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The origins of Tshivenda: an archaeological challenge to historical linguistics

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ABSTRACT

From an archaeological perspective, the Venda language, Tshivenda, evolved in the past 500 years in northern South Africa, rather than 1 500 years ago as some historical linguists claim. The archaeological record for the past 500 years in the Limpopo Valley clarifies the cultural processes involved in this evolution. The ceramic record there for Sotho (*Icon* pottery) and Kalanga (*Khami* pottery) documents interaction between the two groups, facilitated by Kalanga initiation schools for males and females held in chiefs' and headmen's settlements placed along the ethnic boundary. Male circumcision took place in the bush. These schools helped to create Tshivenda and Venda cultural identity. The transformation was not limited to the Mapungubwe landscape, however, and interaction shaped by formal initiatory rites, notably *domba*, most likely occurred throughout Venda. The sequence of linguistic changes was complete by the time the Singo established the Venda nation in the 18th century. Archaeological evidence indicates that Tshivenda was the product of convergence.

KEY WORDS: *Icon* pottery, initiation schools, *Khami* pottery, Kalanga, Sotho, Tshivenda, southern Africa.

Bantu languages are spoken over a large area of the African continent. As is now well known, their distribution represents rapid and relatively recent movements from the proto-Bantu homeland in north-west Cameroon to as far south as the Eastern Cape in South Africa. For five decades now, archaeologists and historical linguists have investigated various interconnections, movements and histories of these languages. Although both disciplines study long histories, their results are sometimes contradictory. The origin of Tshivenda is a case in point. Note that some of these data have been published in other formats (Huffman 2002, 2004a, 2007).

Tshivenda is one of the 11 official languages of South Africa. Spoken by some 1.5 million people, it is largely restricted to the Limpopo Province in northern South Africa (Fig. 1). Venda people are of interest to archaeologists because of their supposed link to Great Zimbabwe (Stayt in Caton-Thompson 1931: 249–59). While a direct link can be questioned, Venda people are unquestionably descendants of the precolonial Zimbabwe Culture, which evolved at 13th-century Mapungubwe (Huffman 1996, 2000).

Linguistically, Tshivenda is said to be a unique blend of Sotho (dominating the lexicon) and Shona (dominating grammar), mostly Kalanga but some Karanga (Lestrade 1927; Wentzel 1981). In some language tree diagrams, Venda is placed between Shona and Tswana, reflecting this blend (Holden 2002). At a larger scale, Tshivenda belongs to Guthrie's (1967–71) Zone S (S21) and is usually classified as part of narrow Eastern Bantu along with Tswana (S31), Zulu (S42) and Shona (S10) (Whiteley et al. 2019). This

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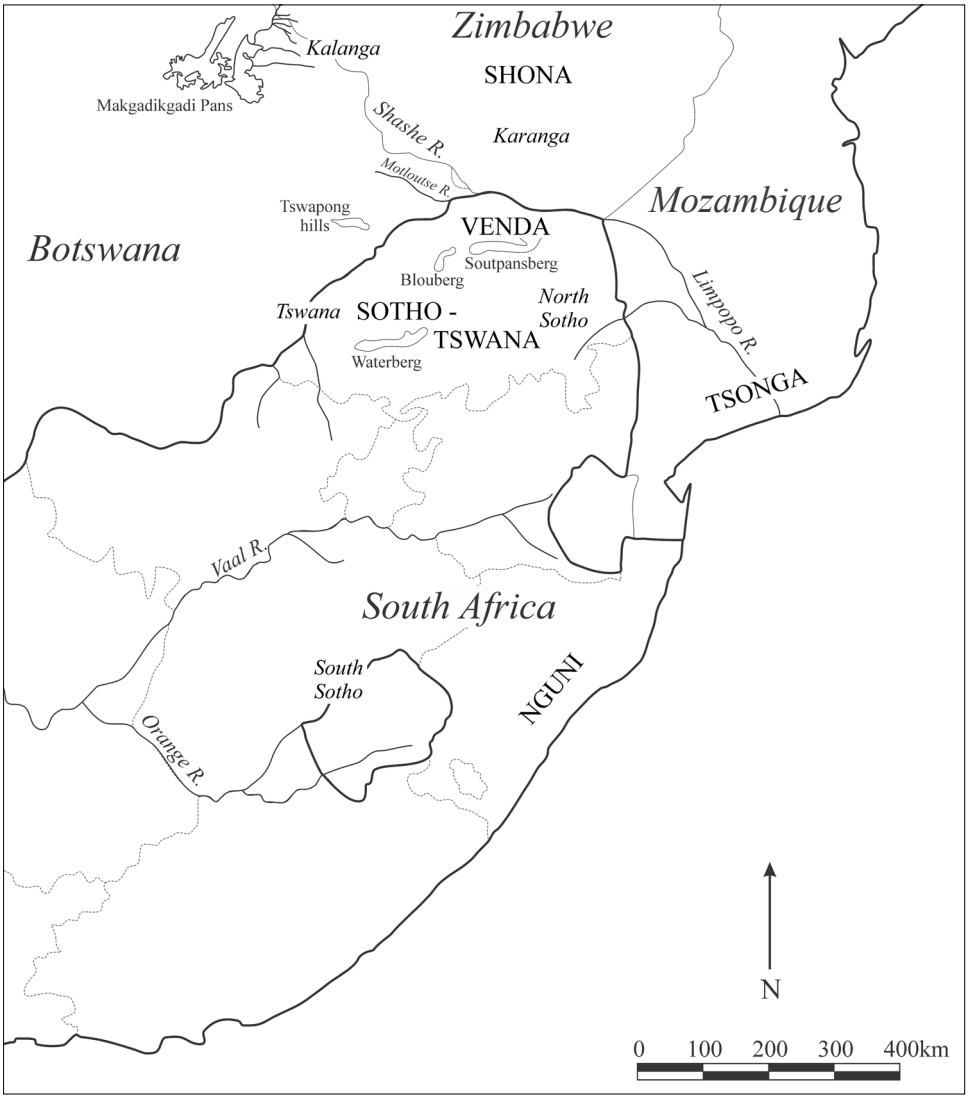

Fig. 1. Distribution of major language families in southern Africa.

is of interest because archaeological cultures usually have linguistic correspondences even though they are not the same as real societies.

Most Shona speakers live in Zimbabwe today, but during the Early Iron Age (EIA)—c. AD 200–1000—their ancestors lived south of the Limpopo. Archaeologically, a complete ceramic sequence links EIA **Kalundu** pottery from South Africa to Mapungubwe and the Kalanga language (Western Shona), while a related sequence links other **Kalundu** facies to Great Zimbabwe and Karanga (Southern Shona) (Huffman 2007: 250, 270, 274, 278). Ehret and Kinsman (1981; but see Borland 1984) provide some linguistic support for this sequence with their postulated origin area south of the

Limpopo for Core Shona, while Ownby's (1985) study found evidence for a Shona-like language, Sala, predating Zulu in KwaZulu-Natal. **Kalundu** ceramics characterize both areas.

Other linkages are more controversial. Ehret (1998: 222–9; see also 1972 for an early statement), in his wide-ranging study, placed Sala-Shona next to an alleged common ancestor of Southeast Bantu (Sotho-Tswana and Nguni) in Mozambique. The common ancestor must date to the EIA, it is argued, because the linguistic distance is too great for only 1 000 years. Recently, Bostoen and linguistic colleagues, in a genetic study by Sengupta et al. (2021; K. Bostoen, pers. comm., December 2021), included Tsonga and Venda in the same geographical space and suggested Venda was the first to separate from the common ancestor. If this latter interpretation was accurate, Tshivenda would be older than Shona and Sotho and date to the EIA. Bostoen and colleagues, it is worth noting, were aware of the discrepancy between archaeological interpretations that favour convergence and historical linguistics that favour divergence. Other linguists, such as Heine and König (2008), are sceptical about the use of lexical items, rather than the comparative method, to determine linguistic ancestry. This is significant.

Jimenez's (2020) Zulu study is another example of the discrepancy between archaeology and historical linguistics. In an otherwise interesting study, Jimenez ignored the well-established archaeological sequence by giving priority to lexicostatistics, dating the presence of Nguni speakers in KwaZulu-Natal to the 9th century, rather than 200–300 years later. Simply put, lexicostatistics is not superior to well-dated archaeological sequences.

Despite the problems with lexicostatistics, some researchers may argue that only linguistic data can determine linguistic phylogenies. While true to a point, this statement requires an important caveat. First, not all linguistic data is of equal value for genetic and historical relationships. Classifications based on lexicons, for instance, are not as good as the full comparative method. This is a well-recognized point (e.g. Heine & König 2008: 236–8). Furthermore, language is the vehicle people use to think about and operationalize their worldviews. Indeed, the subfield of Cognitive Linguistics is based on the direct relationship between language and conceptualization (Taylor 1995). Worldviews are therefore an indirect means of addressing origins and relationships. Herbert and Huffman used worldview, along with the full comparative method (lexicon, phonology and grammar), to question the validity of Guthrie's division of Eastern and Western Bantu (Herbert & Huffman 1993; Huffman & Herbert 1994–95). The combined results showed that so-called Eastern Bantu languages in Zambia (e.g. Bemba) and East Africa (e.g. Kikuyu) were actually Western in origin. In addition, archaeological evidence from southern Africa showed that the present distribution of Bantu languages was not an accurate guide to places of origin. Other researchers have reached a similar conclusion for Central Africa (Seidensticker et al. 2021).

Other linguistic and cultural data place Sotho and Nguni in East Africa, rather than Mozambique, during the EIA. As previously noted (Huffman 2004a), among other linguistic features, both Nguni and Sotho-Tswana use a suffix (*-*(i)mi* in Nguni) as well as a prefix to denote location (Louw & Finlayson 1990; Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993). Shona uses only the prefix. This is significant because the suffix evolved during the EIA in East Africa and, according to the archaeological evidence, Shona speakers were not there. Kinship studies also point to East Africa. Most Southern Bantu have the Iroquois

kinship system (Nguni, Sotho-Tswana and Venda), or the Omaha sub-type of Iroquois (Shona and Tsonga) (Hammond-Tooke 2004). Within the Iroquois system, a limited number of groups share the same term for cross-cousin, namely some variation of *mazala* (*umzala* in Zulu). Anthropologists consider such kinship types as something like 'deep structure' that is particularly resistant to change (W.D. Hammond-Tooke, pers. comm., 2004). It is therefore significant that the closest cultural correlates of Nguni are with Interlacustrine Bantu. The same applies to the unusual custom of *hlonipha* where certain people must act 'bashfully' in the presence of their elder in-laws and must not use their names, nor a word that contains the stem of those names (Finlayson 1984; Herbert 1990). In southern Africa, *hlonipha* is limited to Nguni and Nguni-influenced groups and is often considered a unique characteristic. Significantly, something similar occurs in Rwanda, where a special vocabulary, *ubah*, means 'to respect'. There, people must avoid words related to the king, sacred drum and cattle (Coupez 1978). These similarities involving respect and in-laws suggest that *ubah* and *hlonipha* have a common origin. Hypotheses that place the origins of Southeast Bantu in southern Africa cannot explain these linguistic and cultural data. An EIA origin in East Africa, on the other hand, also accounts for them, as well as the linguistic distance today between Sotho and Nguni.

