

A short summary of the Cultural Landscape as found in the area of the Maremani Game Reserve

Introduction:

The landscape north of the Soutpansberg has always played an important ecological as well as cultural role in the history of South Africa. The natural environment of the area has established itself as an ideal occupational terrain for thousands of years and for many a people. The Limpopo river, as well as three other rivers in the area, the Sand-, Njelele- and Nwanetsetsi rivers have provided water, the fertile soil surrounding the rivers have provided food and the strategically situated foothills north of the Soutpansberg sheltered many groups of people and many generations. This section of the Limpopo valley have been utilised and cultivated from the beginning of mankind and today, the offspring of many great cultural entities live in the area and their ancestors lay buried in its soil. Cultural groups evolved, expanded, made war and disappeared in this area. The most important time periods in the history of South Africa are represented in the cultural landscape of the Maremani Game Reserve and surroundings.

Stone Age Cultures:

Africa south of the equator is better known as the “Cradle of Humankind”. The early, middle and late Stone-Age periods are represented at various major sites all over South Africa. The occurrence of Stone Age scatter sites in the Maremani game reserve link this area to the larger Stone Age milieu of Africa. Stone tools, mostly from the Middle Stone Age have been found at a few sites on the reserve. Some examples of tools manufactured in the Late Stone Age, related to the Wilton Industry have also been identified.

The early Stone Age:

Research shows that early Stone Age areas, dating back to 2.5 million years ago, do exist in the area of the Ha-Tshirundu Mountains and the Njelele River. According to previous reports the area surrounding “Bokpoort” where the Njelele River progresses through the Ha-Tshirundu Mountains contains rich early Stone Age deposits. Large as

well as specialized hand axes typical of the Acheulian industry of the early Stone Age have apparently been found in the hills surrounding the valley¹. Homo erectus, the hominid associated with the Acheulian industry would have used these hand axes for various purposes including chopping and butchering. Further examination of the larger area should reveal other early Stone Age –and related terrains.

The Middle Stone Age:

Around 125 000 years ago a new technological period was introduced in Southern Africa. The main differentiating factor between the Middle Stone Age and the Early Stone Age is the technological advances made in stone tools. Artefacts such as points and scrapers, replaced the hand axe and the cleaver.

The start of the Middle Stone Age more or less correlates with the commencement of the last interglacial period around 125 000 years ago. The interglacial period ends with the start of the glacial period around 75 000 years ago. Thus the Middle Stone Age climate was warm for the first 50 000 years after which the climate cooled down considerably. The first “Homo sapiens” species appeared in this period and the modern human, Homo sapiens sapiens would have evolved completely by the end of the Middle Stone Age.

Middle Stone Age sites are mostly found near streams or other sources of water, and not too far from a source of material used for the manufacture of stone tools. This also holds true for the sites located on Maremani, since all the sites have been found next to or near water sources.

The most important artefact in the Middle Stone Age was the point. The point is essentially a stone flake used for cutting and piercing. The majority of Middle Stone Age artefacts found on Maremani are cores (the rock from which the tools are obtained) and waste flakes. A few formal tools have been collected, but a further survey of the riverbank areas should lead to further discoveries of artefacts.

The Late Stone Age

Between 30 000 and 40 000 years ago the Middle Stone Age developed into the Late Stone Age. The most prominent technological development in the Late Stone Age was the emergence of microlithic stone tools. A microlithic stone tool is usually a

¹ Prinsloo, H.P 2003 Personal comments

minute and refined version of the common Middle Stone Age tools. One would for example find microlithic blades, scrapers, cores and points. These specialized tools were multi functional and would later make way for bone and iron objects. The Late Stone Age people were most probably the forefathers of the modern-day San people. Only one site with Late Stone Age artefacts has up to now been found in the reserve. The site displays a typical assemblage of Late Stone Age artefacts, including microlithic flakes, cores and scrapers. However several sites with San rock art have been identified which indicates the presence of these people in the area.

Iron Age Cultures:

Most evidence of the Late Iron Age remains that is found on Maremani is connected with the Venda cultural group who occupy the northern parts of the Limpopo Province, along the Soutpansberg and its vicinity.

A Brief History of the Venda

Many conflicting historical accounts of the history of the Venda exist. It is difficult to determine the true sequence of events leading to the origin of the present-day BaVenda. Over the years different ethnographers have consulted numerous informants who presented diverse accounts of the history of the Venda. It is therefore important to compare various conflicting Venda histories to each other in order to establish the accuracy of each. One should also remember that Venda history consists out of smaller “regional histories”. This means that each settlement area will have its own micro history that fits into the larger Venda history.

