrambled back to my feet, extending my finger and smiling at the suit and cravat-wearing Indians I could just make out through the windscreen.

“Good afternoon,” said the man in the passenger seat, his window opening with the whine of an electric motor. “Would you be going to Masvingo?”

“I would,” I said. “Would you?”

“We would,” said the man, and, in a burst of Hindi, he instructed one of the refined-looking, middle-aged ladies who were sitting on the back seat to get out and allow me into the middle.

As we drove towards Masvingo, nobody spoke, the air-conditioner hummed and the white line blinked beneath us. Around me, everything was immaculate. The seats were leather and the inlay was walnut. The ladies wore spotless saris and the men’s moustaches were trimmed. As we passed a couple of hitching Zimbabweans, their fingers extended just as mine had been, it would have been perfectly obvious to any observer that the only reason a person as grimy as me had been picked up was because I was white – although my only awareness of the country’s supposedly defunct racial hierarchy was a faint sense of self-satisfaction at having got a lift with some people who were at least brown.

“Do you live in Masvingo, then?” I asked, eventually.

“Bulawayo,” said the driver.

“You’ve lived there long?”

“Nearly twenty years,” he said. “Tryingly, my wife and I were ejected from Uganda in 1972, by Idi Amin. We spent five years in various parts of East Africa before I discovered business openings here.”

We passed through a village where a crowd of people in clothes of every colour were piling into a bus, waving fruit and flip-flops – a reggae-tinged song by John Chibadura and the Tembo Brothers blasting from the open windows.

“As a matter of interest,” I said, “do you have much to do with the African community? Socially, I mean.”

The driver looked at me in the rear-view mirror.

“We are Hindus,” he said. “We do not smoke, we do not drink, and we do not eat meat. We have nothing at all in common with these people.”