With regards to Venda origins, archaeological research established its material-culture signature three decades ago (Loubser 1991). This signature was expressed through changes in ceramic style argued to mirror the linguistic steps leading to Tshivenda (Fig. 2): *Icon* (made by Sotho) blended with *Khami* (made by Kalanga) to create *Tavhatshena* and then *Letaba* (historic Venda and related peoples). Although the link between material culture and group identity is not straightforward, the scales of the linguistic and ceramic entities were more or less equal and sufficient for Loubser's study. His sequence shows that Tshivenda evolved in the northern part of South Africa in the past 500 years as a case of convergence, not divergence from a common ancestor.

New archaeological research has not contradicted Loubser's sequence. At the time of his research, however, the Soutpansberg Range appeared to be the boundary between Shona to the north and Sotho to the south. One purpose of this paper is to present new evidence from the Limpopo Valley that refines the geography and helps to identify some of the important cultural processes leading to Tshivenda. At the same time, it serves as a further archaeological challenge to historical linguistics.

For the present study, the full comparative method is not possible, nor are there historical-linguistic studies of Venda, and only one for Shona (Ehret & Kinsman 1981). Relevant worldviews, however, are on record. Since language is the principal vehicle for thinking about and expressing worldviews, the origin of Venda as a macro-cultural entity is also the origin of Tshivenda. In this case, the associated worldview involves class distinctions and sacred leadership, which differs from that of Sotho people. I first outline the two worldviews and then turn to the archaeological record in the Limpopo Valley.

WORLDVIEWS

In formal terms, a worldview is a cluster of symbols that give meaning to social organization and facilitate its operation, and provide rules to govern behaviour and values to decide choice. Such a worldview constitutes a system of beliefs about people,

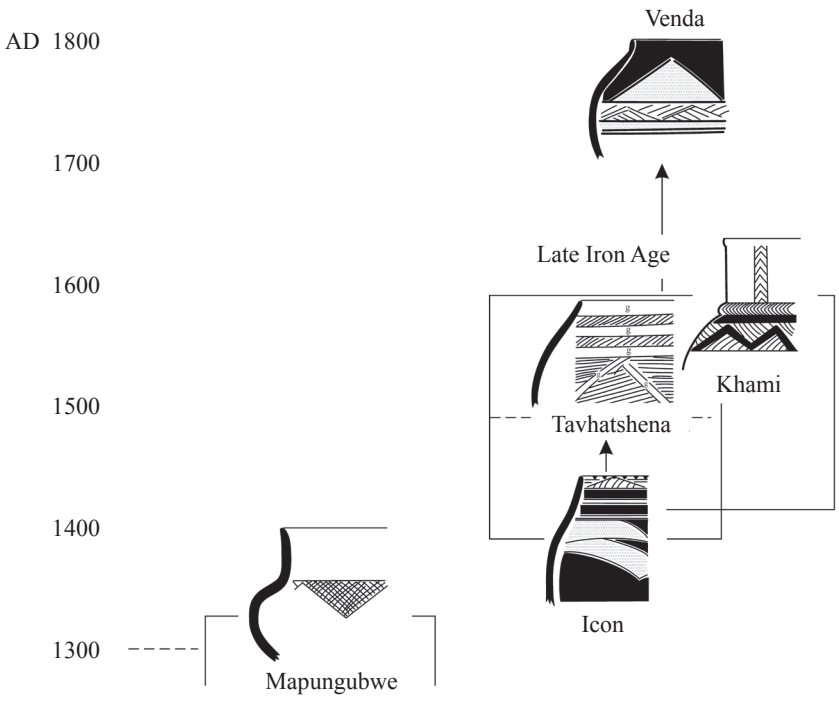

Fig. 2. Ceramic sequence mirroring evolution of Tshivenda.

society and the natural world that is passed down successive generations: it is the conceptual basis of social life derived from the continual interaction between values, practice and the environment. In addition, it includes the associated behaviour that is recognized by others as distinctive.

INTERRELATED PRINCIPLES OF RANKED SOCIETIES

I focus first on the worldview of the Sotho-Tswana language family. This family includes North Sotho, Tswana (or Western Sotho) and South Sotho. I refer to them collectively as 'Sotho'. As this group is one of the major macro-cultural entities in southern Africa, a wealth of anthropological studies provides insights into late precolonial life (Schapera 1938; Mönnig 1967). In brief, Sotho people were organized into ranked-based societies with male hereditary leadership, a preference for bride-wealth in cattle and a positive attitude towards the role of ancestors in daily life; they share these cultural features with Nguni speakers. For the purposes of this paper, I have extracted nine cultural principles that structured the worldview of Sotho and Nguni speakers.

RS (Ranked Society) Principle 1: Male hereditary leadership

Children inherited their father's family affiliation. If the father was a chief, leadership was passed to the oldest son born to the senior wife, sometimes the first married wife, who was usually chosen from a politically powerful family. Chiefs provided access to essential resources, such as land.

'Clans' and 'lineages', prominent in the ethnographic literature on Nguni-speaking societies, were not significant legal or political entities in precolonial Sotho-speaking societies. The most important productive unit was the polygamous homestead (Kuper 1982; Maggs 1984). This basic unit comprised an extended family with the father, his wives and children, and his sons and their wives and children and occasionally clients or close associates. Although homesteads were the fundamental social unit, they were not isolated, and relatives usually built their homesteads near to one another. Furthermore, neighbours helped each other, and women came together to cultivate the chief's tribute fields. The cultivation of grains, such as sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), bulrush (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), along with calabashes (*Lagenaria siceraria*) and legumes, such as cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*) and ground-beans (formerly *Voandzeia*, now *Vigna subterranea*), comprised an important component of the domestic economy. People also raised cattle, sheep and goats and kept chickens and dogs, with dogs used for hunting (Quin 1959).

While homesteads were the basic production unit, chiefdoms were the principal political unit. A hierarchy of office holders encompassed the homesteads of ordinary men, neighbourhood headmen, and then the chief's capital. The Tlokwa (Tswana) in Botswana in the 1930s illustrate this minimum structure: one petty chief ruled over four headmen and 26 homesteads, totalling 1 800 people (Ellenberger 1939). At about the same time, the Ngwaketse (also Tswana) had one senior chief, five petty (district) chiefs, 133 (ward) headmen and 467 homesteads, totalling probably around 30 000 people (Schapera 1938, 1953, 1956). Even larger chiefdoms were sometimes found.

RS Principle 2: Hierarchy of courts

A hierarchy of courts matched the political structure (Huffman 1986). A homestead head (Level 1) judged disputes between members of his extended family, but if a dispute arose between two homesteads, the neighbourhood headman (Level 2) was the adjudicator. If the dispute could not be resolved, or if it involved people from different neighbourhoods, the case was taken to the local chief (Level 3). People in two different chiefdoms took their cases to the senior chief (Level 4) and then to the paramount (Level 5), if there was one. Thus, each chiefly level was the apex of a pyramid of lower courts.

Besides access to land, a smoothly functioning court system was the most important service a chief could provide. Ideally, all men were equal before the court. Individuals and families, however, were not equal in power or prestige. Even within families there was a hierarchy based on seniority and gender.

RS Principle 3: Systemic relationship between wealth and political power

Usually, the chief was the wealthiest man in his chiefdom, amassing more cattle than anyone else through inheritance, death dues, fines, forfeits, raids, tribute and the high bride price for his daughters. His large cattle holdings enabled him to marry several wives and to act as a patron, lending out cattle in exchange for fealty. As a result, he had more wives, children, officials and followers living in the capital, and the capital was usually two to three times larger than the level below. Although precise numbers are sometimes difficult to calculate, hut counts were the source for most historically recorded populations. Historically, Level-5 capitals contained some 5 000 people, while Level-4 capitals had 1 500 and Level-3 capitals about 300. Both Level-2 and 1 homesteads had

about 50 to 100 people (Huffman 1986). In addition, capital populations could swell dramatically during temporary occasions, such as large court cases and national rituals.

RS Principle 4: Status depends on social ranking with reference to the chief
In ranked societies, family status was based on genealogical proximity to the reigning chief, with his extended family forming the royalty. In this ranked system, if the chief lost his position, royalty lost their status and other families replaced them.

Other than the sons of chiefs, the order of initiation schools and ranking within schools (centred around a chief's son) determined the status of individual men. Among other things, men received beer at public functions according to this status and women followed a similar system. Moreover, the status of individual men and their families could rise and fall, depending on the marriage alliances they were able to negotiate.

RS Principle 5: Preference for bride-wealth in cattle
Cattle were the preferred medium of exchange in marriage arrangements. Those who received cattle and gave a daughter were 'father-in-law' and senior to the junior 'son-in-law' who gave cattle and received a wife. There were complex trade-offs and interconnections between bride-wealth, female labour, marriage and the political economy (Whitelaw 2013, 2020). Two generalizations are useful at the scale of the model. On the one hand, societies that emphasized male pastoralism over female cultivation, such as Nguni speakers, had a low bride price relative to their cattle holdings, which was linked in turn to a low value on female labour and, perhaps, to the Nguni preference for a vigorously exogamous marriage pattern (in some cases extending to four generations removed from both sets of grandparents). In contrast, societies that emphasized female cultivation, such as Shona and Sotho, had a high bride price relative to cattle holdings, which was linked to a high value for female labour and perhaps to the preference for more closely related marriage partners (including cross-cousins). These social differences had spatial ramifications. For one, people who emphasized cultivation, regularly built their settlements near arable land so that women did not travel far, and neighbours were usually close, sometimes immediately adjacent. Nguni settlements, in contrast, were markedly dispersed, seldom large and sited to accommodate the needs of cattle.

