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SACRED POWERS AND RITUALS OF TRANSFORMATION: AN ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF RAINMAKING RITUALS AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY DURING THE EVOLUTION OF THE MAPUNGUBWE STATE, AD 1000 TO AD 1300

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The study of sacred leadership at Mapungubwe involves an analysis of how the emerging elite centralised rainmaking and other public rituals. These developments occurred in the Shashe-Limpopo basin between AD 1000 and AD 1300. Mapungubwe was the last in a sequence of capitals in the basin. The first was Schroda (AD 900-1000), followed by K2 (AD 1000-1220) and then Mapungubwe (AD 1220-1300). This sequence corresponds to a series of cultural, socio-political and economic transformations that led to class distinction and sacred leadership, two distinctive features of the region's early state system.

The development of Mapungubwe was a local indigenous accomplishment that occurred in the prehistoric period but in the relatively recent past. This offers possibilities for using current indigenous knowledge to develop relevant ethnographic models.

Over a period of four years, I explored Venda, Sotho-Tswana and Shona traditional agriculture strategies and belief systems through their oral histories, cosmologies and practices. I identified three systems of rainmaking practices. Practice A is associated with kin-based chiefdoms. Practise B exists among class-based polities with sacred leadership. Practice C represents the devolution of complexity after the disintegration of the Zimbabwe culture. These data provide models to clarify the roles of rainmaking and agriculture in the evolution of Mapungubwe.

DECLARATION

The work presented in this thesis was carried out at the Archaeology Division of the School of Geography, Archaeology, and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg under the supervision of Professor Thomas N. Huffman. I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and it has not been submitted previously for a degree or examination at this or any other university.

_____

McEdward Murimbika

Archaeology Division: School of Geography, Archaeology & Environmental Studies. Faculty of Humanity, Social Sciences and Education

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

_____day of February 2006.

To my wife Mercy

With sincere thanks for her love and encouragement,

To my son Tinaye,

To my family for their support throughout my academic career

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

To the student of Southern African prehistory, the contribution of archaeology to understanding the development of complex societies remains incomplete. Limited attention has been paid to the role of belief systems and agricultural practices. Ethnography is one means to fill this gap.

This thesis presents an ethnoarchaeological analysis of rainmaking and agricultural practices in the development of Mapungubwe society in the Shashe-Limpopo basin between AD 1000 and AD 1300 (Fig. 1.1). The development of social complexity was a local accomplishment that occurred in the relatively recent past. This offers an opportunity to take advantage of current heritage. In particular, this study uses indigenous beliefs and practices pertaining to rainmaking and agriculture to establish relevant hypotheses about the past.

The thesis is divided into four broad sections. The first consists of Chapters 1 to 4. These chapters present research aims, the geographical and archaeological background to the research, ethnoarchaeological research practices and research design. The second section has only one chapter, Chapter 5 that provides a detailed overview of traditional

agricultural practices of African communities in southern Africa. The third section presents results of ethnographic research on rainmaking practices of selected communities. The six chapters in this section concentrate on the ethnological field research I conducted among Northern Sotho-Tswana (Hananwa, Pedi and Lovedu) and Venda-speaking communities in the Limpopo Province, Tswana-speaking communities and finally Shona-speaking communities of Zimbabwe. The twelfth chapter generalises the results from the fieldwork to create models that can be applied to the archaeology. The fourth section presents chapters on the archaeological excavation results of a rainmaking site, application of the models to the Shashe-Limpopo sequence and the thesis ends with final comments.

1.1 RESEARCH AIMS

Archaeological research in Southern African (Fig. 1.1) has established the general classification and chronologies of prehistoric cultural traditions. Research on the development of complexity has often concentrated on external causes, particularly long distance trade, and limited attention has been given to agricultural practices. Generally, such practices have implications for worldviews and political as well as economic organisational structures. Ethnoarchaeology offers a viable approach to the study of these aspects.

The present study uses indigenous beliefs and practices pertaining to prehistoric agriculture and rainmaking. Thus, the main research objectives are as follows:

- To examine the linkages between indigenous practices, material culture and cultural contexts in order to establish principles which have explanatory value for the Middle Iron Age (*c.* AD 900 – 1300) in the Shashe-Limpopo region
- To establish relevant hypotheses about the roles of agriculture and rainmaking in the rise of social complexity
- To explore the archaeological implications: that is, to provide a contextual analysis for archaeological data

Apart from the work of Huffman (e.g. 1982, 1996) and a few other studies such as Mahachi (1986, 1990), Mahachi & Pwiti (1991), Huffman & Murimbika (2003) and Murimbika (1999, 2004), an ethnoarchaeological approach has not been widely utilized in Southern Africa (see for example Beach *et. al.* 1997; Beach *et. al.*1998; Lane 1998). The ethnoarchaeological approach in general is not well developed and often not completely accepted. Ethnographic models are often misjudged as misleading mostly because they allegedly present the past in terms of the present, therefore ignoring change.

If our primary aims were to provide historical analyses of particular aspects, such as political detail, then these concerns would be valid.

However, my focus is to understand lifeways of prehistoric communities, particularly their sacred ritual and agricultural practices. To do this, it is critical that we acknowledge that historical particularism and narrow inductivism are far too limited to help us understand cultural norms, belief systems, values, ritual and ceremonial practices, as well as the multi-vocality of symbolic systems.

Here I use relevant ethnographic data on rainmaking ritual and agricultural practices of descendant communities as a source of models to interpret similar prehistoric practices. My emphasis is on general patterns in linkages between practices, material culture and context. This is with the view of establishing relevant hypotheses to compare to other alternative interpretations.

Iron Age archaeological research in the Limpopo Valley has mainly concentrated on the chrono-stratigraphic aspects of the capital sites of Schroda (AD 900 -1000), K2 (AD 1000 – 1220) and Mapungubwe (AD 1220 – 1300). Attention has been on the farmer sequence and socio-political change, particularly the shift from ranked-based to class-based systems. Scholars have emphasised settlement organisation, trade, law and force in the evolution and maintenance of traditional political institutions. Archaeologists have given less attention to the crucial role of ritual in political integration. Therefore, gaps remain in our understanding

of the prehistoric lifeways of the farming communities in general and their agricultural practices and related cognitive and belief systems in particular.



Fig. 1.1: Map of Southern Africa showing the general distribution of some main language groups.

The rise of the Mapungubwe state was associated with considerable population dynamics. These had a direct bearing on the development of agricultural practices. Little is known about the agricultural strategies that supported the estimated 3000 to 5000 residents (Huffman 2000) at the capitals plus the huge number of ordinary people in the valley. New research (e.g. Jonsson 1998; Smith & Hall 1999; Huffman 2000) suggests that, among other agricultural practices, farmers intensified floodplain and valley-bottom cultivation. The current research explores how these practices probably worked.

Previously, archaeologists emphasized the role of foreign trade (Garlake 1978a; Meyer 1983; Voight 1983; Meyer 1998). The rise of the state is usually attributed to class differences created by unequal access to the benefits of the Indian Ocean gold and ivory trade. This emphasis overlooked the centrality and importance of agricultural productivity because class differences are only possible in a relatively large population. Given its importance, adequate institutional mechanisms for controlling agricultural produce must have become a critical issue. Centralising rainmaking practices may be seen as one mechanism that helped to regulate agricultural productivity.

1.2 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND APPROACHES

While social scientists often investigate ritual practices as part of society, usually through a synchronic perspective, archaeologists are mainly concerned with ritual sites and material remains from a diachronic standpoint. Problems arise when one tries to elaborate the significance of past rituals. Obviously, archaeologists recover materials but not the rituals themselves. Ethnoarchaeology provides the possibility of going beyond the artefacts to the rituals (see Hodder 1982, 1989; Kobylinsky 1989).

This study takes a multiple approach to rainmaking and agricultural practices. First, rainmaking rituals involve cosmological ideas of the high being, the ancestral spirit world and the role of sacred leaders. Accordingly, these components are manifested in ceremonies and the material remains left behind. Secondly, rainmaking is part of a set of rituals by which a society deals with the natural world. These rituals help to interpret the meaning of ordinary socio-political and economic life. In these rituals, people may either make explicit the social structure through symbols, or the structure may be implicitly woven together in the actual performance.

Although my underlying assumption is that rainmaking practices form part of some of the deepest and most resilient values to traditional societies, I do not champion religious determinism. It is important to focus on the

process whereby shared social and cultural constructions are created. As Barth (1993: 8) argues, it is essential to "look at how people through their collective and separate activities reproduce and modify the realities of their past and present lives, elaborate features or loosing them, enhancing their coherence or dismantling it". Thus it is possible to learn from the only fully valid source: "people speaking and acting in a living society" (ibid: 25). By the same token, it is possible to extend this understanding from the present to the past. The use of such analogies here, however, is not presented as “explanations”. I do not claim that the past is unknowable unless there is a direct behavioural analogy in the present.

Further, ethnography is not used in this study to derive explanations in a simple chain of deduction. Rather I intend to establish working hypotheses to be compared to alternative interpretations to see which has the best “fit” (see Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981, for a similar issue in rock art). .

Furthermore, ethnography provides a cultural framework in which to interpret the archaeology. While it is clear that there have been significant changes in socio-cultural practices in Southern Africa, the passage of time in itself is unlikely to be a direct cause of cultural change. It therefore does not follow that an ethnoarchaeological approach is automatically invalid simply because time has elapsed. In this study four positions are adopted that help to enhance the value of the data:

- The more widespread a custom or belief, the higher the probability of its antiquity;
- Some customs and beliefs would have been integral to rainmaking before, during and after the development of social complexity and sacred leadership;
- These integral customs and beliefs may have material correlates;
- Actual practices may vary because of context.

Among other aspects, I use an ethnoarchaeological approach to establish the context and variability in rainmaking practices and to formulate models that can be applied to the archaeological record. An emphasis on context and variability takes cognisance of the methodological debate surrounding the use of ethnography to interpret archaeological data.

1.3 PREHISTORY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

In the first few centuries AD, Southern Africa witnessed the arrival of new groups of people in the then predominantly hunter-gatherer area. The people originated from West Africa, specifically the present day Nigeria-Cameroon region, via East and Central Africa. They are represented by what Phillipson (1985) has called the Chifumbaze Complex. The migrations brought in a new cultural and economic package into the southern region marking the beginning of the Iron Age. The people produced particular pottery styles linked to their areas of origins, for example the Gokomere-Ziwa Branch of the Urewe Tradition. They spoke

variations of the Bantu language family, and several groups of their descendants now live throughout East and Southern Africa (Phillipson 1977, 1985; Huffman 1982, 1989; Maggs 1984). The people brought with them knowledge of crop production, particularly sorghum and millet, as well as animal husbandry. They also hunted to supplement their subsistence diet. They built pole and daga houses in settled villages and possessed knowledge of metalworking and mining.

The numerous Early Iron Age sites investigated in Southern Africa have allowed detailed reconstructions of various aspects of life. It is commonly agreed that these communities were organized on ranked-based structures. (e.g. Maggs 1984; Hall 1987; Sinclair 1987; Pwiti 1996; Huffman 2000). This structure began to change at the end of the first millennium AD in the Limpopo basin. External trade became more pronounced, particularly at the site of Schroda occupied by people making Zhizo pottery (Hanisch 1980; Hall 1987; Huffman 2000). This new development contributed to the growth of social and economic inequalities. Archaeological evidence shows that some individuals and influential groups in the big settlements had access to more resources and wealth in imported goods than the vast majority who were living in the outlying homesteads.

After the turn of the first millennium AD, further developments resulted in the formation of the Zimbabwe culture (Huffman 1971, 1974, 1978, 1996b,

2000; Garlake 1974, 1978b, 1982; Phillipson 1977, 1985; Van Waarden 1998). The new culture was characterised by a highly complex socio-political system involving the elite ownership of cattle, intensive agriculture and the control of an ever-growing and lucrative trade with the East Coast. The evolution of complexity reached its zenith with the rise of the Mapungubwe state. This is a general and simplified version of complex developments that occurred in the region at the turn of the first millennium AD. It is essential to describe the geographical setting within which these early developments occurred.

CHAPTER 2

THE GEOGRAPHY BEHIND CULTURE HISTORY

2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING OF THE SHASHE-LIMPOPO BASIN

The Shashe and Limpopo rivers come together at the boundaries of South Africa, the Tuli Block of Botswana, and the Matebeleland South Province of Zimbabwe (Fig. 1.1). The two rivers were important focal points in the development of socio-political complexity.

The basin has a single rainy season in summer, between November and March. The annual precipitation is low and erratic varying from 140 mm to 500 mm with a mean average of 350 mm. Few places enjoy consistent rainfall. Instead, there are marked fluctuations from year to year, variable times when the rains come and sudden heavy downpours. What is more important is not just the total annual precipitation but also its distribution over the season. The present high summer temperatures, exceeding 30^{o} Celsius, and low precipitation shows that dry-land cultivation is difficult.

Massive floods are on record. Local farming communities, such as the Maramani farmers in Zimbabwe, cultivate the flood plains. This practice is not limited to the Limpopo basin alone. Northern Shona in the mid-Zambezi valley, for example, still practice flood plain agriculture along the Muzarabani River (Murimbika 1995; Pwiti 1996)



Plate 2.1: The Shashe-Limpopo landscape from the southern end of K2 facing northeast.



Plate 2.2: The Shashe-Limpopo confluence with dense vegetation along the river.

Geologically, the basin is part of the Limpopo Mobile Belt. Basalt intrudes as dykes and sills in the otherwise sandstone formations belonging to the Karoo sequence (Plate 2.1). The predominant soil types are *Calcic* and *Gleyic Luvisols*, *Chromic* and *Vertic Cambisols*, and a combination of *Lithic Leptosols* and *Vertisols* (FAO 1977-8). Soil characteristics are important to traditional farmers as these affect their choices of field locations and indigenous crops.

The vegetation is predominantly open, deciduous tree savanna with mopane (*Colophospermum)* in the lowlands, *Commiphora-combretum* at medium and low altitudes and *Terminalia sericea* at medium altitudes and in river valleys. Baobabs (*Adansonia digitata)* are also typical of the area. The narrow floodplain supports riparian bush with large trees in a microhabitat not found beyond the river belt (Plate 2.2). Grasses are sparse, but they are palatable and attract large herds of grazers. The low-rainfall lowlands support a sweetveld of annual grasses available at almost all times of the year (Lightfoot 1975). The sweetveld is dominated by *Eragrostis sp*. which is sensitive to both overgrazing and extensive drought.

The Limpopo basin has supported relatively large farming communities between the 10th and 12th centuries AD and at intervals thereafter. In the last half-century European settlers introduced intensive irrigation. Local African communities, for example the Maramani communal farmers,

continue to employ subsistence farming on both dry land and flood plains of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers.

Large herds of wild animals have been documented both in archaeological contexts and from historical records of 19th century hunters (e.g. Plug 2000: 118). Later, much land was converted to cattle ranching, and overgrazing has lead to a rapid deterioration of the veld. Damage to the vegetation has been slow to repair. For example, several areas that supported large historic settlements were still denuded of vegetation by the middle of the 20th century (ibid). Today most of the commercial farms are being converted to game farms or conservation areas centred on a growing eco-tourism market.

2.2 PAST CLIMATIC CONDITIONS

Successive studies on the palaeoenvironment of Southern Africa based on atmospheric-circulation anomalies indicate that regional climatic conditions are complex (Tyson 1987, Tyson *et. al.* 2000). According to Tyson, contractions of the circumpolar vortex and weak westerly wind systems have promoted these anomalies. These conditions in turn promoted anticyclone circulations over the extreme Southern Atlantic region and the Southern Indian Ocean. Consequently the India Tropical Zone shifts southwards, promoting constant continental rains over the region. The reverse condition saw the circumpolar vortex expand, returning the westerly winds over the Southern African region. These in turn promote

dry conditions in the continental interior. This circle ensured warm wet summers and dry winters in the region (ibid.).

The El Nino Southern Oscillation is responsible for disrupting the atmospheric system. The disruption causes flooding in some areas and extreme droughts in others (Partridge 1993:241, NOAA 1998). The 1982-83 drought (Cohen and Tyson 1995) and 1999-2000 floods are local examples.

With reference to the first Millennium AD, Tyson & Lindesay (1992) have reconstructed a regional palaeoenvironmental scenario where it was cooler from AD 100 to AD 200 with the conditions warming between *c.* AD 250 and AD 600. This period was once again followed by a cooler atmospheric regime up to *c.* 900 AD (Tyson & Cohen 1992). A similar picture emerges in a global perspective (Wigley & Kelly 1990). In this context, many references have been made about the palaeoenvironmental conditions and human activities in the Southern African region (e.g. Hall 1987; Huffman 1996a, 2000). Some scholars suggest that the low levels of Lake Cheshi in Zambia around 2000 years ago could have been due to land clearance activities by early farming communities, rather than direct dry conditions (Stager 1988: 62-3). Similarly, Scott (1987: 1) identified a notable decline in tree pollen in Venda, Limpopo Province, which he attributed to clearing and burning of woody vegetation by in-coming farmers in the last 1500 years.

Table 2.1: Palaeoenvironment conditions for Southern Africa. Modified from Tyson *et.al.* 2000 cited in Huffman (2004: 95).

Period AD	*Climatic Conditions*
1750-1800	Warm and wet period
1700-1750	Cool and dry - further drop in interior temperatures and summer rainfall.
1650-1700	Relatively warmer than Little Ice Age phases
1350-1600	Cooler phase of the Little Ice Age: low summer rainfall in interior Southern Africa
1300-1350	Cold and wet
1000 -1300	Medieval Warm Epoch: variable but generally warmer wet conditions with highest temperatures occurring between 1250 and 1300.

A warm wet spell occurred between AD 900 and 1300, known as the Medieval Warm Epoch (Tyson 1992). According to recent studies by J. Smith (2005), however, the warm wet spell did not begin until AD 1000. Cohen and Tyson (1995) note that there were temperature drops during both winter and summer periods some 650 years ago. This marked the end of the Medieval Warm Epoch and the beginning of the so-called Little Ice Age. Smith's new data show that the Little Ice Age in the basin was still wet but cold, the palynologial and micro-mammalian data (Scott & Bousman 1990; Scott & Thackery 1987; Avery 1990; Pwiti 1996; Manyanga *et. al.* 2000) and dendrochronological data (Tyson & Lindesay 1992) show relatively wetter conditions but colder. The

palaeoenvironmental conditions of Southern Africa may be tabulated as below.

Changing climatic conditions would have led to changes in the vegetation. Human developments were neither oblivious nor protected from these changes. Therefore, any attempt to reconstruct prehistoric lifeways in the region will have to take cognisance of this environmental background.

CHAPTER 3

PREVIOUS RESEARCH IN THE SHASHE-LIMPOPO BASIN

In this chapter I discuss the research aims in more detail, focusing on a critique of previous archaeological research in the region. I present a culture history of the basin to set the background for the research design and procedures presented in the next chapters.

Archaeological sequences are derived from dates associated with distinct material culture, variants and traits. Examples include pottery style, house type and spatial organisation of settlements. The culture history of the basin has been increasingly clarified as more data from excavations and detailed surveys become available.

3.1 HUNTER-GATHERER COMMUNITIES

I do not intend to dwell on the debate concerning the subsequent changing relations between hunter-gatherers, foragers, herders and eventually farmers. Such debates are effectively covered elsewhere (e.g. Smith & Hall 2000). Evidently, hunter-gatherer communities continued to occupy the basin side-by-side with incoming farming communities. They interacted socially, exchanging products and services. Hunter-gatherer artefacts have been found on Iron Age sites and vice versa (Meyer 1998; Hall & Smith 2000), and farmers may have relied on hunter-gatherers for

rainmaking rituals (Schoeman, 2006). By the turn of the first millennium AD, farming communities had taken full cultural control of the region.

3.2 THE SPREAD OF FARMING

Early Iron Age

The earliest known farming communities to enter this northern region produced Happy Rest pottery, named after the first recorded site (De Vaal, 1943). This group belonged to the Western Stream, or Kalundu Tradition (Huffman 1979, 1989; Phillipson 1979). Happy Rest pottery has been dated to about AD 500 (Hanisch 1981: 5). It has been recovered from the southern terraces of Mapungubwe (Meyer 1997, cited in Huffman 2000), and from a few other hilltops in what Huffman has described as rainmaking contexts (Huffman 2000: 16), that is from tops of isolated hills with difficult access.

Generally speaking, Happy Rest people practised mixed farming. They settled in easily cultivatable areas with alluvial and colluvial soils. They grew sorghum and millet primarily and herded domesticated cattle, sheep and goats. They also supplemented their food with hunting and fishing (Plug 2000: 121-124).

By AD 600, Happy Rest people had probably left the area. This movement out probably coincided with the change to colder and drier conditions discussed in Chapter 2. Although the data available thus far is not conclusive, this is a reasonable link.

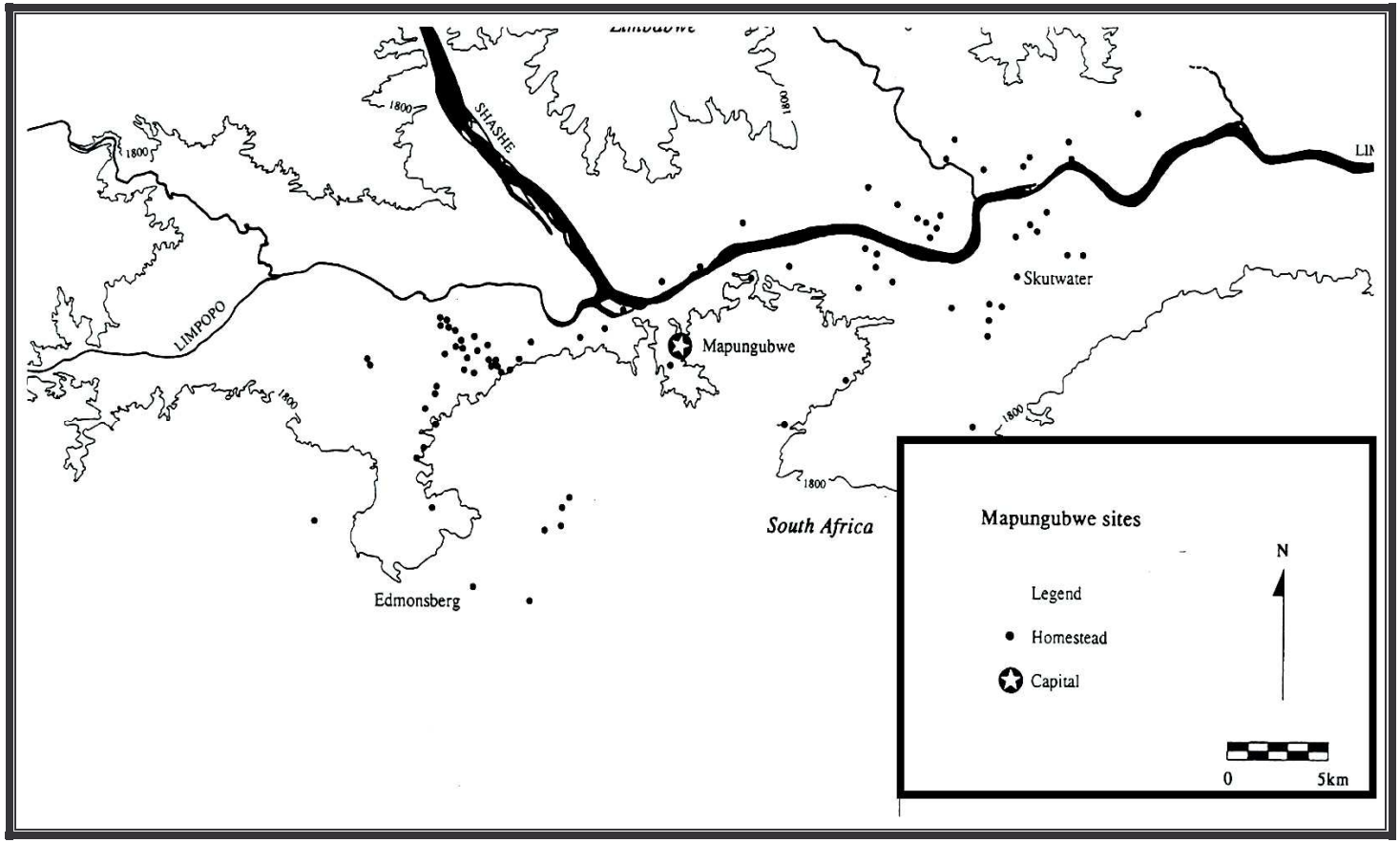


Fig 3.1: The Shashe-Limpopo basin showing the distribution of Mapungubwe period sites. More recent data indicates that site density is even higher (After Huffman 2000: 23).

Zhizo communities

About AD 900, Zhizo pottery-producing farmers moved into the valley. Zhizo pottery is characterized by pots with bands of oblique incision and comb stamping on lower rim; stamped triangles on the upper shoulder followed by horizontal lines of stamping (Huffman 1974; Hanisch 1980). This ceramic style is found in southwest Zimbabwe and adjacent parts of Botswana as well as the Limpopo basin (Robinson 1960, 1966; Huffman 1973, 1984; Hanisch 1980; Denbow 1982; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1992; Campbell *et. al.* 1996). Zhizo sites are generally dated between AD 720 and 1020 (Vogel *et. al.* 1993; Huffman 2000: 16).

Several Zhizo sites have been found in the basin, and most conform to the Central Cattle Pattern (Huffman 1982, Evers, 1984; Loubser, 1985; Denbow, 1986; Van Waarden, 1989; Whitelaw, 1993). Schroda was the biggest and most probably the capital of Zhizo people in the basin. Judging from the hierarchy of Zhizo settlements, Schroda was a level-3 capital and the seat of a chief with at least 300 residents (Huffman 1986a, 2000). Hanisch's (1980) excavations at Schroda yielded a large cache of unusual figurines, which ethnographically have been linked to initiation ceremonies that were probably controlled by the chief (Hanisch 2002; Mönnig 1967: 126-7). This lends further credence to Schroda's chiefly status.

The Zhizo phase is important in the local prehistory because it was at this time that the region was integrated into the Indian Ocean trade network. The earliest evidence of trade contacts consists of numerous glass beads recovered from Schroda (Hanisch 1980, 1981). Glass beads, and most probably cloth, were exchanged for ivory and other animal products. About AD 1000, the volume of trade between the valley and the coast appears to have increased. This period coincided with the arrival of Leopard's Kopje people. These were proto Shona-speaking groups who came to the valley through a local movement from the southeast (Huffman 1974). Two phases, A and B, of Leopard's Kopje ceramics in the basin are represented by K2 and Mapungubwe pottery respectively (ibid.).

3.3 THE RISE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL COMPLEXITY

Previously, it was thought that around AD 1000 Schroda was abandoned and Zhizo ceramics disappeared from the region. It seemed that Zhizo ceramics were rapidly replaced by K2 (Huffman 1974, 1978, 2000: 16-20; Hanisch 1980). However, new studies show that some Zhizo people remained behind and were integrated into the new and larger political formations (Calabrase 2000, 2001). Their Zhizo-derived pottery is now called Leokwe. Current studies will shed more light on the matter.

K2 ceramics are characterised by pots with incised triangles, arcades and chevrons in the neck, dating from *c.* AD 1000 to 1250 (Huffman 2000 Table 2: 18). The K2 people practiced mixed agriculture, growing mainly

pearl millet (*Pennisetum thyphoides)*, and sorghum *(Sorghum bicolor)* as well as various peas and beans (Eloff & Meyer 1981:16). The communities raised cattle, goats and sheep with reduced dependence on hunting (Voigt 1983: 131-135). The K2 population grew considerably, and at its zenith the capital had some 1500 residents (Huffman 2000: 23). It is projected that at least some 60 K2 homesteads dotted the Shashe-Limpopo basin between AD 1000 and AD 1250 (ibid.) (Fig. 3.2).

More important, the K2 elite took control of the long distance trade with the East Coast. Archaeologists have recovered huge amounts of exotic glass beads from K2 (Wood 2000). The K2 people may also have imported cloth. They exported ivory, animal skins and according to Arab documents, probably gold (Huffman 1982), although no direct physical evidence has been found linking K2 to gold working yet. K2 craftsmen also made their own glass beads from the imports. These are known as “garden rollers”, and they have been found on sites as far away as the contemporary Toutswe capital of Toutswemogala in Botswana (Lepionka 1977; Denbow 1983). The limited distribution of imported goods and concentration of ivory products and glass beads are indications that the Leopard’s Kopje capital controlled the interior portions of the coastal trade. The re-processing of the small glass beads into the larger garden rollers may be seen as a deliberate attempt by the K2 leadership to increase the value of trade beads.

The expansion of the East Cost trade brought a revolutionary turn of events in the valley. Long distance trade generated considerable wealth beyond what could have been possible through cattle (Huffman 2000: 25). Huffman's argument that trade wealth directly contributed to inequality and increased political power for an elite group is persuasive. This inequality changed the whole socio-political order in the valley, leading to radical changes in the spatial organisation at K2, the shift to Mapungubwe Hill, and the creation of a new settlement pattern (Huffman 1996b; 2000: 26).

K2 started as a Central Cattle Pattern settlement, but at some point, cattle were shifted from the centre. The centre continued to be intensively used, most probably as the commonman's court. Recent evidence from the rehabilitation excavations I conducted between 2001 and 2003 shows that a midden progressively encroached from the edges of the kraal to eventually replace it after the cattle were relocated. This change represented a major shift in spatial organisation that corresponded to changes in socio-political relationships between commoners and the leadership.

For the first time in the history of the region, cattle - the symbol of male wealth - were separated from the central space. This reflects the rise of a new form of wealth, the fruits of the East Coast trade and restricted ownership of cattle. By AD 1220 developments at K2 had overtaken the

spatial organisation, and the community had to shift its capital to Mapungubwe Hill where a different layout could be established.

When K2 people moved to Mapungubwe, the ceramic style changed somewhat, ultimately becoming Mapungubwe. Among other features, the surface finish was enhanced and earlier designs elaborated.

Commoner sites in the area with Mapungubwe pottery continued to be organised along the Central Cattle Pattern. Therefore, spatial changes from K2 to Mapungubwe were limited to the top structures of the society. Regional centres with Mapungubwe pottery also developed in the area, forming five administrative levels within 100 km of the capital. Sites such as Mtetengwe (Robinson 1958), Skutwater (Van Ewyk 1987) and Edmondsberg (Calabrese 2005) represent the first two settlement levels. The third level is represented by small elite hilltop settlements such as Mmamagwa in Botswana (Tamplin 1977). Provincial capitals such as Mapela Hill in Zimbabwe (Garlake 1966, 1968) represent the fourth level. Mapungubwe was two to three times larger than Mapela, making it the capital of the region. With five settlement levels, Mapungubwe was Southern Africa's first state (Huffman 1982).

The Mapungubwe nobility had well-recognised rights, duties and behaviour (Huffman 1996b; 2000). The senior families of different lineages across the cultural area formed a single bureaucratic upper class,

restricting wealth, prestige and political power to themselves. Commoners, in contrast, lacked the same access to wealth, prestige and power. Secondly, the two classes perpetuated themselves biologically through special marriage patterns. The nobles developed equal marriage alliances by giving and receiving daughters from the same families. The commoners continued asymmetric marriages where they became father-in-law to one family and son-in-law to the other. Thus the elite formed a group increasingly unrelated to the commoners. The upper class held political power, and hence the marriage structures created a kin\civil dichotomy.

Class distinction was legitimised by the ideology of sacred leadership. This refers to the association that was drawn between the leader and the land and the leader and God. In the Zimbabwe culture, God made it rain and it is to God people turned through the leaders and their ancestors (Huffman 1996b). This concept differs from other Bantu-speaking groups, such as present-day Nguni where the rainmaker is a special medicine man, not a chief. Furthermore, sacred leaders were approved by the ancestors: they were not hereditary in the strict sense. Class distinction and sacred leadership characterised Mapungubwe and subsequent phases of the Zimbabwe culture, and represent the most complex society in precolonial Southern Africa (Huffman 2000: 14).

3.4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Iron Age archaeological research in the Limpopo basin goes back to the early 1930s, focusing on Mapungubwe and K2 (Gardner 1955, 1958, 1963; Garlake 1966, 1968; Meyer 1998). As is well known now, early researchers worked in a methodological vacuum where standards and guidelines were not yet available (Eloff 1998). Excavation procedures were limited, including detailed documentation, and these limitations later drew much criticism (e.g. Pikirayi 1997b: 68-76).

