

# LET'S GO VISIT THE RUINS: ORAL TRADITION AND SETTLEMENT RECONSTRUCTION: TWO NDEBELE CASE STUDIES

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Hierdie artikel beklemtoon die belangrikheid van addisionele en aanvullende navorsingsmetodes by vestigingstudies in Suid-Afrika. Vestigingspatroon-studies is in wese multi-dissiplinêr van aard en wek belangstelling in die antropologie, argitektuur en die argeologie. Dit blyk egter dat navorsers in hierdie dissiplines onversigtig staan teenoor alternatiewe navorsingsmetodes wat tydens veldwerk aangewend kan word. Twee sulke metodes is die ontginning van mondelinge oorlewering en aanvullend daartoe, etnoargeologiese data. By die rekonstruksie van die vestigingspatroon van die Suid-Ndebele het die aanwending van veral hierdie twee metodes suksesvol geblyk te wees, soos wat die twee gevallestudies aandui.

This article emphasizes the importance of additional and ancillary research methods in settlement studies in South Africa. Settlement pattern studies are essentially multidisciplinary and raise interest in anthropology, architecture and archaeology. It appears however that researchers in these disciplines are careless as to applying alternative research methods which may be utilized during fieldwork. Two such methods prove to be the application of oral traditions and ancillary to this ethnoarchaeological data. In the reconstruction of Southern Ndebele settlements pattern, the application of these two methods in particular proved to be successful, as indicated in the two case studies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The study of settlement patterns and related aspects such as architectural forms, the evolution of these forms and their spatial orientation and building techniques, have hitherto received sparse attention in the field of anthropology in particular (see Seymour-Smith 1986: 15). In the recent past, anthropologists seem to have supplied settlement type data to archaeologists for the use of such data in ethnoarchaeological or ethnographic analogical analyses (Parsons 1972: 127). It also seems that although archaeologists, anthropologists and even architects have independently explored the field of settlement studies and related issues, there has been very little coordination. The anthropologist Evon Vogt (in Parsons 1972:130) made researchers aware of this shortfall during the seventies. There also appears to be a lack of interdisciplinary understanding and interpretation in each of the above-mentioned scholarly traditions.

The contention here is that additional sources outside the immediate interest of anthropology and architecture need to be explored and incorporated in a more sensible integrated approach. In the first instance these supporting sources need to be identified and, secondly, methodological implications, advantages and limitations are to be considered. Two such methodological mechanisms will be discussed here, namely the use of oral traditions and their validation, and the use of ethnoarchaeological data. The two methods are necessarily interrelated and related to the nor-

mal research procedures and methodology of the anthropologist and the archaeologist.

When considering the above-mentioned sources and their application, the architect Frescura's (1985:6) careless remarks on the application of oral tradition as a source in understanding historical and contemporary changes in settlement patterns and house form, comes as a surprise. The second source of interpretation, namely settlement archaeology, produces different problems in the South African context. Thus far, archaeologists exploring the nature and evolution in settlement patterns in pre-colonial times, have produced evidence of some use to the anthropologist, and vice versa (S. Hall: personal communication). There appears, however, to be a limitation in the use of ethnoarchaeological data in recent times, especially since the turn of the century. It is not always clear how the archaeologist, the anthropologist and the architect should meet on this problem/issue. It might be possible for the oral historian and the settlement archaeologist to arrange fruitful *in situ* encounters and produce evidence to the benefit of the anthropologist and architect.

This article aims at the following: (1) to show that oral tradition combined with what is available in written documents is indispensable for the reconstruction of settlement types which no longer exist, (2) that ethnoarchaeological evidence, ancillary to oral history, fills important gaps in the total understanding of past settlement patterns, and (3) that these sets of information enable the anthropologist, architect and archaeologist to reconstruct early settlement structures, either for controlling experimental purposes *per se* or as part of an ethnographic 'salvage' project like a site mu-



Figure 1: First three grass huts: Ndebele Open Air Museum, Middelburg

seum. In the process we will briefly view the state of settlement studies in anthropology and other disciplines, and whether these provide any insight into this kind of reconstruction. We will also discuss and evaluate the methodological aspects of settlement reconstruction as it seems that there is a major lack of understanding and ignorance as far as the 'tools' of empirical reconstruction are concerned. This will be followed in the final instance by two case studies which explain the application of oral history and ethnoarchaeological data in settlement studies here in South Africa.