Venda speakers currently inhabit a large part of the Limpopo Province and southern Zimbabwe. South of the Soutpansberg one can also find a predominantly Sotho-speaking population. North of the Limpopo in Zimbabwe live the Shona. Linguistically and culturally the Venda display similarities with the western Shona (or Kalanga) of Zimbabwe (Wentzel 1983b:172). Some aspects of the Venda vocabulary can however also be compared to that of the Sotho. Despite these similarities, Venda has sufficiently unique elements to be considered as a distinct language. The language of the Venda has three regional variants. An archaic form of Venda known as

Twamamba still exists in the northwestern Soutpansberg and another dialect called Ilafuri are spoken in the western and central mountains. An eastern variant known as Tshimbedzi is used by Venda people in southern Zimbabwe (Loubser 1988:1).

The origins and political history of these people have intrigued generations of researchers and scholars. Two schools of thought have dominated interpretations of Venda origins: an early school emphasizing migration, and the current school emphasizing local development (Loubser 1988:3).

The first *migration*-focused school based their hypotheses on Singo oral traditions, indicating that these ancestors of the Venda originated somewhere north of the Zambezi river in the vicinity of present day Malawi. Singo is the “totemic name” of the politically dominant group among the Venda (Loubser 1988:3). During their southward migration through Shona territory, several Shona elements were incorporated into this pre-Venda culture. The Singo group, of which at least five different oral traditions exist, moved through present-day Zimbabwe and Shona territory. Here the Singo came into contact with some important Zimbabwean groups, including the Rozvi living at Danangombe, also known as Dhlo Dhlo. This was the capital of the Changamire Rozwi from about 1693 to the early 1820’s. The Rozwi are remembered as the principal Zimbabwean dynasty of the past and they were the builders of most of the *dzimbabwe* (capitals) in the country.

It is said that the first three generations of the Singo lineage ruled north of the Limpopo River and the last five ruled in the Soutpansberg, before the installation of the Venda chief Makhado in 1864 (Loubser 1988:5). During the seventeenth century this group of Shona immigrants, the royal Singo, moved south into South Africa and settled on the banks of the Njelele river (Stayt 1968:12) near the Soutpansberg. Here they built their capital, known as Dzata. They extended their power base and dominated the whole of the Venda Kingdom. Most traditions agree that a united Singo elite expanded from Dzata to incorporate virtually all earlier communities in the Soutpansberg. The Singo empire came to an end with a dispute over the succession of chief Thoho-ya-Ndou. According to genealogical lists the Singo empire in the Njelele Valley must have broken up between 1750 and 1800 (Van Warmelo 1935, Stayt 1968).

The Venda is therefore a conglomeration of the original Venda group and several other groups. The Venda family formed the royal group and their leaders were acknowledged as chiefs of the whole population.

Under the leadership of chief Thoho-ya-Ndou, the Venda extended their authority over the Soutpansberg area that led to a period of relative peace. After Thoho-ya-Ndou's death, the leadership was disputed and three main sections emerged during the split. The three parts: the Western, Eastern and Southern Venda form the basis of the Venda classification (Van Warmelo 1935:117-120). The Western section mainly comprises the Ramabulana Singo. The Eastern section is constituted of the Tshivase and the Mphaphuli dynasties and the Southern section includes former vassals of the Singo that gradually became incorporated into the Sotho chiefdoms.

In each of these areas independent chiefs ruled the various Venda tribes. The archaeological sites on Maremani are associated with the headman Tshirundu, who is classified under the Western Venda group (Van Warmelo 1935: 118).

While the eastern tribes remained relatively isolated, the western tribes had greater contact with other tribes and white settlers. More facts are also known about the history of the western tribes since their chiefs are from the senior bloodline of Thoho-ya-Ndou. Chief Mpephu is recognized as the senior among all the Venda chiefs of the Western Venda group. All the Western Venda chiefs are also blood relatives of chief Mpephu (Eloff 1968:10). The various Venda tribes all see themselves as BaVenda, but distinguish themselves from each other by means of the lineage name of their chief i.e. vhahaTshirundu (the people of Tshirundu) in the case of Maremani.

The second and current school emphasizing *local development* base their interpretation mostly on the fragmented and highly telescoped non-Singo traditions (Loubser 1988:9). Rather than looking for Venda migrations from central Africa, scholars of the new perspective thus emphasize more localized developments and influences. They stress developments among diverse Venda communities that had existed prior to the Singo. According to researchers this group of people, the VaNgoni existed in the Njelele valley and they were the builders of the Dzata Ruins (Ralushai 1977:16). They were later scattered all over the Soutpansberg and, with the reign of the chief Thoho-ya-Ndou, became the BaVenda people. Many scientists view this theory of "Venda isolation" as a myth and question the theory of local origins and development in which migration is excluded.