RS Principle 6: Gender linkages to normative behaviour
In addition to male leadership, gender conditioned individual roles. Men represented women in court cases and were the herdsmen, metal and ivory workers and warriors. Women were the cultivators, potters and home keepers. These roles were part of a larger symbolic nexus that linked men to cattle and women to small stock, while in the agricultural sector men were linked to tall grains, such as sorghum, and women to underground plants, especially ground-beans. Furthermore, since men built with stone and worked metals and women worked clay, this symbolic nexus extended to classes of artefacts and features: pots, grain bins, houses, furnaces and copper items were linked to women, while iron spears, knobkerries and cattle kraals were linked to men.

RS Principle 7: Nature versus culture
Settlements, especially a chief's place, were the centre of sociality and civilization, safe from dangerous forces found in the wild bush (Comaroff 1985: 54–60). As the social centre, people should behave according to cultural norms (e.g. humility, kindness

and respect for seniors), while the bush was chaotic and antisocial, being the abode of witches and witches' familiars, such as hyenas. Furthermore, ancestral spirits were associated with the settlement, while supernatural forces associated with nature, such as rain, inhabited the bush.

RS Principle 8: Rain control through impersonal supernatural forces

Both men and women could be ritual specialists, but rainmakers were usually men. Chiefs controlled the process and could be rainmakers themselves, but they would have needed special training and to possess the necessary rain-making equipment. Rainmakers usually worked throughout the agricultural year in a 'rain kraal' at the back of their settlement (Schapera 1971). They produced rain medicine in clay pots dedicated to that purpose and stored in cool places. Among other things, this medicine was spread around the fields (often by immature youths). In times of severe drought (three to five years in a row), however, rainmakers climbed special hills to 'pull the rain down' (Murimbika 2006). In essence, they were trying to manipulate impersonal supernatural forces through imitative magic, such as creating black smoke to call black clouds. Their male ancestors helped them.

RS Principle 9: Positive role of ancestors in daily life

As a rule, ancestors were the spirits of deceased parents and grandparents. Only people who left children or grandchildren behind could become ancestors; although children entered the spirit world on death like everyone else, deceased children could not be ancestors. As another rule, the role ancestors played in the spirit world paralleled their role in life. Thus, an ordinary man looked after the spiritual welfare of his descendants, while a chief looked after his chiefdom. As a third rule, death was the great leveller and people were not usually buried with their worldly goods. Children could be an exception in that they may be buried with glass beads that a traditional doctor had prescribed to counter the original illness. The beads were not removed because once used in ritual, objects should not be returned to secular contexts. Moreover, a 'hot' death needed to be rectified before a person entered the spirit world. Thus, newborns or stillbirths could be buried in a pot with their head emerging to correct, symbolically, a breech birth (Huffman & Murimbika 2003).

Ancestors were supposed to be helpful, as in rain-control, but the relationship was reciprocal. People needed to observe pollution rules, otherwise, ancestors could allow evil forces to sicken a child, for example, or cause a drought (Ngubane 1977). Ancestors also punished sins against family members, or failures to honour the family ancestors at special times, such as a year after death when the spirit was brought 'home'. Home was the homestead and the physical cemetery for its members.

Central Cattle Pattern

These principles were all expressed in a gendered spatial organization known as the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) (Kuper 1982: chapter 10; Huffman 2001). This spatial pattern has had numerous critics (e.g. Hall 1984; Stahl 1993; Lane 1994–95; Badenhorst 2009), but as I have shown elsewhere, most criticisms are without merit (Huffman 2004a, 2010a, 2012): merely disagreeing is not sufficient. Following normal scientific procedure, researchers apply the spatial pattern to the archaeological record and

compare it to other models to see which provides the best explanation. It is significant that critics have not provided more cogent interpretations.

The centre of the settlement, the domain of men (*RS Principle 6*), encompassed cattle kraals (containing cattle received as bride-wealth; *RS Principle 5*) where men and other important people were buried (*RS Principle 8*), as well as sunken grain pits for long-term storage of 'male' grains, a public smithing area (smelting was outside) and a court where men resolved disputes and made political decisions (*RS Principle 2*). The outer residential zone, the domain of women, incorporated the households of individual wives with their house, kitchen and private grain bins, as well as pits for the short-term storage of female-associated crops (such as ground-beans), middens of household rubbish, the graves of women and children and enclosures for sheep and goats (*RS Principles 6* and *8*). The family of each married woman formed a separate 'house', while the male owner (or his widowed mother) lived in the 'great house' at the top (*RS Principle 1*). If unconstrained by physical features, a CCP settlement spanned some 60 m, from the outer ring of granaries and middens through houses and central kraals to more houses, middens and granaries (Figs 3a, b). The application of this model to the 11th-century Kgaswe homestead in Botswana and the EIA Ntshekane complex in KwaZulu-Natal demonstrates its wide utility, even though these settlements cannot be linked to either Sotho or Nguni (Maggs & Michael 1976; Denbow 1986; Huffman & Murimbika 2003; Huffman & Whitelaw 2020).

Outside the settlement, rain-control hills were conceptually in the 'bush' (*RS Principles 7* and *8*) and so were male initiation centres (*RS Principles 4* and *7*). Physically, the latter sites were marked by stone cairns, erected after the school to celebrate the birth of a new age set of men. As a reversal (characteristic of rites of passage), the cairns resembled graves, yet symbolized rebirth.

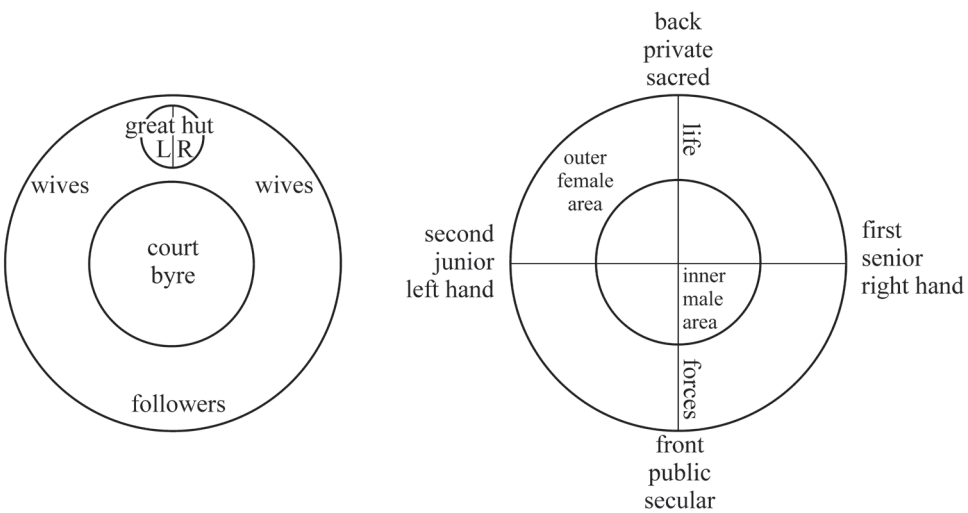

Fig. 3a. Structural organization of the Central Cattle Pattern.

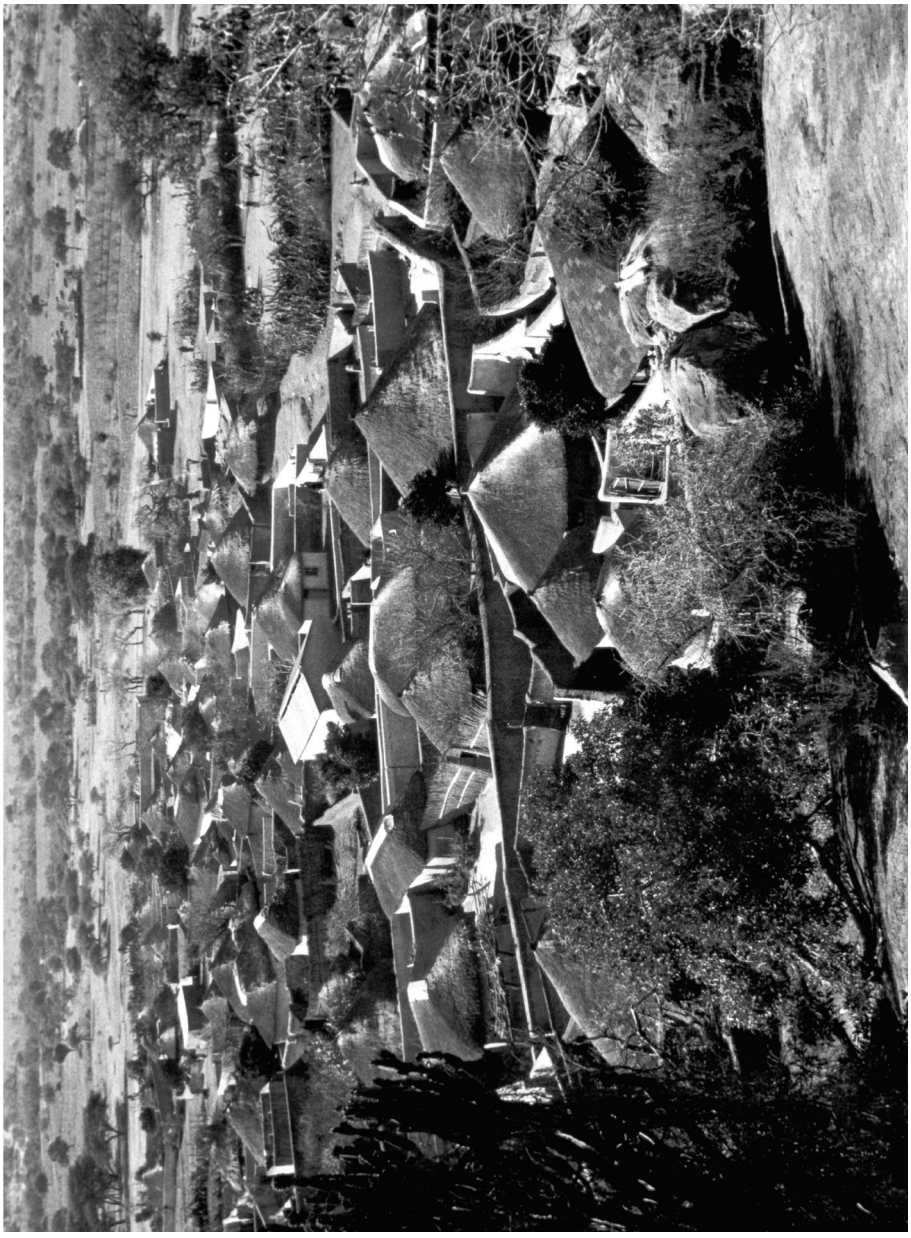

Fig. 3b. Central Cattle Pattern in the village of Chief Sekwati Mampuru (Sekhukhuneland; Mönnig 1967: plate 7B). Note central cattle kraal on the right in the middle distance. (Courtesy of Ditsong Museum of Cultural History, Pretoria.)