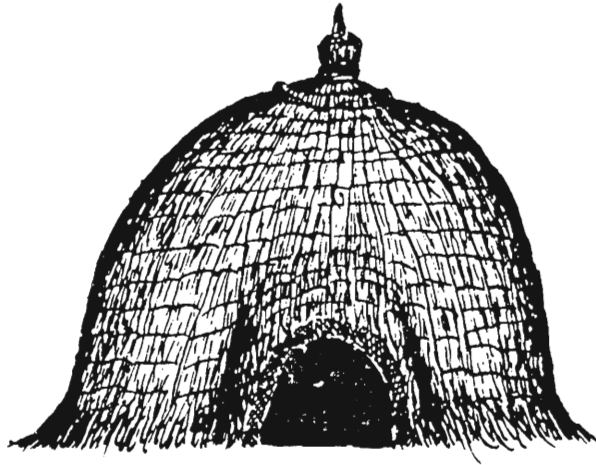
## 2. THE CURRENT STATE OF SETTLEMENT STUDIES: AN OVERVIEW

Scholarly interest in settlement patterns has always been the concern of archaeologists in the first instance, as settlement studies intend assisting archaeologists in interpreting the 'whole' picture. Parsons (1972:126) distinguishes between an American tradition and a British one – the former is said to be more anthropological in its focus. Early studies in settlement behaviour included those of Mor-

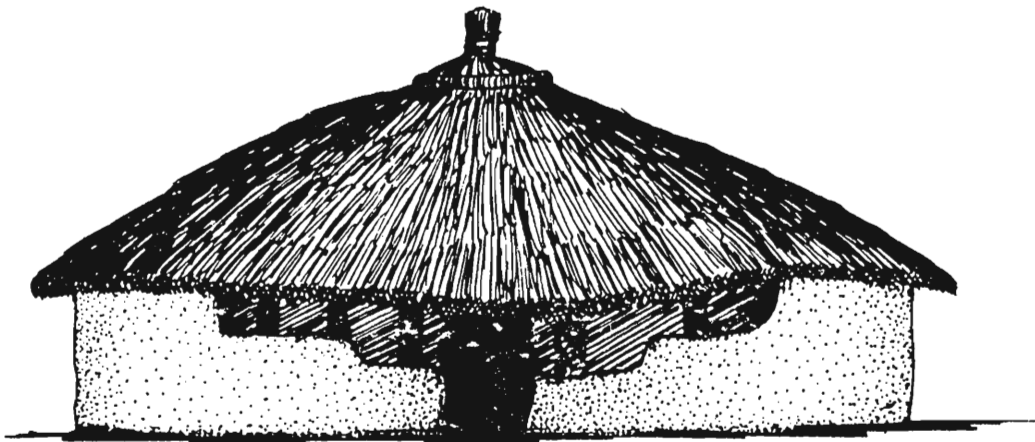
gan (1881), Steward (1930), the Phillips-Ford-Griffiths report (1951) and that of the archaeologist Wiley (1956). Wiley's publication (see Parsons 1972: 130) included the contribution of anthropologist Evon Vogt who suggested a fivefold focus on settlement studies: firstly a description of individual house types, secondly the spatial arrangement of these types within the village, thirdly the relationship between house types and specific architectural attributes, fourthly the general plan and outlay, and, in the last instance, the spatial relationship between communities or villages on the macro level.

According to Parsons (1972: 132) the sixties saw the emergence of long-term studies on the relationship between settlement pattern and land use by Carneiro (1960), the Narrolls' 'Floor area and settlement population' study and the one by Cook & Heizer (1965). Two significant contributions in the late sixties came from the archaeologist K.C. Chang (1968) and the architect/anthropologist Amos Rapoport (1969). Chang's contribution led to widespread reaction from fellow archaeologists and Rapoport's was to be greatly influential