Gardner (1963) extensively excavated Mapungubwe and K2. He was specifically searching for settlement deposits containing cultural material and human skeletons. Based on his work, early interpretations emphasised a succession of population groups: “Hottentots”, Nguni, Sotho, and Venda and back to “Hottentots” (Gardner 1963). As part of this framework, the human skeletons recovered from K2 and Mapungubwe were identified as “Bush-Boskop” (Galloway 1959: 118-125). On the other hand, Schofield (1948) believed the Mapungubwe burials and associated pottery reflected different Bantu-speaking people. This position was taken more seriously in the 1960s. In keeping with interpretations elsewhere, he perceived all pottery changes as externally influenced and therefore related to the arrival of new groups.

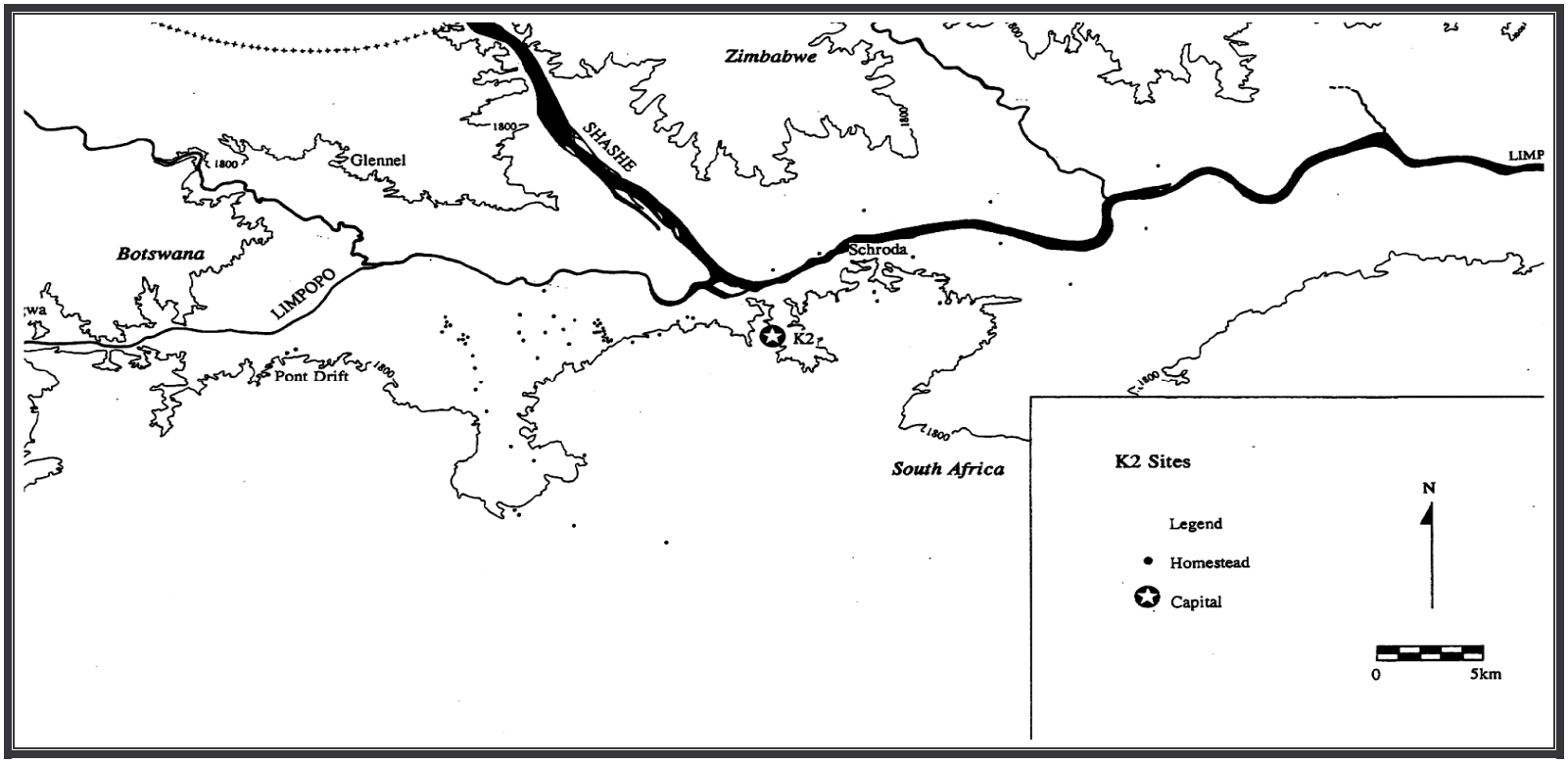


Fig 3.2: Distribution of K2 period sites (*c.* AD 1000 – 1220) in the Shashe-Limpopo basin (After Huffman 2000:17). Current surveys in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwean are yielding more data on spatial distribution.

Further north in present day Zimbabwe, a new crop of archaeologists such as Robinson and Summers had accepted Childe's (1929) concept of "archaeological culture". Summers (1950: 95-107) introduced the term "Iron Age" to Southern African prehistory. These developments forced researchers in the basin to redirect their efforts. The new thrust in the 1950s and 1960s was to establish the age and chronology of the Greefswald cultures and the racial contexts of the people. Thus, research turned to stratigraphic aspects, radiocarbon dating and pottery sequences. With improved research techniques and methodologies, more attention was devoted to pottery classifications (e.g. Huffman 1974). Archaeologists and linguists began to equate Early Iron Age culture with Bantu-speaking people (e.g. Guthrie 1962; 1967-71).

From the 1970s, interpretations of Iron Age culture developed from pottery typologies, material culture chronology and spatial distributions of sites. Ceramic traditions contributed to models of migration (Huffman 1974, 1978, 1984; Phillipson 1977, 1985). Eventually, Schroda, K2, Mapungubwe, and other related sites were placed in a chronological sequence. In the 1980s Huffman (1982, 1986b) pioneered cognitive studies for the Southern African region. According to Huffman, far reaching cultural changes developed after the arrival of Leopard's Kopje. These developments involved changes in interpersonal relations, perceptions of nature as well as the supernatural. Huffman's structuralist

approach focused on the spatial organization of Zhizo, Mapungubwe and Zimbabwe period sites (1982).

In his subsequent publications (1986, 1989, 1996b, 2000b) Huffman explicitly places the culture-history developments in the context of changing ideology and religious practices. He argues that political power evolved from a ranked kin-based structure to highly stratified social classes with sacred leadership. Under this structure, social values and settlement layout changed too. At Mapungubwe the royal elite were separated from the commoners: the king now lived in isolation while commoners remained in outlying homesteads organised according to the Central Cattle Pattern. Other changes included the intensification of flood plain agriculture and commodification of gold production.

Recent research emphasises lifeways and more detailed explanations for culture change (Huffman 1996c, 2000; Calabrese 1997, 1998; 2005; Huffman *et. al.* 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004) including ethnic stratification (Calabrese 2005) and the archaeology of rainmaking (Schoeman 2006). It is within this context that the present research was formulated.

3.5 DEFICIENCIES IN EXISTING DATA

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the rise of complex societies is a dominant aspect of prehistoric studies in the basin. Debates have focused on various stimuli. External stimuli come from features as diverse

as long distance trade, conquest and migration of new cultural groups. Change has also been ascribed to internal political endeavours. Studies have focused on the actions of individual social agents or political entrepreneurs who strived to increase their own power and prestige within local constraints and opportunities (e.g. Pwiti 1996; Huffman 2000; Pikirayi 2001).

Clearly, it is evident that research has progressed, but I contend several parameters still remain poorly understood. This is especially so with reference to daily dynamics, belief systems, socio-political interactions, intra-regional relationships and subsistence agricultural strategies. Changes in culture are certainly important. Indeed, the importance of rainmaking rituals and agricultural practices in the development of sacred leadership and social complexity may not be overemphasized. This is especially so because transitions from ranked-based to class-based societies are concerned with changes in ideology (Flannery & Marcus 1993: 263).

According to recent studies (e.g. Huffman 1996b), a shift probably occurred from talented people who manipulated impersonal supernatural forces to sacred leaders whose ancestors communicated with God. From this standpoint, there is a need to analyse ritual sites dating to the Zhizo, K2 and Mapungubwe periods. This research seeks to make such a contribution through empirical data and relevant ethnographic models.

Furthermore, no research has ever attempted to link rainmaking ritual and agricultural practices in Southern Africa in general and in the Shashe-Limpopo basin in particular. Little is known about agricultural strategies that enabled Mapungubwe people to support their ever-expanding populations. Today we know that indigenous agricultural strategies are not limited to crude ‘slash and burn” methods, but include a wide array of soil and water conservation measures tailored to local crops and local conditions. Ethnographic examples show a range of intensification from floodplain to dry land fields (e.g. Murimbika 1995). These examples have the potential to help understand agriculture on the Shashe-Limpopo flood plains.

I contend that the control of rainmaking rituals was an institutional mechanism for controlling agricultural productivity. The present ethnoarchaeological study offers one method to examine these inter-related aspects. Therefore, in many ways, this study is an attempt to correct research imbalances.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

> *Power is like the wind: we cannot see it, but we can feel its force. Ceremonial is like the snow: an insubstantial pageant soon melted into thin air, so invisible and ephemeral, hence difficult to study* – D. Cannadine (1987).

The success of an archaeological inquiry is not judged, nor is it dependent on, right or wrong methods. The method needs to be in relation to the questions. First, there has to be a premise to enable the conclusion. As Huffman notes, in empirical sciences, premises do not form a deductive link to the outcome (1997: 139). In studies such as archaeology, premises and hypotheses may well be hidden. Therefore, the selected method of study should explicitly allow for testing conclusions (Huffman 2004: 69).

It follows that the scientific mode of inquiry should not be merely a process of listing the most enticing conclusions (Gould 1987: 417). In fact, the conclusions are the consequences and not the essence. In search of the appropriate method to address questions on rainmaking and agricultural practices, I note that it is simply not sufficient, nor is it possible, to draw

reliable conclusions based on archaeological data alone. I therefore adopted ethnoarchaeology.

I explore Venda, Sotho-Tswana and Shona traditional agriculture and belief systems through their cosmologies and practices. In keeping with the original aims, I use these data to draw archaeological implications and to generate hypotheses about prehistoric practices.

Generally speaking, there has never been a unified school of archaeological thought: the subject has always been characterised by competing stances that often arise from different bodies of data and attendant problems of interpretation (Yoffee & Sherratt, 1993: 1). Typically, there is limited agreement among archaeologists, historians and anthropologists about ethnoarchaeological reconstructions. These concerns have been dealt with elsewhere (e.g. Huffman 1996b, 1997, 2004; Beach *et. al.* 1997, Beach *et. al.,* 1998), and I do not review them. Rather, the core of the present chapter concerns the current practice of ethnoarchaeology.

4.1 REGIONAL CULTURAL CONTINUITIES

Continuous cultural sequences offer an opportunity to derive explanatory models from descendant societies. In Southern Africa, centres of power geographically shifted through out the second millennium from Mapungubwe to Great Zimbabwe and eventually to Khami in the

southwest and Mutapa in the north of Zimbabwe. There is strong archaeological evidence for cultural continuity through out this political development and into historic Venda society. Clearly, this cultural continuity offers an opportunity for ethnoarchaeology.

4.2 ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

Although different human and social sciences influence archaeology, ethnography and anthropology are the most important. Ethnoarchaeology to me is the most far-reaching contribution to cognitive archaeology. This methodology enables an understanding of the relation between material culture and social organisation (Binford 1962; Trigger 1995: 449).

Ethnoarchaeology, however, has sparked a long and protracted debate among archaeologists, historians and anthropologists particularly in Southern African. This debate reached its zenith after the publication of Huffman's ethnoarchaeological study of the Zimbabwe culture entitled *Snakes and crocodiles: power and symbolism in ancient Zimbabwe* (1996). The criticisms and comments were so divergent that one wondered whether the reviews were referring to the same publication (Beach 1997: 125-127, 1998; Bourdillon 1997: 127-128; Denbow 1997: 128-129; Hall 1997: 129-132; Lane 1997 132-135, 1998; Pikirayi 1997a: 135-137; Pwiti 1997: 137-8). It is not surprising that Huffman replied:

> Much of the criticism … stems from different approaches to the past… Some colleagues think *Snakes and crocodiles* proceeds in logical steps, others that it is circular. Some think the ethnographic data lack

> context, others think the associations between the ethnographic and archaeological data are well established. Some question the whole enterprise, others challenge the details… (1997: 138).

There are, however, some thought provoking observations about the relevance of ethnographic analogies in archaeological interpretations. In my opinion, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of ethnoarchaeological practices.

First, ethnoarchaeology is a combination of two disciplines: archaeology - techniques for recovering and recording material remains of past cultures; and ethnology - the study of human behaviour and social organisation in living societies (Gould 1977). In this combination, archaeologists are relying more on their own ethnological studies to obtain insights into past behaviour. An ethnoarchaeological framework is an integrated and necessary part of archaeology since most inference is via analogies. While individual interpreters may not do fieldwork in living societies themselves, they rely upon published anthropological, archival and ethnographic literature as a basis for analogical reasoning. This option is referred to here as “passive ethnoarchaeology”.

Secondly, ethnoarchaeology is a method of collecting primary data in a non-excavation situation directly related to archaeological problems. These data are subsequently used as theoretical frameworks and analogies. The overall aim is to understand the relationship between

artefacts and the cultural environment within which they are produced, used and discarded (Haaland 1977:1). Ethnoarchaeology may include studies of “living” or “action” archaeology along with other approaches (Gould 1977: 162). This may be done in two distinct yet related ways:

(a) ***In a particular way on the basis of specific archaeological material.*** The archaeologists themselves provide the relevant ethnographic and archaeological documentation they need to propose a hypothesis about how material culture was used in the past (e.g. Hodder 1982a; Haaland 1995; Huffman 1996b).

(b) ***In a general way on the basis of general archaeological principles.*** By exploring the connection between material culture and human behaviour in different ethnographic societies, it is possible to develop generalised meanings and methodological principles that could be applied to specific questions and problems.

I will refer to both practices as “active ethnoarchaeology” because it is the archaeologists themselves who study living behaviour. As practicing archaeologists, Watson argues, “we will surely benefit from the necessity of entering that portion of the anthropological field… and carry out archaeologically oriented ethnographic research ourselves” (1979: 301).

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Ethnographic fieldwork

I conducted my fieldwork in a series of trips to Zimbabwe, building on ethnographic research that started in 1998. Fieldwork in the Limpopo Province began in 2000. Naturally, the fieldwork created a number of opportunities as well as problems. Each trip played an important role in the development process of the next fieldwork.

Choice of Societies for Study

The choice of groups was determined by my aims. This study focuses on particular developments that occurred in the Shashe-Limpopo basin and then spread on to the Zimbabwe Plateau. Selected societies therefore needed to be widely distributed to show that agricultural and rainmaking practices are not restricted to closely related social groups within a small geographical area.

It is also important that the groups are different. For example, there are distinctive linguistic differences between Shona, Venda, and Sotho-Tswana groups (Hammond-Tooke 1974). However, all are Eastern Bantu-speaking. Furthermore, they all value cattle but arrange their settlements differently. The Shona no longer arrange their settlements according to the Zimbabwe pattern like the Venda, that emphasizes the difference between royal and commoners (see Huffman 1996b). Sotho-Tswana homesteads, on the other hand, are grouped in large agglomerations (Hammond-

Tooke, 1993; Mönnig 1967) that follow a town version of the Central Cattle Pattern (see Kuper 1982; Huffman 1982; Hammond-Tooke 1993). Finally, the selected groups are descendants of the Iron Age farming communities whose history we are attempting to reconstruct.

Field Situations

In the course of the field research, I conducted formal and informal interviews with individuals and groups of people of different socio-political standings in their respective communities. Some were specialists in rainmaking activities. I had opportunities to conduct group discussions at traditional activities, such as beer parties. Some data, however, remained elusive, particularly details of specific medicines and sacred activities related to rainmaking rites.

During the initial field trips, local people were always sceptical and suspicious of strangers who ask questions about ritual activities. There are two sides to this field problem. Although the research areas are relatively far apart, the communities share similar beliefs and concerns. In Sekhukhune and Makgabeng, for example, I had the problem of discouraging people from thinking that I was conducting the research as a “witch-hunt”. Fears of witchcraft are high in both areas, and everyone’s first impression is suspicion. Secondly, as an outsider, local communities need real convincing why they should share intimate details about their

beliefs and rituals. In any case, it is difficult for most people to discuss their beliefs, since the beliefs are a way of life rather than points of debate.

To overcome these problems, I made several trips to the same areas. The multiple trips established a sense of confidence and a relationship with the communities. In some circumstances I was fortunate. In my first trip to Sekhukhune in 2002, for example, I was in the company of a colleague who had been conducting developmental anthropological research in the area since 2000. She is familiar with the area, the villages, the communities and local leaders. She introduced me to Moyalodi Ramaila (a retired schoolteacher) from Jane Furse. Ramaila became my field contact during most of my consecutive research trips. In the subsequent years to 2005, I conducted several heritage impact assessments in the district, affording the opportunity to collect ethnographic data.

My first trip to Makgabeng in 2003 was in the company of Benjamin Smith of the Rock Art Research Institute (see Smith 2003) and his research team from the University of Witwatersrand. He introduced me to one local elder, the late Elias Raseruthe, who became my principal contact in this area. I also retained a local young man, Johannes Mahowa, as my field assistant. In my subsequent follow-up to Makgabeng, Jonas Tlouma, a local Tour Guide, assisted me.

I conducted several trips to Venda in the Vhembe District between 2001 and 2004. Rudzani Munyai was my local contact as well as my field assistant. He arranged for the interviews, meetings and discussions with most of the informants, prior to, and in the course of the fieldwork.

Building on preceding field experiences, I decided not to limit my interviews to structured questionnaires. This formal approach usually distorts the discussions and has a tendency of leading the respondents. Furthermore, this approach usually causes discomfort and anxiety to respondents. They want to know why they are being “interrogated”. I therefore approached informants with open questions about rainmaking and related agricultural ceremonies.

Generally, rural people categorize the past by chronology. The first category is a *“timeless past”* about origins. Such traditions refer to creation myths and dreamlike times.

The second category consists of references to a *"long-time ago"* and lacks eyewitness or any specific first-hand experience. The memories are contained in stories, folklore, and traditional songs and, more importantly for an archaeologist, through sites and the landscapes.

The third time phase of oral tradition refers to *“the olden days”.* These olden days are linked to an idyllic past when things “were better… and

tradition was still the ideal life style…" Such times are described with authority, either as first-hand experiences of the very old, or as authentic indigenous knowledge the elders received from their predecessors. Such data include detailed descriptions of pre-European periods, the coming of Europeans as well as 20th century conflicts and colonial experiences. I usually held these discussions with traditional authorities, comparing then and now. Mostly, things have deteriorated from a traditional perspective. The Shona have several idioms that refer to this belief. For example, *pasi pasati parohwa nenyundo* – "before the hammer hit the earth" – literally meaning before things turned bad as they are today.

The last and fourth phase I refer to as *"living memory".* It consists of first-hand experience, either as a participant, or contact with those who actively participated or are still participating. People in Sekhukhune, for example, vividly remember the changes that were brought about by the Afrikaans Nationalist rule from the 1950s. The elders give details about the rivalry between Chiefs Sekhukhune and Sekwati in the then Central Bantu Homeland. The locals also give clear details of the current political rivalry between Sekhukhune royal brothers, Ryn and Kennedy. The Makgabeng Hananwa people refer to encounters with migrant labourers who passed through from the north enroute to mines in the Witwatersrand. As a final example, some Hananwa remember the 1940s when the colonial administrators came to villages with Chief Malebôhô to recruit young healthy man for the Second World War.

Limitations and problems

Being a member of one of the indigenous groups, I had certain privileges with respect to data gathering. Nonetheless, I encountered certain problems, most of which are common to this kind of research:

(a) Few interviews in a few locations. I visited several villages both in Zimbabwe and Limpopo Province. Given the time and other logistical realities, I had to rely on a limited number of informants in each case. Initial interviews are often contradicted later. It usually took repeated visits to the same people to establish good working relationships.

Ethnological studies are generally criticised for being impressionistic because they lack precision and are not quantified (Hammerslay, 1998: 9). From field experience, I found nothing intrinsic to the data that exclude quantification. However, quantitative precision is neither always required nor is it the standard measure of success.

Furthermore, ethnographic findings are also criticised because they are based on small samples. In my research, the choice of small samples represents a trade-off between studying cases in depth or in breath. I am concerned with discovering principles rather than making empirical generalisations.

(b) Language problem and the "interpreter effect". Whilst language was not a problem north of the Limpopo, it was an issue among Sotho-Tswana and Venda speaking communities south of the Limpopo. In all situations I first established good relationships with the local elders, most of whom I adopted as my principal informants. The local field assistants further cushioned my linguistic limitations. In Sekhukhune, for example, Ramaila is a retired schoolteacher and also a respected local elder with whom I could effectively communicate in English. In Venda Rudzani Munyai is an archaeology graduate, who has worked with me before (and continues to do so now).

In addition, I had the opportunity to present some of my results to elderly people I worked with at K2 during an archaeological project between 2001 and 2003. Members of this group were mainly Venda and Sotho speakers, and a few also spoke Shona. These independent discussions helped me to verify or clarify some data. This gave me the opportunity to visit some of their villages in the Vhembe District.

(c) Psychological vulnerability. Being a Shona speaker, by experience I was familiar with Shona customs beforehand. In fact, I had participated in some of the rituals and agricultural activities under study. More importantly, I came from a family of *mhondoro* spirit mediums of the Kazangarare chieftaincy. As a result, there was a conflict between personal and professional aspects in the field. For example, I had to

inquire about rainmaking rituals of the Korekore, yet I was raised to conduct these very rituals but not to question. I simply note here that I was aware of this situation during the research.

By the same token, confidence even among my own people does not reside in my cultural background, but in the assiduous fieldwork and archival research I conducted. Nonetheless, I do not dismiss the advantages of having a profound familiarity of the cultural context of the study.

(d) **Acknowledging change** is probably one of the major criticisms levelled against the ethnoarchaeological approach. By its nature ethnological data is synchronic, but it is nevertheless possible to develop an independent chronology that may be matched with ethnological events.

Background of informants: a case study

The ethnographic fieldwork brought me in contact with a variety of individuals and groups. These people had common, or rather, similar backgrounds within their particular and yet individual socio-cultural environments. The following detail of my first field trip to Venda provides a good case study representative of the fieldwork in general.

My first Venda trip was to Tshipise Village in Mutale, Vhembe District. I was with Rudzani Munyai. Since I was hosted by VhoMunyai (Rudzani

Munyai's mother in her late 80s), we began by holding lengthy discussions over a couple of weeks on different topics, ranging from, rainmaking, *thevhula* (thanksgiving)ceremonies, working *dzunde* (tribute field), 'seed doctoring" ceremonies, traditional agricultural practices and traditional grain storage techniques. The discussions with Munyai's mother were held in an environment where she was comfortable in teaching us about the "Venda way of doing things".

In the neighbouring village of Dambale, we approached VhoMutshagole Nenweli, a widow of a local rainmaker. Our experiences with VhoMutshagole represent some of the common difficulties. Rudzani Munyai, in preparation for the fieldwork, had spoken to VhoMutshangole about rainmaking and the related agricultural rituals. When Munyai and I returned a few weeks later, however, she had changed her mind about further talks. She claimed she was not sure whether she knew much. Through perseverance and patience on subsequent visits, we managed to convince her to share with us the "little" that she knew about what her husband used to do as a rainmaker. This problem was not limited to VhoMutshangole. In fact, it is difficult to secure interviews with women across the study groups. Women generally are supposed to play a background role in public affairs, and they tend to plead ignorance about rituals or any other major community affair.

One of our principal contacts in Venda was the now late VhoTshigala of Tshivhongweni Village in Mutale. We visited him in September 2002. VhoTshigala was around 80 years old and had stayed in Tshivhongweni all his life. He used to assist one legendary local rainmaker named VhoTshirumbula Mikovha. We held several discussions with him on 'seed doctoring" ceremonies and *thevhula* rituals. As a community elder, he bemoaned the loss of Venda "traditional" culture and like many other elders in other groups, was always keen to speak about Venda culture and traditions as much as he remembered. We therefore visited this enthusiastic elder on more occasions. We were able to confirm and seek additional data before he passed away in late 2003.

In September of 2002, Chief Takalani Mukula hosted us at his *musanda* (royal capital) northeast of Thohoyandou. We made a few more subsequent trips to the chief (he is 40 years old and has been chief since he was 25). With his blessing, we held numerous lengthy discussions with *Makhadzi* VhoMunzhedzi NeTshiombo, the sister of Chief Mukula's late father. Typically, she lives at the royal capital.

During a subsequent trip, Chief Mukula appointed his younger brother, who holds the official title of *Ndumi* (see Stayt 1931; Huffman 1996b on discussion of Venda royal authority), to accompany us to Mukula Village 2 where we spoke to Masindi Maeba, a sister of the late local rainmaker, Tuwani Maeba. Born in 1925, the elderly Masindi Maeba related as much

as she could remember about the work of her late sister, and within the boundaries for discussing rainmaking rituals. The royal *Ndumi's* presence played an important role given the secretive nature of Venda rituals. The same was also true of similar situations elsewhere when the local leaders approved of our research.

In Phiphidi Village in Thohoyandou we interviewed VhoLydia Tshivhase who is a *vhakolo* (royal elite family member) of the Tshivhase line. Although she had little to say about rainmaking rituals, she was a reliable source on *thevhula* rituals, the 'seed doctoring" ceremonies and the Venda *dzunde* royal field concept. In the same village we also spoke to VhoVele Khangale. We followed the same pattern in other Venda villages such as Pile, Luvhubu, Phiphidi, and Gundani.

Clearly we had diversified sources: I interacted with different people from different backgrounds. The same is applicable to the Pedi communities in Sekhukhune, the Hananwa of Makgabeng and the Shona of Zimbabwe.

The problem of field relations

In the field, it is always difficult to gain trust. An explanation of why you need the information does not guarantee an honest response: there is always the tricky part of a reward. Some informants believe there is money to be gained from the data. Some even said that they had assisted researchers before and were paid for their troubles.

If I pay them, they are obliged to respond even if they do not know the answers. On the other hand, failure to reward informants who believe we make money from the information means they may either hold back or misinform us. Either way, it is a vicious circle.

I tried to break this circle by adopting particular local elders as mentors. Having convinced my adopted field mentors of the relevance of the study, I made them the leaders and I was their junior partner. Even during my absence, they continued to make inquiries, and we would discuss the data later.

Eventually, I decided not to reward informants. Traditionally, information is not for sale. For those whom we presented gifts, it was within the acceptable traditional setting where a visitor may bring gifts to the hosts. In our case, we brought groceries to informants whom we visited on several occasions. Furthermore, it is normal for anyone visiting the royal capital to bring gifts to the chief. When we visited Chiefs Takalani Mukula and Pile, we brought groceries as gifts. This approach allowed us to escape the expectation of rewards. We then assumed the position of ordinary visitors keen on learning aspects of local culture.

Finally, it is possible to verify information as we interviewed more people in the same area. In some cases I returned to the same individuals with the

same questions. I did not rely on a single source in any given context and strove to have contacts with different classes of people, ranging from royal family members, to the commoners and at times the ritual conveners themselves.

4.4 ADVANTAGES AND POSSIBILITIES

I stress here that it is relevant to be aware of the ambiguity between social processes and how they are expressed in archaeological material. Whereas anthropologists tend to concern themselves with aspects of culture not directly materialised, archaeologists are left with the material remains with few possibilities to relate them to the social world.

By relating material remains to social life, I am able to highlight certain aspects of which the informants themselves might not have been aware. Some of the remains may be perceived as the unintended consequences of an action (Giddens 1982: 30). In a way, this helps eliminate the search for a single most knowledgeable folk philosopher.

In *Balinese Worlds,* Barth (1993) defined the problem of diversity, in my opinion, in the most effective way:

> The reality that is being created, in any community or circle, must be diverse. (1) There are variations in the level of “expertise” in the population: which level could hold authority for all? (2) There is diversity of received traditions. (3) There is a varied particularism of local history, contention and context. (4) There are all the differences between people in positioning and experience, besides

> that of expertise: old and young, male and female, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable. (5) Finally, there is the pragmatics of purpose and interest: differing presentations for different tasks. Which should be the anthropologist's privilege? Or do we adhere to a belief that, if only it is thoroughly abstracted, it all coheres in its essence? (Barth 1993: 4-5).

I follow a reflexive approach in intentionally sharing (whether in agreement or disagreement) with my audience the underlying assumptions of this study. This guided the ways in which I sought answers and interpreted the results. This becomes clearer as I present the fieldwork.

CHAPTER 5

TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Reliable food production is a prerequisite for settled traditional communities. The same is particularly true in situations where these societies transformed from egalitarian, kin-based to complex class-based state systems. Class differences are a product of unequal access to particular benefits, such as the Indian Ocean trade. From another perspective, however, it could be argued that class differentiations are only possible in a relatively large population. While trade had a great impact on the development of complexity, these developments were intricately interwoven with agricultural production. To understand how population growth was sustained, it is necessary to understand agricultural strategies.

Eastern Bantu-speaking farmers of Southern Africa have for almost two millennia relied on a combination of cereal cultivation and livestock production. Traditional agriculture has gone through several changes most recently due to colonial influences. Indigenous farmers have, however, retained many important principles and aspects of their agricultural practices. These include the choice of farmland crops, cultivation techniques as well as agricultural calendars and associated ceremonies.

5.1 TRADITIONAL FIELD SYSTEMS

It is common practice to cut the main field from bush that surrounds a new settlement. Stones are usually heaped into cairns and the vegetation burnt, leaving the ash as fertilizer. Similar activities have been recorded in documents dating back to the 15th century. For example, the German explorer Carl Mauch has this to say about the Makalaka (19th century Karanga Shona):

> The bush is cut down and grass torn up by its roots and left to decompose… Stones are placed out of the way, and either piled into heaps or laid in rows… and during the winter months, trees are felled which, when sufficiently dry, are burnt in the land which is to be cultivated… When the stacked grass is sufficiently dry, it is also burnt and then the ground is ready to receive the seed (Bernhard 1969: 198).

Tree branches are also used to fence the fields from both wild and domestic animals. Farmers hoe and plough before they sow the seeds. Every activity is timed and guided by seasons, which are usually announced by the performance of specific rituals.

Thomas Morgan left detailed descriptions of the preparations and management of cropland in the 19th century:

> … the husband begin to fence it [the specially selected plot] round… for a month or more, until the persevering woman has actually broken up the whole patch of new or fallow land. The time for sowing having come, she goes over the same ground carefully

> again, while her husband is chopping down branches of the large trees… (Reid 1977: 97-8).

Fire is also an important component of traditional farming. Fire retards the growth of certain plants while promoting others. This reduces the biomass, thereby, lessening the competition for water. Different farmers told the author that plants benefit from the death of other plants. When unwanted plants are burnt, they help by depositing their nutrients. Although this is a limited explanation for a complex process, it does capture the basic principles of soil fertility management. As a general rule, savannah soils respond to nitrate and phosphates. Burning bushes help reduce phosphorus deficiencies by releasing phosphorus and potassium (Ruthenburg 1971). Traditional farmers directly observe the benefits of such practices.

Traditional field sizes expand on an annual basis. Among mid-Zambezi Gwembe Tonga, the main field per family grows from two to ten acres over a period of ten or less years (Reynolds, 1968: 73). The direction of this extension is away from the settlements. At some point it becomes necessary to have temporary homes at the far end of the fields. This allows farmers to maximize their working time as well as to protect the crops. In the old days, when the fields became too far, both the village and the field were abandoned. A new site was selected in another virgin area and the process repeated.

There are a host of factors that influence traditional field systems. Villages may continue to be occupied long after the nearby fields are exhausted. At times, fields are left fallow for sufficient periods to be re-cultivated. In other circumstances, farmers might have access to highly productive river valley gardens (Murimbika 1995).

Floodplain and Valley-Bottom Fields

Traditional farming practices show some measure of inventiveness in almost all areas of application. Centuries of indigenous farming have taught farmers how to supplement their rain-fed fields with wetland during the dry season.