INTERRELATED PRINCIPLES OF THE ZIMBABWE CULTURE

The second worldview characterizes the Zimbabwe Culture (ZC), an archaeological entity limited to Shona and Venda people in southern Africa. Its underlying principles are known through a combination of Portuguese eye-witness accounts, Shona oral tradition and Venda ethnography (Bullock 1927; Stayt 1931; Van Warmelo 1932, 1971; Holleman 1952; Beach 1980). Earlier research in the Limpopo Valley shows that the worldview of the ZC was a transformation of the ranked society at the site K2 because of population increase due to floodplain agriculture and to surplus wealth from long-distance trade. Consequently, the two worldviews share many values, rules and symbols. I concentrate on the differences, because Tshivenda is associated with these differences.

ZC (Zimbabwe Culture) Principle 1: Unequal distribution of wealth

Traditional leaders and their royal associates controlled the inland portions of the international gold and ivory trade and, in addition, owned most cattle.

ZC Principle 2: High bride price in cattle

Because royalty owned most if not all cattle, the bride price of their daughters was so high no commoner man could marry up (the children of a commoner woman and royal man, on the other hand, could become royalty). Furthermore, the same families could be both father-in-law and son-in-law to each other, so that the marriage system was no longer asymmetrical. Commoners continued with the old system but had to borrow cattle from royal patrons or use other items for bride-wealth payments, such as iron hoes. This symmetrical marriage system supported an upper class.

ZC Principle 3: Institutionalized social classes

As a rule, a person was born a royal or a commoner—or, in the case of Lemba, a serf. In the Venda language, commoners were called *Vhasiwana* and royals *Vhakololo* (Van Warmelo 1971: 42). In formal terms, senior families of different lineages formed a single bureaucratic class in which wealth, prestige and political power were concentrated. By virtue of birth, the upper class enjoyed universally recognized rights and privileges.

As a result of the class division, separate puberty schools were held for royalty and commoners. Among Venda in the colonial period, only commoner boys were circumcised: royal boys instead attended *thondo* in the *musanda* of their chief. Both royals and commoners attended the premarital school known as *domba* (Blacking 1969: part 3).

ZC Principle 4: Hierarchy of dual courts

Courts and settlements were also ranked in a hierarchy, but the system included two courts: a public one for commoners and a private one for royalty. Disputes among royalty, for example, would not be aired in the public court, only the result would be announced there later.

ZC Principle 5: Ancestors and God

Rather than impersonal supernatural forces, it was to God (Mwari in Shona; Raluvhimba in Venda) a man must turn to ensure the fertility of the land and people. Rain was given by God (Stayt 1931: 230–6) and the conduit was through royal ancestors propitiated

at the back of the palace, rather than in the 'wild bush'. In this sense, then, Zimbabwe Culture people had 'domesticated' the concept of God.

In addition, Zimbabwe people, especially commoners, continued to observe pollution rules associated with the ancestors.

ZC Principle 6: Sacred leadership

Rather than primogeniture, sacred leaders were ideally chosen by the ancestors (on behalf of God), so that there was a mystical association between leaders, the land and God. Sacred leaders were therefore supposed to guarantee the earth's fertility. As part of the mystical association, sacred leaders were linked to the majesty of mountains, to the 'snake of the mountain' (in reference to rain control) and to the attributes of crocodiles: longevity, fearlessness and access to the ancestral world at the bottom of deep pools. These associations culminated in a symbolic triad, expressed as a 'crocodile in its pool guarded by a giant snake' (Nettleton 1984).

ZC Principle 7: Gender and leadership

Leadership was a triad—a sacred male leader, his half-brother, who was in charge of the public court, and a ritual sister. The sister was the senior woman of the ruling line who served as an important advisor; she was therefore present at all important consultations with her brother or kept informed. Her own duties included human fecundity, marriage arrangements and other female matters. Symbolically, she was a female crocodile associated with the 'snake of the water' (human fecundity).

Zimbabwe Settlement Pattern

As with the earlier CCP, the principles of the Zimbabwe Culture were expressed in a specific spatial organization. Once again, critics have not provided a better model (e.g. Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008; Huffman 2010b).

Inside a capital (known as a *muzinda* (pl. *mizinda*) in Shona and *musanda* in Tshivenda), sacred leaders stayed in a hilltop palace that provided ritual seclusion and protection from various polluting forces (*ZC Principle 6*). The leader's portion included an audience chamber divided in half so that supplicants would be on one side and the leader and his entourage on the other (Fig. 4). This division also facilitated the ritualized behaviour that surrounded the aloof and secluded leader. Another palace section was reserved for the ritual sister (*ZC Principle 7*) and both participated in national rain-control ceremonies conducted at the back (*ZC Principle 5*). Because of this responsibility, most sacred leaders built their palace on top of an earlier rain-control place, appropriating its power.

An ideologically strategic shift to this pattern occurred in the Soutpansberg after the Singo subjugated established Khami polities (see next section) and delegated rain control to the deposed rulers (Loubser 1991: 403). As part of the shift, Singo chiefs chose not to live on their predecessors' settlements.

Typically in the Zimbabwe Culture, the leader presided over the private royal court inside the palace, while the brother oversaw the public court outside (*ZC Principle 4*). Other royalty lived on the hillslopes surrounding the palace, forming a protective circle, while commoners lived in the front, usually to the west (*ZC Principle 3*).

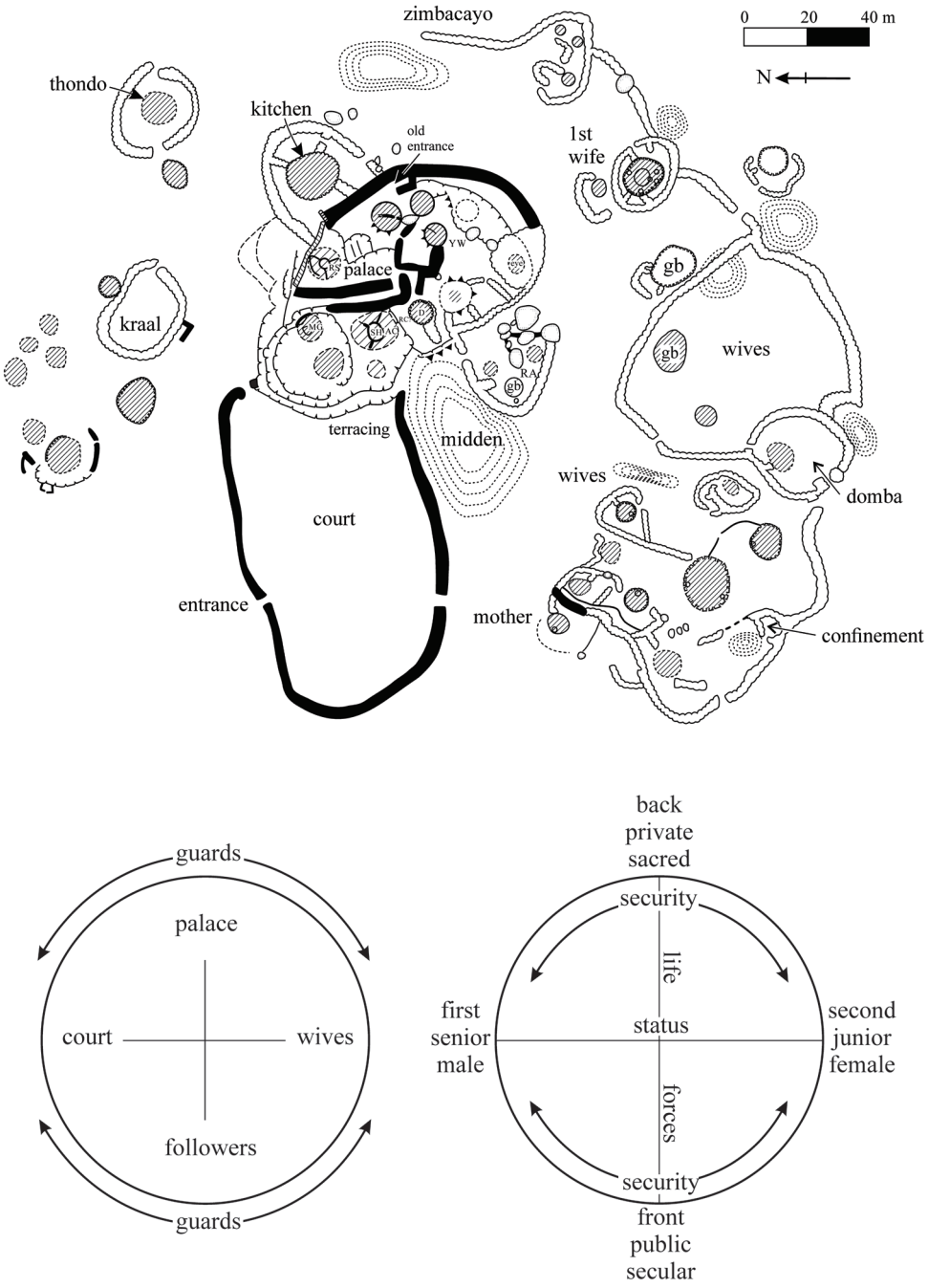

Fig. 4. Above: Zimbabwe Pattern at Danangombe (from Huffman 1996). Below: Structural organization of Zimbabwe Pattern.

Outside the capital, commoners lived in homesteads organized by the older principles of the CCP, with one change: villages ideally faced west. Further away, male initiation schools were conducted in the bush (*ZC Principle 3*).

THE KHAMI PERIOD

A brief outline of the Khami Period provides the political background to Tshivenda origins. Initially, the Khami capital (Robinson 1959) near Bulawayo probably started as the centre of a Kalanga-speaking district under Great Zimbabwe. Between AD 1400 and 1450, however, it became the large capital of an independent state ruled by the Torwa dynasty in an area known as Butua (Fig. 5). State control spread west into Botswana to the Makgadikgadi Pans (Denbow 1986; Van Waarden 2012) and south across the Limpopo to the Soutpansberg (Huffman & Hanisch 1987; Huffman & Du Piesanie 2011). Various stonewalled palaces in Limpopo Province mark this southern spread. In AD 1644, the Khami capital was destroyed and for the next 40 years, no single leader controlled the former kingdom (Beach 1980: chapter 7; Huffman 2007: 204–7; Van Waarden 2012: chapter 7).