1. Beehive dome (grass hut)



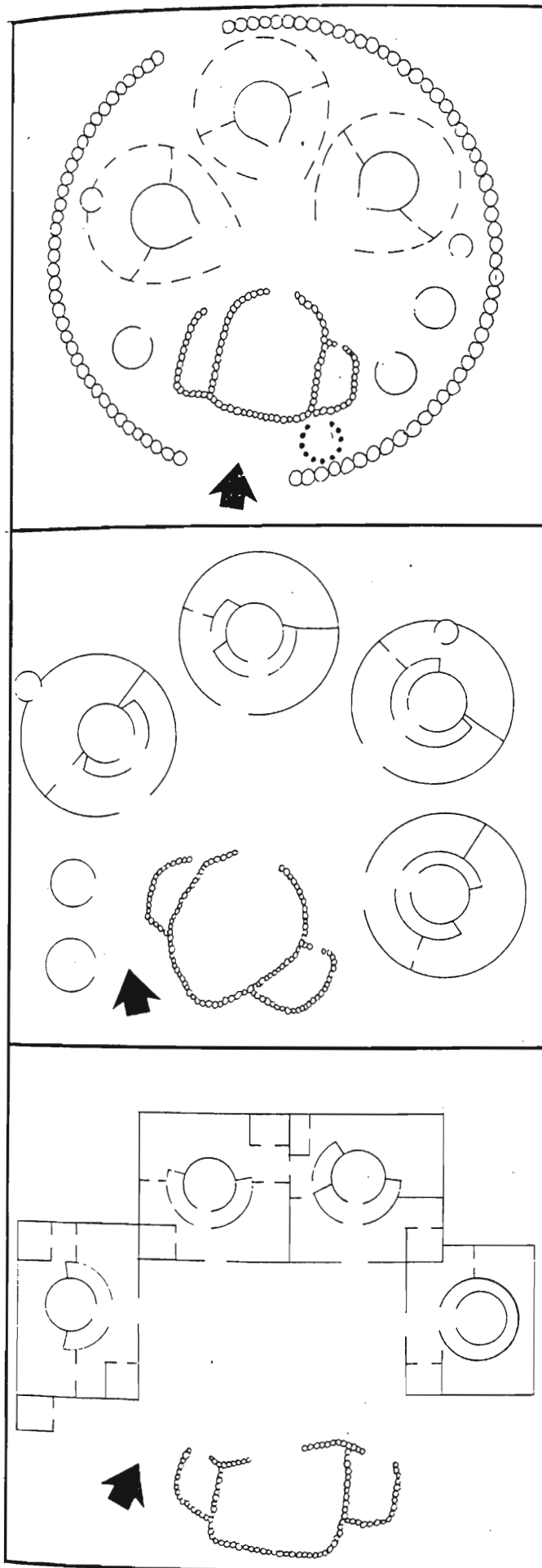
2. Cone-on-cylinder (rondawel)



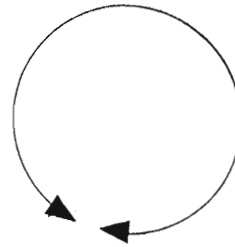
3. Square/rectangular (thatch roof)



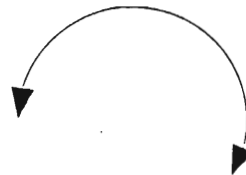
Figure 2: Evolution in Ndebele house form



1. Pre-colonial (pre-1883)



2. 1883-1950's



3. 1950's - present

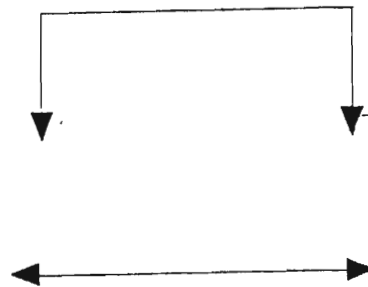


Figure 3: Stages in settlement pattern

to architects in the years thereafter (Egenter 1992:75). Chang's work challenged the archaeological fraternity for not being aware of the close relationship between archaeology and ethnology.

Rapoport's monograph *House form and culture* (1969) focused on the fundamental determinants in form and settlement outlay. These are the climatological, the availability of material and expertise, site location, defense, economic determinants, religious preferences and cultural requirements like kinship, the arrangement of wives in certain polygynous societies, privacy and social interaction (Rapoport 1969: 19-104). Of these determinants he considers the cultural to be most influential in contrast to the climatological which are only important on the level of modifications: 'They merely make possible forms which have been selected on other grounds, they make certain forms impossible, and, in acting as a tool, they modify forms' (Rapoport 1969: 104).