The Venda had a history of conflict with the Swazi, the Sotho and the followers of the Swazi chief Manukuza. The settlement of the Shangana-Tsonga in the east during the

nineteenth century resulted in several skirmishes with the Venda. The first contact between the Venda and white pioneers occurred during 1836 when the trek of Louis Trichardt entered the Soutpansberg. In 1850 the town of Schoemansdal was founded, which led to increased contact between the two groups. At this time European traders also entered the area, which led to the circulation of western goods.

The people of Tshirundu and the Ethnographic record

According to ethnographic records, the headman Tshirundu and his tribe occupied the landscape known as HaTshirundu in the area of the present-day Tshirundu Mountain (near Tshipise and currently part of the Maremani Private Nature Reserve) from the turn of the previous century to approximately 1935.

Not much is said in the ethnographic record about Tshirundu and his people. Information on this subject is limited to basic surveys and limited photographic records. A small Tshirundu settlement appears on a map by N.J van Warmelo, compiled in 1935. This correlates with photographs taken by Van Warmelo and Lestrade in 1933, contained in the Mapungubwe Archive at the University of Pretoria. When examining these photographs it is possible to conclude that these people were BaVenda. The cloths, as well as decorations in the form of helixes worn by the women can be traced back to the BaVenda people. On van Warmelo's map, Tshirundu and his people are grouped under the western division of the Venda. The head of this division, as mentioned previously is Chief Mphephu.

Ethno-archaeological research will be one of the fundamentals of archaeological research at Maremani. The consultation of relatives of Tshirundu and locals in the area will be crucial. They can aid in the identification and explanation of the archaeological sites and the cultural landscape. Through ethnography these settlements can be given names and attributes in the world of cultural dynamics.

The Venda Settlement and its Representation on Maremani

The term tribe, in this case, implies a group of people under the authority of an independent headman who occupies a certain area of land, which they see as their own.

According to Stayt (1968: 29) Venda villages of the past were of a larger nature than those found on Maremani. With more peaceful conditions prevailing in the Soutpansberg area, it became unnecessary for the community to protect itself against surprise attacks. Some sites on Maremani do indeed exhibit certain defensive architectural structures in the village layout. The fortified outer walls display palisades of sharpened sticks as well as loopholes. Most of the sites are built on the more prominent kopjes in the area. These fairly inaccessible settlements would make any attack very difficult.

Due to the patrilocal residence tradition of the Venda, their communities consisted of men from the same bloodline. The bigger family unit usually consists out of a man, his wives and unmarried children, his brothers and married sons and their families. The bigger household unit would occupy a separate village. The head of the village would be the eldest son of the first wife of the previous headman (Eloff 1968: 18-27). The archaeological sites on Maremani are the physical representation of this bigger household unit.

Most villages or homesteads were built in close proximity to the chiefs' own village (Stayt 1968: 30). This would explain the relatively small distance between the stone-walled sites on Maremani. Each settlement though functioning as an independent entity, would still remain under the chiefs' control and could easily be summoned when needed.

The villages of the community would mainly follow the pattern of the larger village of the chief, each displaying its own courtyard, cattle and goat kraals, a beer-hut and granaries. The only structures unique to the chiefs' village would be the thondo, the sleeping quarters and school of the small boys, and tshivhambo, the chiefs' court (Stayt 1968: 31).

Each wife in the village would be responsible for her own kitchen, hut and yard. The chiefs' hut would be the largest in the village and decorated with ochre and charcoal (Stayt 1968: 30). Stayt (1968: 31) notes that to the back of the chiefs hut usually had a veranda to the side with the best outlook over the countryside. He also notes the presence a small roofed yard where his meat was cut up and hung to dry. This area was taboo for any other members of the tribe except the chiefs' sons and senior wife. This would seem to fit into the village pattern of similar structures on some of the

sites on Maremani where a connecting veranda was built on next to the position of a prominent structure in the village.

The identification and description of the specific family groups and their traditions in and around Maramani Private Nature Reserve would be an important scope for further research. One can tentatively conclude that some Venda groups are represented at Maremani but due to the regional nature of Venda history, a detailed future study of this area and its people will result in a more complete and accurate history of the these specific Venda groups that settled in the area and their cultural landscape.

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