Strong leadership was reinstated when the Rozvi established a new capital in the 1680s at Danangombe (Caton-Thompson 1931: 164–84). When the famous Rozvi leader Changamire Dombolakonachingwano died in 1696, at least three sons competed for kingship. One losing competitor went to the Hwange area near Victoria Falls to start the Nanzwa (Hemans 1913); another crossed the Limpopo to establish a capital at Dzata in the Soutpansberg. From Dzata, the newcomers, now called Singo (also MaKhwinde, VhaSenzi), conquered the pre-existing Khami-period chiefdoms to create a Venda state (Stayt 1931: 6; Loubser 1991: 391–9). Both strata in the Soutpansberg—the Khami chiefdoms and the Singo—were originally Kalanga-speakers from the core area of the Zimbabwe Culture. Data from the Limpopo Valley and Soutpansberg, however, show that Tshivenda had evolved among the Khami chiefdoms before the advent of the Singo. The Singo probably would have re-introduced Kalanga.

THE LIMPOPO VALLEY

Foot surveys in the Mapungubwe landscape have yielded some 398 sites with *Icon* (95) and *Khami* (285) pottery, plus some with both (18) (Fig. 6). Some sites, such as the Icon name-site, date to the end of the 14th century (Table 1). The remaining occupations occurred in two main pulses: *Pulse 1* during the 15th century and *Pulse 2* during the mid-16th century (Huffman & Du Piesanie 2011; Huffman & Woodborne 2021). Isotopic analyses of baobab tree rings show that these two pulses experienced relatively high and sustained rainfall, separated by dry conditions inimical to farming (Woodborne et al. 2015).

All these sites mark agricultural homesteads or small villages near lands (with a central cattle kraal, permanent housing and numerous surrounding granaries) organized according to the principles of the CCP; field camps near lands (with middens, granaries, small stock kraals but no cattle kraals or permanent housing); cattle posts away from lands (with central kraal and few granaries); rain-control hills in the bush (small hills with steep sides, pottery of multiple periods, burnt granaries, small stock kraals but not

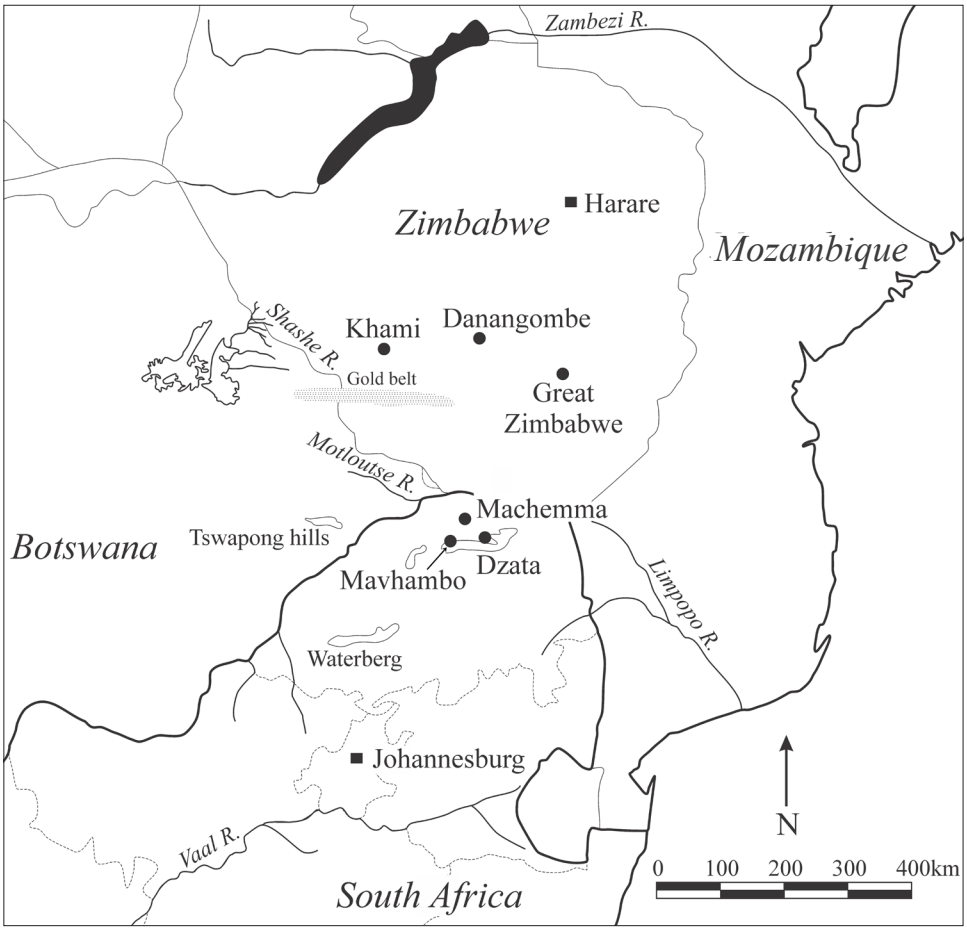

Fig. 5. Important sites mentioned in the text.

housing or cattle kraals); and stonewalled *mizinda* organized according to the principles of the ZC pattern. I begin with the earlier Sotho settlements.

Icon

Although *Icon* pottery evolved into *Tavhatshena*, the differences are few: *Tavhatshena* includes a few stylistic types that combine *Icon* and *Khami* motifs (Huffman 2007: 262–5; Loubser 1991: 456), otherwise it has the same types as *Icon*. Since the facies are difficult to separate, and small surface samples could be either, I consider the two together.

The faunal remains from the Icon name-site (site number 2229AD3), recorded by Hanisch (1979), suggested an impoverished community (Voigt in Hanisch 1979). Now we know that it was a cattle post on the plateau overlooking the Kolope Valley. Within the valley (*RS Principle 5*), agricultural homesteads have yielded more items: at 2229AD160 and 2229AD161, for example, fragments of iron bangles, hoes, arrow and spearheads, as well as spindle whorls (for cotton spinning) lie on the eroded surface. Before this time, most iron objects were concentrated in the various capitals (Calabrese

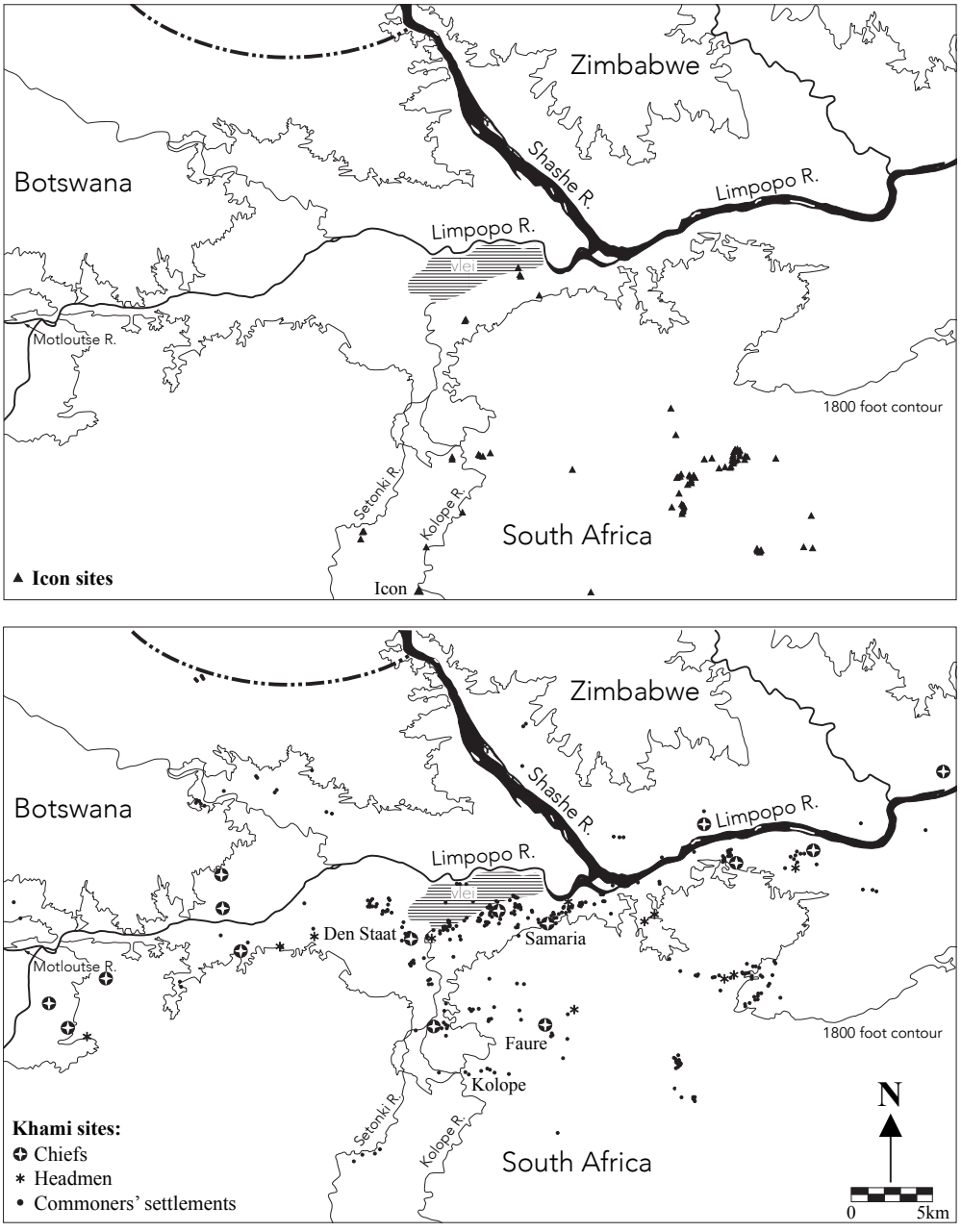

Fig. 6. Khami Period settlements in Mapungubwe landscape. Above: Icon. Below: Khami.

TABLE 1
Radiocarbon dates for Late Iron Age sites in the Mapungubwe landscape and surrounds.