Floodplain gardens are small, but since the alluvium annually rejuvenates them, they are regularly and constantly able to produce good crops. Today, this is still commonly practised by some communities that live along the Zambezi Valley in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Reynolds 1968). I documented this practice among Korekore along the Musengezi River in Muzarabani District of northern Zimbabwe (Murimbika 1995). During the rainy season, the Musengezi River is high. As the rainy season ends, the farmers (mostly women in this case), start work on the gardens. Such work is a full-time enterprise with well-timed responses to the complex system of flood-advance and retreat. Similar floodplain gardens are still used in Maramani Communal Lands two kilometres north of Mapungubwe. In both areas the gardens provide at least two crops

each year and, although at varying degrees, a constant supply of vegetables.

The floodplain and riverbed gardens are prepared the same way as dry land fields. Grass and reeds are cleared and burnt. The ground, which is usually soft, is hoed and hollows scooped out. Seeds are planted in the moist subsoil where they grow without the necessity of either rainfall or irrigation. The gardens gradually expand towards the riverbed as water levels retreats. At Kapatamukombe Village (Murimbika 1995; Pwiti 1996: 140-1), gardens completely cover some sections of the riverbed by the time the Musengezi stops flowing, usually between May and July.

Government efforts to stop riverbank cultivation have met stiff resistance. Indigenous farmers argue that their ancestors farmed the floodplains, and the river still floods and flows, contrary to official claims that this practise hinders the river system.

5.2 INDIGENOUS FARMING PATTERNS

Traditional farming in Southern Africa is and has been predominantly rain-fed. The system is based on practices that provide two or more crops from the same field in a single agricultural season with emphasis on increasing production.

A good traditional farmer is one who can identify good soil for different crops. Soil quality determines the length of time the field will be used. Table 5.1 provides data on examples of soil qualities and their suitability for different crops. Land is judged by its physical characteristics, such as soil colour, texture, depth and form. Traditional farmers also look at the type of vegetation: abundant vegetation signals fertile land. Therefore, relative distance from the villages to the field is not the only important factor (Pwiti 1985; Murimbika 1995).

Traditionally, sandy soils are divided into two groups: the fertile good type and the infertile type with poor drainage. Crops such as millet, sorghum, bambara groundnuts, cowpeas, as well cassava and sweet potatoes are grown on sandy soils. Sorghum does well on the red and loamy soils (Jonsson 1998). Legumes return high yields on rich sandy soils. Rich red clays are considered good for any crop save for cassava and sweet potatoes. The Korekore on the Zambezi escapement grow sweet potatoes in their river valley and floodplain gardens (Murimbika 1995).

Fertile but poorly drained soils are used for growing traditional rice. This is commonly observed in different areas of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe; particularly the higher rainfall areas such as Nemanwa near Great Zimbabwe (Jonsson 1998: 81). Rocky soils are utilized for growing finger millet (Plate 11.1).

Generally, traditional farmers fully appreciate the varying qualities of different soil types. Overly sandy soils are regarded as infertile. Loams are the best because of their moisture retention, relatively good fertility and workability. Clay soils are fertile and favourable when rain is adequate but are often avoided because they are difficult to work.

Traditional cropping patterns

One central aspect of traditional farming is multiple cropping. Two practices are common: sequential cropping where individual crops are grown one after the other on the same piece of land within a single agricultural season; and intercropping where two or more crops are grown together.

I identified four basic methods of intercropping in Zimbabwe and the Limpopo Province:

(a) Mixed cropping - unsystematic;

(b) Relay cropping - the second crop with a shorter growing time is planted when the first has reach maturity but awaits physiological maturity;

(c) Row intercropping - simultaneously in a row; and,

(d) Strip cropping – wider than a row.

There are many possible combinations in mixed cropping, and the choices are adapted to suit local conditions.

Several historical documents refer to intercropping of one form or other. One example is that of Thomas Morgan's description of 19th century Ndebele cultivation in southern Zimbabwe: "The seeds may be of one kind as *amabele, amumpu, upogo, unyawuti,* or of three or more different sorts…" (Reid 1977: 97-8).

Intercropping is more complex than it first seems. It is based on intricate traditional knowledge on weather and the environment, as well as plant biology, production yields and storage characteristics. Intercropping provides greater food security than monoculture by minimising crop losses due to adverse weather and pests. Furthermore, intercropping protects the soil from erosion; it is a more efficient use of resources because different crops have different requirements; it spreads labour during the farming and harvest periods; it produces different commodities in different quantities ; and where legumes are involved, it provides nitrogen to the companion cereals (Dakora *et. al.* 1987).

Most of Southern Africa's arable land receives between 300 and 1000 mm annual rainfall. In areas with rainfall between 300 and 600 mm simultaneous cropping is practiced with varieties that have shorter growing periods. Emphasis is on productivity, which depends on the better use of space (land and soil types, fertility) and time (when, how much and how long the rains last).

Table 5.1: Soil classification and suitable traditional crops (Adapted from FAO 1978: 81-86).

	CROP TYPES				
Soil Type*	**Sorghum**	**Pearl Millet**	**Phaseolus bean**	**Maize**	**Rice**
Chromic Cambisols	SI	S1	S1	S1	S1
Vertic Cambisols	S2	S2/N2	S1/S1	S1/S2	S1
Rhodic Ferralsols	S2	S2	S2	S2	S1/S2
Lithic Leptosols	N2	N2	N2	N2	N2
Chromic Luvisols	S1	S1	S1	S1	S1
Ferric Luvisols	S2	S2	S2	S2	S2/N2
Gleyic Luvisols	N2	N2	N2	N2	S1
Calcic Luvisols	S1	S1	S1/S2	S1	S1
Haplic Nitosols	S1	S1	S1	S1	S1
Luvic Arenosols	S2	S2	S2	N2	N2
Cambic Arenosols	S2	S2	S2	N2	N2
Ferralic Arenosols	S2/N2	S2	S2/N2	N2	N2
Vertisols	S2/N2	S2/N2	S2/N2	S2/N2	S2

* S1 is ideal and very suitable; S2 in marginally suitable; S1/S2 denotes areas with half their soil suitable and the other half is less suitable; N1, the soil quality is unsuitable in its natural state unless soil altering argents such as fertilizers are applied; N2, this soil group is more permanently unsuitable with very little chance of improvement even with fertilizer interference; N1/N2, this soil falls within a borderline with the potential for improvement and the unsuitable soils. NB. Gleyic soils are regarded as hydromorphic within the first half meter in depth and may be treated as low input soil in some circumstances. The classifications are based on low input agriculture.

While intercropping is advantageous, the system can easily be impacted by the suitability of cultivars, soil moisture levels, plant interaction, and intense competition for resources. The interaction of any two or more crops may be positive or negative. Some plants, for instance, release phytotoxins. These have negative effects on other plants (Newman & Rovira 1975). This means some crops are not suitable for intercropping.

Economic and social conditions are also important factors in choosing crop combinations. Patterns of ownership and labour demands are some of the additional elements. For example, where maize is the dominant staple in Shona communities, it is a family crop controlled by the family head. Subsidiary crops such as vegetables, pumpkins and sweet potatoes are owned and cared for by women. These subsidiary crops are particularly important in intercropping. Furthermore, intercropping demands complex scheduling. Generally, there are variables in planting dates that are closely related to growth periods, maturity and harvests. The scheduling provides different foods prior to the main harvest and ensures harvesting is not a single action.

In the traditional farming context, intercropping yields tend to be higher than the mono cropping systems. Indigenous farmers face erratic rainy seasons. Therefore, reliable yields have always been critical. Efforts are usually directed towards minimising risks rather than achieving the highest

yields. Traditional farmers plant a combination that collectively produces an average yield even in the worst years.

One way of increasing production has been intensive farming practices. This demands retuning soil nutrients and adequate labour supplies. The bush fallow system is a way to return soil fertility. Traditional farmers practice other systems as well. Different legumes for example are used to fix nitrogen into the soil. A long term rotation of maize in the first season and *mucuma* (a leguminous cover crop) in the second season maintains the standard maize yield for two decades without the need to apply chemical nitrogen (Vine 1953).

More studies have indicated that traditional legumes, such as cowpeas and Bambara groundnuts, provide large quantities of nitrogen to the benefit of the staple cereal crops (Dakora *et. al.* 1987*)*. Based on studies of legumes-cereal rotation, it is estimated that nitrogen derived from biological fixation is 101 kg/ha and 201 kg/ha for groundnuts and cowpeas respectively. Net nitrogen returns to the soil in groundnuts and cowpeas are 68 kg/ha and 150 kg/ha. This is equal to 60 kg/h of nitrogen fertilizer (ibid).

These statistics clearly demonstrate that when practiced well, traditional crop rotation and intercropping could provide adequate nitrogen for sustainable crop production. Indeed, traditional practice of both

intercropping and crop rotation has successfully provided long term food supplies without constantly moving fields.

The successful practice of intercropping by traditional African farmers to date is therefore an indication that it is an ancient practice, developed and preserved from generation to generation through traditional knowledge.

Traditional farming seasonality

One of the most important aspects of indigenous farming is the time of the growing season. This is even more critical in dry lowveld areas such as the Shashe-Limpopo basin and the mid-Zambezi valley. These areas receive a mean average of about 350 mm. Although other areas in the region receive up to 1000 mm annually, it is not the overall amount that is crucial. The distribution of rain through the farming season is critical.

In this regard, most traditional communities name their months and seasons after the climatic conditions in relation to the corresponding farming activity. Table 5.2 presents the calendar of the Gwembe Tonga in the Zambezi valley. The Shona calendar follows a similar pattern (Table 5.3). The Shona name for January for example is *Ndira* derived from *kuindira* (to wait). This month is full of anxiety with regards to food production – the period of waiting, hence *kurindira*. Similarly, February, *Karadzi* is named after a woman – *mukadzi*. February is the month when new produce begins to ripen and the uncertainty of food supplies

disappears. Women threaten to leave their husbands about this time because food supplies are usually low. A variety of crops are called *mukadzi usaende* (“my wife do not go”) that are fast maturing and a bridge between the previous harvest and the new produce. March is called *Kurume,* derived from *murume* (man or husband). Men are usually now busy repairing and preparing the granaries. Further, men now spend time hunting to fill the food gap. Animals are usually plentiful because of the abundant vegetation.

5.3 INDIGENOUS CROPS

Indigenous food crops, such as sorghum, millet (Plate 5.1), cowpeas, Bambara groundnuts, watermelon, yam and gourds, were widely cultivated in the savannah and transitional savannah zones (Table 5.4). From the 1500s, European travellers began linking Africa and the New World, leading to an influx of foreign crops particularly from South America. Local farmers adopted some of the new crops, such as maize, sweet potato, cassava, and peanut, leading to the replacement of some indigenous crops (Lewicki 1974). Even now, soybean (*Glycine max*), common bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) and peanut (*Arachis hypogaea*) are displacing cowpeas and Bambara groundnuts.

There are indigenous legumes in Sub-Saharan Africa whose seeds and tuber are consumed, yet there is no evidence of them having been domesticated (Dakora 1996: 117). Examples include the *marama* bean

(*Tylosema esculentum*) and the African yam bean (*Sphenostylis stenocarpa*). The *marama* is indigenous to the Kalahari and the surrounding sandy regions. This wild bean is important in the diets of local Khoisan, Herero, Tswana and other groups in the regions (Ibid.). The *marama* bean is especially important because it is adapted to extreme dry conditions.

Table 5.2: Tonga agricultural calendar (modified from Jonsson 1998: 83).

Time	*Activity*	*Tonga Time*	*Meaning*
August	New fields are cleared	*Mukulampumba*	Wild fruits begin to flower
September	Clearing old fields	*Jowela*	The sound of birds sucking nectar
October	Field preparation	*Lwenza*	?
November	First crops planted	*Sizhumbi*	The rain is promising
December	Planting continues; weeding begins; farmers move to temporary field homes	*Nalupale*	Working in hard soils, planting or weeding
January	Weeding continues	*Mukumbaziba*	Month of many pools
February	First crops ripen	*Mulumi*	Month of new crops
March	First harvest of short term crops (millet and sorghum)	*Muyobo*	The head of the millet forms
April	Harvesting	*Mukubwibwangala*	The ripen head of the millet
May	Harvest of long term crops varieties (sorghum)	*Chiyumu*	Millet dry in the fields
June	Ferrying produce and returning home	*Tyatyamunzi*	People return home after harvesting
July	Off season	*Ibupupa*	The month of the wind

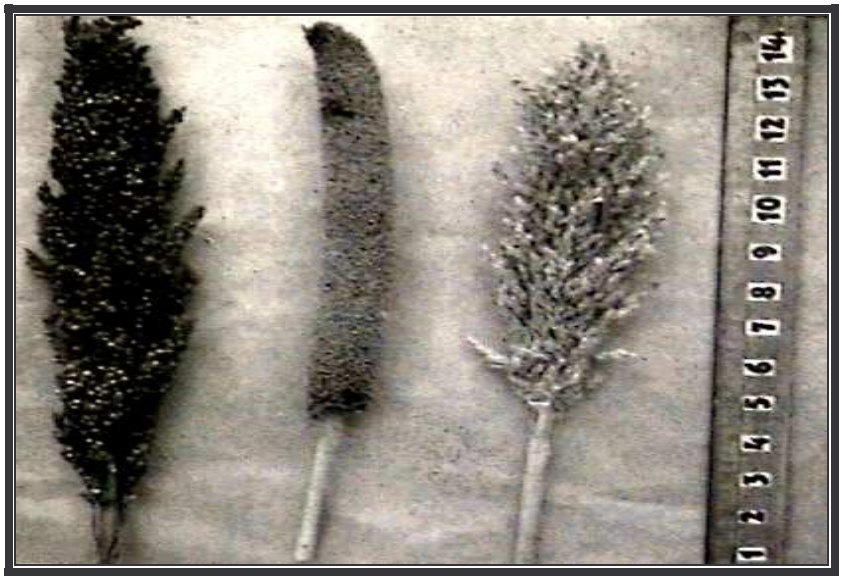


Plate 5.1: Types of traditional sorghums and rapoko (in middle) (After Quin 1959).

Table 5.3: Shona annual seasons and the corresponding farming activities.

Season (*Mwaka*)	Months (*Mwedzi*)	Activities
Winter*(Chando)* (The term refers to cold conditions)	*Chivabvu* (May); *Chikumi* (June); *Chikunguru* (July); *Nyamavhuvhu* (August)	Marks the end of the farming season; harvesting, processing of the produce and storage; Afterwards, people rest in off-season.
Spring-Autum *(Chirimo)* (term refers to preparation of the fields and cultivation. It is during this period that rainmaking ceremonies begin).	(September); *Gumiguru* (October); *Mbudzi* (November)	People slowly begin to prepare their fields for a new farming season; ploughing begins as the first rains come in October/November. November is an important month marked by total ban on any ritual activities such as ancestral ceremonies even marriages.
Summer *(Zhizha)*	*Zvita* (December); *Ndira*	The rain season is on; Planting

	(January); *Kukadzi* (February); *Kurume* (March); *Kubvumbi* (April)	continue; weeding begins; as crop tendering continue, protecting the field from animals and birds becomes crucial; short term crop varieties ripen by February; harvest begins for early crops. First crop ceremonies and harvest ceremonies are conducted at appropriate times.



Plates 5.2 & 5.3: Variety of *mapudzi* (Shona), smooth-skinned and warted gourds (*Lagenaria vulgaris*). These gourds are widely grown across Southern Africa. They are consumed when immature. Fresh leaves are used as potherbs and vegetables. Mature gourds are used to make storage vessels for both liquids and solids (Photographs after Quin 1959: Plates 33 & 34).

In addition, indigenous communities used to exploit a wide variety of wild fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, the knowledge of these plants today is limited to a few elders scattered in different groups. Because of the lack of detailed research, the information is gradually being lost. This knowledge is of great importance to local communities because it might be the dividing line between starvation and survival.

Table 5.4: Some of the common cultivars found in Africa south of the Sahara.

Crop	Botanical name	Domestication Status
Pearl millet	*Pennisetum typhoideum*	Also known as bulrush millet. Cultivated widely since antiquity in Africa. In Southern Africa it widely grown pantropically, in areas too dry for maize.
Finger millet	*Eleusine coracana*	Most common cultivated variety in Africa south of the Sahara. and wild variety is hard to distinguish from the domesticated resulting in introgression particularly in East and Southern Africa.
Sorghum	*Sorghum vulgare*	28 species have been identified in African regions with 156 varieties. Has been cultivated for over 5000 years on the continent. *Bicolor* is the most common primitive form also widely found in southern Africa. *Kafir* is a southern African race found in no other place. In all sorghum is a very important cereal in southern Africa. There are several wild varieties, e.g. *sorghum virgatum* and *aruninaceum.*
Brown Rice	*Oryza glaberrima*	African rice widely cultivated. Identifiable to wild varieties *barthii* and *breviligulata*
Fonio	*Digitaria exilis*	Cultivated mostly in West Africa
Pumpkin	*Cucurbita pepo; telfairia occidentalis; telfairia pedata*	Widely cultivated in different varieties having spread from West Africa to east and southern Africa. In Zimbabwe (*nhanga)* the leaves are a source of vegetable relish through out the rain season. They tend to produce new leaves in winter providing vegetables during this dry

		period.
Gourd (Calabash)	*Lagenaria siceraria (L. vulgaris)*	Widely cultivated from West Africa to southern Africa. In fact its one of the most ancient cultivated crop in both the old and New Worlds. The gourds are eaten prematurely before they harden after which they are harvested as calabashes. The hard shells have a long history as utensils that probably predate ceramics. The *vulgaris* variety was imported from the Americas.
Watermelon	*Citrullus vulgaris*	Probably native to the Kalahari region but has been cultivated from ancient times in Egypt and widely grown from West to southern Africa pantropically.
Melon (dry melon)	*Cucumis melo*	Grown in west and Southern Africa. The Shona and Venda people use its leaves as spinach and pound the seeds as flavouring in place of groundnut flavouring.
Cucumber	*Cucumis sativus*	Cultivated in Central and Southern Africa. There are wild varieties in southern Africa. In fact the domesticated varieties easily adapt to the wild especially by turning bitter and unpalatable for human consumption.
Cowpeas	*Vigna unguiculata*	An old cultivated native crop of Africa south of the Sahara, widely grown in grasslands and also in woodland areas. The most common cultivar in Africa is V. sinensis, drought tolerant, grows well in rainfall ranging from 280mm to 410mm. It is successfully intercropped with maize among the Shona.
Bambara groundnut	*Voandzeia subterranea*	Cultivated from West, East and southern Africa. Found wild in West Africa. Grows well in arid inferior soils that are unsuitable for groundnuts. Thrives in climates where groundnuts, sorghum, and millet are grown, but will still

		yield in conditions, which are too arid for these crops.
Marula	*Sclerocarya Birrea*	Cultivated as a fruit in South Africa. Found in the wild as well.
Baobab	*Adansonia digitata*	Wild in the tropical Africa. Widely spread through out the lowlands and semi arid regions of southern Africa. It is a very important source of food in the region particularly in drought prone areas.

Quantities and qualities of indigenous food plants

Indigenous farmers produce grain crops as staple food. The crop output is determined by rainfall combined with the complex schedule of planting. Crops such as sorghum are generally grown between November and December, mature from March and are harvested from May.

Table 5.5: Nutritional value of selected African legumes (After Dakora *et. al*. 1996)

Legume	Essential amino acids%		Protein %	Carbohydrate %	Fibre %
	Lysine	**Methionine**			
Bambara groundnut	N/a	N/a	17.5	72.2	N/a
Cowpea	6.6	1,1	24	56.8	3.9
Marama bean (seed)	5	0.7	29.5	24.3	20.5
Marama bean (tuber)	N/a	N/a	8.1	56.3	22.8
African yam bean	6.8+	1.9	21+	50	6.0

The growing period is roughly about 90 days. Sorghum fields yield between 420 and 480 kg/ ha. (Allan 1965; Lancaster 1981; Pwiti 1985, 1996). Naturally, yields diminish as the soil quality deteriorates. Pwiti (1996: 33) estimated that an adult required about 180 kg of grain per year. This translates to one hectare supplying two to three adults. Given the fact that various other food types are available, a hectare may feed more than three people. The yields of valley-bottom and floodplain fields are different. It is anticipated that floodplain fields are more fertile and well watered and would produce higher yields.

The value of food is measured in terms of its contribution to the diet. In scientific terms, this is represented by different nutrient groups (Table 5.5). Most African legumes are rich in carbohydrates and fibre, both important in human diet. Cowpeas and bambara groundnuts contain higher calories and fibres than imported soybeans and groundnuts (Dakora *et. al.* 1987). Furthermore, leaves of African legumes are used as a vegetable and are a good source of protein. The wild African yam contains 15% protein, several times the protein in imported sweet potatoes and cassava (ibid.). To balance dietary requirements, farmers plant a variety of leguminous crops for protein and other crops for energy and minerals.

5.4 TRADITIONAL FOOD STORAGE SYSTEMS

In traditional communities, food is synonymous with wealth. Richards (Richards 1932: 31, cited in Quin 1959: 137) observed that “authority and

social status are almost invariably based, whether in the family or in the tribe, upon the power of controlling supplies of food or the natural sources from which they are produced". This is still true in traditional communities across the region. A man is successful if he produces sufficient food to feed his family and surplus to make beer for guests and other public functions.

After harvest the most important thing is secure storage, particularly the staple grains. Once grain is processed, it is put in raised grain bins (*dulu* in Venda; *dura* in Shona), which stands within the homestead. The Pedi use large storage baskets (*se$ego*), which are kept under roof in a shed. In circumstances when more grain should be stored for long-term use, other means are used, such as underground storage pits (*tshisiku* in Venda; *let$aka* in Pedi).

Tshisiku is a shallow pit, usually half a meter to one-and-half meters deep. The pit is plastered then lined with special grass to avoid moisture spoiling the grain. Special ash from burnt aloe leaves is commonly used to stop weevils. These underground pits are said to provide effective storage for years.

Among Pedi, the *let$aka* storage pits are always located in the cattle kraal. The same is true for the Hananwa Tswana-speaking communities of Makgabeng (Plate 5.4). The cattle kraal is out of bounds for women. Men

therefore place the grain in these pits. Family heads control access to this grain (Quinn 1959: 137). Furthermore, whilst women control grain from their own grain bins for family usage, they may not redistribute the grain without the permission of the family head.



Plate 5.4: This old cattle kraal site (marked by greying dung in the foreground inside the black line) contains underground storage pits that were abandoned about 20 years ago, Mont Blanc Village, Makgabeng (January 2006).

Venda people however dig a pit in the periphery of the homestead around the grain bins. These pits are used to store tuber plants such as sweet potatoes. The tuber pit is usually larger. Pits *(pfimbi*) for sweet potatoes are also common among Shona groups. Such pits are usually located around a woman's kitchen. In all cases individual women control the produce.

5.5 AN OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL FARMING PRACTICES

Traditionally, political leaders control the timing of agricultural activities. At the beginning of each season, the chief summons the people to hoe and sow the royal tribute field, *matswetla* in Tswana, *zunde* in Shona. These fields belong to the office of the chief and not the person. The chief provides the seeds, and the people use their own implements. Afterwards, people start to work in their own fields. Everything, including planting, weeding, reaping of the first green produce, harvest and even letting livestock feed on stubble, awaits the chief's permission. Usually, specific agricultural rituals and ceremonies signals his permission.

The cultivation season begins in November, after rainmaking rituals and work in the tribute field is complete. Where fields are far from the villages, people move to temporary field houses for the season. After ploughing, seeds are sewn until the end of January, depending on rainfall. When the seeds germinate, weeding begins. After this stage, people continuously tender the fields and rest while the crops ripen. Green produce (pumpkins, melons, sweet canes and various field vegetables) is harvested immediately after the chief has conducted the first fruits ceremony.

From April to May, women and children guard the fields against birds, monkies and baboons. In the meantime, men construct or repair conical

wooden stacks to store the ripen grain. Women also prepare the threshing-floors by hardening and smearing the ground.

Harvest usually begins after the first winter frost hardens the grains. Everyone except herd boys participate in harvesting. Usually, women and girls are left to the threshing and winnowing. The grain is mixed with special wood-ash to prevent weevils from destroying the produce. Shona take their grain immediately to process at home. In other situations, for example the Tswana, grain is processed in the fields and then put into bags and baskets to transport to the villages. The grain is stored in granaries (*difala* in Tswana*):* large earthen bins mounted on stones for protection against termites and ground moisture. Field houses are abandoned and village life resumes again.

In practice, indigenous farming activities are guided by traditional calendars, which are punctuated by the performance of particular rites. There are basically two types of rituals and medicinal usages in traditional communities: private and public. It is not an uncommon practice for indigenous farmers to protect their new fields with doctored pegs against negative effects. Some individuals may use other different medicines to protect their crops from pest attacks.

5.6 PREHISTORIC FARMING PRACTICE IN THE SHASHE LIMPOPO BASIN

The Shashe and Limpopo rivers are the largest in the area. Until recent historic times, the Limpopo flowed all year round and there is an abundance of fertile floodplain. The area's agricultural potential can be seen in the floodplain farming practised today along the sections of the mid-Zambezi valley, Musengezi River and parts of the Limpopo.

Furthermore, large amounts of carbonised seeds have been recovered from excavations of K2 and Mapungubwe period site (Plates 5.5 & 5.6). These show that the Leopard's Kopje people widely cultivated sorghum, a variety of millets, beans and peas.

Current survey data shows that most Leopard's Kopje settlements were orientated towards the main river valleys (Figs. 3.1 & 3.2). Based on available survey data, Huffman (2000: 23) estimates that there were about 3800 people residing in outlying K2 homesteads between AD 1000 and AD 1250. In addition the K2 capital itself sheltered some 1500 people. These figures grew during the Mapungubwe phase. Between AD 1250 and AD 1300, the valley was home to at least 4000 people in outlying villages and 5000 people at the capital, nearly double that of the K2 period. With new survey data coming from the Zimbabwe and Botswana sides of the valley, population estimates will probably increase.



Plate 5.5 & 5.6: Carbonised sorghum lumps bean seed from K2 excavations (June 2003).

Based on the estimates of 420-480 kg of grain per hectare and the estimated 180 kg of grain per adult, the K2 capital needed about 270 tonnes of grain per year. To produce this amount, the farmers need access to about 643 hectares of arable land. Mapungubwe required 900 tonnes of grain per year and therefore access to 2143 hectares of arable land (Table 5.6).

Table 5.6: Estimates of Leopard's Kopje population K2 and Mapungubwe and the estimated required grain output and farmland.

Phase	Estimated Population	Estimated Required grain	Estimated Required farmland
K2 AD 1000-1250	1500	270 000 kg	643 hectares
Mapungubwe AD 1250-1300	5000	900 000 kg	2143 hectares

Less arable land may have been used because the capitals were in a position to import grain from outlying villages through trade and tribute. Furthermore, the fact that Leopard's Kopje communities continuously occupied the Shashe-Limpopo area for nearly three centuries indicates that people had stable food supplies. The area was suitable for this continuous occupation because farmers utilized the highly productive floodplains.

It is therefore safe to conclude that the leadership at Mapungubwe deliberately took steps to centralise rainmaking and agricultural ceremonies in recognition of their importance to the subsistence economy, the new sacred leadership and political order.

CHAPTER 6

PEDI RAINMAKING PRACTICES

My first trip to Sekhukhune was in October of 2001 with a colleague working in the area. I decided to focus on the Pedi because they are the major political and cultural group in the area. Rain is crucial in every aspect of Pedi life. Owing to environmental conditions, farming in most parts of Sekhukhune is often precarious, yet it is the main means of survival. Traditional leaders retain wide socio-political control over their territories, to some extent by means of guaranteeing, through rituals, adequate rains.

6.1 GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The area is traditionally known as Bopedi, meaning the land of SiPedi-speaking people. Chief Sekhukhune is recognized as the paramount chief of the territory. The Olifants River to the west and northwest and the Steelpoort River to the southeast mark the boundaries. This area is dominated by mountain ranges: the Sekhukhune Mountains to the southeast, the Strydpoort Mountains and the Lulu (Leoleo) Mountains stretching east-west. Most villages are found along the foot of these mountains (Plate 6.1).



Plate 6.1: The Mphanama village tucked against the Leoloe Mountain slopes. Most of the Sekhukhune country is now de-forested bushveld with acacia thornveld dominant (December 2003).

Sekhukhune incorporates mountainous bushveld, plateau and middleveld areas which receive rainfall averaging between 400 to 600 mm per annum. The more temperate zones average from 600 to 950 mm. The land contains *ferraginious lateritic* soils which range from deep and shallow sands to sandy-loams suitable for traditional agriculture. Friable sandy gravel and light grey loam soils are also a common choice for fields.

Bopedi country is largely deforested today due to population pressure, and it now is a mixture of sour bushvelds and grassvelds. In the western area the vegetation is predominantly Acacia thornveld (Plate 6.1).

6.2 HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS OF SEKHUKHUNE

Sekhukhune has received a fair amount of attention from anthropologists, particularly during the early colonial periods. However, most of the literature is fragmented in English, German, Dutch, and Afrikaans and different Northern Sotho dialects (e.g. Junod 1913; Harries 1929; Eiselen 1929; Hunt 1931;Van Warmelo 1935). Furthermore, data on rainmaking and agricultural practices are usually too fragmentary to be useful.

Defining the Pedi

The term Pedi is widely applied to different Northern Sotho-speaking groups. The Pedi in this study consist of units that claim direct descendancy from the original tribe of Chief Sekhukhune. Today, the Pedi belong to the Northern Sotho, which also includes Kwena, Koni, and Tau. These subgroups are defined primarily on historical and ethnic grounds, rather than by common descent (e.g. Van Warmelo, 1935, 1944).

The Mongatane are said to be the first to arrive in what came to be known as Bopedi. They changed their group totem to *Kwena* (crocodile) when they crossed the Olifants River and adopted Kwena as their tribal name. Smaller groups followed. The third main group was the Koni. The Koni claim Nguni ancestry (Koni is the Sotho word for Nguni). The main group was the Bakoni of Matlala who settled near present-day Polokwane. The main Bakoni group have *tlhanthlagane* (scaly-feathered finch), *tšwane* (baboon), *Kwena* (crocodile) and *Tau* (lion) as their totems. All the groups

are linked to the Langa Nguni cluster that probably moved into the area between AD 1600 and 1700 (Huffman 2004: 93-101).

When the Pedi arrived, the Mongatane were dominant. The ancestors of the modern Pedi are said to have moved from Schilpadfontein (near present-day Tshwane [Pretoria]) and crossed the Olifants (Lupalule) River through the Middleburg area. According to oral traditions the group moved under the leadership of Thobele. Genealogical calculations have put the date to about AD 1650 (Winter 1912: 89).

Internal Political Dynamics

The Pedi paid tribute to the Mongatane (Kwena) until the reign of Mampuru I, at the beginning of the 1700s (Hunt 1931). Mampuru subjugated the Mongatane, the Tau and Koni and in the process created a network of alliances through royal marriages. From the mid-1700s to the early 1800s, Pedi enjoyed relative stability and success in their new empire. In the mid-1820s, the Ndebele under Mzilikazi (or Zwide) invaded Bopedi country, wiping out the Pedi royal family in the process. The Pedi leader Sekwati is said to have survived by fleeing north into Venda country and seeking refuge with Ramapulana. Pedi oral traditions credit Sekwati with the re-unification of the Pedi empire before the Voortrekkers appeared in 1845. For decades afterwards, the Pedi were at war with Boer settlers and later the British forces in what is historically known as the Sekhukhune wars.

At the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902, Sekhukhune was sent to prison and Pedi were subject to full colonial administration under joint chieftaincy of Mampuru II and Nkopedi in South and North Geluk Locations. In 1953, the colonial authorities created a single Pedi paramount chieftaincy under the Maruteng house. This opened yet another period of political strife as chiefs and subchiefs competed for power in the new establishment. Even today, succession disputes affect the chieftaincy, and two brothers (Kennedy and Ryn Sekhukhune) are currently competing for leadership. The debate hinges on the right to hold national rainmaking rituals. Smaller chiefs have taken advantage of the situation, and some are said to be running their own rainmaking rituals, without looking to the paramount (Chief George Mphanama, *pers. comm.* May 2004).