Since settlement studies have been essentially inter-disciplinary in nature, we will probably have to distinguish between contributions made by archaeologists, a few anthropologists and those by architects. In the field of ethnoarchaeology, archaeologists make use of contemporary settlement information to assist them in interpreting a past society's settlement behaviour. Ethnographic analogy thus becomes an important instrument in the final interpretation. In recent years Yellen's (1977) studies on Bushman settlement structures provided some insight on settlement behaviour of earlier hunter-gatherer societies otherwise unknown to archaeologists. However, few similar studies with late iron age societies in mind have emerged. The recent research by McIntosh (1977) on the mud structures in West Africa, and Shaffer's (1993) on wattle and daub building collapse in Italy are of immense importance in establishing a chronology in the evolution of structure and material types, on which he quite correctly comments: 'Unfortunately, many archaeologists do not avail themselves of this architectural research potential' (Shaffer 1993: 59).

According to Egenter there has been an increased interest amongst architects in the past twenty years in studying 'traditional house shapes'. He states that the old conventional view of 'building outside culture' has been abandoned, and that the idea of architectural anthropology is currently flourishing, or, as he defines it: 'what man builds in a wider sense is not primarily related to aesthetics but to man' (Egenter 1992:79). Egenter's plea for a balanced view of humankind's spatial behaviour entails the documentation of materials, construction types, form, spatial and temporal conditions and importantly, social relations.

In South Africa, academic or scholarly interest in settlement and related studies reflects many of the above-mentioned deficiencies. Early literary references stemming from, amongst others, missionary and travelling reports, were frankly descriptive, pictorial and in many ways reflected European colonialist prejudices (see Frescura 1985:3). Despite its limitations, pictorial evidence from drawings and other written references have some value since there is little other sound literature on settlement patterns and indigenous architecture.

In southern Africa, a few architectural studies on vernacular architecture have emerged in the past decade or more. Although they have some limitations, which will be discussed later, these studies have contributed to the contextualization of indigenous architecture in South Africa, especially within the macro socio-historical and political framework. Some of these include the work of Frescura (1981, 1985) on rural indigenous architecture in general, those by the Larssons (1984) from Sweden on Tswana architecture, and Rich's (1984) research on Ntwane and Ndebele architecture.

Early interest (from the 1950s onwards) in vernacular architecture displays some romantic popular interest in the 'creativity from the African bush'. This was probably the case in the popularization of Southern Ndebele mural art and house form. The tourist value of the 'traditional' Ndebele village outside Pretoria seems to have been captured in expressions such as 'Kleurrykste Bantoestam in Transvaal' (translated: Most colourful Bantu tribe in the Transvaal) (Brincker 1962) and 'Master craftsmen of the Ndebele' (Moss 1955) (see overview in Van Vuuren 1983:159).

As far as Ndebele settlement patterns are concerned, there are very few early written materials available and it was only in the late 1950s that the academic architect A.L. Meiring documented aspects of settlement pattern, with publications in 1949, 1951, 1953, 1954 and 1955 (see 1955 in Bibliography). The simultaneous interest in mural art gave rise to Weiss' (1963) anthropological ('volkekundige') study, and other popular publications. Research on Ndebele architecture led to Frescura's general study (1981 and 1985) on architecture in Southern Africa, Rich's (1984) article and Van Vuuren's (1983) dissertation on Ndebele settlement patterns. Recently Schneider (1985), an art historian, studied Ndebele mural art extensively. Although these later studies included techniques such as some fieldwork, they seem to lack holistic interpretation in certain critical fields. The saliency of this probably lies in the absence of interpretation on the micro level as far as the changes and evolution

in specific architectural forms are concerned, as well as oral historical and ethnoarchaeological evidence.

Anthropological contributions in the field of settlement pattern studies have to a large extent been the interest of 'volkekundiges', many of whom were employed in museums for brief periods at the time of their research: Van der Waal (1977) and Van Vuuren (1983), to name a few. Social anthropologists have preferred to shy away from these 'descriptive and sterile' and often esoteric topics.

### 3. ALTERNATIVE METHODS IN SETTLEMENT RESEARCH

At this stage one needs to pose the question whether the above-mentioned contributions lead to an empirical, sound and integrated research methodology in documenting indigenous architecture. To an anthropologist, a study of settlement arrangement almost logically involves an initial literature study followed by fieldwork. Fieldwork is to the anthropologist, one could argue, what the shell is to the tortoise. Fieldwork, as equipment, is problematic in the sense that it 'involves in itself some characteristic difficulties for which many researchers are initially unprepared wherever they choose to carry it out' (Seymour-Smith 1986: 117). As a matter of fact, many anthropologists, despite being sound theoreticians, never adapt to the fieldwork situation, whether it be in the remote outback, or in an urban setting.