Site	Ceramics	Lab No.	BP ± 1σ	SHCal20 1σ
***Pulse 2* AD 1520–1590 (300–390 BP)**				
DS 32 (VI/G) (V/B/UF)	*Khami* + *Tavhatshen*a	IT-C-1087 IT-C-1497	300±33 380±37	1512–1546 1544–1625
Edmondsberg 2229AD161a	*Icon/Tavhatshena*	IT-C-683	310±49	1569–1585
Kongo 2229AD531	*Icon/Tavhatshena*	IT-C-682	310±49	1569–1585
Samaria 2229AB354	*Khami*	IT-C-2053	320±26	1511–1547 1564–1571
KK 110 (IV/K/2)	*Khami*	IT-C-1499	320±39	1509–1551 1558–1582
Verulam (2229DA1)	*Khami*	Wits-1589	320±50	1508–1588
Blyklip (2229AD9)	*Khami*	Pta-7273 Pta-7280	330±40 340±45	1509–1553 1556–1584
Kolope (2229AD4)	*Khami*	Pta-7975	340±40	1508–1586
Glen Avon 2229AD433	*Icon/Tavhatshena*	IT-C-2059	350±31	1508–1587
Map 10	*Khami*	Pta-6562	360±20	1506–1516 1525–1528 1536–1591
Machemma (2229DC1)	*Khami* + *Tavhatshena*	Pta-3761 Pta-4078	370±45 380±45	1500–1600 1483–1514 1543–1626
Breslau 2229AB603	*Khami*	IT-C-2044	380±31	1546–1625
Breslau 2229AB605	*Khami*	IT-C-2035	390±27	1550–1559
Faure 2229AD2	*Khami* + *Tavhatshena*	Pta-7971	390±40	1477–1511 1546–1562 1575–1623
***Pulse 1* AD 1400–1480 (420–550 BP)**				
Kilsyth HM 2229AD268	*Khami*	IT-C-2046	420±27	1457–1501
Mtao V16	*Khami*	Pta-8956	420±45	1452–1508
Greefswald 2229AB16	*Khami*	IT-C-2057	430±33	1454–1501
Collins 2229AD642	*Khami*	IT-C-565	440±31	1451–1498
Samaria 2229AB161	*Khami* + *Icon*	IT-C-2054	460±27	1443–1485
Horizon 2229104 BC5	*Icon*	IT-C-2036	460±27	1443–1485
Venetia BCP (2229AD226)	*Icon*	IT-C-2055 IT-C-2061	470±27 500±27	1438–1462 1432–1453
Kongo 2229AD533B	*Icon*	IT-C-2048	480±27	1436–1459
DS 32 midden II/A/4	*Khami* + *Icon*	IT-C-528	530±32	1418–1445
Samaria (2229AB355)	*Khami*	Pta-6579	510±50	1410–1457
Machemma (2229DC1)	*Khami* + *Icon*	Pta-3248 Pta-4076	480±45 550±50	1422–1485 1402–1445
Icon (2229AD3)	*Icon*	Pta-1652	620±50	1385–1416
Edmondsberg 2229AD161	*Icon*	IT-C-638	630±62	1381–1415

2000). Now, they are commonly found in many Icon homesteads, cattle posts and field camps. Presumably, Sotho people brought these metal tools with them, because iron ore does not occur locally. Occasionally, male burials have washed out of the cattle kraals or female burials from the residential zones (*RS Principle 9*).

Icon settlements also incorporated low stone lines that marked front and back courtyards, like those in historic settlements. Indeed, front and back courtyards form a bilobial pattern that is characteristic of the Sotho (Maggs 1972). The stone lines show that gender relations in 14th–16th-century Sotho society were like those in the historic period.

The distribution of Icon sites is also of interest. Rather than being dispersed, like most Middle Iron Age settlements, Icon homesteads often occur in lines, side-by-side, indicating that some probably belonged to headmen or petty chiefs. Five homesteads at the base of the Edmondsberg in the Venetia Reserve (including 2229AD160 and 2229AD161) provide one example of clustered homesteads, and three on the north side (including 2229AD13) provide another. A large cluster on Glen Avon (2229AD433–436) probably belonged to a headman or petty chief (*RS Principles 1–3*).

These sites demonstrate another point: most Icon homesteads were located several kilometres south of the Limpopo River. Either early Sotho were unaware of the good agricultural land around the *vlei*, or alternatively, elephants and other dangerous animals returned when the valley was abandoned and bush expanded. A third possibility involves the Shona.

Khami

During *Pulse 1* in the 15th century, the Khami state expanded into Botswana and across the Limpopo. The senior chief (Level 4) for the Limpopo settlements lived at Machemma, about 60 km further south (Fig. 7) (De Vaal 1943). Because both Shona and Venda use natural features, such as rivers, to mark political boundaries, the Limpopo most likely served as the boundary between senior chiefdoms in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Machemma has three layers of occupation: *Pulse 1*, Khami with some *Icon*; *Pulse 2*, *Khami* with some *Tavhatshena*; and 17th-century Venda walling with *Letaba* (Huffman & Du Piesanie 2011: 200). Because of concepts about ritual pollution (*RS Principle 9*, *ZC Principle 5*), new people would not occupy the *muzinda* of another group. The 17th-century phase therefore represents a cultural and political continuity from the 15th century. Significantly, the Tshivhula dynasty of the Twamamba (Western Venda) claim Machemma as an early headquarters (Ralushai 2002). They also claim that their territory once extended from the Soutpansberg to the Limpopo. This claim is compatible with historical evidence for the size of capitals and their associated territories (*RS Principle 3*, *ZC Principle 4*). Level-5 capitals, for example, controlled some 30 000 km^2. Because each level is two to three times the size of the level below, Machemma would likely have controlled roughly 10 000 km^2, corresponding to the area claimed by the Tshivhula. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the Khami Phase in the Mapungubwe landscape marks the arrival of the Twamamba, and perhaps the Tshivhula dynasty.

Although Level-4 territories arguably were unlikely to have changed through time, since they were bounded by rivers, their size and internal hierarchies could have changed as the Torwa state at Khami expanded or contracted. Because of such shifts, it is difficult

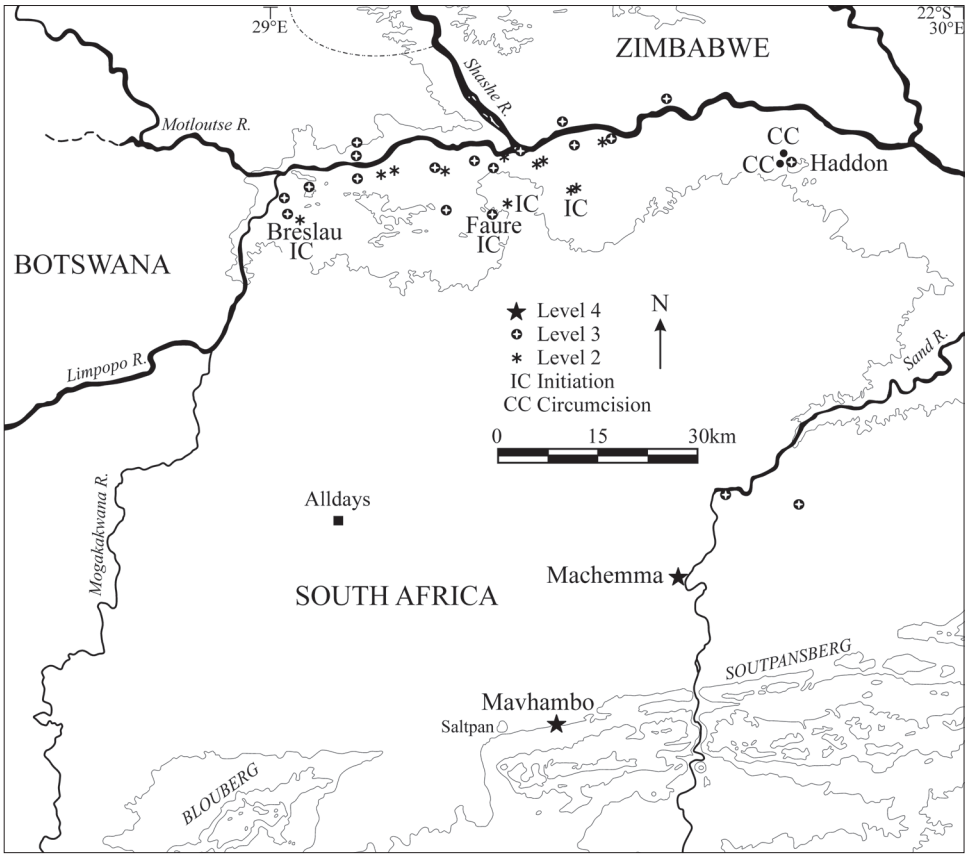

Fig. 7. Machemma (15th–17th centuries) and Mavhambo (19th century) in relation to Limpopo settlements.

to know which settlements in the valley were contemporaneous and, therefore, the size of each petty chiefdom. We can nevertheless make a rough estimate. If we take one well-researched area dating to *Pulse 2* (between the Kolope stream and Mapungubwe), divide the number of agricultural villages (107) by the number of shifting capitals (3), multiply by 50 people per homestead—a reasonable estimate based on Kgaswe in Botswana (Denbow 1986)—and add the capital at Faure (2229AD2) (300 people), we reach:

> 107 villages ÷ 3 shifting capitals × 50 people per homestead + 300 people from the capital = 2083 people per petty chiefdom

This estimate compares favourably with the recorded figures for the Tlokwa in the 1930s (Ellenberger 1939). At the next level, the 30000 Ngwaketse at the end of the 1930s provide a reasonable population estimate for the Level-4 chiefdom based at Machemma. These comparisons are valid because the ethnographic data relating political stratification and population are independent of worldview and environment (Huffman 1986: 293–5).

As with the Ngwaketse, Machemma appears to have had at least three petty chiefdoms under its jurisdiction in the valley during the two pulses. The furthest west included

the two Breslau *mizinda* (2229AC1 and 2229AC2), as well as Pont Drift (2229AA2) and Den Staat (2229AA10); the centre included Faure (2229AD2) and Samaria (2229AD33); and the eastern chiefdom included Schroda (2229AB8) and Weipe (2229AB218). These *mizinda* were administrative centres for each chiefdom, providing a forum to resolve disputes and provide agricultural land. Each petty chiefdom contains more than one *muzinda*, either because commoners had re-located to better agricultural lands or because different family lines (i.e. different 'houses') had taken over the chieftainship and needed their own headquarters. In any case, the multiple *mizinda* in a chiefdom were not contemporaneous. Most were placed near streams and rivers, because this was where the best agricultural lands were located and, therefore, where the commoners lived. Furthermore, boundaries, commonly aligned with rivers, could be contested, but territorial centres were stable and usually did not require protection. Level 4- and Level 5-capitals, on the other hand, could be more centrally located and more permanent.