The colonial era was marked by major attempts to dissipate and Christianize the tribes. Several missionaries built centres in Sekhukhuneland. We are not, however, in a position to trace or state with certainty the levels and varying degrees of influence over time. Earlier scholars have referred to the Pedi as generally conservative. Mönnig (1966), for example, notes that less than five per cent in the Sekwati area were classified as Christians. This was after a century of missionary activities and colonial administration.

6.3 WORLDVIEW

The Pedi have obviously adopted certain socio-cultural elements as a result of westernization. Nevertheless, there are specific practices that have survived. In religion the Pedi generally practice traditional ancestor worship. They believe in a Supreme God, *Modimo* who is associated with the creation of life. He is not, however, directly worshipped nor contacted with regard to the peoples concerns. Such concerns are directed to the ancestral spirits (*Badimo*) with whom the Pedi maintain a symbiotic relationship.

Ancestral spirits are placed in a structural order based on importance. The royal ancestors rank highest; beneath them are the lineage or headman's ancestors and then the ancestors of individual families. This same structure can be observed in the socio-political hierarchy. However, Pedi royalty are still close to ordinary members of society in comparison to the highly stratified Venda society.

In general the ancestors care for the welfare of their descendants. Family ancestors are concerned only with the fortunes of their immediate descendants. Similarly, the chief's ancestors are concerned with their descendants, the sitting chief, who is in turn dependent on their goodwill to retain his authority. The chief is then responsible for the welfare of his subjects and only indirectly are his ancestors. The most important ancestors are therefore the chief's. Through the chief, they are responsible

for the land's safety, fertility and rainfall. As Ramaila explained, people naturally expect rain to fall, but the ancestors, for particular reasons, may withhold it. That is why it is important to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the ancestors through propitiation rites.

6.4 RAINMAKING RITUALS

On different occasions during my field research in Sekhukhune, I held several discussions with Mathodi Nthobeng, a descendant of one of the chief councillors and uncle of the current Chief George Mphanama. Although I interviewed and held discussions with several other Pedi elders in Phiring, Mosego and Tjate villages, including traditional doctors and headmen, Nthobeng was my principal source. Because of his seniority both in age and socio-political rank, he can be regarded as an authority on Pedi indigenous knowledge.

Nthobeng lamented that, for a number of reasons, rainmaking rituals have not been held in recent times. He acknowledged that the Pedi still follow and practice the centuries-old rainmaking rituals (*mothakgo*). These fall into two categories. The first consists of the standard rites conducted before and in the middle of the farming season. The second includes elaborate rituals performed when drought threatens the community. The chief conducts and presides over all communal rituals.

Standard rituals

Pedi rainmaking rituals involve sympathetic magic and sacrifices to the royal ancestors by the reigning chief. Rainmaking medicines are kept in the backyard of the homestead of the chief's senior wife. The medicines are held in a large ceramic pot (*mphoko*), which is stuck permanently in the ground. The exact ingredients are a secret known only to the chief and his rainmaking doctor(s). The rain doctor is known as *monesapula* (the rainmaker).

Generally speaking, the Pedi agricultural cycle begins when the elders approach the chief's first councillor, and inform him that it is time for rainmaking rites (Table 6.1). The councillor will in turn beseech the chief for rain. The chief will inform his senior wife and together they will set the date. Some Pedi elders maintained that the date is set before the chief approaches his senior wife. They say the senior wife is not actively involved at the beginning.

When I asked some elders why they emphasized that the senior wife should not be part of the initial discussions, they explained that once the senior councillor approaches the chief, the chief must observe certain taboos, including sexual activity. Furthermore, the details of impending rituals are closely guarded so that evil people cannot work against the rain medicine and pre-empt its strength. In the meantime, the chief councillor will send his assistant to summon the rainmaker to the royal court.

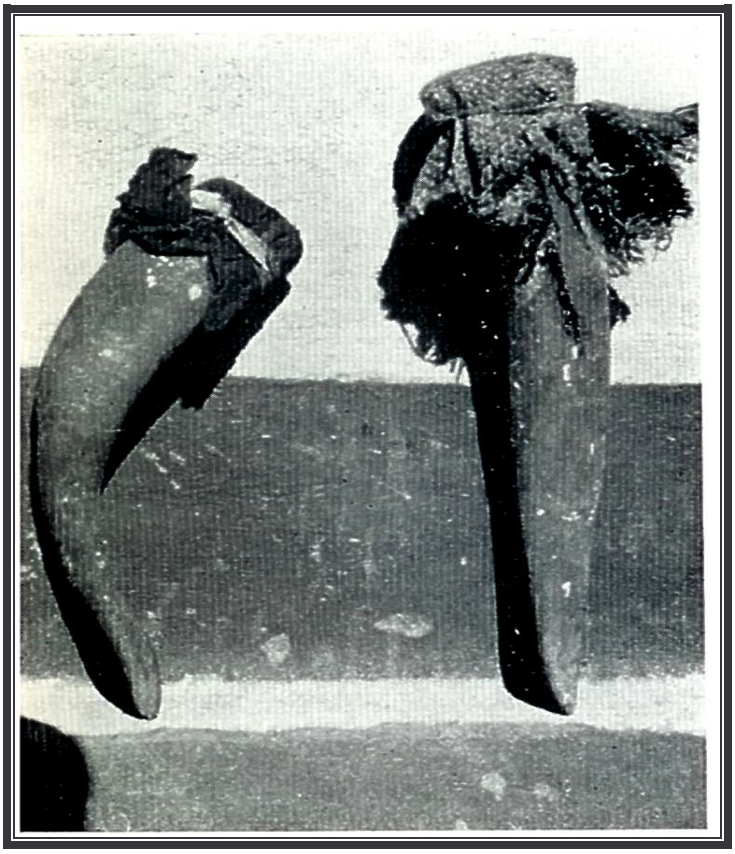


Plate 6.2: Pedi rain horns. Only the chief and his rainmakers handle them. Rain horns are part of the chieftaincy regalia and always come in pairs, one taller than the other. The one on the left contains specific rainmaking medicines and the other contains medicine that is also used in seed blessing (After Quin 1959: Plate 9: 281).

Using the chief's royal divining set, the rainmaker informs the chief about what needs to be done and what new ingredients are needed to replenish the rain medicines. While no one could confirm the exact ingredients, reference was made to honey from the royal hive and to fat from a black sheep from the royal flock. The rainmaker collects and prepares the medicines in private and adds them to other substances kept in sacred

rain-horns (*nakaye-pula*) (Plate 6.2). Rain horns are important items of royal regalia and symbols of Sekhukhune chieftaincy. They are taken from sacrificed bulls (Plate 6.3.). Once the sacred rain horns are fortified, a small portion of the medicine from the horns is mixed with the rest of the medicines in the rain pot.



Plate 6.3: Bull skulls tied to a tree in the middle of Chief Mphanama's royal *kgoro* (October 2004). Horns of bulls that are slaughtered during sacrifices are collected and turned into medicine containers.

On the selected day, the senior wife will summon young uninitiated girls from the village to bring blackened un-used ceramic pots to the royal *kgoro*. They are sent to collect water from different sources across the country to fill the rain pot. When the medicines are ready, the rain doctors

will sprinkle some medicated water over all the participants with a whisk made from the tail of a gnu. The girls are sent out with the medicated water to treat the fields. They do this whilst singing special rain songs. Most of the songs have themes that ask Kgobeane, Modimo's mythical son, to give them rain. (Interestingly, the Pedi rainmaking songs to beg this son for rain and yet the whole rituals are dedicated to the royal ancestors. No one seemed to know who this son is). When the girls finish fetching water as instructed, they leave the pots in the rain kraal. This concludes the standard rainmaking rituals.

Table 6.1: Pedi rainmaking rituals and agricultural calendar.

Time	Event	Rainmaking Activity	Location	Agricultural Activity
July	Renew rain medicines.	Rain doctor collects new medicines for the rain pots.	Royal rain kraal	Off season/ storage of grain from last harvest
August	Mohlapo – preparation of rain medicines	Collection of new rain medicine ingredients continues	-	Clearing of new fields begins.
September	Elders approach chief formally to supplicate for rain.	Chief meets his rainmaker(s), sets date for rituals, notifies the senior wife; rain medicines are activated, rainmaker divines to inform procedures	Chief's rain kraal and royal kgoro	Clearing of old fields
October	Mothakgo –	Young girls fetch water;	Royal	Field

	Rain-making rituals	rainmaker mixes rain medicines in the sacred rain pots in the rain kraal; girls/young boys are sent out to treat the fields with medicated water, singing rainmaking ritual songs in the process.	court/ rain kraal then the fields	preparations continue
November	Blessing of the seeds	The village heads collect seed samples and approaches the chief to bless them; seeds are blessed using medicines from rain pot and rain horns	Royal rain kraal	Planting season opens with planting the chief's field first.
December	Rain sacrifices (If rains is late)	If the rain is late, a black beast is sacrificed to ask ancestors to help with the rains.	Royal burials in the chief's cattle kraal	Anxiety. Farming preparation continues.
December-January	Additional sacrifices to royal ancestors (only of drought threatens)	Chief summons beer to be brewed, chief leads delegation to sacred mountain sites, Modimole, libations are poured and prayers, sacrifices offered to royal ancestors. Pour libations and black sheep/bull sacrificed. Meat ritually consumed and bones left on sacred sites.	Sacred mountain sites Modimole	Farming season
February	Loma - First fruit ceremony	New produce brought to the chief to mix them with medicines and ritually test the produce. Thereafter	Royal court	People continue to tender fields and begin consuming new

		people free to consume new produce.		farm produce.
April	Harvest	Early new harvest used to brew beer to thank ancestors for successful farming season. Queen pours libations to royal ancestors.	Royal Kgoro	Harvest begins.
May-June	Harvest and storage of produce.	-	-	Harvest – off season

Further rainmaking rituals

When rain is later than usual, additional rainmaking rites are conducted. At this stage the chief calls the raindoctors to the royal *kgoro* where they use the royal divination set to identify the problems. Initially, the diviners might select a black goat or sheep for sacrifice to royal ancestors (Plate 6.4). Usually, traditional beer is brewed for such occasions, but sometimes the sacrifice might take place without beer. The diviner determines what happens at this stage.

The stomach contents of the sacrificial animal are spread over the graves of chiefs, buried in the royal cattle kraal. The royal family men consume the meat, and then lay all the remaining bones over the royal graves. The meat is prepared at the tribal fire in the royal *kgoro*, at the portal of the royal village (Plates 6.5, 6.6 & 6.7). This fire burns throughout the year until, according to tradition, a new one is made. The chief himself leads

the sacrifices. Beer will be poured in libation on the royal graves as the chief prays to his predecessors asking them to give the tribe rain. After the sacrifice, the rainmaker is called upon to repeat the first stage of the rituals. This time, though, the chief summons uninitiated boys to the royal *kgoro.* The boys are given horns (as opposed to the ceramic pots girls carried) filled with the rain medicine and sent out to treat the land.



Plates 6.4: Ancestral sacrifice shrine at Chief Mathiba's Kraal in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, during an ancestral appeasement ceremony. Grain, sacrificial animal stomach contents, and traditional weapons are found on these sites during the ceremony (November 2005).

If these sacrifices fail to bring rain, the chief leads another round. At this next stage beer must be brewed. A black bull is sacrificed on specific royal graves as indicated by divination. The chief leads an expedition of the nobility to the sacred mountains, Modimole*,* where more prayers are

conducted, begging the earlier chiefs to send rain and save the tribe. Sacred mountains are not approached except for royal ritual purposes. One of the most important sacred mountains in Sekhukhune is Masankotane where sacrifices to the royal ancestors are made in a cave (Kennedy Sekhukhune, *pers. comm.* February 2004). If the drought persists, the rainmaker, in concurrence with the chief, orders a sacred rain hunt. All village men participate. The hunt used to be directed at a specially designated animal, whose parts were used to fortify the rain medicines. However, this phase is often omitted now. These changes can be attributed to the attempts by colonial administrators to control illegal hunting. The rain medicines are nonetheless fortified after another round of divination, and then uninitiated boys are once again sent out with medicinal horns to treat the land.

If the situation does not improve, the chief rekindles a special rain fire where special green leaves are burnt to produce thick smoke, associated with rain clouds. The chief may also order the community to cleanse the land. This is done usually by collecting all inexplicable items, such as animal carcasses, believed to be polluting the land. The Pedi also believe that bad people sometimes contaminate the land by hanging magical items that keep rain clouds away. The diviners will identify such items, and the community will use special medicines to cleanse the places before burning them.

There is no straightforward procedure if the situation continues to deteriorate. Some elders insisted that the general cleansing rites are conducted once in a while even if there is no drought. Whatever the case, Pedi believe that conditions must be made right for the ancestors to release the rain. Furthermore, there are taboos during the rainy season that control such activities as cutting certain trees and grasses, and women are forbidden to make floors.



Plates 6.5: The traditional Pedi Court of Paramount Chief Moroamoche Sekhukhune with his headmen sitting around the tribal fireplace (Modified after Quin 1959: Plates 100).

Drought is seen as punishment for disregarding the laws of the land, and so Pedi strive to rectify conditions of “impurity and heat” before the rainy season. For example, if an elderly person died on the land, the chief provides medicines from the rain horns to neutralize the heat. The same

applies when a woman gives birth on the land or when lightning strikes. Every effort is made to supplicate the ancestors (by medicinal manipulations or through sacrificial offerings) to ensure conducive conditions for adequate rain.



Plate 6.6: The Pedi tribal fireplace where the annual fires are lit (Modified after Quin 1959: Plate 98).



Plate 6.7: Sacred fireplace by the royal entrance to chief Mphanama's *kgoro*. (January 2004).

Seed Blessing and First Produce Ceremonies

When the first rains fall, the community elders approach the chief to ask him to conduct the seed blessing ritual and to set the date for ploughing the royal field. On the set date, all village heads collect samples of different seeds and take them to the royal kraal. Here the rain doctors and other diviners make predictions about the new season. All seeds are mixed with a sample from the chief's own supply.

The medicine men inform the chief which medicines need to be used in the blessing. These are commonly burned at the royal fire. The charred medicines are ground into powder and mixed with the seeds in a large ceramic pot. Village heads then take the medicated seeds back to their villages where family heads mix them with the rest of the seeds to be planted that season.

In some cases the chief's diviners will doctor the territorial boundaries using special wooden pegs treated with the same medicines used for the seeds. Some of the pegs are put around the ceramic pot containing the seeds. Young boys are sent with the rest of the pegs to the territorial boundaries where they put them into the ground to protect the villages from outside negative forces. This process is usually done during the night to counteract the dark negative forces that can affect new crops.

Once the seeds are blessed, the chief calls the village heads to commence ploughing the royal field. This is a small field where people plough and plant as a form of traditional tax. This royal field must be started before the people can work in their own fields. In the “old days”, according to some elders, the chief first instructed the subchief of the Maleka clan to organize the ploughing of his field. The Maleka people claim descent through the Mongatane and this makes them descendants of one of the first Sotho inhabitants of Bopedi.

When the first green produce is ready, the elders ask the chief to conduct the *loma,* (first fruits) ceremonies. Village heads send young girls across the fields to collect samples of the new crops. These are taken to the royal *kgoro* for the ceremony. The chief’s diviners cast their bones to decide which medicines to use before the new produce is consumed. New produces are considered potentially dangerous (hot) and therefore should be treated before the public eat them. A Pedi friend of mine confirmed that even today, initiated men do not consume new produce before *loma* is conducted (Ntlabidi Sekhota, *pers. comm.* Oct. 2005).

Once treated, the chief takes four bites of the selected produce, for example pumpkin. Each time he takes a bite, he spits in the four cardinal points, inviting the ancestors to eat with him. He then chews and swallows the fifth bite. The Maleka subchief follows the same procedure. Finally, following the political hierarchy, all subchiefs and village heads take turns

to mark the beginning of the green produce season. Thereafter, the general public are allowed to consume their green produce. Such rituals continue when harvest time arrives. The first beer is brewed at the chief's *kgoro* and dedicated to the ancestors before anyone in the villages can produce new beer.

All the ceremonies invariably take place either at the royal *kgoro* or in the royal cattle kraal where earlier chiefs are buried. These ceremonies are of such importance that anyone who breaks rank would be considered to be challenging the reigning chief's authority. This is an act of treason.

6.5 CONCLUSION

Pedi rainmaking rituals follow a cycle. At the beginning of the agricultural season they manipulate imitative and sympathetic medicines to influence rainfall. After the initial rites that are meant to cleanse the land, rain should fall. Should there be problems, further rituals include sacrifices to the royal ancestors. The Pedi community strives to create a conducive environment for rain, such as cleanliness of the territory and appeasement of the ancestors. Seed blessing and first fruits ceremonies mark later important stages of the agricultural calendar, all of which the chief directs. It therefore follows that the Pedi chief has a strong tribal hold on agro-economic activities. Herein lies one of the main pillars of traditional power in ranked-based chiefdoms.

CHAPTER 7

HANANWA RAINMAKING PRACTICES

This chapter presents the results of ethnographic research conducted among the Hananwa of the Makgabeng. The Makgabeng-Blouberg area is situated at the western end of the Soutpansberg Mountain range in the northwest portion of the Limpopo Province (Fig. 7.1).

7.1 THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE MAKGABENG

The Makgabeng area today is predominately occupied by the Hananwa Tswana-speaking people under Chief Malebôhô. Malebôhô's capital is at Blouberg about 90 km northwest of Senwabarwana (formerly Bochum) (Fig. 7.1). During my fieldwork, I focused mainly on five villages: GaMmasebe (Mont Bloch); Maboya (also known as Sweethome); GaHlako (also known as New Jerusalem); GaLekgwara and Mongalo. I also made brief visits to Bonne Esperance, Dithabaneng and to the Bakoni Matlala area to the southwest.

The Blouberg and Makgabeng ranges dominate the research area. These rise to between 700 m and 1100 m above sea level. The area's geology is predominantly aeoleon sedimentary sandstones. These form the basis of the predominantly sandy to loam soils. In GaMmasebe village there is a

network of caves with Khoi-San rock paintings as well as white and black paintings attributed to farming communities (Smith 2003).

Rainfall across the territory ranges from 400 mm to 770 mm per annum. Generally speaking the Makgabeng is a low rainfall area. Its people are subsistence farmers who grow sorghum as their main crop. They also grow millet, maize, groundnut, pumpkin and varieties of beans. Like their Northern Sotho counterparts, the Hananwa people raise mixed livestock dominated by cattle.

The area's main rivers were perennial, but today they hardly flow during the dry season. The rivers are the main source of water for livestock, and so people dig shallow wells here during the dry season.



Plate 7.1: The resurrection bush (*moteja motshwele)* is a highly regarded herb used to cure several ailments and is an ingredient of rain medicines (December 2005).

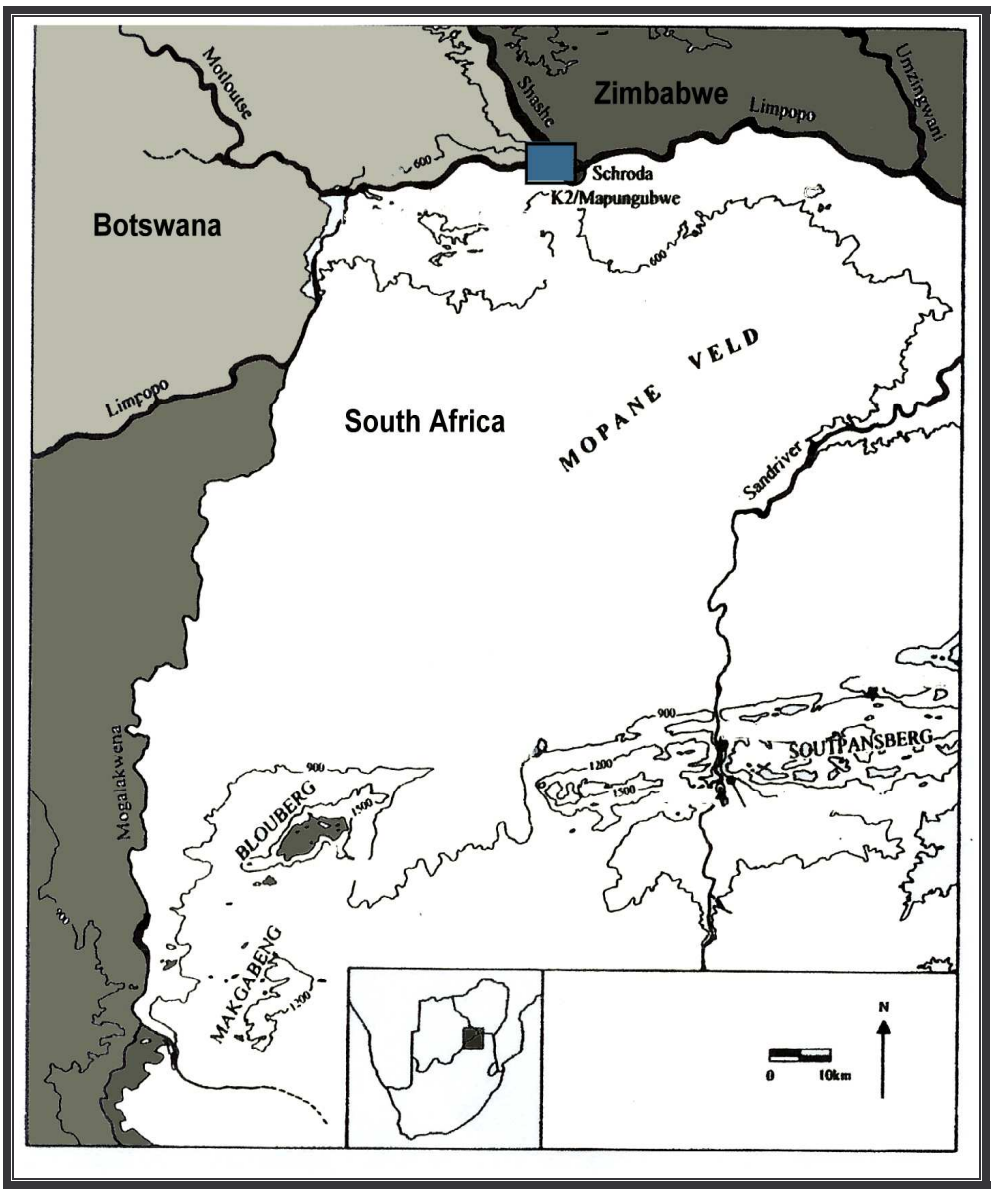


Fig. 7.1: The Limpopo Province showing the Makgabeng-Blouberg research area and the Shashe-Limpopo basin (After Hall & Smith 2000: 31).

The vegetation is a mixture of sour veld and savannah woodlands, with the exception of the dense forests along the valleys and mountain slope. One of the most important plants in the area is the “resurrection bush” known locally as *moteja motshwele* (Plate 7.1). This plant is used for

curing coughs and other common ailments. The same plant provides one of the ingredients for rainmaking medicines.

7.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MAKGABENG

In the early 1700s, BaKoni people migrated into the area and established their capital at Matsetedi in Makgabeng. Of the present day inhabitants, they have lived in the area the longest. They collectively claim duiker (*phuti*) as their original totem and later on adopted the *ithlanthlare* (small thunder bird).

At some time between 1750 and 1800, Venda lived in the Blouberg area, for example, at Brodi Hill. It was not until about 1800 that the Hananwa (Gananwa) moved from present day Botswana into the Blouberg area. The Hananwa are of Hurutshe origin. These Tswana-speaking communities claim *thswene* (baboon) as their totem (Plate 7.2).

According to tradition, the Hananwa under Chief Matsiokwane Lebôhô stormed Blouberg and defeated the smaller groups. They established their Malebôgô capital there. Initially the Hananwa paid tribute to Bakoni Matlala. They managed to establish their authority either by force or through treaties. By the mid 1800s, they had taken control of the Blouberg and Makgabeng, and even received tribute from the Matlala (Van Schalkwyk 1997: 156). Ever since, Hananwa, Matlala and Kibi groups have been rivals, but they maintain political alliances through royal

marriages. The Hananwa took control of important rainmaking rituals such as calling for rain, blessing the seeds, the annual fire ceremonies and first fruits rituals. Nonetheless, the BaKoni Matlala retained a level of ritual specialisation, particularly with regards to the supply of rain medicines.



Plate 7.2: These Late White paintings are attributed to Hananwa farming communities, particularly those that depict the baboon, the Hananwa totem (January 2006).

7.3 TRADITIONAL RAINMAKING PRACTICES IN MAKGABENG

Rainmaking is mainly centred on medicinal and magical manipulation, first to cleanse the land and protect it from negative outside forces and second to aid cloud formation. The Hananwa (and other tribal groups in Makgabeng) believe in the supreme god *Modimo* with whom they do not have direct contact. They conduct ancestor worship in the same way as most southern Bantu communities. The royal Malebôhô ancestors occupy

the top of the ancestor hierarchy with individual family ancestors at the bottom.

Hananwa rainmaking rituals are conducted in phases, depending on climatic conditions. They conduct basic ceremonies at the beginning of every farming season, followed by additional ceremonies if drought threatens. All these are conducted within a traditional cycle. There are places such as caves, mountains and pools that are considered sacred across Makgabeng. Such places are associated with the ancestors of the earlier inhabitants of the area. Although rituals are conducted only at these specific localities, their functions have universal value across the communities. This cycle of sacred ritual sites is not unique to the Hananwa. It is also practiced universally across Eastern Bantu-speaking communities in the sub-region (Hammond-Tooke 1993). Before discussing the cycle of Makgabeng rituals in detail, I discuss the different localities and their role in the rituals.

Sacred Caves

My principal informant in Mmasebe Village, the late Elias Rasaruthe, first took me through the network of the Mphekwane caves. Most caves have hunter-gather and farmer paintings. Two caves are considered sacred: one is believed to be the home of the sacred rain snake locally known as *mamogaswe, or hlware*. The second cave contains abandoned ceramic pots (Plate 7.3). The villagers attribute the pots to “earlier occupants of the

area a long time ago" although the cave is too small for residential purposes. It is similar to caves identified by Aukema (1989: 70-2) in the Lephalala Basin in the Limpopo Province.

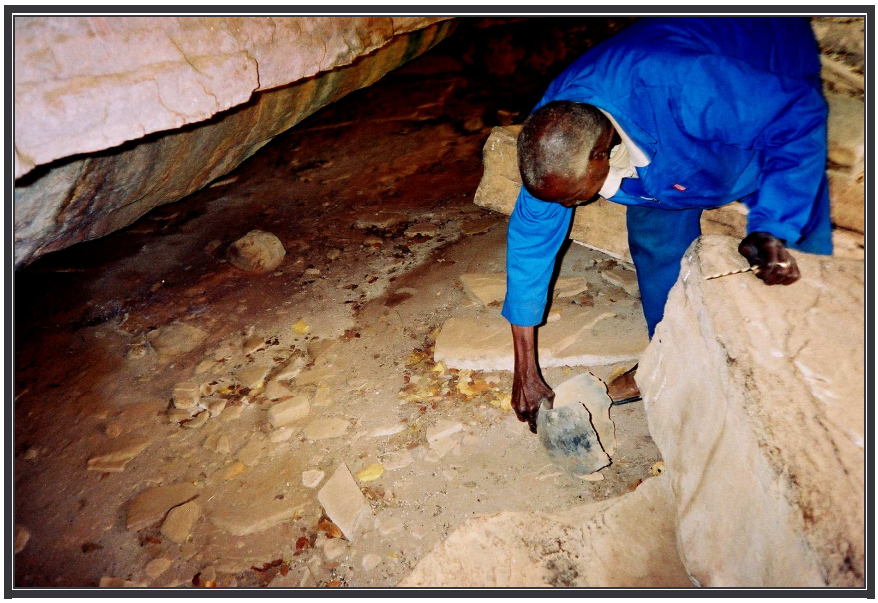


Plate 7.3: Elias Rasaruthe pointing out pottery abandoned in one of the Mphekwane sacred caves (August 2003).

The sacredness of the Mphekwane caves is highlighted by another factor. At the end of the pass that links the caves, there is a stone cairn where everyone who passes should place a stone (Plate 7.4). This act honours the unnamed ancestors of the land. Disregarding this practice could cause misfortune to the perpetrator and prevent the rain.



Plate 7.4: Elias Rasaruthe and Johannes Mahowa standing over the sacred stone cairn at the exit of the Mphekwane passage (August 2003).

The Rain Snake

Although no one claims to have seen it, the *mamogaswe* snake is described as "…large, powerful and can fly…" When it moves there will be "lots of noise and whirlwinds and at times thunderstorms". In the "old days", a community elder would go to the snake's cave to request rain or groundwater from fountains. One elder, the late Cornellius Mabje, a founding villager at Mmasebe, is said to have been the last man ever to see the sacred snake. The same Mabje was also Chief Malebôhô's messenger, a title locally referred to as *motseta*. When approaching the cave, one should strip naked, then kneel at the cave entrance. The messenger then prays, requesting the snake to appear. Local legend has it that when the snake appears, one will not see its head or tail because of

its size. The messenger quickly cuts off a chunk of the snake's fat and leaves without turning back.

Chief Malebôhô's rain medicine included the flesh of the rain snake that Mabje collected. Mabje is said to have placed part of the flesh at one of the permanent water springs at Bela Bela in New Jerusalem village. The snake's flesh is believed to have the strength to retain water even during dry seasons. According to local elders, this is the reason why the Bela Bela fountains have never dried out.

Rainmaking mountains and sacred pools

The Thabana Nhlana GaMmasebe Mountain is regarded as sacred. It is taboo for more than one person at a time to go up this steep-sided sandstone mountain (Plate 7.5). Few people are said to have climbed it, and only two elders I interviewed claimed to have done so: Piet (the local traditional doctor and rainmaker) and the late Rasaruthe. Today the local tour guide Jonas Tlouma regularly climbs the mountain with willing tourists. According to Rasaruthe, there is a large pool at the top that is the source for rivers and fountains. Piet added that there is a sacred rainmaking site on top. Although he has not used the site recently, he explained that when drought threatens, follow-up rituals are conducted at special places, including mountain sites.



Plate 7.5: South view of the sacred Thabana Nhalana GaMmasebe Mountain. This mountain is named after the legendary rainmaker Mmasebe. (February 2005). One of the Lehlosane pools in the foreground.



Plate 7.6: The Lehlosane Pools. They are regarded as the sacred residence of the spirits of the lands (August 2003).

Another important mountain in the area is Ngwana-Ntŝwane in Milbank Village. Some elders from Mmasebe and GaHlako remember when, as young boys, they were occasionally sent to Ngwana-Ntŝwane to collect the *serwalo* plant. This lichen is used as one of the ingredients in rain medicine.

Outside Mmasebe Village there are pools locally known as Lehlosane (Plate 7.6). They are now usually dry during winter. But in the recent past, they never dried up completely. The larger pool has sandstone boulders in the middle with hunter-gatherer rock paintings depicting a rhinoceros and what appear to be a herd of elephants. The acting village head of GaHlako, MmaHlako, remembers how she and other young girls were sent to collect water from the pools during 'special rain ceremonies". Water from these pools is important for the preparation of rain medicines because locals believe the ancestors of the earlier inhabitants of the area reside there.

7.4 THE CYCLE OF RAINMAKING

Rainmaking rituals among Hananwa people may be abstracted as in Table 7.1. Chief Malebôhô initiates and conducts the main rituals. First, the chief works secretly with his rain doctor to renew the rain medicines. Secondly, the chief starts the new farming season by holding the annual fire ceremony. Later, he summons his rain doctor(s) to conduct rainmaking rituals (Fig. 7.2). Subchiefs and village headmen then repeat similar rituals at their local centres.

Table 7.1: Hananwa rainmaking rituals and agricultural calendar.