INTERACTION IN THE LIMPOPO VALLEY

Intermarriage

If we accept that ceramic style can be a material-culture proxy for people speaking the same language, at least at a macro scale, *Icon* pottery in Khami settlements represents some form of face-to-face interaction. Archaeologists in southern Africa usually ascribe such interaction to marriage alliances (following *RS Principle 5*) (e.g. Denbow 1982: 85; Evers & Hammond-Tooke 1986; Jacobson et al. 1991; Thorp 2009: 208). Among Shona, at least, a young bride should take an unused pot (representing her fertility) to her husband's home (Aschwanden 1982: 189–94). If she was from a different macro-cultural entity (e.g. Sotho), she would be introducing another ceramic style (e.g. *Icon*) to her new home.

To assess the degree of interaction through intermarriage represented by *Icon* pottery, we must estimate the number of wives in a settlement and the duration of its occupation. If, like Kgaswe, each homestead had about 20 houses and kitchens (two per family and at least one for young, unmarried men and another for unmarried women), there would have been on average eight married women per homestead. It is unlikely that a homestead was occupied for more than 50 years, which is also the duration of each pulse. So:

> 303 Khami homesteads ÷ 2 pulses = 151.5 homesteads × 8 wives per homestead = 1 212 married women

If we assume one Sotho woman for each Khami site with *Icon* pottery, about 18 (1.49%) of the married women in Khami homesteads would have been Sotho. Because the three chiefdoms have not been equally surveyed, however, these rough calculations probably underestimate the number of married women, both Kalanga and Sotho. Even if we triple the number of Sotho wives in Shona settlements, the small number still cannot account for the significant linguistic change.

Domba

Linguistic change could have been facilitated by institutions such as the *domba* school of the Venda (*ZC Principle 3*). In the past, this important rite of passage was attended by every Venda youth—male and female, royals and commoners—after completing

their puberty rituals (Blacking 1969: part 3). Traditionally, *domba* lasted 9–12 months, mirroring the period of human gestation; at the end, the youths were 'reborn' as adults eligible for marriage. Throughout the year, youths worked for the sponsor (a chief or headman) during the day and at night attended lessons (*milayo*). A public aspect was the *domba* (or python) dance performed in the public court. Private lessons were taught by a ritual specialist (as was the dance) in a special enclosure built for this purpose. Because this kind of education belongs to the domain of women, the school was usually attached to the royal wives' compound. Especially private lessons were taught in a large hut (the *tshivhambo*) with two doors inside the *domba* enclosure; the doors symbolized various combinations of adult statuses, such as old men and old women, young men and young women, and so on. *Milayo* were taught through riddles, proverbs, physical exercises, dances, songs and dramas in which assorted figurines were used as teaching aids. Through the various lessons, youths learned societal values, especially those concerning the proper moral behaviour expected of married people. All participants were introduced to royal legends and ideology, and commoners to court language (Van Warmelo 1971; Blacking 1969: part 2). As with rites of passage elsewhere, *domba* was full of reversals: the male leader was called 'mistress' of ceremonies; girls and boys represented penises in the *domba* dance; and the *tshivhambo* hut was at the public front, rather than the private back of the enclosure. Stonewalled enclosures with various reversals have been documented at many ZC settlements (Huffman 1984, 1996: 401–5).

Venda girls also attended a short ceremony at puberty in the settlement of their headman or chief; one ceremony was held for commoners and another for royalty (*ZC Principle 3*). Later, both social classes came together for a few weeks so that nobles could learn the songs and dances taught to commoners (Blacking 1969: part 1). Typically, *domba* enclosures were also used for these ceremonies.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, *domba* was held in a capital only when a chief was installed so that he might choose young wives to help him start his reign. Afterwards, he allocated the right to hold subsequent schools to headmen. If this custom applied during the Khami Period, the *muzinda* of a new chief should have one school and then headmen settlements should have others. As it turns out, each of the three chiefdoms in the Limpopo Valley have at least one *domba*-like enclosure: Breslau B (2229AC2) in the west, Faure (2229AD2) and Hartbeestfontein (2229AD15) in the centre, and Kilsyth (2229AD267 and 2229AD268) in the east (Huffman & Hanisch 1987 and field notes) (Fig. 8). Some are in headmen settlements, such as 2229AD15, 2229AD267 and 2229AD268, and they date to both pulses.

Sotho youths would have attended the schools of the dominant authority. Rather than suffer raiding, one Sotho headman told Loubser that his predecessors were willing to attend *domba* to channel tribute and labour to Singo chiefs (Loubser 1991: 415). Significantly, the Khami initiation centres stretch across the southern boundary with Icon settlements, not in the centre of the Khami area as I once thought (Huffman & Du Piesanie 2011: 196–7). This is a new finding. Since these initiation centres are not located elsewhere, the boundary siting appears to have been on purpose, facilitating the incorporation of Sotho youths into Kalanga society: over the years, several thousand Sotho and Shona youths would have been instructed. It is within this social milieu that people probably began to change Kalanga and Sotho into Tshivenda.

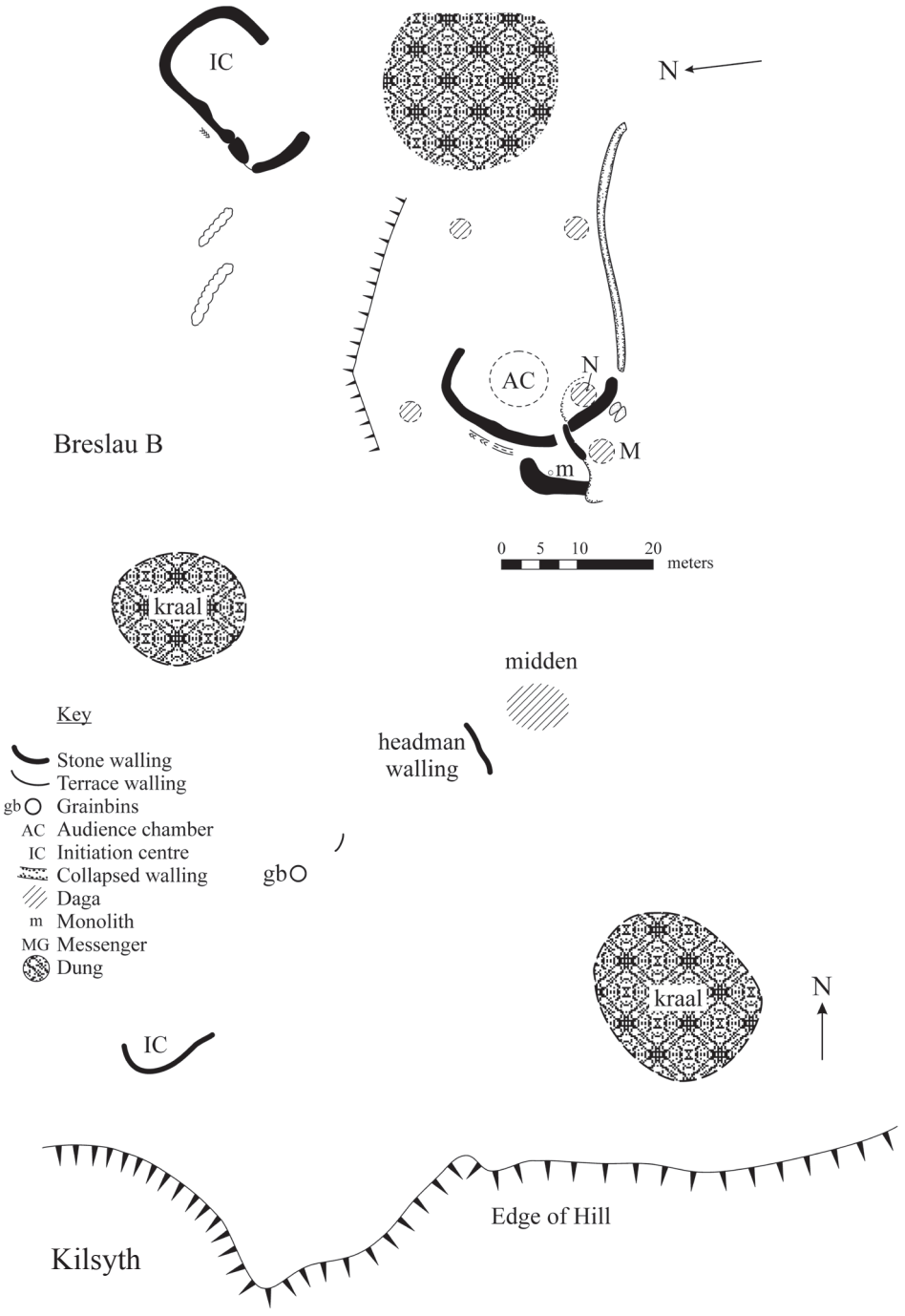

Fig. 8. Kalanga initiation centres at Breslau B and Kilsyth.

Circumcision rituals

Another, related institution contributing to the social milieu in the Limpopo valley was *murundu*, male circumcision, which was attended before *domba* (*RS Principle 4*, *ZC Principle 3*). Circumcision schools were at one time widespread in southern and eastern African societies, including among Nguni (Bryant 1929: 99), Sotho (Willoughby 1909: 228–45) and Venda (Wheelwright 1905). As a rule, Sotho and Venda schools were organized every four to five years around a chief's son when he reached puberty. Up to 200 boys of similar age could attend. The participants included the 'shepherds'—the young men who had attended the previous school. The initiates formed a new age set that acted as a personal bodyguard for the son when he became chief. The school, in fact, was a type of military induction and was supposed to be difficult: it lasted for two to three months, was always held during winter and involved military tactics and various hardships. As with *domba*, lessons about proper behaviour were reinforced through songs and proverbs, while many ordinary objects had special names and symbolic referents. The initiates themselves, for example, were sometimes referred to as 'hyenas'. Because they represented a period of great disorder (*RS Principles 4* and *7*), circumcision schools were held outside the settlement, literally in the bush.