Time	Event	Rainmaking Activity	Location	Agricultural Activity
July	Collecting rain medicines.	Rain doctor collects new medicines for the rain pots.	Private	Off season/ storage of grain from last harvest
August	Chief sends emissary to specialist rainmakers	The chief's emissary visits specialist rain doctors to collect ingredients for rain making.	-	Clearing of new fields begins.
September	Annual fire ritual; chief to supplicate formally to for rain.	All headmen gather at royal court; chief and rain maker create new fire' all collect new fire and spread across villagers	Chief's royal *kgoro*	Clearing of old fields
October	Rain making rituals	Young boys are sent out to villages with medicines horns to protect the chiefdom and keep rain in the territory.	Royal rain kraal then the fields and villages	Field preparations continue
October	Blessing of the seeds	The village heads collect seed samples and bring them to the chief for blessing; seeds are blessed using medicines from rain horns	Royal court	Farming begins with the chief's field
November	Clouds gathering	The rainmaker continues working in private to draw the clouds and ensure constant rain supply	Private rainmaking kraal	Farming in full swing.
December	Rain sacrifices (If	If the rain is delayed, More rain medicines are burnt to	Royal rainmaking	Anxiety. Farming

	rains are delayed)	create thick smoke to draw the clouds	kraal	preparation continues.
February	First fruit ceremony	New produce brought to chief for blessing.	Royal court	People continue to tend fields and begin consuming new farm produce.
April	Harvest	Early new harvest used to brew beer to thank ancestors for successful farming season. Queen pours libations to royal ancestors.	Royal *Kgoro*	Harvest begins.
May-June	-	-	-	Harvest – off season

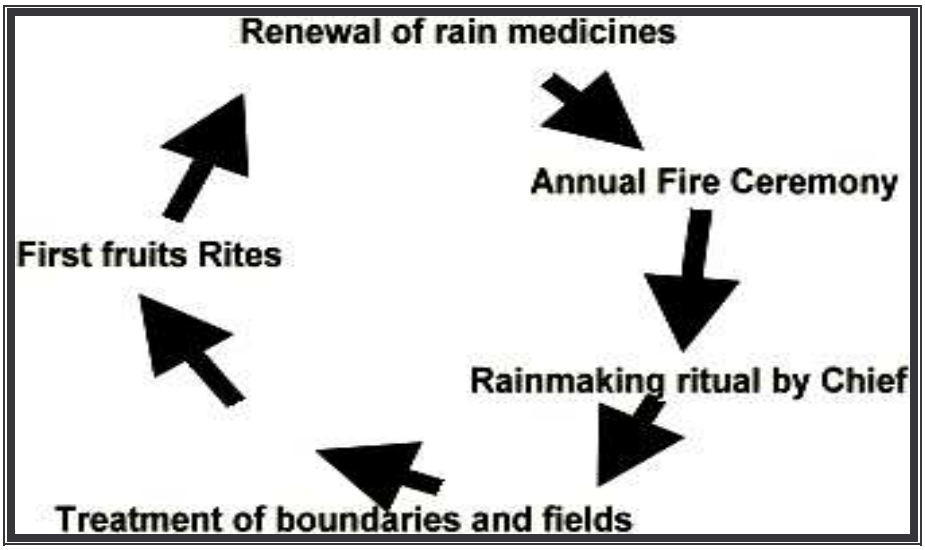


Fig. 7.2: A schematic cycle of Hananwa rainmaking rituals.

Annual fire ceremony

At the beginning of the farming season, Chief Malebôhô calls on his raindoctor to prepare for the first rainmaking rituals. The preparations involve collecting new medicines and replenishing old ones. On a particular day, all villagers are asked to extinguish all domestic and court fires. Locals from the royal village and every subchief and headmen, or their representatives, come to the Chief's court. The rain doctor starts a new fire in the traditional way rubbing sticks together. Special herbs and rain medicines are put in this fire. All participants bring cow dung to add to the fire. The participants return home carrying the burning dung, thereby spreading rain clouds over the whole territory. The dung brings new fire into every homestead, signifying the beginning of the agricultural year. Some headmen repeat the fire ceremony for the benefit of their villagers.

One senior councillor explained that in the "old days", instead of bringing back burning cow dung, the village head would bring medicines from the royal rain horns that would be passed to the local rainmaker tasked to start a new fire.

Rainmaking medicines

After the annual fire ceremony, the chief instructs the rain doctor to begin the next rituals. Chief Malebôhô used to send emissaries to different places to gather special ingredients; the late Cornelius Mabje was sent to Chief Matlala with the royal rain horns to collect additional medicines.

Two separate things support one another in this symbiotic relationship. It is probable that the Hananwa regard the ancestors of the Matlala as important because they occupied the area earlier. Chief Matlala is also said to have worked closely with the renowned rain queen Modjadji of the Lobedu. Chief Malebôhô benefited from this by receiving additional rain medicines from Matlala. In return, Matlala maintained political power in his area even though he paid tribute to Malebôhô.

Although the exact ingredients of rain medicines are secret, they included plants associated with water. One such plant is the *serwalo* lichen. This lichen has the special ability to draw water from rocks. Other ingredients include twigs and leaves collected from flood froth along riverbanks. In addition fat, such as that from the rain snake, is important because it is associated with fertility.

The rainmaking rituals are conducted in the rain kraal located usually at the back of the chief's homestead. As the season progresses, the rain doctor continues conducting other rituals at his homestead. In the past, rainmaking was a full time job and rainmakers did not work in the fields.

As a third step, when the rain medicines are ready, the chief summons young boys to the royal court. They are given medicated water to treat the

boundaries of the territory to stop negative forces from entering. There are fears that evil people might contaminate the land with black magic.

The next efforts focus on summoning the clouds by way of continuously mixing medicines and burning rain charms in the rain kraal. The intensity and extent of the rituals depend on the predicted nature of the rainy season. For example, the diviner might predict that the rains will be hard and ferocious. The rainmaking rituals would therefore attempt to soften the storms. Elderly men are sent to protect the villages with special medicines.

Once the chief conducts the main rainmaking rituals, headmen are free to conduct their own rituals using their own rain doctors. The procedures are basically the same. Because rainmaking is a specialist service, local leaders have to compensate rainmakers for their services. At times, leaders recruited specialists from distant villages or completely different communities.

At the time of my fieldwork, elders in the Makgabeng were unhappy that rainmaking ceremonies by the chief had been disrupted for many years. The reigning chief Malebôhô has not conducted the rituals since he was inaugurated. Most rainmaking rituals in recent years have been conducted at the village level. The current succession dispute between rival Malebôhô families might explain the disruption, as it is not clear which royal faction has the right rain horns. The disruptions have also filtered

down to the village level, and some headmen have not conducted rainmaking ceremonies in “many years”.

Seed blessing and first crops ceremonies

After the annual fire ceremony, the chief sets a date for village heads to bring seed samples for the blessing ritual. The seeds are mixed in a large ceramic pot or basket set on the ground in the rain kraal. The rain doctor prepares the concoction to be mixed with the seeds, drawing some ingredients from the rain pot. After the seeds are treated and blessed, they are given back to the village heads who return to their own *kgoro*s and repeat the ceremony for the benefit of their own villagers. The village heads also respond to the call to plough the chief’s royal field. As in other southern African groups, the royal field is symbolic and too small to feed the royal family. Thereafter, ploughing and planting begins in earnest across the chiefdom.

In the middle of the rainy season when the first green produce is available in the fields, the chief calls for a ceremony to bless and taste the new produce. This ceremony is held at the royal *kgoro.* The ritual involves symbolically treating and cleansing the new crops to make them safe for consumption. New medicines, including some from the rain horns, are used in the cleansing rites. Word then spreads that people may consume their new produce. In some instances, village heads will instruct their villagers to wait until they have conducted their own ceremonies.

Similarly, when the crops in the royal field are ready for harvest, the chief calls the community to harvest his first. The grain from this field is usually used to make the first beer to thank the royal ancestors for the successful farming season. Thereafter, all people complete their harvest and store and use their grain as they see fit.

Additional rainmaking rites

Rainfall patterns in the Makgabeng research area are not always reliable. If the rains are delayed after the first round of rituals, a decision is made to conduct additional rites. It is during these follow-up rituals that animals are sacrificed to appease the ancestors of the land and to cleanse further the village of all negative forces. Makgabeng people believe that there are potential negative forces that may stop the rain from falling. These negative forces must be neutralized ahead of the agricultural season. When initial standard ceremonies fail, the rain doctor will conduct follow up rituals at different localities, such as mountain tops. The rainmaker carries his paraphernalia and medicines up the sacred mountain. While on top, he burns the rain medicines to form clouds, or “to pull the rain down”. Specific details of these follow-up procedures are scanty. What is clear is that rainmaking rituals are a process and not an event. They are conducted continuously in a cyclical form that marks the agricultural calendar.

7.5 DISCUSSION

Rainmaking rituals form a key component of the Makgabeng annual cycle. Hananwa rituals are predominantly magical rites with a limited emphasis on approaching royal ancestors. As an annual communal institution, rainmaking rites are initiated and controlled by the chief. Furthermore, rainmaking is not an event but a process meant to ensure good relationships between the community, their chief and the ancestors who are the link with *Modimo* and the strength to control natural forces. The process is complex and conducted in different conditions and localities. The chief holds an annual fire, seed blessing and first fruit ceremonies at the royal court while the rainmaker uses the rain kraal. In times of distress, the rainmaker may move to a sacred mountain to conduct more rituals. The procedures change as dictated by the conditions and participants. Therefore, rainmaking is not a fixed process both in the actual practice and in the location of the ritual sites.

CHAPTER 8

TSWANA RAINMAKING PRACTICES

Tswana-speaking communities occupy most of southeastern Botswana and North West Province. The main groups are Kgatla, Ngwato, Ngwaketse and Hurutshe. They live in relatively large concentrated settlements organised in the town version of the Central Cattle Pattern (Kuper 1980; Hammond-Tooke 1993; Huffman 1982, 2003). Politically, they are ranked-based chiefdoms. The town-like settlements are divided into wards under headmen. However, in the last century the Tswana have gone through gradual decentralisation (Pauw 1965: 240), so that there are few large compact Tswana villages today. Their cultivated fields lie outside each village, arranged in close proximity to each other and yet worked according to family usufruct rights. In the outskirts, dotted across suitable grasslands, are grazing-posts. Each cattle-owning family has its own post, or they share with other families, depending on the size of the herds.

Rain (*pula*) is crucial in every aspect of Tswana life. Traditionally, Tswana chiefs retain control by holding rain ceremonies (*pulanyana)* and ‘successfully bringing adequate rain". Today things have changed: such ceremonies are rare, and the tradition has been incorporated in Christian practices as *thapêlô ya pula* (rain prayer) (Schapera 1930: 211; 1984).

8.1 RAIN GEOGRAPHY

Most Tswana territories experience ground water problems and frequent droughts. On average southeastern Botswana and most of North West Province receive 450 to 500 mm of rainfall annually. This amount is sufficient for sorghum and grasslands, but the seasonal distribution is critical. As, P. R. Weare, Senior Agricultural Officer of the Botswana Government (cited in Schapera 1971: 12) commented:

> The total rainfall required to produce a fair crop of grain sorghum is less important than the distribution within the growing season… in general terms it is safe to say that granted fair distribution, fair crops of sorghum (3-4 bags per acre) can be reaped on a 12-13 inch rainfall, provided a high standard of husbandry is maintained throughout the season…

Given this state of the natural environment, it is hardly surprising that rain should mean so much to Tswana. They associate their chiefs with rain in every respect and use the term to greet him. Several proverbs underline the importance of rain, for example: "The charm for corn is rain; Clouds are not rain, smoke is fire; Rain is a stranger who has his own home" (Schapera 1971: 15-16).

8.2 TSWANA WORLDVIEW AND RAINMAKING RITUALS

It is a general belief that the chief produces rain, usually with the help of an expert rainmaker. Men bring tribute while women sing rain songs (*dipina tsapula*), asking the chief to provide them with rain. The Tswana believe that God (*Modimo)* has the ultimate power to send rain, but since

he is far removed from the living, the chief approaches the royal ancestors asking them to intercede with *Modimo*. As the descendant of royal ancestors, the chief is said to have direct influence in both the living and the ancestral communities, maintaining the balance between the two worlds. Today, due to Christian influence, some Tswana people believe that God makes it rain, but he does this if the chief prays to him.

A similar hierarchy may be observed in the Tswana political order. The chief is at the top, and below him are the petty chiefs and village heads. At the bottom are the commoners. The same applies to the ancestors. The royal ancestors are more important than the family ones and so on.

The chief asks for rain through the ancestors by performing rainmaking rituals with the assistance of rain medicines. The paraphernalia includes rain horns, clay bowls and pots and rain medicines. All are kept in a sacred rain kraal, *rôtlwana sa pula*, where the rituals are performed.

In addition Tswana associate certain animals, such as the eland, with rain. There is also a mysterious rain snake called *kgwanyape* among the Kgatla (Schapera 1971: 35). This snake was said to live on top of the isolated steep-sided Modipe hill in a pool. Only the chief and a strong medicine man used to go up Modipe to collect rainmaking ingredients (ibid: 36).

While it is the sole responsibility of the chief to make rain, he does this ritual with the assistance of a recognised professional rain doctor The rainmaker does not have to be a member of the Kgatla tribe. They are expert medicine men who, to some extent, make a living from hiring out their services (Ibid: 45).

Rainmaking is a form of magic ritual that involves a specialised use of particular medicines (*tshitlho*). There are different combinations, but all are meant to combat hostile influences and secure protection and fertility for both the community and the land respectively (Schapera *op. cit.*.: 49). The most important rain medicines are kept in rain horns. The exact ingredients are a closely guarded secret of the chief and his rain doctor. Among other items, the concoction is derived from a combination of plant roots, frogs, portions of the lightning bird (fish eagle or sea eagle) (ibid: 59), skin of a crocodile and fat from the rain snake . As water animals, the frog and crocodile are essential. Most ingredients are symbolically associated with rain/water, or are metaphorically related to protection, prosperity and potency.

Table 8.1: Tswana rainmaking rituals and agricultural calendar.

Time	Event	Rainmaking Activity	Location	Agricultural Activity
July	Collecting rain medicines	Chief/ Rain maker collects new medicines for the rain pots	Rain kraal	Off season

August	Chief/ rainmaker cleansing ceremony	Chief/ rainmaker is cleansed to officially be able to begin the rainmaking rituals	The chief's main house	Clearing of new fields begins
August	Rainmaking kraal renewed, cleansed and protected	The chief and rainmaker clean up the rain kraal and fortify the palisade with medicines to protect the rain pots	Rain kraal	Preparation for new farming season
August/ September	Protecting the tribal territory boundaries	Boys sent out with medicated wooden pegs to protect the crossroads and village boundaries from negative forces.	Royal court and villages	Preparations continue and farming season taboos come into effect
September	Annual rainmaking ritual	Chief and rainmaker mixes the rain medicines	Chief's royal court	Clearing of old fields
October	Rain making rituals	Young boys/ or girls are sent out across villages with medicines horns/ or pots respectively to sprinkle the fields with medicated water	Royal rain kraal then the fields and villages	Field preparations continue
October	Blessing of the seeds	Village heads collect seed samples and bring them to the chief; seeds are blessed using medicines from rain horns	Royal court	Farming begins with the chief's field
November	Clouds gathering	The Chief rainmaker will continue burning additional rain medicines from the rain kraal to keep the clouds and ensure constant rain supply	Private rainmaking kraal	Planting continue after the chief's field is worked. Full farming season

December	Fighting drought	If the rain delays, local leaders approach chief with a bull to ask him to rectify the rain problem; women hold traditional protests and the royal village; specially medicated water is poured on royal ancestral graves in the cattle kraal in order to cool down the ancestors	Royal court; royal burial sites in cattle kraal	Anxiety. Farming preparation continue
December-January	Rain hunt	The chief/ rainmaker may order a rain hunt for a specific to fortify rain medicines and rain rituals are repeated	Royal court	Farming activities continue
February	First fruit ceremony	New produce brought to chief for blessing	Royal court	People continue to tend fields and begin consuming new farm produce
April	End of season taboos	Chief announce the end of season taboos; holds a bull castration ceremony; Early new harvest used to brew beer to thank ancestors for successful farming season. Queen pours libations to royal ancestors.	Royal cattle kraal	Harvest begins
May-June	End of harvest-	Chief announces permission for people to allow their cattle to graze on the grain stalks	Village fields	Harvest – off season

Annual rainmaking ceremonies

The Kgatla traditional rainmaking ceremonies may be divided into two sets. The first set is performed annually at the beginning of the farming season. The second set is only performed in cases of excessive drought.

The following is a simplified schematic sequence of events for the annual rainmaking ceremony: (a) before the farming season is announced, boys (sometimes men) are sent out by the chief to protect tribal boundaries using medicated wooden pegs; (b) the rain kraal is built or renovated privately under the chief's supervision and/or the rainmaker's; (c) rain medicines are replenished; (d) rain pots are filled with medicines; (e) children are sent out to sprinkle the medicines in the fields and crossroads; and finally chief and rainmaker(s) burn rain medicines in private to summon rain clouds (Table 8.1).

For part of the farming season Tswana communities observe certain taboos. A breach of these taboos may cause crop failure and adversely affect the rainfall. Some taboos are associated with the sexual activities of newly widowed spouses or women who had miscarriages. Such misfortunes are considered to be "hot"; the victims should be cleansed to ensure that they do not contaminate the clean conditions demanded for a successful rainy season.

The rain kraal

Traditionally, every Tswana chief has a sacred rain kraal. This structure is a small enclosure usually located in the back of the chief's residence, or that of his senior wife or queen mother. The enclosure has a small fireplace and a few large pots where the medicines are processed. There is a palisade fence built of special branches (*Ehretia hottenticia* or *Croton gratissimus*). These two species are associated with ground water. They are never used for firewood but may be used to cover graves.

The rain kraal is cleansed before rain rituals begin sometime in August. Thereafter, only the rainmaker and the chief are allowed to enter. Other participants, such as young immature girls and old women, are allowed controlled access during part of the rituals. In Mochudi during the 1930s, successive Kgatla chiefs might use the same rain kraal for a while (Schapera 1971:68). When the chief relocates the rain kraal, the old one is abandoned together with the old rainmaking implements. These must be destroyed to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands.

Items that may be found on such sites include empty ceramic pots, potsherds, grinding stones and hearthstones that were used to process the medicines. Although such remains may be associated with domestic spaces, in this context they would not be associated with house floors or any other household remains. Rain kraals are usually not floored or roofed. Once the site is abandoned, the wooden palisade would collapse,

leaving the ceramics and other remains exposed to the elements. People usually avoid tampering with such sites because of their sacred nature.

The rain medicines

When the rain kraal is renovated and doctored, the rainmaker would immediately start collecting additional rain medicines. He would doctor the rain pots and place the medicines inside. One rainmaker, Rapedi, in 1929 informed Schapera (1971) that doctoring the rain pots involved marking them with special lines in a white substance (*moupatladi*) and red ochre (*maleko*). The significance of these markings was not explained. I asked Sebina (October 2001), a Kgatla elder originally from Mochudi and now working in Gaberone, about the significance of these marks. Although he has not witnessed such a process, he explained that in Tswana traditions white represent cleanliness, and the marking might symbolise the beginning of a new phase, whilst red represents virility and fertility.

In final preparations, sometime in September, the rain doctor would slaughter a black sheep (or goat as indicated by divination). The black colour represents the dark clouds of soft soaking rains without thunder and lightening. The sheep's blood is smeared outside the pots, the stomach contents are mixed into the rain pot and the fat is collected and used in the rain horns (Schapera *op. cit.*: 72). The meat is given to old men and immature girls who help with fetching water. Meat from the sacrificial

animal may not be taken into a domestic environment at all and has to be consumed in the rain kraal.

When the rain medicines are ready, the rainmaker would inform the chief who in turn would order young girls to fetch water with used pots bearing black soot. As the girls pour water into the rain pot individually, the rainmaker would stir the medicines, producing froth similar to froth that forms on the banks of flooding rivers.

Divination is an important aspect at every stage of the process. At the start of the ritual cycle, in July / August, the rainmaker divines whether the process would go well. The divining bones might indicate that one of the rainmakers" or the chief's relatives is happy. That individual is called to confess and ask the ancestors not to hold back the rain. A diviner is also consulted on which sex of goat or sheep should be slaughtered. A male sheep means "hard rains" and a female one 'soft rains". Furthermore, divination bones are also thrown to determine who should mix the medicines. Specific details are mentioned such as the totem of the selected individual. This individual, for example an old woman, is called into the rain kraal to mix the medicines. When her duty is complete, she is cleansed with water from the rain pots.

A few days after the rain pots have been filled and the rain medicine is ready, parties of young boys are sent out to the periphery of the villages to

smear medicines which will keep the rain in the territory. This ceremony is similar to the pegging of the territorial boundaries. While the later is meant to keep evil forces out, the smearing medicine keeps the rain in.

Summoning the Clouds

In October, the rainmaker initiates rites to summon rain clouds. This he does in the privacy of the rain kraal. However, the general public would know that the rainmaker is busy because they see dark thick smoke rising from the rain kraal. The procedures mainly involve burning medicines from the rain horns and other materials, such as leaves, twigs and moss from riverbanks (Schapera 1971: 89). Further, praise poetry dedicated to the sources of rain medicine and departed chiefs are a type of ancestral prayer. Rain is supposed to immediately follow this rite.

With the rains falling, ploughing and planting commences, usually by November. As the first crops geminate, the community begins to observe public taboos associated with rain rituals.

Rain Season taboos

Rainmaking rituals do not directly involve the common people. However, there is a point in time when people are ordered to stop ploughing or planting new crops. At this point community members should not cut down certain tree species, castrate bulls, collect pot-clay nor make new pots. These taboos are specifically directed towards protecting the land's fertility

and ensuring steady and consistent rainfall. They are usually enforced from December or January, depending on how early the rains come.

The rainmaker is also bound by some special taboos. He refrains from sex from the time he begins to cleanse the rain kraal until the end of the rain season. Sexual acts generate “heat” which would make the land dry. Furthermore, in the old days, the rainmaker was expected to stay in some semi-isolated state. He was particularly cautious about encountering pregnant women because of symbolic similarities between pregnancy and “hot blood”. As Sebina explained, the rainmaker used to work on rain rituals through out the season, and villagers would help his family work his fields. During this time, the rainmaker together with the chief would refrain from consuming any new produce before it is offered to the ancestors.

Once all rituals are performed, the rainy season should be successful.

8.3 FIGHTING THE DROUGHT

When standard rain making rituals fail, special procedures are invoked to counter an imminent drought. Usually the headmen gather and collectively approach their chief with an ox, asking him to reconsider the rain situation. At the same time, the women might hold a traditional demonstration at the chief’s *kgôtla*. They would sing rain songs blaming the chief for neglecting his duty. All these efforts usually occur in late December when there are signs of a drought.

The chief usually consults a diviner who might indicate that one of the deceased chiefs was unhappy. In this case, an appeasement ceremony would be organised. Usually the queen mother summons women to bring water pots to the rainmakers" kraal. There, water mixed with rain medicines is distributed, and the women would march to the chief's cattle kraal where they pour the special water on the grave of the dead chief. The women would dance and sing for a day at the royal cattle kraal in an attempt to "cool" the temper of the deceased chief.

Funeral rites of the chief also have a bearing on normal rainmaking ceremonies. A Tswana chief is buried in the cattle kraal next to the main court. The corpse is wrapped in a black ox skin. At the burial, the incumbent chief prays to the ancestors, asking *Modimo* to help their chief to sleep well and leave them with rain.

During additional rainmaking rituals, a traditional doctor might be called to cleanse and "cool the weapons" of the late chief. At this ritual, libations are poured over the royal grave and prayers are dedicated to the ancestors. In the meantime, the rainmaker would continue to perform additional rites in private.

Rain hunt

When the rainmaker is not satisfied with the results of the standard ceremonies, he requests the chief to order some men to capture a specific animal. A klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*) is a common target (Schapera 1971: 102) because it is associated with hills and difficult to catch. The rainmaker slaughters and processes it the same way as he does a sacrificial black sheep or goat. Certain animal parts are mixed with the medicines, and the stomach contents are burnt to summon the clouds again. If it does not rain, the rainmaker repeats the procedures with a different species of animal.

If this fails to break the drought, the rainmaker stops, and the conclusion will be that the chief has to appease his royal ancestors. The chief then consults diviners to seek explanations. Usually, the blame is thrown back to some commoners who are accused of breaking the laws of the land. Alternatively, some individuals may be blamed for polluting the land with evil charms. At times the blame goes to outsiders or enemies of the chief.

Additional rituals

There are other unintentional causes of poor rainfall, such as an unburied human corpse. Tswana also believe that aborted or miscarried infants buried outside the mother's hut will cause rain to fail. It is taboo to bury infants in dry open land for this will cause the land to remain dry. Should this be identified as the cause, relocating the remains and cleansing the

area should remedy the situation. The chief may summon villagers to the court where the offender is publicly cleansed using medicines from the rain horns.

In times of distress, the chief also orders all fires in the capital to be put out and a new fire started in the royal court. The failure of rains is obviously a tribal distress, and the tribal fire has to be renewed. The chief sends a message to village headmen to inform their people to put out all fires on a particular evening. The next morning, the women collect the ashes and place them where they would be washed to the river. In the meantime, a specially doctored fire is started at the chief's court. From here headmen send someone to collect charcoal in a potsherd to be used to start a new fire in their villages. All households then collect their fire from the headman's hearth.

If there were no further complications, the farming season would proceed. The next rituals would be conducted when fresh produce is available in the fields.

8.4 FIRST FRUIT AND HARVEST CEREMONIES

The first-fruit ceremony is a public affair held at the royal *kgôtla*. Heads of the royal families bring new green produce to the chief and his heir-designate. The same would be repeated at individual villages down to the

family level. Thereafter, people freely consume their own produces up to the harvest.

When all the produce is harvested and the grain is ready for storage, every family woman takes a basket of corn to her respective headman. The headman takes the grain to the chief who puts it in royal granaries. Like the crops from the sacred royal field, the grain is public property controlled by the chief. The chief gives back a few bags to the headmen who then prepare traditional beer for a public party at the local *kgôtla*s.

To mark the end of the taboos, the chief invites his headmen to a public ceremony to castrate his young bulls after which a public announcement is made to the people. This is usually done around April or May as the winter begins and the rainmaking cycle is finished for the year.

8.5 DISCUSSION

Like Pedi and Hananwa rainmaking rituals, Tswana rituals are part of socio-economic and political processes, and the rituals are conducted progressively as a cycle. This cycle can be divided into four sets.

The first set is the actual rainmaking ceremonies. These ceremonies involve imitative magic to directly produce rain. Summoning the rain clouds is a standard ritual performed every year. The second set of rites cleanses the land and the fields to eliminate all negative forces that might prevent

rain from falling. Men or boys mark territorial boundaries and crossroads. The third set involves preventive rituals directed towards guaranteeing timely and adequate rains. This set of rites includes seasonal taboos observed throughout the farming season. Divination determines the type and sex of the animals to be sacrificed as well as the selection of the other person to help the rainmaker mix the medicines. The fourth set of rituals involves reaction and corrective measures when all else has failed to bring rain. Should the rain completely fail, the chief is blamed. This last set includes a rain hunt and sacrifices at the royal graveyard. Some individuals might be targeted as perpetrators of social ills that affect the rains, and corrective measures are instigated.

The primary duty of the chief, among others, is to make rain. As soon as fresh products are available, they must be brought to him. He tests the fruits and makes an offering to his ancestors. From all this, it may be inferred that the chief's hold on his people is closely dependent on rainfall patterns during his reign.

Tswana rainmaking rituals draw much from symbolic associations. The choice of rain medicines and other substances are related to water and wetness. The medicinal plants usually grow in wetlands. The choice of a black ox or a black sheep is associated with dark rain clouds. The same symbolism is seen when rain medicines are burnt and dark smoke rises to

the sky. The mixture of medicines imitates the foam and froth of rushing water.

While rainmaking ceremonies involve extensive use of magical medicine, there are clear theological aspects to the process. All cosmic power lies with God, and individuals do not communicate with him. Tswana chiefs pray to royal ancestors to intercede with God.

Tswana taboos are observed because it is believed such acts may offend the ancestors and therefore God. When individuals are identified as having broken the laws of the land, they would be punished in public, sending the message to other would-be offenders to take note. This therefore implies that rain rituals are not only inter-linked to the livelihood of the community, but they also reflect the laws that govern the people.

CHAPTER 9

LOVEDU RAINMAKING PRACTICES

Lovedu territory is situated in Limpopo Province between the Oliphants River to the south and Klein Letaba in the north. The Lovedu nation is under the rule of Queen Modjadji – the renowned rainmaker in Southern African region. The queen's influence goes beyond the Lovedu, and traditionally she received emissaries for rain from as far as Zululand, Swaziland, Botswana and Venda.

9.1 SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Today the Lovedu consist of different groups, mainly of Northern Sotho extraction. The royal group is believed to have originated in the north, from the Zimbabwe culture. Lovedu royals still use terms such as *Mukhalanga* and *Muhozvi* – as praise names. These refer to Karanga and Rozvi groups in Zimbabwe. Today khiLovedu is practically a dialect of Northern Sotho, and yet its vocabulary is similar to Venda. Lovedu also falls between Sotho and Venda in grammatical structure.

A female chief leads the Modjadji dynasty. The Lovedu queen leads a secluded and ritualised life (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 76). Her personality and health are closely related to the earth's fertility and the well being of the nation. Even dirt from her body is said to form part of the mystical and

powerful rain medicines. Traditionally, she is expected to commit suicide should she become too ill or deformed. In fact, her death is not related to her state of health; it perpetuates the divinity of the queenship. Krige & Krige (1943; 1954) remarked that Queen Modjadji in the 1930s had been reigning since 1894. She was noteworthy for not have been sick a single day. The health and status of the queen is regarded as a reflection of the state of the nation.

Lovedu are patrilineal, but women occupy high positions in political and ritual life. Queen Modjadji is traditionally and ritually treated as a male. She marries, drawing most of her wives from her subchiefs and headmen (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 77). Power is passed down from the queen to her daughter.

Although today there are more Lovedu people who practice Christianity, in the 1940s less than five per cent were estimated to be converts (Krige 1940: 84). In practice, most people remain predominantly traditional in religious and ritual practices. To the Lovedu, Queen Modjadji provides rain and fertility. Poor agricultural seasons are still blamed on the queen. At the same time, should a drought strike, the royals are quick to blame the people for failing to observe traditional practices and authority.

9.2 ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The Lovedu believe in a high God, the creator who made all things. He is referred to as *Khuzwane* or *Modimo*. However, like other communities in Southern Africa, the Lovedu do not communicate directly with *Modimo*. They pray to their ancestors, starting from the basic unit at family level. For national matters, such as rain and drought, the chiefdom depends on the queen's royal ancestors. These may only be placated by the descendants of the royal family (Krige 1940: 85). The queen's ancestors control rain and its distribution as the intermediary to God. Therefore, the agro-economy and welfare of the Lovedu lies in the hands of royalty, headed by the queen.

Maintaining a good relationship with the ancestors is therefore of primary concern, and it is the queen's responsibility to maintain the link between the ancestors and people.

Lovedu have special places and sites dedicated to the ancestors. They also have objects of religious importance that formerly belonged to their forefathers. These objects are highly regarded and believed to have special powers of protection and healing. Examples include ancient glass beads, traditionally worked iron or copper bangles, spears and axes. Ancestral weapons are dedicated to the royal ancestors as a collective.

In practice every Lovedu family has an ancestor shrine. This is situated on the left hand side of the entrance to the main sleeping hut. The queen also has such a shrine. This is located inside the main sleeping house of the senior wife. The shrine usually consists of a raised earth platform, where the ancestral paraphernalia is kept. There are situations when a tree is grown and dedicated as an ancestral shrine (Plate 9.1).



Plate 9.1: A tree stump in an ancestral shrine in the courtyard of Queen Modjadji (Photograph modified after Greg Marinovich cited in Hammond-Tooke 1993: 156).

Senior royal women conduct and preside over national rituals. Important religious rites are conducted by the queen's father's eldest sister, or her niece, the eldest daughter of her brother (Krige 1940: 96; Hammond-

Tooke 1993: 157). The oldest sister is usually the priestess in the family. Men may perform ritual ceremonies only if sanctioned by the women elders.

Basically, Lovedu ceremonies consist of prayers accompanied by libations. Ritual sacrifices for the propitiation of the ancestors usually involve the slaughter of black sheep. Such sacrifices are carried out at the graves of ancestors.

9.3 RAINMAKING

The Lovedu rainmaking practice is a complex institution that goes beyond the confines of merely seeking rain in times of drought. In this very important practice, the chief actor is Queen Modjadji herself. In fact she is primarily the sole rainmaker who provides security to her people and may withhold rain to punish their enemies. In life the queen is the transformer of the clouds and in death she changes the seasons and guarantees their regular cycle. Although the strongest belief of the Lovedu is that their queen transforms the clouds, they also recognize the natural cycle of seasons.

The queen's rainmaking rites continue throughout the year (Table 9.1). She is not directly responsible for individual rain episodes, but rather she exercises some general control which ensures good rainy seasons. Even great historic African leaders such as Tshaka are reputed to have sent

delegations to Modjadji to supplicate for rain (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 76). During such visits, the delegations bring with them troops of dancers to perform the traditional rain dance (*legobathele*).

Table 9.1: Summary of Lovedu rainmaking ritual and agricultural calendar.

Time	Event	Activity	Location	Agricultural Activity
July	Renew rain medicines.	Queen calls rain doctors to assist with collecting new medicines to activate rain pots	Royal rain kraal	Off season
August	Activate royal rain pots	Queen mix rain medicines from horns into rain pots	Rain kraal	Cleaning of new fields begins.
August	Regional leaders active local rain pots.	Queen summons local rainmakers/ leader to activate the rain pots in support of hers.	Local rain kraals	
September	Rain requests	Regional delegations visit queen to supplicate for rain and conduct *legobathele* rain ritual dance ceremonies	Royal court	People prepare to plough for new season
October	Summoning the clouds	Queen mixes rain medicines to call clouds	Royal rain kraal	Planting season
November	Rainmaking rites continue	Queen and rainmakers continue conducting secret rainmaking rituals.	Royal rain kraal	Planting begins with the queen's field

December	Requests for rain (threats of drought)	If the rain delays, regional leaders will ask the queen to supplicate for rain. Queen responds by conducting additional rain rituals	Royal court/ rain kraal	Farming season
December-January	Sacrifices to royal ancestors (only when drought threatens)	Queen summons beer to be brewed; she leads a royal delegation to sacred groove where ancestors are buried; pour libations and sacrifice black sheep -. meat ritually consumed and bones left on burial sites	Sacred groove where ancestors buried	Farming season
February	First fruit ceremony	Pre-puberty girls collect a sample of new green farm produce and bring them to royal court. Queen mixes them with rain medicines and ritually tests them.	Royal court	People continue to tend fields and begin consuming new farm produce.
April	Harvest thanks-giving	Early new harvest used to brew beer to thank royal ancestors for successful farming season. Queen pours libations to royal ancestors at royal graves.	Queen's royal ancestors shrine in the royal residence.	Harvest begins.

The queen and rain doctor

As the greatest rainmaker in Southern African, Queen Modjadji is an expert in rain charms and medicines. However, she seldom works alone.

She works with a rain doctor or a team of rain doctors. In bad times, the doctor divines the cause and seeks explanations why the queen is unable to create rain clouds. As part of the remedial action, the doctor may use his special medicines. The rain doctors are also consulted independently outside their areas. Tsonga and Venda chiefs are on record for hiring Lovedu rain doctors. Even Tswana across the Limpopo used to call upon some of these specialists (Schapera 1971).

The relationship between the queen and her rain doctors is comparable to that of the queen and her royal ancestors. Rain doctors acknowledge that if the queen “holds their hands” their rain medicines and charms cannot make rain. In the end, the queen has all the rainmaking powers. She needs to placate her ancestors, however, and she needs the rain doctors to conduct additional rites.

Rain medicines

The manner in which the queen transforms the clouds and the details of the act are a subject of great mystery. She acts as a magician who guards her secret. This secret is highly regarded because it is bound up with the royal title and succession to the throne. The knowledge is usually passed on to the successor just prior to the death of the reigning queen.

The queen’s rain medicines are kept in rough ceramic pots (*mehago*). These medicine pots are kept within a special rain shrine at the back of

the royal compound where access is restricted. The medicine pots are closely linked to rain horns, which are kept separately in the main hut. It is believed that when these horns are placed on the ground, rain will fall and conversely, when they are hung up, the skies clear.

Although the specific details of the rain medicines are not clear, Krige (1940: 172-173).managed to identify some ingredients and some were identified during fieldwork in Modjadjiskloof:

- Skin of the deceased chief or senior councillor collected before burial
- Fat of the scaly anteater, pangolin *(kwara)*. This is regarded as a royal animal and when found has to be brought alive to the royal village
- Sea water because it foams and froths
- Feathers of a "lightning bird"
- White and black seashells
- Various roots and barks of plants, including stems of the *Khadi adenia gumnifera* – a tough forest creeper that contains much water
- Time to time a black sheep is sacrificed to strengthen the queen's rain medicines

Important district heads maintain and keep their own rain pots, but they must wait until the queen commands them to activate their rain pots. They

do this by mixing medicines with water that is collected by pre-puberty girls.

First fruit ceremony and additional rainmaking rites

As part of the agricultural ceremonies, Lovedu ritualise the first green produce. At this ceremony all new crops maturing in the fields are collected, ground together with medicines and put into the rain pot. There after, the queen tests the new produce before anyone is allowed to collect or consume them.

Queen Modjadji controls rain only in agreement with her ancestors, and they are capable of holding her abilities back, just as she is able to stay the hands of the rain doctors. Hence, the queen always prays to ancestors not to hold her hands so she can work her charms productively. Since the queen's ancestors can cause drought by not helping, further steps to appease them will sometimes be taken. The height of the appeasement process is the sacrifice of black livestock. In times of serious drought, the queen and the rain doctor lead a procession to a sacred grove where royal family members are buried. The queen pours beer and prays to have her hands freed to allow her to make rain clouds. A black sheep is slaughtered and parts of the carcass are placed on the graves. Rain medicine from the medicine horns and rain pots may also be sprinkled on the site (Krige 1940: 180). The remaining meat is cooked and eaten by all participants. Bones are collected, tied together and left on the graves (ibid.:184).

There are many taboos and traditional regulations observed by all Lovedu as part of ensuring good rains. The regulations are tied to other activities such as mortuary practices. Women dying in childbirth, abortions or miscarriages, infants, twins, people struck by lightning, all are buried in cool places – river valleys and waterways. This is done so as to "cool their spirits" since they "died in hot circumstances". If they were otherwise buried on dry ground, rain would not fall. Such improper burials, which stop rain, are corrected by the use of rain medicines, which are believed to disperse the "windy spirits" and cool the grave. The medicine is meant to pacify the angry spirit, mollify the heat and cause the wind to subside (Krige 1940: 178).

There are times when drought grips the whole country. It is thought that the country is not right due to a general disrespect of the land's laws. In these desperate times, all fires are put out with rain medicines from the queen's rain pots. This is only done as a last resort when the diviner's bones indicate so. Putting out the fires is believed to usher in a new year, but it is not an annual fire ceremony as practiced by neighbouring groups. In the Lovedu practice, rain medicines are mixed with water collected by young girls. Young boys are then sent out with the medicated water to put out all village fires. A new fire is started at the royal court and spread henceforth.

9.4 DISCUSSION

Rain making rituals are sacred and are therefore closely linked to sacred sites and spaces, such as royal burial grounds. Queen Modjadji prays and conducts rituals in the sacred rainmaking kraal at the back of the royal homestead. It is in this place that medicine pots are kept. Special rain medicines are kept in sacred horns stored in the queen's main house.

In times of more trouble, the queen makes sacrifices to the ancestors at the royal graveyard. The Lovedu provide a good case of intermingling religious practices and magical rites. Prayers and offerings are made to ancestors and yet the rain medicines remain an essential part of the process. There is a strong appeal to magical powers and not just offering "food" to the ancestors. Although the Lovedu queen is the official rainmaker, the oldest royal may have precedence in approaching the royal ancestors. She therefore works closely with other royal family members. She also works closely with rain doctors. In the end, people look to the queen for rain and the well being of the nation.

Furthermore, sacred leadership is part of the Lovedu social structure. The queen lives in seclusion and she retains absolute control over all national rituals. Her health and well-being are directly linked to the nation's health, fertility and agricultural productivity. The queen is the way to the national ancestors who in turn have links with God, *Khuzwane*. This socio-political

structure probably derives directly from sacred leadership in the Zimbabwe culture.

CHAPTER 10

VENDA RAINMAKING PRACTICES

The Venda occupy more than a third of the Soutpansberg districts in Limpopo Province. Their territory is bounded on the north by the Limpopo River, on the west by the Sand River and on the south and east by the Levuvhu River (Fig 10.1). North across the Limpopo there are more Venda-speaking groups who are neighbours to Shona-Karanga groups. To the east and southeast there are Tsonga groups whilst to the west and southwest they border with Northern Sotho.

10.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Historical and ethnographic sources refer to a Venda presence in the Shashe-Limpopo basin and the Limpopo valley area of Mozambique (Schapera 1930, 1971, 1984; Liesegang 1977: 181-2; Scully 1978: 330). Venda people today are a distinct group formed around a nucleus that originated from the north of the Limpopo. Linguistically, Venda is strongly related to western Shona-Kalanga and Karanga (Wentezel 1983: 172) and yet the vocabulary has strong Sotho influences (Lestrade 1989: 487; Hammond-Tooke 1993: 43). Although Venda are neighbours to Shona, Tsonga and Sotho groups, their languages are distinctively different from each other (Van Warmelo 1935; Jones-Phillipson 1972: 204-206; Ehret 1982). Oral tradition and archaeological work shows that people migrated

into Soutpansberg in a series of waves (Stayt 1931: 9; Loubser 1991). In addition to language, other cultural traits define Venda today, including distinct social classes and distinctive initiation rituals.

Venda origins has been a subject of intense debate among scholars for some time (Loubser 1991). Two schools of thought have dominated this debate: (i) the old migrationist school and (ii) the current local development school. Today, Venda ruling elite have the Singo totem. The migration theorist and early ethnographers used Singo oral traditions to conclude that the Venda originated from north of the Zambezi River and migrated across Zimbabwe into the Soutpansberg region. Here they conquered the local chiefdoms and established a Venda empire (Wessmann 1908; Stayt 1931; Wilson 1969). In the same context all distinct cultural developments in Venda were attributed to Singo migration, expansion and political revolution in the region (Loubser 1991).

Others have challenged that position. Non-Singo traditions point to the fact that pre-Singo groups in the Soutpansberg had close affinities with Shona groups to the north and Sotho groups to the south (Ralushai & Gray 1977; Ralushai 1978). This interpretation favours local development. Various evidence shows that Singo originated in Zimbabwe. For example names and titles of the earliest Singo chiefs, such as Mambo, Dyambeu, Dimbanyika and Thoho-ya-ndou, are Rozvi rulers of the Torwa state in southwestern Zimbabwe (Wentzel 1983: 94-5; Beach 1984: 261), and oral

traditions refer to close links with VhaRozvi, (Beach 1980, 1994: Huffman 1996b).



Fig. 10.1: Map of Southern Africa showing the general area occupied by the Venda people in relationship to the distribution of other Bantu-speaking groups mentioned in this study (After Huffman, forthcoming).

During my fieldwork between 2001 and 2003 in southwestern Zimbabwe , local Venda elders constantly referred to prominent archaeological sites in the area as “homes of the Rozvi”. One of my principal contacts in Maramani, Lucus Nyadzani Nyoni (February 2001), recited an old story of the legendary Dimbanyika who crossed the Limpopo with a large group of people. In Shona, *dimba* derives from *timba* meaning to dig and may metaphorically mean long distance walking. *Nyika* refers to country or land. So *mutimbanyika* is a person who crosses vast lands. Nyoni explained that was how Dimbanyika got the name. Whatever the derivation, oral traditions link Venda groups to the Shona people.

A revised culture history indicates that Venda evolved through three major phases. In the first phase, different groups collectively called VhaNgona lived in the area. In the second phase, 15th to 16th century, Khami-type palaces mark the capitals of Shona-speaking Mbedzi, Tavhatsinde, Lembetu and Ndou dynasties (Huffman & Hanisch 1987; Loubser 1991). The third phase saw the expansion of the Singo. Interaction between these Shona groups and Sotho-Tswana resulted in the creation of a new Venda identity. In essence then, the Singo came to politically dominate a region that was already Venda. Today traditional political power is split between two Singo dynasties: Tshivhase and Mpephu.

The greatest Singo ruler is thought to be Thoho-ya-Ndou. He probably was responsible for consolidating the Venda empire from Dzata in the 18h

century (Huffman 1996b: 41). After his death, the empire disintegrated into independent chieftaincies. This left the groups engaged in intermittent conflict until the *mfecane* and arrival of European settlers. After the Anglo-Boer War colonial administrators divided the Venda country into units (Stayt 1931: 19).

Venda live in small villages composed of numerous homesteads of close kinsmen and clan relatives. Chiefs" villages are larger than commoner homesteads. Modern villages are built on the plains with easy access to arable land, water and pasturelands. During the troubled 18th and 19th centuries, Venda people strategically located their villages on inaccessible hilltops and precipitous slopes (Loubser 1991). This location is still evident today.

Venda, like most Southern Bantu-speaking groups, are primarily agro-pastoralists. The bulk of their food supply comes from their gardens and fields. Access to land is by guaranteed usufruct rights. Farm sizes are usually controlled by individual family sizes and needs. Chiefs have large royal fields (*dzunde)* that are worked by public labour as a tribute. Small stock provide most of the domestic meat. Cattle are raised and closely guarded as a source of wealth.

10.2 RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL ORGANISATION

Venda are monotheist, believing in *Raluvhimba*, a God directly similar to the Shona God *Mwari*. Although *Raluvhimba* is peculiar to Venda people, they now interchangeably use the name *Mwari* / *Nwali*. This great God created the whole universe and is linked to natural phenomena that affect people as a whole, such as prolonged drought, floods and thunder.

The Venda chief is believed to be recipient of *Raluvhimba's* instruction. For example, when lightening and thunder strikes, the chief enters his hut to address *Raluvhimba* as *Makhulu* – his senior ancestor. Until recently, the Venda rulers used to send a black ox and a black piece of cloth to the Shona's *Mwari* shrine in the, Matopos Hills in Zimbabwe. When movement of cattle was abolished in the colonial years, the chief started sending an alternative in cash. Failure to obey *Raluvhimba*/ *Mwari* was punishable with a severe and long drought.

In addition to *Raluvhimba*, Venda strongly believe in ancestral spirits. Burial sites of chiefs are the sacred residence of the royal spirits. Other kinds of spirits are believed to reside in rivers, pools and natural lakes. One outstanding example is Lake Fundudzi. The lake is infested with crocodiles, which are symbolic of Venda chiefs. The lake is also believed to be the residence of old spirits of VhaTavhatsinde who predate the Singo.

Venda religious practices are mostly directed to their ancestors. The relationship between an individual and his or her ancestral spirits is basically a family affair. At national level, the chief's ancestors are supreme. These are considered to be associated with the land and therefore all people.

Politically, and socially Venda provide a classic example of sacred leadership. They maintain a distinct division between nobility (*vhakolo)* and commoners (*vhasiwana)*. Succession is based on a well-defined concept of royal blood where rulers are directly drawn from noble descendants. The sacredness of Venda chiefs is expressed in a mystical link between the chief and the chiefdom: he is a "living ancestor". His health and strength directly influence the nation's health, wealth and general well-being. This distinct form of sacred leadership was present in the Zimbabwe culture (Huffman 1996b).

The modern royal class consists of direct descendants of the Singo. The remainder now form the commoner classes. In Venda, nobility is one with the land. Commoners do not own land and theoretically do not have any control over what is on it. They have usufruct rights as granted only through the chiefs. Only Venda chiefs may call for national assemblies, arrange or sanction ceremonies such as rainmaking, *thevhula* (thanksgiving) rituals and seed blessing rites.

Venda chieftaincy is highly symbolized in national ceremonies; *thevhula*, the annual agricultural thanksgiving being most important. Physical expressions of Venda royalty are also seen in chiefly insignia, such as sacred doors with crocodile designs (Plates 10.1 &10.2). Even in everyday speech, the chief's door is called "crocodile", his salt is "sand" and his dog is referred to as "messengers" (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 71).

Although royal men run the courts, Venda royal women retain important ritual and political roles. When a new Venda chief is appointed, a special ceremony must be performed to transform him into a living ancestor. This ritual is in the hands of the *makhadzi*, the great aunt – the chief's official. The *makhadzi* works in close harmony with the *khotsimunene*, uncle of the chief – the father's official brother. These three form the sacred leadership: there must always be a chief, an official brother and official sister.

Venda people observe a number of rites to honour their ancestors. These coincide with the agricultural cycle. After harvest and before the new farming season begins, the royal family conducts the most sacred ritual, *thevhula*, to honour the royal ancestors. Between October and November, the chief calls the whole community to work the *dzunde* field. After *thevhula*, the lower chiefs are allowed to call rainmakers to conduct local rainmaking rituals.



Plates 10.1 & Plate 10.2: Venda sacred door and ritual drum with crocodile designs, symbols of Venda sacred authority (Photographs modified from Greg Marinovich and A. Nettleton as cited in Hammond-Tooke 1993: 156 & 81 respectively).

10.3 *THEVHULA* - THANKSGIVING CEREMONY

The ceremonial cycle begins after harvest round about July (Table 10.1). Harvesting takes place in winter, after the first frost when the grains are hardened. After the harvest of the royal field, the people harvest their own crops, process them and store them away. Headmen and petty chiefs collect tribute grain and pass it on to the chief. At times, the chief returns a portion to the headmen. Tribute grain is stored together with produce from the royal field in the royal grain bins. The chief then initiates preparations for *thevhula.* This ceremony is one of the most elaborate and sacred of all Venda public functions. *Thevhula* can take place in July, or the other

months after, but not during August. August is sacred, and no ceremonies are conducted at this time nor will people even build houses.

To mark the beginning of *thevhula,* the official sister and official brother, in consultation with the chief, invite a diviner to layout the procedures to be followed. The diviner indicates who will lead the ceremony. This ceremonial leader is called *tshihfe*. It is usually the official sister. With the *tshihfe* appointed, some royal pre-puberty girls help elderly women to prepare the ritual beer (*mpambo)*. This beer is brewed under strict conditions. It is made from specially selected sorghum from the royal granary. It is supposed to be whitish, semi viscous and flowing. One Venda elder (VhoTshirumbula Mikovha, September 2002) referred to *mpambo* beer as the symbol of the ancestors" fertility because of a symbolic link with semen and fertility.

On the day of *thevhula,* people gather at the *khoro* in the chief's village (*musanda*). The ritual beer is placed in a ritual pot. The royal ceremonial regalia (*zwithungula*) that include items passed down from previous rulers are collected in a palm leaf basket (*mufaro)*. A ceremonial cloth (*riwenda)* is also included with the royal ceremonial regalia.

Ritual drums and horn flutes are brought to the royal *khoro.* Members of the royal family are summoned to form a procession that would head to the royal burial site. This sacred place is usually at the back of the

musanda where access is restricted only to royal elite. When they arrive, the official brother will announce the beginning of the ceremony. The official sister, with the help of a specially appointed girl and the *tshifhe* carry the ritual calabash, the ritual beer pot and the royal paraphernalia. The sister announces to the ancestors the reason for their visit.

With the sister in the lead, the procession heads back to the royal court and then to another sacred ritual site in the *musanda* called the *zwifhoni*. The beer and royal regalia are placed down next to two sacred stones at the site, (Plate 10.3). These stones represent male and female ancestors. Thereafter, the ritual leader humbly takes the beer in a calabash and introduces himself / herself to the ancestors by addressing the sacred stones. She then pours a libation, offering the royal ancestors the new produce and thanking them for a good rainy season and harvest. The nobility take this opportunity to address the ancestors on various issues and to request a favourable new farming season. The main message here is a vote of thanks to the royal ancestors, the owners and guardians of the land, for good harvests past and future.

After the dedications, the sister drinks beer from the calabash and then the brother, followed by the reigning chief. All members of the royal clan in their descending order come next. Although commoner wives of royals are present, they do not partake. This ritual drink is reserved for royal blood only. Even royal children take their share. After the drinking is complete,

the brother announces to the crowd gathered at the *khoro* that the sacrifice is complete. The procession heads back to the *khoro* where the *tshikona* dance has started. There the sister proudly announces that the year may begin and the nation has been granted permission to till the land again.

Sometimes a diviner may indicate that an animal must be sacrificed. This will always be a black bull. This bull is presented to the ancestors at the back of the *musanda* before it is slaughtered. In Thohoyandou, we learned another version that particularly applies to the Tshivhase ruling dynasty. Tshivhase royals go to the sacred ritual site with a cow known as *nyatema*, and a royal bull, known as *makhulu* Tshivhase, to represent female and male royal ancestors in the same way as the two stones at the *zwifhoni*. After the libations, the ritual beer is first given to the two cattle to drink. Some of the beer is poured on their backs as individual members of the royal family address the ancestors on matters affecting the whole nation. After this, the procession heads back to the court and joins the public feast.

Table 10.1: Summary of Venda agricultural rituals.

Time	Event	Activity	Location	Agricultural Activity
July	Thevhula	National ritual. Royal family brew *mpambo* ritual beer, make offerings and pour libations to ancestors at ritual site. Rituals to thank royal ancestors for previous season and ask for rain in the next season.	Beer brewed at musanda. Ritual procession visit royal graves and ritual offerings conducted at sacred zwifhoni site.	Complete harvest and go off season.
August	Sacred month	No ritual or ceremony conducted in this month.	National	No activity
September	Rainmaking rituals	Lower chiefs get permission to summon local rainmakers to conduct the rain ritual. Rituals conducted in private by rainmakers in their own rain kraal. The royal family members may participate.	The rainmakers' kraal.	Begin to prepare fields for new farming season.
October - November	Ploughing the dzunde	Chiefs mobilise local heads to work in the chief's tribute field.	Musanda and royal village fields (dzunde).	After dzunde public may start ploughing own fields.
November	Ritual seed dressing	Chief summons the royal medicine man to fortify seeds for planting in new season.	Musanda – Royal court.	The commoners plant the dzunde first then work their own fields.
February – March	First fruits ceremony	The chief ritually tests a sample of new farm produce. At times, some medicines may be used to ritually cleanse the new produce before the chief tastes and offers them to the ancestors.	Musanda – Royal court.	People partake in consumption of new green produce.
May - July	Harvest of dzunde fields	Sub-chiefs and their ranks mobilise their people to harvest the royal fields when the crops are ready.	Musanda, village dzunde.	Harvest begins and goes into off-season.

When one of my principal informants, the late VhoTshirumbula Mikovha, asked me why I wanted to learn about rainmaking, I gave him a generalised explanation that we were studying Mapungubwe (note that Venda traditions acknowledge Mapungubwe as a distant ancestral site). We suspected that the Mapungubwe people abandoned the area centuries ago because there was no rain. He quickly responded *"… then the king of Mapungubwe was a failure who did not keep up with expectations of his office"*. His response emphasized that it is the ruler's responsibility to ensure rain.

After the national *thevhula* ceremony, other lower chiefs and headmen hold their own ceremonies. The procedures are basically the same with minor technical differences. In chief Tshikundamalema's area in Mutale, we encountered a slightly different form of *thevhula* at the lower political level. The royals used to conduct their *thevhula* at a cave with San rock paintings near Dambale Village. A handful of different seeds from the harvest together with the *zwithungula* and ritual beer were taken to the rock shelter. On the shelter floor are small cupules in which the seeds were placed. Ritual beer is poured in the cupules as the ceremonial leader addresses the ancestors.

In addition to cupules a game-board lie in front of the cave. The game board is similar to others associated with Late Iron Age sites. In the

Tshikundamalema case the *zwifhoni* is located far away from the *musanda* in the mountains, as opposed to all others within the *musanda* or nearby. Most probably, the Tshikundamalema chiefs sought to expropriate the powers inherent in the prehistoric site.



Plate 10.3: Venda sacred stones that represent male and female royal ancestors. *Thevhula* offerings are conducted here to honour the royal ancestors (After Hammond-Tooke 1993: 153).

10.4 OTHER RAINMAKING RITUALS

Rainmaking among Venda, although no longer widely and frequently practiced, remains one of the most sacred and secretive rituals. Despite discussions and interviews with Venda elders, rainmakers and members of the royal families, we did not recover specific details as to how exactly rain medicines are collected, processed and used in creating rain clouds. The

details are not a subject of open discussion. In spite of these limitations, we managed to record the principles.

First and foremost, the chief calls for other rainmaking rituals only after the *thevhula* ceremony. These auxiliary rituals follow a different procedure from *thevhula.* For example, the previous Chief Mukula used to send a young female goat to the local rainmaker summoning her to begin the rainmaking rituals (VhoMasinde Maeba, July 2002,). The rainmaker starts by replenishing the rain medicines, between September and October, and never in August as noted earlier. On the designated day, the chief sends ritual (*tshikona*) dancers to the rainmakers" village to conduct rain dance routines. The rainmaker processes the rain medicines in the privacy of their own rain kraal. The royal family and a few selected community elders consume the sacrificial goat meat. No salt was used in this ritual feast. The rainmaker collected the bones and buried them in a wetland (*maroromani*) together with a concoction of rain medicines. The rainmaker then informed the chief that the rituals were complete.

VhoLydia Tshivhase provided a slightly different version of rainmaking rituals. Chief Tshivhase used to send a sheep, *tshikona* dancers and grain to Tshisinamavhute, the rainmaker from Mianzwi Village in Thohoyandou. It is unclear how the sheep was used because specific details were not for public knowledge. Describing the items that may be found in a rain kraal, she listed small and large ceramic pots and sometimes grinding stones

and potsherds. When we visited the deserted rain kraal of the late Maeba in Mukhula village, we found pots of different sizes, potsherds, a spearhead and a set of animal horns that were probably used as medicine containers.

Seed doctoring ceremony and the *dzunde* field

When the rainmaking rituals are complete before planting begins, all family heads bring a sample of seeds to their headman. The village heads in turn take the seed to the chief's *musanda*. The chief appoints a medicine man to doctor and bless the seeds. A mixture of different seeds is placed in a large pot and mixed with rain medicines. The headmen take seed samples back for redistribution to their villages. The doctored seeds are mixed with the rest of the seeds to be planted by individual farmers. The doctored seeds from the chief are usually kept in a small closed storage pot, which is placed in the middle of the field to protect its fertility. New seeds are occasionally added throughout the planting period.

Individual farmers might decide to protect their fields further from potential bad forces. Venda believe that there are some unscrupulous individuals who use bad magic to affect the crops of other people. Some farmers therefore hire a traditional doctor privately to protect their fields.

To mark the beginning of ploughing, the chief sets aside a special day when all the headmen lead their people to work in the chief's *dzunde*.

Ideally the chief would organize a beer feast for the workers that day. Some of the grain from the *dzunde* is kept for such national functions. After ploughing and planting the *dzunde*, villagers work in their headman's *dzunde* and thereafter their own fields.

First fruit ceremony

When new green products are available in the fields, a special day is set aside when the village heads collect samples and take them to the *musanda*. The chief leads a ceremony to test symbolically the produce and make an offering to the ancestors. Thereafter, petty chiefs and headmen follow suit in their respective areas, and then the people are allowed to consume the new green produce from their fields.

Although many of our informants said this ceremony was not elaborate, Chief Mukula explained that at times he would consult a diviner before he tested the new crops. He invites a medicine man to clean the new products. Although this ceremony is mostly viewed as a gesture, it is a serious crime to consume new produce before the chief gives permission. In principal, the chief equals the land and everything on it, and therefore his permission is critically important.

10.5 DISCUSSION

First and foremost, Venda hold only one national rainmaking ritual. *Thevhula* ceremonies thank the royal ancestors for previous and

forthcoming success. The rituals are centrally controlled by the royalty. Furthermore, Venda sacred leaders hold a monopoly over economic rituals of the nation. Any attempt to disobey royal regulations is viewed as an act of treason. Apart from being political leaders, Venda leaders live in an ambience that discourages the downward transmission of their knowledge. Their valued knowledge can only be exchanged with royal ancestors in return for the supreme boons of health, fertility and economic prosperity of their subjects. Only as ‘sacred” leaders can they transmit their special knowledge, and this they do in ritual action. Hence, it is only the chief who controls *thevhula* and any other agricultural ritual.

The ritual system has two parts. First, only the royal family, on behalf of the whole community, conducts *thevhula*. Thereafter, individual sub-chiefs invite specialists to conduct rainmaking rituals for their areas. These other rituals, unlike *thevhula,* involve medicines and magical manipulations.

The same hierarchy in ritual practice is reflected in the socio-political structure of Venda society.

CHAPTER 11

SHONA RAINMAKING PRACTICES

The focus in this chapter is on data from my field research in Zimbabwe. First I worked among the Korekore in northern Zimbabwe. These Northern Shona are found along the mid-Zambezi Valley from Mount Darwin in the northeast through Guruve to the Hurungwe plateau east of Lake Kariba (Fig.11.1 & 11.3).

At the beginning of 2001, I visited Eastern Shona-speaking Manyika people in Nyanga District. I worked in Chief Saunyama's area in Nyaguwi, Chirimanyimo and Maristville. I had worked here earlier on an archaeological project (see Soper 1996).

The first section presents a brief outline of the Shona belief system. Next are descriptions and analyses of rainmaking rituals. In the last part I create a model of Shona rainmaking based on the premise that rituals relate the present to a "timeless" past.

11.1 SHONA BELIEF SYSTEM

Spiritual Hierarchy

In the Shona worldview both the living and ancestors have a political hierarchy. While distinctions are made between the world of humans and

realm of spiritual powers, both exist within a single universe of experience. In such a universe, the ancestors remain affectively present in the lives of the living (Murimbika 2004).

Shona believe in God (*Mwar i/ Musikavanhu / Nyadenga* [the most high]) (Bullock 1927; Gelfand 1959, 1962; Bourdillon 1976). The Shona concept of *Mwari* may be abstracted as follows: *Mwari* made the earth; created all men, women and children (*Musikavahnu* – creator of the people); brought into being all animals, vegetation, mountains, the sky, the sun, moon and the stars. He is a spirit that created the air we breathe. *Mwari* is indifferent to men and not directly concerned with their problems, for he is too far removed. Before the advent of Christianity, Shona people did not pray directly to *Mwari* (Bullock 1927; Abraham 1964) but through their ancestral spirits.

The concept of *Mwari* has long been associated with the development of sacred leadership in Southern Africa and the rise of complex society at Great Zimbabwe (e.g. Huffman 1996b). At the decline of the Zimbabwe culture, sacred leadership began to change. Religious powers were gradually taken over by royal ancestral spirits (*mhondoro),* symbolically associated with lions, while chiefs retained political power. Today mediums of *mhondoro* spirits hold sacred duties, such as controlling rainmaking and agricultural ceremonies.

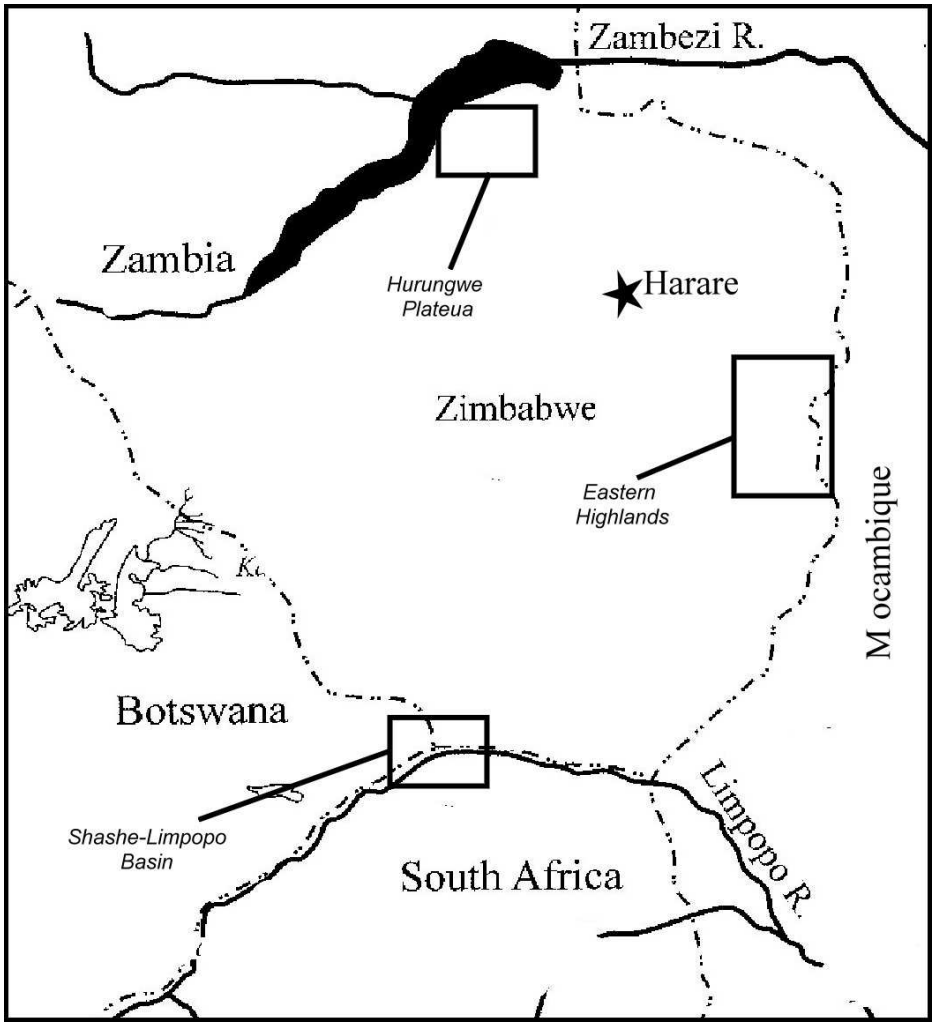


Figure 11.1: The Hurungwe Plateau and Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe in relationship to Shashe-Limpopo basin.