One large initiation area on the farm De Klundert is located about 40 km east of the Shashe-Limpopo confluence, not far from the tall Dongolakop, a folded magnetite quartzite formation. Here, two cairn fields about 3 km apart dot the landscape. The larger field (2229BB3) has several hundred cairns spread over a 200×700 m area. Some cairns have a white border around a dark centre that undoubtedly had symbolic referents, perhaps in reference to the white clay initiates put on their bodies (Wheelwright 1905: 253). Since arable land does not exist here, the cairns cannot be the result of land clearance. Like circumcision sites elsewhere, these cairns resemble graves, but were probably erected to mark the 'birth' of men. Such cairns were an appropriate symbol because a grave was the symbolic womb of the dead (Murimbika 2004). In some historic cases, only one cairn was erected per school, in another there were two ('big and little hyena') and in a third, the ratio was one per clan/lineage (Huffman 1996: 197–206). Whatever the ratio, several thousand youths would have passed through schools here. It is unclear, however, if there was more than one lodge.

The lodge for the second cairn field (2229BB2) is on record, southwest of 2229BB3. Known as Haddon Ruin #2, the lodge wall was built in local ironstone (Jones in Fouché 1937: 21–2, plate XIII). When Edwin Hanisch and I visited this site in the 1980s, we were impressed by the large cairn field at 2229BB3 and overlooked the cairns standing downslope below the wall of Haddon #2. So, the lodge here was also associated with cairns. Although internal structures may have been destroyed, Zimbabwe lodges included permanent stonewalling, like that at 2229BB2. In contrast, the Sotho lodge was burnt at the end of the school along with the paraphernalia associated with childhood. Thus, these cairn fields associated with 2229BB2 and 2229BB3 do not mark Sotho schools.

About 1.3 km south-east of 2229BB2 stand the remnants of a Level-3 palace known as Haddon Ruin #1 (2229BB1; Fouché 1937: plate XIII). By 1934, part of the granite walling had been removed; by the 1980s, the remainder was mostly gone. Early photos show that the front wall originally incorporated a dark stone line and two check designs, dating it to the Khami Period like those further west. Haddon

#1 was thus occupied by a petty chief who was probably under the authority of the senior chief at Machemma.

The large cairn field (2229BB3), stonewalled lodge (Haddon #2) and small *muzinda* (Haddon #1) stand in a restricted zone of igneous rock and bush most unattractive for settlement. This zone of bush contrasts markedly with the good arable land in the Limpopo flood plains a few kilometres to the north-west and north-east, while rough granite hills, beyond the *muzinda*, together frame dead ground suitable for hunting but little else. Consequently, the *muzinda* was located here, it seems, not to provide services to agriculturalists but to administrate the initiation schools. Perhaps the mothers of the initiates, or some other group of women, stayed here during the schools to prepare food for the participants (Stayt 1931: 131).

Circumcision may have ceased because of the long period of military conflict that started in the early 17th century. Civil war in Butua, Rozvi campaigns against the Portuguese, Singo aggression, and then the upheavals of the *difaqane*/*mfecane* made it impractical to hold isolated schools in the bush where the youngest age sets were vulnerable to attack.

As a result, Shona have no living memory of circumcision schools and conventional wisdom maintains that western Venda adopted the practice from Sotho in the 19th century (it may actually have greater antiquity in the western Soutpansberg). There is, for instance, no evidence for circumcision in the eastern Soutpansberg Venda 'heartland'. The archaeology elsewhere says otherwise on both counts; that is, the initiation hypothesis explains these data better than any alternative. Indeed, there is no persuasive alternative explanation for the stonewalling and cairns on the summit of Gombe Mountain in Buhera (Caton-Thompson 1931: 130), a district with one of the oldest Shona chiefdoms in Zimbabwe (Beach 1980: chapter 8). Other than the well-known instance of Makhado (Stayt 1931: 125), Venda royalty were not circumcised, only commoners were. Perhaps these schools were held only for Sotho and Kalanga commoners (R. Tshivhase, pers. comm., 1990s). Whatever the situation, thousands of young men in the Khami Period were initiated into manhood this way. The large number shows that, like *domba*, *murundu* schools would have helped to incorporate Sotho youths into Kalanga society. Presumably, the De Klundert and Haddon schools were held during both occupational pulses.

At the end of *Pulse 2*, the local climate was too dry to support many farmers in the Limpopo Valley and so, the final step in the creation of Tshivenda took place elsewhere. For the final step we need to consider the better-watered valleys in central Venda.

INTERACTION IN CENTRAL VENDA

The ceramic change was not limited to the Limpopo Valley. Several Level-4 *mizinda*, equal to Machemma, stretch along the Soutpansberg (Ralushai & Grey 1977) and *domba* must have been held many times since the 15th century. Indeed, Blacking (1985) thought *domba* pre-dated the Singo. Moreover, the royalty in these other *mizinda* were all related through blood or marriage, most had Sotho neighbours and many commoners had relatives in other chiefdoms. While royalty stayed bonded to the land, commoners moved relatively freely from one chiefdom to the next (Van Warmelo & Phophi 1948:

8). A change in one district would therefore have been known and replicated throughout the culture area. Rain control may have played a part in the transformation.

Droughts and rain control

In the Zimbabwe Culture, sacred leaders were the rainmakers, praying to God through royal ancestors on behalf of the people (*ZC Principles 5* and *6*). Rainmaking in ranked societies, on the other hand, was under chiefly control, but in the hands of professionals (*RS Principle 7*). Most of the time, these specialists worked in their own homesteads, but in times of sustained drought (3–5 years), they climbed special hills to perform their task.

One such rain-control site was located on Matokwa Hill (2329DA2) near the Tropic of Capricorn (Huffman 2008). The steep and slippery granite slopes make the hill unsuitable for residence, yet profuse amounts of decorated pottery lay on several ledges and the summit. The pottery includes *Eiland*, associated with 13th-century droughts, and *Tavhatshena*, associated with a drought at AD 1530±10 (Huffman & Woodborne 2016).

The Soutpansberg range, 57 km to the north, is clearly visible from Matokwa Hill. This range stands 1 400 m above sea level in some places and the southern slopes receive copious rainfall (up to 1 000 mm per annum) from the south-easterly winds coming from the Indian Ocean. Rainmakers on Matokwa Hill could therefore see rain falling on the mountains even when they were trying to call the rain for their drought-stricken area—visual affirmation, so to speak, of the efficacy of sacred leadership.

Matokwa Hill stands not far from the Matoks Icon site (2329BC3), dated to the 14th century (Pta-7330, 570±50 BP), and somewhat further north is the Tavhatshena name-site (2329BB2), whose Tavhatshena levels date to the 16th century (Wits-1549, 370±80 BP) (Loubser 1991: 198). Sotho people had therefore lived both north and south of the mountains for some time, interdigitated among Kalanga. Presumably, some of these Sotho attended Kalanga initiation schools. The location of more specific boundaries with *domba* and perhaps *murundu* enclosures, as in the Limpopo Valley, remains for future research.

Exclusivity

My final point concerns an unusual characteristic of Tshivenda. To many other Southeast Bantu speakers, Tshivenda has a reputation for being difficult to understand, to hear certain sounds (a lateral trill) and to speak. This linguistic difficulty makes Venda people exclusive (A. Trail, pers. comm., 1990s), separating them from Sotho to the south and from their Shona relatives to the north. Since Kalanga were actively incorporating Sotho as commoners, the focus was probably to the north.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language change is not random, but effected by such social factors as gender, status and class (Labov 1966). In urbanised Western societies, it is led by (a) youngish, (b) lower middle-class, (c) females, who are (d) upwardly mobile, and (e) socially gregarious (J.R. Taylor, pers. comm., January 2021; see also Cameron 2003: 189–92). In the case of Tshivenda, this probably translates to the commoner youths attending Kalanga initiation schools. With this in mind, we can hypothesize the potential steps. In *Pulse 1*, the change probably started with some Sotho learning Kalanga and vice versa, and many people were probably bilingual. Later,

in *Pulse 2*, words, grammatical features, and sounds may have been borrowed so that a new dialect was emerging. Later still, a completely new language emerged. Perhaps, a Shona-dominated grammar reflects the dominant political authority, while Sotho words came from foreign subjects who did not pose a threat.

Whatever the actual linguistic sequence, the ceramic sequence shows that the final step in the creation of this new language was complete by the time the Singo established Dzata in the 1690s (Fig. 2). Radiocarbon dates and stratigraphic relationships show that the final step occurred in the mid-17th century, between about AD 1650 and 1680. It is significant that this was the Interregnum Phase in Zimbabwe, after the strong Torwa state at Khami had been defeated and before the powerful Rozvi established a new state at Danangombe. With weak leadership, political forces in Butua could not require linguistic continuity, nor suppress ethnicity. If the exclusivity of Tshivenda was a social statement, Venda were separating themselves from their Kalanga homeland.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides the cultural context for investigating Tshivenda origins. Rather than a list of core words with questionable applicability, such cultural principles as class distinction and sacred leadership should be a focus. These were also core features of the precolonial Zimbabwe Culture. At one time, then, this core would also have characterized Shona, but not Sotho, society.

The archaeological evidence outlined here provides a chronological framework for the evolution of the Zimbabwe Culture. For one, the ceramic sequence in the Limpopo Valley probably parallels the transformation of Kalanga and Sotho into Tshivenda. First recognized south of the Soutpansberg, the transformation probably occurred throughout northern South Africa. The broad occurrence of the ceramic and linguistic phenomena was made possible by the close relationships among the Kalanga upper class and by their similar responses to Sotho neighbours. In the Limpopo Valley, face-to-face interaction provides a model for the rest of Venda. Here, Kalanga chiefs and headmen actively incorporated Sotho youth into their society through initiation schools, such as *domba* and *murundu*. Over the years, several thousand Sotho and Kalanga youths would have intermingled, perhaps leading to marriage alliances undetected archaeologically. Through such intermingling and incorporation, linguistic change may have progressed from bilingualism through lexical, grammatical, and phonological borrowings before a unique language emerged. These hypothesized steps require linguistic scrutiny. Linguists could also investigate whether Tshivenda was the product of intense borrowing and absorption or of creolization: what was borrowed from whom? Whatever the process, the unique Tshivenda language was finalized during the Interregnum Phase in Zimbabwe when Butua lacked a single powerful ruler.

The alleged antiquity of Tshivenda, proposed by historical linguists, may well reflect the Shona component of the language. The archaeological evidence presented here shows that the Sotho contribution cannot be as equally old. This conclusion agrees with traditional linguistic studies.

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