The concept of *mhondoro* spirits has been a subject of debate among several scholars (for example Bullock1927; Gelfand 1959; Daneel 1971; Bourdillon 1976; Auret 1982; Lan 1985). *Mhondoro* are supposed to be close to *Mwari* (Fig. 11.2) and are responsible for the general welfare of people in their respective territories (Gelfand 1959; Daneel 1971; Bourdillon 1976).

Gelfand (1959) refers to the legendary lion spirit of Chaminuka as the head of all *mhondoro* spirits. Under Chaminuka, these other spirits care for large regions, often not strictly defined. The hierarchy goes from these regional/ provincial tribal spirits to lesser *mhondoro* at the district level. Strictly speaking these lesser spirits should not play a large part in religious matters, as most of the honour and responsibility should go to greater tribal spirits.

Tribal spirits were once living men and women who after death transformed their prophetic powers and prowess at warfare, tribal expansions, rainmaking and royal status into spiritual powers. Most of the great *mhondoro* spirits are founding leaders. Below tribal spirits are clan spirits, followed by the family spirits.

In addition to the *mhondoro* hierarchy, there are clearly defined levels of ancestorhood (Fig. 11.2). At the bottom are family spirits of recently departed parents or grandparents (Murimbika 1999, 2004). Next are group ancestors, such as the chief's immediate ancestors. On top are the tribal spirits that are founding rulers of the chiefdom: guardians of the land who deal with issues such as fertility and rainfall. In principle, the same levels are reflected in Shona politics.

Gelfand (1959: 15) might have been correct in identifying Chaminuka at the top. Today, however, there is no single national *mhondoro*. The

hierarchy is regional or provincial, and not national (Lan 1985). Although legendary spirits such as Chaminuka have a wide reputation, they are not necessarily senior to other great *mhondoro* such as NeHanda, Dzivaguru or Mutota (Auret 1982:174-176). One should note that the Shona spiritual world is not at loggerheads: the tribal spirits do not engage in battles. They all converse with one another for the benefit of the nation. Tribal spirits are therefore concerned with the welfare of a group, a community or whole tribe, and not individual problems. It is within this communal context that Shona rainmaking rites are conducted under the authority of the *mhondoro*.

Guardians of the Land

The *mhondoro* are the spiritual protectors of the land, while the chiefs are its living custodians. The *mhondoro,* through their mediums, are prophets who foresee the future, and their advice in almost every matter is highly prized (Gelfand 1959: 5). As an authority on every subject, they know whether rain will fall or why it is being withheld. If annoyed, *mhondoro* spirits may even affect the rain. Tribal *mhondoro* also control other natural elements, such as soil and crop fertility and availability of game. In theory every chiefdom has its own senior royal *mhondoro.*

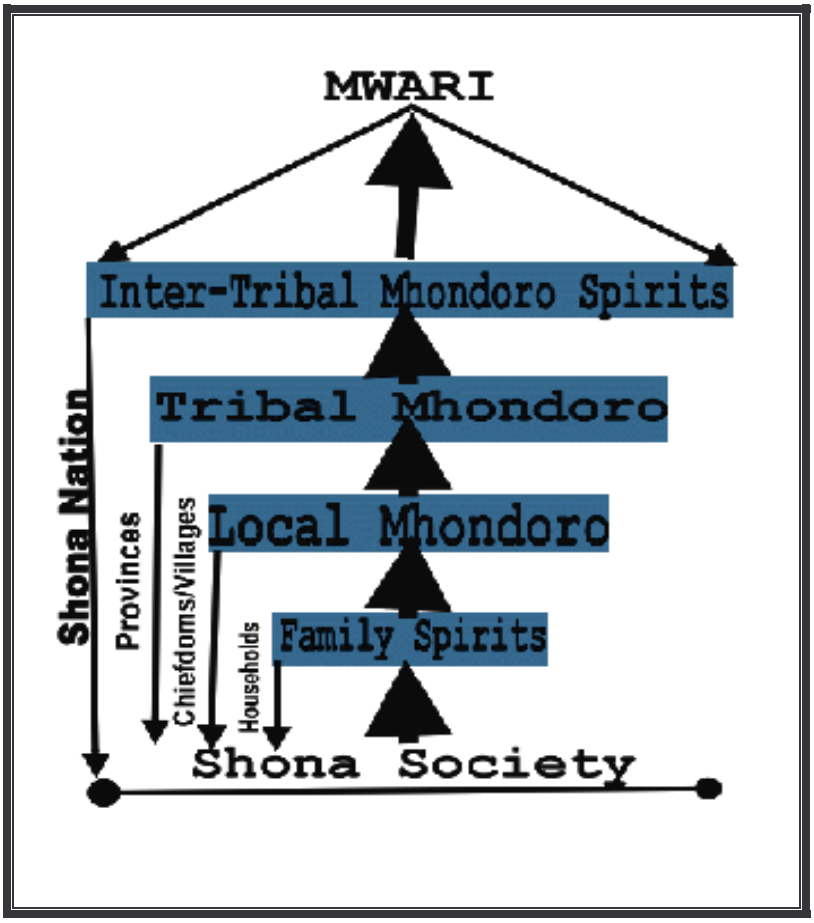


Fig. 11.2: Hierarchy of Shona ancestral spirits in relation to the social structure.

While it is the chief's duty to enforce the laws of the land, *mhondoro* may exert general punishment if the people disregard these laws. Disgraceful or antisocial acts, such as incest, annoy the tribal spirits and are punishable by drought or some other general catastrophe. Further, in recent Shona history, the tribal *mhondoro* spirits have been involved in the selection of new chiefs in their respective territories. They also guide him in his duties. There is a delicate but symbiotic relationship between the chief and the tribal *mhondoro.* The chief relies on the *mhondoro* for political and religious support, while the *mhondoro* relies on the

acknowledgement of the chief to retain recognition, control and status as the mediator between the living and the spiritual world. The political influence of the *mhondoro* grew tremendously with the advent of colonialism. For example, the mediums of NeHanda and Kaguvi led the first Shona rebellion in the 1890s. Subsequent mediums of outstanding *mhondoro* spirits played a central unifying role during the 1970s liberation movement.

11.2 RAINMAKING PRACTICES

Shona rainmaking rituals in general and Korekore in particular are not a single event but a yearlong cycle (Table 11.1). People annually pray for rain and the fertility of the land. Ceremonies are held in honour of the regional tribal spirits for good rains, to bless the seeds and give thanks for the harvest. All people are required to attend rainmaking ceremonies in their respective areas, and they must keep the days of rest prescribed in every chieftainship in order to be blessed with satisfactory rain and good crops.

Shona rainmaking practices consist of three rituals each year – in January, April and September (Gelfand 1959). In practice, among the Korekore, this cycle begins in September with the *rukato* rain ceremony. When new green produce are available from January, another ceremony allows people to eat the new produce. Harvest ceremonies follows in April.

Table 11.1: Phases of standard Shona rainmaking rites.

Time	*Event*	*Activity*	*Location*	*Agricultural Activity*
September	*Rukato* (rainmaking rituals)	National ritual organised by the chief conducted by the mhondoro. Ritual beer brewed headmen lead their villages to the ceremony; ritual beer offerings and libations to ancestors at ritual site. Rituals to thank royal ancestors for previous season and ask for rain in the next season.	Rushanga ritual enclosure	Preparing fields for new season
October	Seed blessing	Chief collect seed samples to be blessed by mhondoro and redistributed across villages	Mhondoro public court, *banya*	Prepare to work sacred field, zunde.
November	Sacred month	No rituals on this month	-	Plant the zunde and plant all fields.
February	First fruits ceremony	The chief collect new produce and take to mhondoro to bless the produce.	Mhondoro public court, banya.	People partake in consumption at new green produce.
April	Harvest ceremony Mishashe	Chief mobilise village heads to harvest zunde fields; Ritual beer brewed with new grain and offerings to the mhondoro	Mhondoro court	Harvest, use of new produce and go into off-season.

***Rukato* (rainmaking) ritual**

The *rukato* ceremony is held in September before the rains are due. During this ritual the chief leads his people in asking for rain while at the same time thanking the *mhondoro* spirit for the previous year's good rains. The *mhondoro* medium also advises the people on what crops to grow during the oncoming season. These rituals are similar across the Shona country, and they are the most important of all communal rituals. Among the Manyika these rituals are called *makasvo.*

The chief in consultation with the *mhondoro* medium sets the day. He summons his headmen to bring their contribution of grain for brewing traditional beer. The process, from initiating the brewing to the ceremony, may take two weeks. It begins with a prayer to bless the ritual beer. This prayer also serves as a notice to the spirits about the impending ceremony.

Women beyond childbearing age and girls below puberty participate in brewing the sacred beer. This beer is brewed specifically with millet or sorghum from the royal granary or grain harvested from the *zunde* fields. Other women may prepare the common beer for the public. Ideally, all headmen will lead their followers to the ceremony, and they usually bring with them some domestic animal for slaughter.

On the last night of the ceremony, people gather at the *banya* (or *dendemaro* – a hill-like structure with two entrances),which is the *mhondoro* public courthouse. The people dance and sing all night. Towards dawn, the mediums will be possessed, starting with the lesser spirits, and the senior *mhondoro* is usually the last.

As soon as the senior medium is possessed, the acolyte, or special assistant to the medium brings the regalia of the spirit. These include a spear and walking stick (Gelfand 1959: 54), and a hat made of special grass to resemble the long neck-hairs of a senior male lion. An elderly woman or a young girl crawling on her knees brings water in a wooden plate, or ceramic pot, to the *mhondoro* (Plate 11.1). Sometimes the water is put in a ladle. This action is observed at all *mhondoro* ceremonies to cool down the medium after the spirit has entered him. The emphasis is on the opposing states of “hot” and “cold”.

Once the senior *mhondoro* is settled, the people enter and sit in the *banya,* women on the left and men on the right. Sexes do not mix during these traditional ceremonies. The senior *mhondoro* sits on a reed mat on a slightly raised platform at the back, facing the congregates. Next to the senior *mhondoro* will be other invited *mhondoro* and family spirit mediums. In front of the senior *mhondoro* there is an open space that is used for dancing. Singing and dancing continue with men and women taking turns. The *mhondoro* also dances. The *mbira* (thumb piano) usually

accompanies the singing. Korekore ceremonies include a unique drumming and singing known as *mangwingwindo.* This involves vigorous dancing and is held in the open outside the *banya.* Special rain dances and music called *mapfuwe* are also performed.

At sunrise a procession leaves the *banya* and heads for the ritual enclosure, the *rushanga* (Plate 11.2). This ritual enclosure is a special sanctuary built around a specific tree on the periphery of the village. There is uniformity in its construction. It is constructed around a *muhacha* tree (among the Zezeru).



Plate 11.1: *Vakaranga* –ritual wives of *mhondoro* spirits – bringing water to their respective spirit mediums during a *rukato* ceremony held at Mubayiwa Village in Chundu Communal Lands (September 2003).

In northern Zimbabwe, *muhacha* trees do not grow, so the Korekore use either *mukamba,* or baobab trees. The tree is in the centre of a circular

palisade of poles of specific species as instructed by the local *mhondoro*, for example mopane, joined together by bark fibres. The circle is broken at one spot by a small gate through which the presiding officials enter. In some areas where building poles are scarce, a circle of stones usually demarcates the ritual area. In other cases a grass palisade serves the same purpose. The ritual enclosure is kept as a sacred site. Every *mhondoro* medium has one. It is the duty of the local chief to make sure his royal *mhondoro* has a ritual enclosure.



Plate 11.2: *Rushanga* enclosure where rainmaking rites are conducted by the *mhondoro*. Note the tree in the middle (Photograph modified from Gelfand 1959: 24).

When the procession leaves the *banya* to go to the *rushanga,* a senior elderly woman would lead other women carrying pots of ritual beer (Plate 11.1). There is one pot of sweet beer and another of strong beer. The

previous night two small beer pots were left in the ritual enclosure for the spirits to drink. Upon arrival at the ritual enclosure the women accompanied by the acolyte enter and place the pot of sweet beer on the eastern side of the tree next to the small pots left there previously. The other pot is placed on the western side. East and west cardinal points symbolically represent the world of the living and that of the ancestors, respectively.



Plate 11.3: From left to right: Dumbura (*munyai – mhondoro* aide and Korekore elder); Tonderayi and the author (*machinda* – traditional princes); Nyikadzino (*sahwira* -Ritual aide); Tete Risi (*baba-kadzi* "female father"- family aunt and representative of elderly women) pouring libations to unnamed spirits during *rukato* ceremony at *mhondoro* Karembera's *rushanga* in Nyamakate Village, Hurungwe District (October 2003).

The senior *mhondoro* accompanied by one or two other *mhondoro* mediums and the chief sit around the tree with their backs to the palisade, just like men sit around the fire in the traditional court. The common people sit outside, men on the right and women on the left of the entrance. The acolyte takes a ladle or a small pot full of beer and prays to each regional *mhondoro* (Plate 11.3). He asks them to remember the tribe by giving them good rains and ensuring the fertility of their fields. Men clap and women shrill at every point the speaker pauses. The person conducting the prayers asks the known *mhondoro* spirits to pass on the message to other unnamed spirits beyond, spirits of the heaven and finally to God. Thereafter, the mediums receive the beer in turns to drink. The chief shares the remaining beer with all the senior people who are in the *rushanga*. The process symbolises the unity of the worlds of the living and the spirits brought together for the common good. Afterwards, the procession returns back to the village where the celebrations continue into the day as people drink ordinary beer and the spirits return to the ancestral world.

Manyika people conduct rainmaking rituals in a slightly different way, on a sacred mountaintop. Eastern Shona believe that different ancestors reside at specific locations, and the spirits of the land choose sacred mountains. The Nyama people under chief Saunyama used to hold rainmaking ceremonies (*makasvo*) on top of Mt. Muozi (Fig.11.4) (Soper 1996). This mountain top consists of an archaeological site which local traditions

attribute to a legendary rainmaker. Excavations here yielded calibrated dates ranging between AD 1500 and 1635 (Soper 1996: 23-24).

During the rainmaking rituals, instead of going to the ritual enclosure in the morning, as Korekore and Zezuru do, Manyika go to the mountain. Royal ritual priestesses singing rain songs lead the procession of selected elders, both women and men. The priestesses are the “wives” of the ancestors. The procession involves sexual songs and sexual imitative dances as a symbolic way of seducing the ancestors to release the rain (Jacobson-Widding 1985: 8-9). In Shona symbolism there are common links between fertility and manhood; semen and wetness; sex and heat. The elderly men in the procession are expected to be sexually active whereas the elderly women should be beyond menopause and sexually inactive. The men should be “fertile” while women “clean”. This symbolism is important.

On arrival, the beer pots are placed on a ritual platform. Prayers and the offerings are dedicated to the ancestors of the land (*vadzimu ve nyika*). The singing and dancing continues along with beer drinking. Thereafter the procession heads back to the royal village. After the ceremony people wait for the new agricultural season, which usually begins by seed blessing and working the royal field.

Working the *zunde* field

Towards the ploughing and planting time, communities collect seed samples and take them to the chief. He then leads a delegation to the *mhondoro* medium to ask for the seeds to be blessed. The blessed seeds are redistributed back to the people. After the first rains, the chief calls his headmen to lead their people to work the royal *zunde* field.

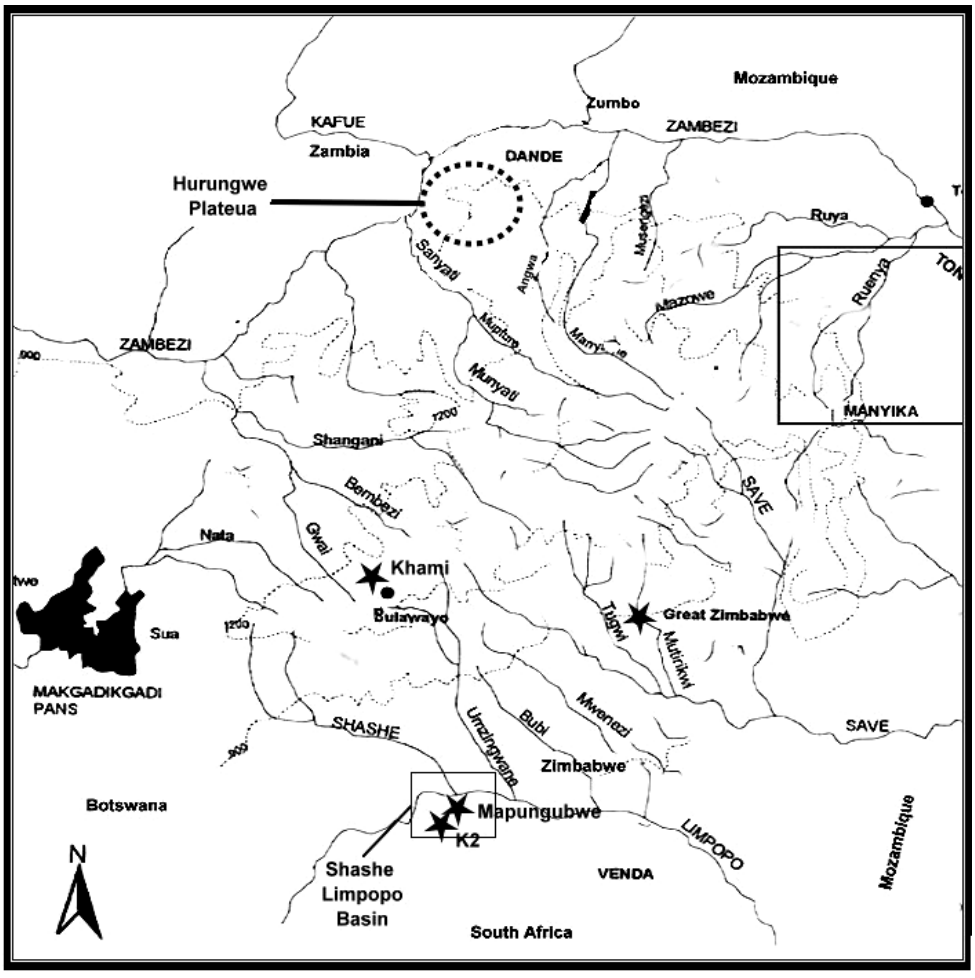


Fig. 11.3: Location of the field research areas and main archaeological capitals in relationship to river systems of the Zimbabwe Plateau (After Pikirayi 2001).

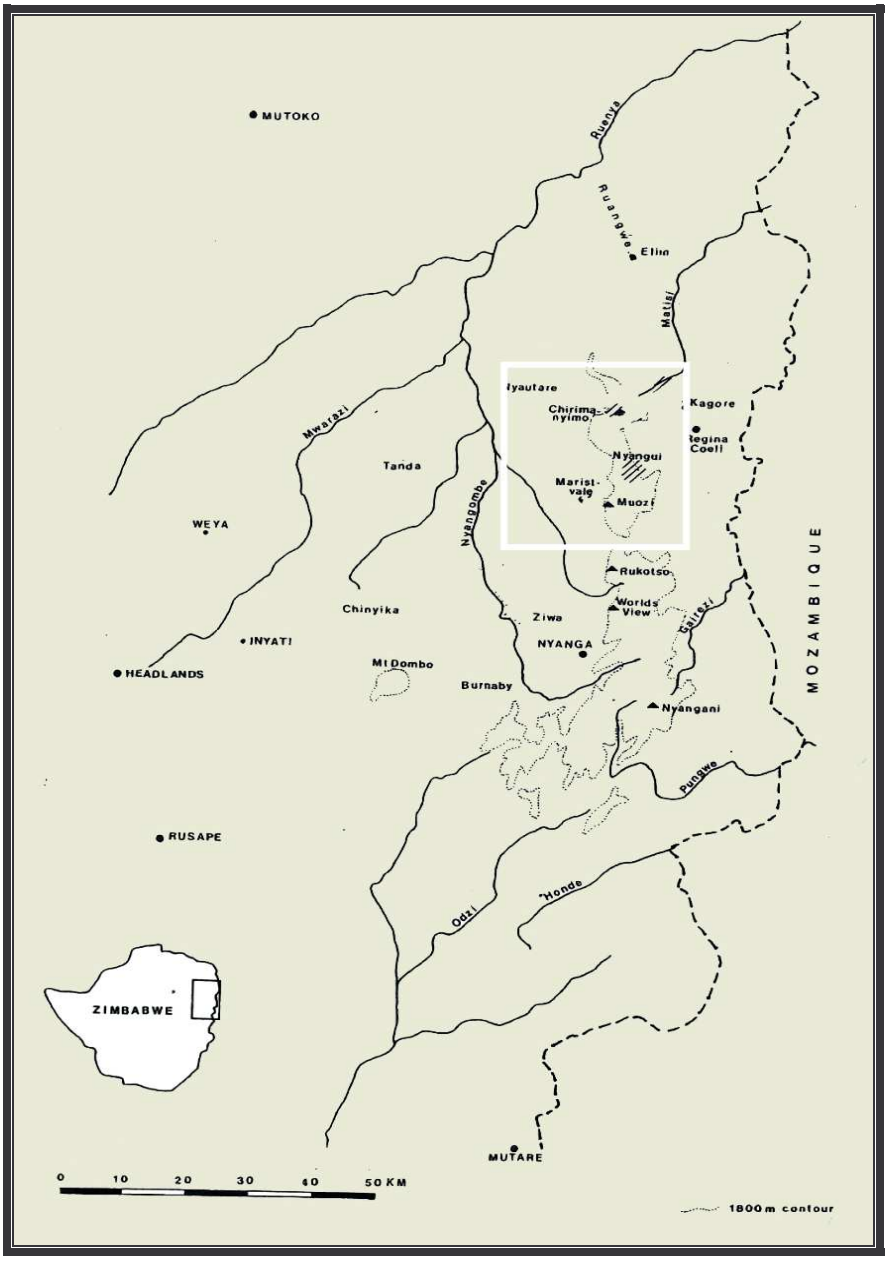


Fig. 11.4: Manicaland Province in eastern Zimbabwe showing part of the Chief Saunyama research area (After Soper 1996: 5).

For the Korekore, both the chief and the *mhondoro* medium have *zunde* fields. When both these fields are worked, people are free to cultivate their own fields. The people however continue observing sacred days of rest

dedicated to the ancestors through out the farming season. In contrast, sacred days do not apply when people are working in a *zunde* field.

First Fruits ceremony

About January or February, when new green produce is available, a few elders collect samples. Under the leadership of the chief, these would be taken to the *banya* where they are blessed by the *mhondoro*. This ceremony does not involve any form of ritual beer. A few people attend and thereafter the chief announces that people may eat the new produce, such as pumpkin–leaves, spinach, fresh corn and other traditional vegetables. It is taboo to disregard this regulation, in some case punishable by expulsion.

Harvest Ceremony

In April-May, a harvest ritual, called *mishashe,* is conducted. This ceremony is meant to inaugurate the eating of new millet, maize and other grains. The ceremony is marked by brewing beer and making thick porridge, (*sadza* - the Shona staple food) from the new grain just harvested. The ceremony is usually held in late April as soon as the corn is ready. There is beer brewing and offerings at the *rushanga.* Ideally this ceremony is similar to *rukato*, and at times, the *mishashe* and *rukato* ceremonies may be combined in September.

Drought and Famine

If a drought lasts for years, the community approaches the *mhondoro* for solutions. The villagers first send delegates to the chief who in turn sends his messengers to the senior *mhondoro* for consultations. The *mhondoro* explains what has gone wrong. Usually the blame goes to a few individuals accused of violating the laws of the land, such as incest and not respecting the sacred days of rest. Probable solutions are presented. When the messengers give the response to the chief, he relays the message to the people gathered at the court. A day is set aside for a special ceremony, usually a sacrifice to the ancestors of the land. The headmen usually bring a beast and grain for beer. The ceremony does not involve visits to the *rushanga.*

If a universal drought affects the whole land, delegates are sent to several senior *mhondoro* spirits, such as NeHanda, Hwatira, Karembera, and Dzivaguru, to end the drought. If they are not able to find a solution, the delegation may be sent further to special *mhondoro* such as Chaminuka, who are legendary rainmakers (Bourdillon 1976: 311). Chaminuka has attained a special status. According to oral traditions, this spirit was capable of addressing people from a rock without a medium. His mediums are reputed magicians; for example they are allegedly able to make wooden pegs sink into rock (Gelfand 1962; Daneel 1970; Bourdillon 1976). After approaching Chaminuka, a major ceremony is organised. The

procedures are the same as standard rainmaking (*rukato)* rituals, but the difference is in scale. Each chief offers Chaminuka a black cow or bull as tribute for returning the region to normality.

11.3 DISCUSSION

Shona hold annual rituals between September and January to ask for rain from the *mhondoro*. Although Shona commune with their dead in a symbiotic relationship, there is a clear distinction between the two worlds. Strictly speaking the spiritual hierarchy is more complex than the political hierarchy.

On the other side is the parallel religious hierarchy of spirit mediums. At the apex are the super tribal *mhondoro* whose influence goes beyond chiefdom boundaries. They are believed to be in touch with *Mwari* from whom they derive their authority and power. They ensure that the rain falls and the land remains fertile. They also derive their recognition from different chiefdoms. As such they do not have a parallel in the community of the living. Below the super *mhondoro* are chiefdom level senior *mhondoro* spirits. These care for their tribal territories. If they fall short, their people would refer to more senior *mhondoro*. At the lower echelons are the family spirits, consisting of grandparents and parents of individual families, usually the recently deceased. These are the basic spirits concerned with day-to-day affairs.

The current separation between political and religious structures is probably a result of the collapse of sacred leadership. Sacred Shona kings used to hold both secular and religious offices. More research is still needed to ascertain the details of how sacred leadership devolved into the present dual system.

CHAPTER 12

MODELS OF RAINMAKING

In this chapter I draw together general principles from chapters 6 to 11 to generate models that should help us understand changes in rainmaking that were part of the rise of Mapungubwe. As noted in Chapter 4, common principles most likely date back to the pre-colonial period.

In developing the model, I recognise that the impact of Christianity is a problematic factor. Traditionally, one cannot address directly any supernatural power – God or natural forces. Instead, the ancestors serve as mediators. I omit any practices that do not conform to this principle.

Two other principles are common to all traditional societies in Southern Africa. First, rainmaking practices are a complex process rather that a series of isolated events. Rainmaking is a cycle of rituals integrated with traditional agricultural calendars. Next, the details are supposed to be a secret. In fact, some elements should not be expressed in words. As one of my informants put it "…it is knowledge you gain by experience…" In some situations, pre-puberty boys and girls are essential to ensure the efficacy of the rituals, but they do not comprehend the process. From a traditional perspective, it is immaterial that "ignorant" young boys and girls

are central to success. The young are considered “clean” and therefore “innocent”, and negative forces have no power over them.

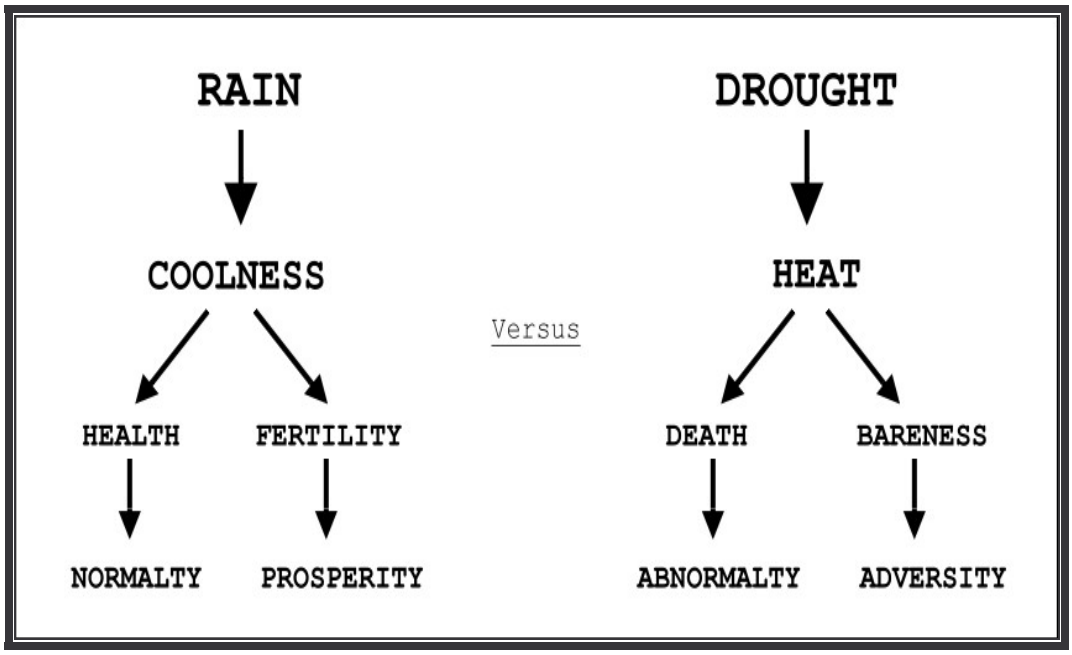


Fig. 12.1: Schematic presentation of rain and drought symbolism.

It is clear that rainfall is not only a material source of economic security. It is also a symbol of spiritual well-being and proof that the social order is operational. Rain is associated with “coolness” representing a state of health, prosperity and social euphoria which stand in contrast to drought and “heat” (Fig. 12.1). Coolness thus stands for normalcy and heat stands for the opposite (Hammond-Tooke 1978: 123). Lack of rain brings drought and therefore death. The Pedi chiefs quickly dispatch “cooling” rain medicines to treat a site struck by lightening, a point at which the heat has been delivered to the land.

Constructing ethnographic models to interpret the prehistoric past is not an attempt on my part to reify social processes or transform them into a rigid timeless structure separate from their cultural context. Instead, I note that the levels of socio-political organization have a direct bearing on belief systems and ritual practices.

12.1 THREE PRACTICES

Three practices, or models, can be extracted from the ethnography: Practice A relates to ranked-based society (Pedi, Hananwa and Tswana); Practice B relates to class-based society (Venda and some extent Lovedu); and Practice C relates to a bifurcated structure where political and religious powers are split (Shona).

Practice A

In Practice A, the cycle of transformation begins with the ritual preparation of imitative magic and rain medicines. These involve cleansing the land and attempts to bring forth rain clouds. When rain does not fall, corrective measures must be pursued. It may be that the preparations were inadequate or something within the community needs attention. After the initial rites, more rituals are conducted in succession until the desired results are attained.

Efforts are directed at changing and preparing the environment (doctoring the territorial boundaries); changing the environment (summoning the clouds to bring down the rain); waiting in anticipation (work fields, plough,

plant crops); act again (appease the ancestors, observe taboos); and act again (repeat if necessary or celebrate first fruits if rain has fallen).

In this cycle, Practice A involves the use of specialized medicines to influence supernatural forces within the ideology of ancestor worship. The ancestors do not cause the rain directly but they can, if they want, influence the forces that do. In this sense, they controlled the rains.

In Practice A, magic rites should avert the bad and encourage the good. Such rites may be seen as raising the group to an intensity of shared common emotions where inexplicable and frightening events, which break upon the community, are rectified. Nature because of its unpredictability may bring the society into a state of disequilibria. Lightening strikes and births on the land are both considered hot and bad omens to the general community. Therefore medicines must be used to cool these locations and therefore transform society back to the state of balance.

Practise A emphasises symbols of transformation. There is a deliberate use of black pots, black sacrificial animals and so on. In rainmaking ritual, the colour black represents dark rain clouds. Fire is used also a symbol of transformation. Annual fire ceremonies mark the beginning of the new farming season and fire transforms medicines into dark smoke to create clouds. Fire is also used to destroy surplus rain medicines to prevent them from falling into wrong hands.

Finer details, such as the ingredients of rain medicines, or activities in the rain kraal and during sacrifices, differ somewhat from society to society. These details vary yet the system is the same because the cultural meaning of rainmaking is not limited to the knowledge of the process. It also relies on a consensus about the symbols associated with rainfall and crop fertility.

As another common theme, there are specific places selected for rainmaking. Common sites include kraals, pools, rock shelters, royal burial sites and hilltops. Not all these sites are used at the same time nor for the same rituals. Rainmakers use rain kraals to prepare medicines; they use pools, rock shelter and known graves to appease water spirits, ancient ancestors and recent ancestors respectively; and they go to sacred hilltops as a last resort when all else has failed. Some locations, it should be noted, lie outside settlements – in the bush.

At other times, the entire landscape is treated as a ritual area. Groups of boys and or girls, for example, perform special rituals to protect the whole territory against negative forces that may affect rainfall and crop fertility. These rituals are performed on territorial boundaries, cross roads and other such landmarks. Cross road are important because they symbolise the cardinal directions – the four corners of the world.

Since Practice A involves specialised medicines, specialist rainmakers are important, and they should be men. The one exception (Maeba, a commoner in Venda) had male features (facial hairs, wide shoulders, narrow hips and flat chest), was never married and acted like a man. Some people thought the ancestors made her that way in order to be a rainmaker. Thus the exception proves the rule.

Rainmakers work with the chief or they are hired to conduct the rituals on his behalf. As such, every rainmaker has his own rain kraal and in principle, every chief has his own ritual sites. This means in a given territory, several places are associated with rainmaking. Generally, chiefs control national sites, whereas subchiefs and headmen control local rainmaking. This system operates within a socio-political hierarchy with the chief at the top, followed by headmen and family heads. This same hierarchical structure is evident in the beliefs about the ancestral world. Therefore, Practice A represents a decentralised but hierarchical system.

Practice B

Practice B is associated with the highly structured centralized class system of Venda, and to some extent Lovedu. In essence, Venda leaders do not hold the same kind of rituals as ranked societies. Because of the connection to God through the royal ancestors, a single ceremony is sufficient for the nation as a whole. Furthermore, the ceremony takes place in a domestic context – not in the bush.

At the single ceremony, the nobility thank royal ancestors for the good harvest and for more rain in the future. As long as they are appeased at *thevhula*, and all taboos observed, rain is set to come. Should a drought threaten the land, the chief may call for corrective measures, such as sending emissaries to the Mwari cult, or calling a specialist diviner to eliminate negative forces. At the same, time lower chiefs are usually granted permission to perform rain making rituals that are similar to Practise A in form. So the two systems can occur together.

Unlike the combination of rain medicines and magic used in Practice A, the single ceremony involves only bull sacrifices and ritual beer. In Venda cosmology, sacred leaders are the intermediary between the living and the ancestor world, and the ancestors speak to God. It is God who makes it rain, rather than impersonal natural forces.

Leadership is shared between the offices of the chief, special brother and special sister. In keeping with this division, the sister is concerned with human fertility, and the chief with the land. This ritual system parallels Venda political structure. The nobility on behalf of the nation conducts *thevhula*. Royal provincial chiefs conduct provincial *thevhula* and so on to the family level. Local ceremonies are never conducted before the national *thevhula.*

Similarly, Lovedu emphasise nobility versus commoners. The royal family performs exclusive rituals dedicated to appeasing royal ancestors. Thereafter the queen conducts all rainmaking rituals on behalf of the nation. She is the link between the living and the royal ancestors who can influence nature. In other respects, however, Lovedu rainmaking resembles Practice A. This is probably because Lovedu have been strongly Sotho-ised since they moved south beyond the Venda area.

Practice C

Practice C is limited to present day Shona. Here chiefs only have political power, while spirit mediums perform religious duties. This separation is unique in Southern Africa. They usually work together, although the influence of spirit mediums often extends beyond chiefdom boundaries. The duties of spirit mediums are similar to sacred leaders in Practice B: they ask royal ancestors to intercede with God on behalf of the nation. In other situations, the system is similar to Practice A in that sacred rainmaking sites lie in the bush outside settlements.

I now apply these three models to the Shashe-Limpopo basin. I first turn to the excavation of a ritual site that lies outside the settlement zone.

CHAPTER 13

EXCAVATIONS AT RHODESDRIFT

Another aspect of my research involved the test excavations of a ritual site on the farm Rhodesdrift. The Rhodesdrift data form a datum for possible comparison to other rainmaking hills and commoner homesteads excavated by other members of the research team (e.g. Schoeman 2006).

Given the breadth of our research goals, M. H. Schoeman and I put together dual research designs. Schoeman adopted an archaeological methodology and I adopted an ethnoarchaeological approach. Whilst Schoeman conducted archaeological excavations at most of the selected sites, I only test excavated Rhodesdrift (Site 2229 AB 73).

13.1 THE RHODESDRIFT SITE

The site is situated approximately 20 km west of the capitals K2 and Mapungubwe. In striking contrast to the Middle Iron Age pattern of residential sites, Rhodesdrift is located on top of a steep-sided sandstone hill difficult to access (Plate 13.1). The summit can only be reached from a path on the southeast. A relatively large quantity of potsherds are scattered on the summit. There are small stone platforms and concentrations of burnt daga marking the remains of small mud features.

These materials are spread over a surface area measuring about 25 m by 15 m.

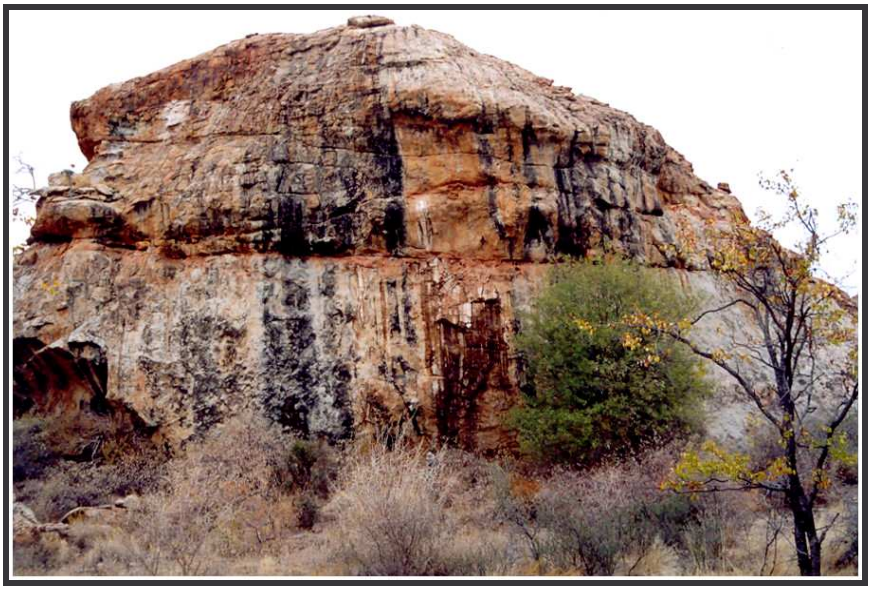


Plate 13.1: Rhodesdrift Hill viewed from the east.

13.2 THE EXCAVATION

Rhodesdrift can be conveniently divided into three broad areas: A, B and C marked by surface features and artefact concentrations. Concentrations of pottery and daga rubble are seen on the eastern Area A and western Area C (Fig. 13.1). Area B, in the middle, contains a small tree and thick grass cover. The outstanding feature in Area B is a semi-circular platform built of large stones facing towards the southeast. Upon reaching the hilltop, one comes to this central area. The rest of the site is bare rock with pottery scatters and cupules.

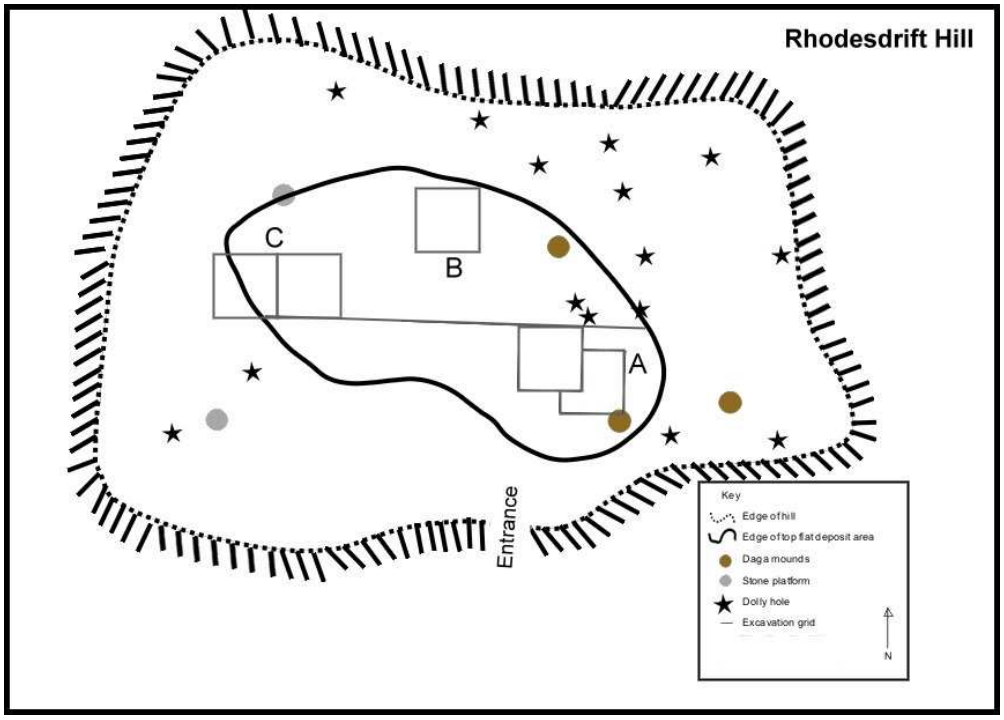


Fig. 13.1 Site plan of Rhodesdrift Hill site.

From the beginning, our intention was to excavate Rhodesdrift in terms of culturally meaningful units such as platforms, daga rubble, pottery concentrations and middens. We ultimately wanted to compare materials from different areas in a way that would allow an intra-site spatial analysis and comparison with other sites in the valley. Rhodesdrift had thin deposits already partly eroded.

The whole site was marked into 2 x 2 m grids. Because most of the surface is bare rock, a limited number of squares were available for excavation. Six were sampled: two in eastern Area A; one in central Area B and three in western Area C (Fig. 13.1). Although modest in size, these

squares nevertheless covered most of the remaining *in situ* deposits. We excavated each square in 10 cm levels.

AREA A

Trench T1

Square T1 exposed remains of a daga Feature T1S1, and so T1 was extended to Square T1a. Levels 1 consisted of dark grey course soil mixed with burnt daga rubble (Plate 13.2). It yielded 138 potsherds: 110 were undecorated, five were decorated and 23 were rim sherds (Table 13.1). Generally, this level had much burnt daga rubble along with a few bone fragments, a single ostrich-egg shell fragment, charcoal, charred sorghum lumps, bean-like seeds and copper bangle fragment made from wound-wire.



Plate 13.2: Trench T1 section with deposit lying on rock surface. The layers had coarse soil mixed with burnt daga rubble.

Level 2 consisted of coarse grey soil consistent with Level 1 but compacted with burnt daga rubble. The second level yielded more stick-

impressed daga on top of Feature T1S1 (Plate 13.3). This circular feature measured 130 cm in diameter (Plate 13.3). It consisted of a concave daga floor surrounded by a small wall about 5 -10 cm thick incorporating charred pole remains. The shape indicates that this was a grain bin built on the rock surface.

Table 13.1: Archaeological finds from Square T1

Level	*Ceramic Remains*			*Seeds*	*Other*
	Total sherds	Decorated	Rims		
Level 1 (0-10cm)	138	5	23	sorghum, beans	Copper wire; bone; daga; ostrich shell
Level 2 (10-20cm)	47	3	4	sorghum, beans	Bone; iron bangle; daga
Level 3 (20-30cm)	Large beaker			sorghum	Fresh water mussel; iron spearhead

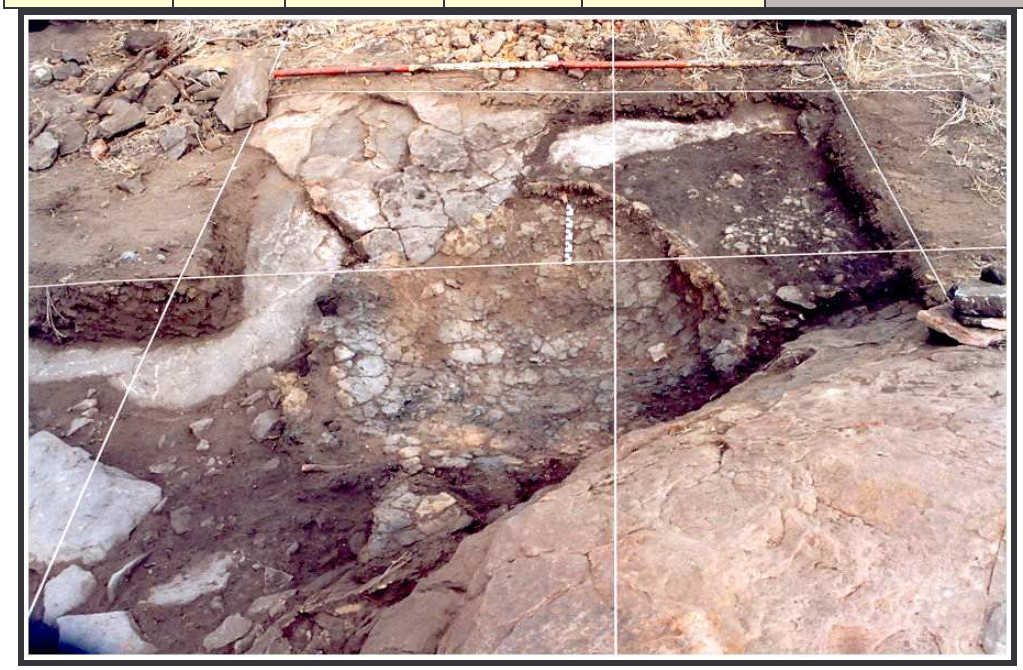


Plate 13.3: Trench T1 in Area A. Burnt daga Feature T1S1 situated on rock surface.

Level 2 yielded 47 potsherds including 41 plain body sherds, four rim sherds and three decorated sherds. Charred sorghum and bean-seed remains were also recovered along with two small fragments of an iron bangle and a few small bone fragments.



Plate 13.4: Reconstructed beaker from Trench T1 Level 3. The beaker is unusually large compared to beakers recovered from contemporary K2 period sites.

Level 3 contained dark grey gravel soil associated with the bottom of Feature T1S1. Charred seed remains, charcoal fragments and few small bone fragments as well as fragments of fresh water mussel shells and a

small iron spearhead were recovered from this level. Fragments of an unusually large beaker 50 cm high with a 48 cm rim diameter lay just outside the floor of the grain bin (Plate 13.3), itself built on the rock surface. Markings on the exterior suggest that the beaker was probably placed between supporting thin wooden poles to keep it vertical.

Trench T1a (3 x 1 m extension)

The soil colour and texture in this trench extension were consistent with the TrenchT1 levels. Level 1 produced a few small bone fragments and a total of 21 potsherds: 15 were undecorated, three decorated and three rim sherds. The deposit also includes two charred *marula* seed shells and four beans, a small ostrich eggshell fragment and a 2 cm-long piece of copper wire bangle.

Table 13.2: Archaeological finds from Square T1a (extension).

Level	*Ceramic Remains*			*Seeds*	*Other*
	Total sherds	Decorated	Rims		
Level 1 (0-10cm)	21	3	3	marula, beans	Copper wire bangle; bone; daga; ostrich shell
Level 2 (10-20cm)	13	0	0	-	Worked bones; iron object; slag; daga
Level 3 (20-30cm)	0	0	0	-	Daga rubble

Level 2 yielded mostly burnt daga rubble. On the floor of Feature T1S1 we recovered two fragments of a large metapodial bone, split longitudinally along the centre and smoothed. Eight fragments from a heavily corroded

iron object, two small fragments of iron concretions and 13 undecorated potsherds were recovered.

No artefacts were recovered from level 3. The level consisted of burnt daga rubble down to the rock surface.



Plate 13.5: To completely expose this daga feature, Square T1 was extended to T1a.

AREA B

Trench T2

Area B is the largest flat surface on the hilltop. On the north side, a semi-circular stone platform forms a terrace. I placed the trench in the middle of this platform and excavated in 10 cm spits. The soil in Level 1 was light coloured with pellets of dung. The deposit yielded two beaker-base potsherds and one large beaker body sherd. In total 14 undecorated potsherds were recovered.

Table 13.3: Archaeological finds from Square T2

Level	*Ceramic Remains*			*Seeds*	*Other*
	Total sherds	Decorated	Rims		
Level 1 (0-10cm)	14	0	0	-	Ashy soil; pellet dung
Level 2 (10-20cm)	30	1	3	Beans?	Bones; ivory fragment? Pellet dung
Level 3 (20-70cm)	5	0	0	-	Bones

The light grey soil in Level 2 contained 30 ceramic potsherds: one decorated sherd, three rims, two vessel bases and 20 plain potsherds. A single fragment of what appear to be worked ivory occurred along with bone fragments, a few charred seeds and more small pellets of dung.

From level 3 down to 70 cm, the soil was soft and greyish in colour with little cultural remains. Only five undecorated potsherds were recorded and a few poorly preserved bone fragments. A few small lumps of dung were encountered down to bed rock.

Trench T2 yielded the partial remains of a thin daga floor in the southeastern corner. More importantly, the lumps of pellet dung show that a small goat/sheep kraal was located here.

AREA C

Trench T3

Two squares of 2 x 2 m make up this trench: T3a and T3. The stratigraphy consisted of only a single layer of grey-ashy soil mixed with broken daga. Deposit in this area was thin. Both squares reached bedrock at about 10 cm. T3a yielded 31 plain body potsherds, one decorated potsherd and ten rims. A few charred bone fragments were also recorded. T3b yielded 27 plain potsherds and eight rim sherds.

A burnt daga floor lay partially exposed on the surface. The excavation removed the thin daga rubble that covered the remaining floor. This daga structure, Feature T3S2, was circular with a 100 cm diameter and a thin wall between 5 and 10 cm thick. Five charred wooden poles formed part of the thin wall. It was built on a small stone platform plastered with daga to form a flat floor. This feature was probably a grain bin similar to Feature T1S1 in Area A.

13.3 POTTERY

Pottery constitutes the largest category of archaeological materials recovered from Rhodesdrift. A total of 392 potsherds came from the trenches (Table 13.4). For comparative analysis, the vessel parts were classified according to shape. Vessel decoration was analysed according to technique and pattern. Incision is the dominant technique and occurs

mainly on the shoulder to neck regions. Vessel size was difficult to document because of the fragmentary nature of the potsherds.

All potsherds belong to Leopard's Kopje K2 period. The most unique find was the large beaker in Trench T1 (Plate 13.3). This is probably the largest beaker on record from a K2 site.

Table 13.4: Rhodesdrift pottery by Trench. * Diagnostic sherds refer to distinct vessel that are not decorated. ** All 14 sherds belong to the reconstructed beaker (Plate 13.4).

SHERD TYPE	*TRENCH*					*TOTAL sherds*	*% TOTAL*
	T3a	**T3b**	**T2**	**T1a**	**T1**		
Undecorated	31	27	43	53	151	305	77.8
Decorated	1	-	1	3	8	13	3.3
Rim sherds	10	8	3	5	27	53	13.5
Diagnostic*	-	-	5	2	14**	21	5.4
Total	42	35	52	63	200	392	100
% Total	**10.7**	**8.9**	**13.3**	**16.1**	**51**	**100**	

13.4 DISCUSSION

The pottery at Rhodesdrift all belongs to the K2 period: transitional and Mapungubwe pottery were not present. Significantly, the settlement organization at the K2 capital first followed the Central Cattle Pattern; and so Practice A should be a valid model for the beginning of this period. Practice A, then, provides a model to interpret Rhodesdrift.

First, Rhodesdrift could not have been a residential site. It is located on a small steep sandstone hill whose surface area is insufficient to accommodate a standard Middle Iron Age homestead. Contemporaneous homesteads consist of a cattle kraal in the middle and an outer residential zone with houses and grain bins: the whole covering 60 – 80 m in diameter. It is impossible to fit this pattern on the small hilltop.

The small kraal in Area B is of interest, spatially occupying the centre. Although it is clear that the site was not a homestead and that the small kraal was not for cattle, its location might have been a deliberate attempt to follow the contemporary settlement layout.

Furthermore, Rhodesdrift is located far away from other contemporaneous settlements as well as agricultural lands. This isolation suggests that Rhodesdrift was not accessed frequently. It was probably used on limited occasions for specialised rainmaking rituals. Following Practice A, such isolation is normal for hilltop rituals conducted as a last resort.

The distribution of stone platforms and daga features suggests that they were all contemporary. The site might have been used over a single generation most probably by a single ritual convenor. Individual rainmakers usually use their own ritual sites throughout their career. Even in Practice C, Shona *rushanga* are used by individual mediums. When the

medium dies and the spirit moves to another person, a new *rushanga* will be constructed at a new place.

The high density of pottery is not unusual for such sites. Ritual pots are similar to those found in domestic contexts, but once they are placed at the ritual site, they can never be returned to a domestic context. To protect the strength of the rain medicines against contamination, interaction with domestic environments has to be avoided. This repeated activity explains the large amounts of pottery on archaeological sites such as Rhodesdrift. More whole pots are brought into the ritual site every time it is used. These must be broken at the end to prevent evildoers from using them to prevent rain.

The large beaker recovered from Rhodesdrift is unusual. Its size suggests that it was mounted on the rock surface. Exterior markings support this interpretation. Interior markings suggest that some material was processed inside. This pot, too, was broken. Other artefacts are also explicable in terms of historic rainmaking sites. The few metal items, including the spearhead, were probably part of the ritual regalia. The large bovine bone recovered on the floor of Feature T1S1, modified and worked, obviously had a special function.

The small grain bin features, associated with sorghum and other seeds are of special interest. To begin with their locations on the east and west

ends might have symbolic meaning: one associated with the living and the other with the dead (Murimbika 1999). Furthermore, they were not raised on stones as is normal; and so, they served as temporary storage facilities during the rituals. In addition they were both burnt. Because natural fire would not reach the hilltop, there were no signs of lightning and little to burn, the burning appears deliberate. Such action, in terms of Practice A, would serve more than one purpose: the sorghum and other seeds inside would be a sacrifice of much-needed food; it would create black smoke; and it could not be later used for evil purpose. All in all, then, Practice A makes sense of Rhodesdrift.

So far the application of rainmaking practices has been site specific. I turn now to more general considerations.

CHAPTER 14

ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

One major purpose of this thesis has been to establish ethnoarchaeological models that can be applied to the Shashe-Limpopo sequence. This sequence, presented in Chapter 3, includes a series of transformations that led to class distinction and sacred leadership. At the beginning, the Central Cattle Pattern shows that early K2 society was probably kin-based, and that social ranking was determined by genealogical distance from the reigning chief. The movement of cattle out of the central kraal represent the restricted ownership of cattle and the first step towards class distinction. The second step, the movement to Mapungubwe, shows that class differences were probably well entrenched by the early 13th century. The shift to a stone-walled palace, the third step, provided ritual seclusion, and shows that sacred leadership had evolved.

Changes in rainmaking would have been an integral part of these transformations. In the first part of this chapter, I apply the practices to the Leopard's Kopje sequence and identify them with specific steps.

As the interpretation of Rhodesdrift shows, Practice A applies to the early K2 period before cattle were moved out of the centre. At this time, each local chief probably controlled rainmaking rituals and used independent

specialists. These rainmakers would have used medicines and rituals to influence supernatural forces, and the ancestors would have been important mediators. Furthermore, rainmakers and chiefs would have been men.

Because rainmaking was part of a cyclical process, rainmakers would have used different places for different purposes. Further, every rainmaker would have probably had their own ritual sites. The rockshelter at the back of K2, for instance, is a likely place for a chief's rain kraal. Because of strict separation between domestic and ritual contexts, hilltop sites should be located away from normal settlement. These sites are sacred and only approached for ritual purposes. Since these are not an everyday activity, long distances are not a problem. Sacred hills, in any case, are only approached when all else has failed.

In addition to Rhodesdrift, there are three other hilltop rainmaking sites in the Shashe-Limpopo basin (Schoeman 2006; Schoeman & Murimbika forthcoming). All are steep sided and associated with small caves or shelters, and in some cases with pools or places of water marked by cupules. Indeed, cupules in association with cisterns and other natural rock pools are diagnostic. Three of these sites (2229AC11, 2229AD30, and 2229AD35).are clustered within a 5 km radius and Rhodesdrift is approximately 10 km further west. Preliminary results indicates that all four date to the K2 period.

During the K2 period, hunter-gatherers and Leokwe people may have supplied some of the specialists. One Leokwe site on Schroda has a bearing on this point. A large collection of Leokwe pottery lies between two baobab trees (about 30 m apart) at the base of a hill supporting a Khami-period palace. Steep sandstone cliffs form the end of the hill, and there are cupules pecked into the rock on top. Zimbabwe culture palaces are regularly built on top of old rainmaking sites (Huffman 1996b), and walling here conforms to that practice. Significantly, the Leokwe site at the bottom appears to contain only pottery.

Some rainmaking hills in the basin have yielded Early Iron Age Happy Rest pottery. Since these hills could not have served as normal residences, this early pottery shows that Practice A has a deep time depth.

Mapungubwe Hill also contains cupules, associated cisterns and Happy Rest pottery, as well as the characteristic physical features of a rainmaking hill. Clearly, before the palace was built, Mapungubwe must have been an isolated ritual site used in times of climatic stress. By the time of the palace, however, the situation must have changed. As noted earlier, systems of rainmaking parallel socio-political organisation, and Practice C shows that sacred leadership is not possible when political and religious powers are separated. Because there is ample evidence that sacred

leadership had evolved by the time of the palace (Huffman 1996b), Practice B must have been operating by then.

In terms of Practice B, there would have been a strict distinction between national and local systems. At the top, the elite would have conducted all national rituals. These rituals would have been directed to God through the guardians of the nation. Provincial or district chiefs would have directed their rituals to lesser royal ancestors, while further down non-royal leaders would have followed procedures in Practice A. This order follows an established hierarchy with nobility at the top along with their ancestors. The commoner class is below with its own hierarchy of ancestors. Finally, leadership would have been shared between three offices with the special sister responsible for human fertility, while the chief would have been responsible for the fertility of the land.

It is the transformation from Practice A at K2 to Practice B at Mapungubwe that now commands our attention. Simply stated, Leopard's Kopje society transformed from a ranked-based kin organisation to a class-based civil/kin dichotomy headed by a sacred leader.

The ideological changes accompanying this transformation involved theology. In both Practices, the ancestors are the mediators between the living and the cosmic forces that affect rain and fertility. The theological

change was in the nature of the forces. In Practice A they are impersonal nature spirits, but in Practice B it is the high God.

Following Horton (1965, 1967) and Hammond-Tooke (1986), this theological change probably resulted from a greater knowledge of the world transmitted through the Indian Ocean trade. In addition to desirable items, the trade would have introduced different cultural systems as well as opportunities to visit foreign lands. As multicultural interaction widens, so did the theological universe (Huffman 2000). More specifically, the concept of God developed from a vague, impersonal and unapproachable creator to the personal, approachable source of all fertility. This approach, of course, was by way of the ancestors.

In a sense, Leopard's Kopje people domesticated the concept of God. The premier rainmaking site, the back of the palace, is in the settlement, not in the bush. Furthermore, a domestic bull and beer made from a domestic crop are the preferred offerings, not wild plants and wild animals. Even the domestic goat, a common sacrifice in Practice A is associated with the bush. Furthermore, the royal family refer to the senior leader as a "living ancestor" and God as the "Great Ancestor". God is no longer an impersonal cosmic force.

The change in the cycle of Practice A is also noteworthy. As detailed earlier, Rhodesdrift and other sacred hills would have been used only in

times of serious drought. Modern rainmakers in Practice A go up the hill to get closer to the sky to pull the rain down. The emphasis here then is focused on the cosmic forces: not on appeasing the ancestors. Similarly, in Practice B, the one national ceremony focuses on God. In a developmental sense, then, the national ceremony is an outgrowth of the last extreme ritual in the earlier system.

This development also includes change in what was secret. In Practice A the details are secret but in Practice B everyone knows what the leaders should be doing. Commoners are excluded only from the ceremony, not the knowledge.

An important principle of Practice B is that sacred leadership with three offices (chief, brother and sister) controls both religious and political power. With the new order in place, independent rainmakers would have been a threat to the new system. Indeed, among Venda, holding local *thevhula* before the national ceremony is considered as treason. This explains why Rhodesdrift only contained K2-period materials. By the time of the palace at Mapungubwe, these sites would probably have been abandoned.

One qualification should now be noted. Since Mapungubwe commoner still organised their settlements according to the Central Cattle Pattern, we would expect some rainmakers to continue with Practice A. However,

since chiefs also act as headmen in their own districts, old-style, independent rainmakers would have to practice in other districts. Therefore, the interpretation of Rhodesdrift, close to Mapungubwe, still appears valid.

Practice C is only evident among present-day Shona. Today, chiefs only have political power. During the disintegration of the Zimbabwe culture, religious powers passed to regional spirit mediums. Historical documents (Beach 1980) show that this split occurred as a result of Portuguese intervention in the Mutapa area. Practice C is therefore not applicable to the Leopard's Kopje sequence in the Shashe-Limpopo basin.

I have applied the practices to the sequence in a specific way: Practice A applies to early K2 and Practice B to middle Mapungubwe. The steps in between involved an elaboration of the concept of God and centralisation of the process. I now turn to a few general comments.

CHAPTER 15

FINAL COMMENTS

It is apparent that rituals are physical performances rather than physical objects. Therefore, attempts to reconstruct ritual practices simply from objects or sites have serious limitations. Indeed, some material objects (such as clay pots and grinding stones), are common to domestic environments. Rhodesdrift did not yielded any artefacts which could be considered specifically ritual. Likewise, some ritual locations also have other uses, such as the royal court and tribal fireplace. The meanings of such objects and locations are not inherent but constructed from practical examples and cultural values. Symbolic actions and physical symbols express these values. But symbolic meanings are hidden and multivalent and vary with context. Millet, for example, is a main subsistence grain and yet sacred when part of ancestral rituals.

Further, daily activities are often conducted with reference to the ever-present ancestors. The social division between Venda nobility and commoners, for example, is believed to be supernaturally sanctioned. Commoners view the leader as a living ancestor who is treated with reverence, while disloyalty may trigger general punishment such as drought. As a second example, certain mortuary rites are observed in order to avoid drought and to maintain crop fertility. These examples

emphasis the point that rainmaking is deeply rooted in the overall belief system.

These examples and the previous comments also show that it is not possible to reconstruct the social environment from material remains alone. As this thesis has shown, ethnological models provide interpretive framework for archaeological situations. Understanding ritual performances in particular is a gateway to a better understanding of the archaeology.

Contemporary rainmaking practices suggest a long antiquity and relative conservatism in organisation and principle. As a result, the capacity for interpretive models, and the diverse areas to which they may be directed, makes ethnoarchaeology a fruitful area for research in Southern African Iron Age studies.

I hope this thesis demonstrates to contemporary scholars the relevance of studying contemporary indigenous cultures to understand prehistoric communities. I also hope this thesis demonstrate to contemporary indigenous peoples the intrinsic value of preserving and studying their fast disappearing traditional practices.

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