Doing fieldwork involves techniques such as participant observation, informal or formal interviews (including becoming skilful in the local language), photographic and audio documentation, drawing maps, diagrams such as genealogies and plans and sketches, doing measurements, etc. It follows logically that any student in settlement studies will embark on one or more of these techniques, whether she/he is an architect, anthropologist or archaeologist. An evaluation of recent studies in settlement architecture reveals that very little attention has been paid to the exposition of research methodology. We will evaluate two such studies undertaken in southern Africa, one by the Larssons (1984) on Tswana housing, and the well-known work of Frescura (1981) on vernacular architecture in southern Africa in general.

The Larssons' survey was undertaken or commissioned it seems, on behalf of the Swedish Council for Building Research, in eastern Botswana. At the outset their sampling method as explained, was determined by the fact that the structures which they intended to study had to be 'typical examples of Tswana housing' (Larsson 1984: 17). Their fieldwork

consisted of five main activities, namely (1) interviews on the composition of the household, building methods, etc., (2) the measuring and drawing to scale of houses and yard sizes, (3) setting up an inventory: the type and amount of furniture and the condition of the material of houses, (4) photographic documentation of indoor and outdoor appearances of dwellings, details of construction, outdoor environment, traditional furniture, etc., and (5) so-called unsystematic observations. They reveal aspects of their initial interaction with the local community: 'In true Tswana tradition, the introduction took time' (Larson 1984: 45), and they provided their hosts with gifts and photos of their country of origin.

Frescura (1985: 3) clearly distinguishes between his literature research and the fieldwork phase of the study for his doctoral dissertation. He reflects as follows on historical literature as source material: '[(these) ...] are often ambiguous and incomplete, using an inappropriate nomenclature and reflecting the writer's prejudices and values'. His fieldwork encompassed (1) personal *in situ* investigation, (2) making use of senior student assistants, and (3) *in situ* interviews on current (building) practices: extensive photographic documentation, measurement of homesteads and surroundings, aerial photographs, writing down architectural and settlement nomenclature, etc. Frescura (1985: 6) undoes his otherwise holistic empirical research with statements on interviews such as: 'to differentiate between hard data and the telling of beautiful tales'—the latter of which he romantically referred to as an 'ancient rural tradition'. Although one understands the limitations of specialist fields of interest, the researcher cannot dispense with the aid of other sources. Frescura's (1985: 98) careless statement on oral tradition once more comes as a surprise: 'Unlike the historian, the architect is unable to draw on the richness of oral traditions'.

Since both the Larssons and Frescura are not anthropologists in the true sense of the word, one cannot expect them to comply with the total inventory of fieldwork techniques, including a relationship with the host community, and its many pitfalls. However, in both studies and in particular on the level of methodology, one could have expected to see more in depth attention paid to the use of oral data with specific reference to past (e.g. pre-colonial) forms in settlement structures. In this respect especially, Frescura's remarks are short-sighted. Oral history in combination with written history is indispensable to the researcher interested in the reconstruction of an architectural chronology, which is exactly what Frescura intended doing to a large extent. The two

studies serve as examples, nevertheless, of the contribution to the salient absence of similar studies particularly in southern Africa.

The following two case studies, it is hoped, will illuminate the valuable application of theory and method of an interdisciplinary nature in cases where the researcher has to rely on reconstruction of settlement pattern and structures.

**4. INDENTURE, DIASPORA AND APARTHEID : A HISTORY OF EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN NDEBELE SETTLEMENT PATTERN**

Understanding a society's settlement behaviour at any point in time implies its contextualization in terms of certain socio-historical processes within that society or community.

Rapid changes in settlement pattern need to be explained in terms of events which took place within that society on both the macro and micro levels. This was exactly the case with the Southern Ndebele of Transvaal. (Note: the Transvaal Ndebele should not be confused with the Ndebele of Zimbabwe, also known as the Matabele).

Oral history takes us back to the middle 1600s when the Ndebele were said to have resided north of Pretoria. The group split up and the numerically larger Ndzundza section settled in the Middelburg district on the Transvaal Highveld. As a chiefdom they were almost annihilated by the Mzilikazi onslaught (c. 1822). The remnants were forged together by the famous chief Mabhoko (who became known as Mapoch by the Boers) and by the '1840s re-emerged as a significant chiefdom'

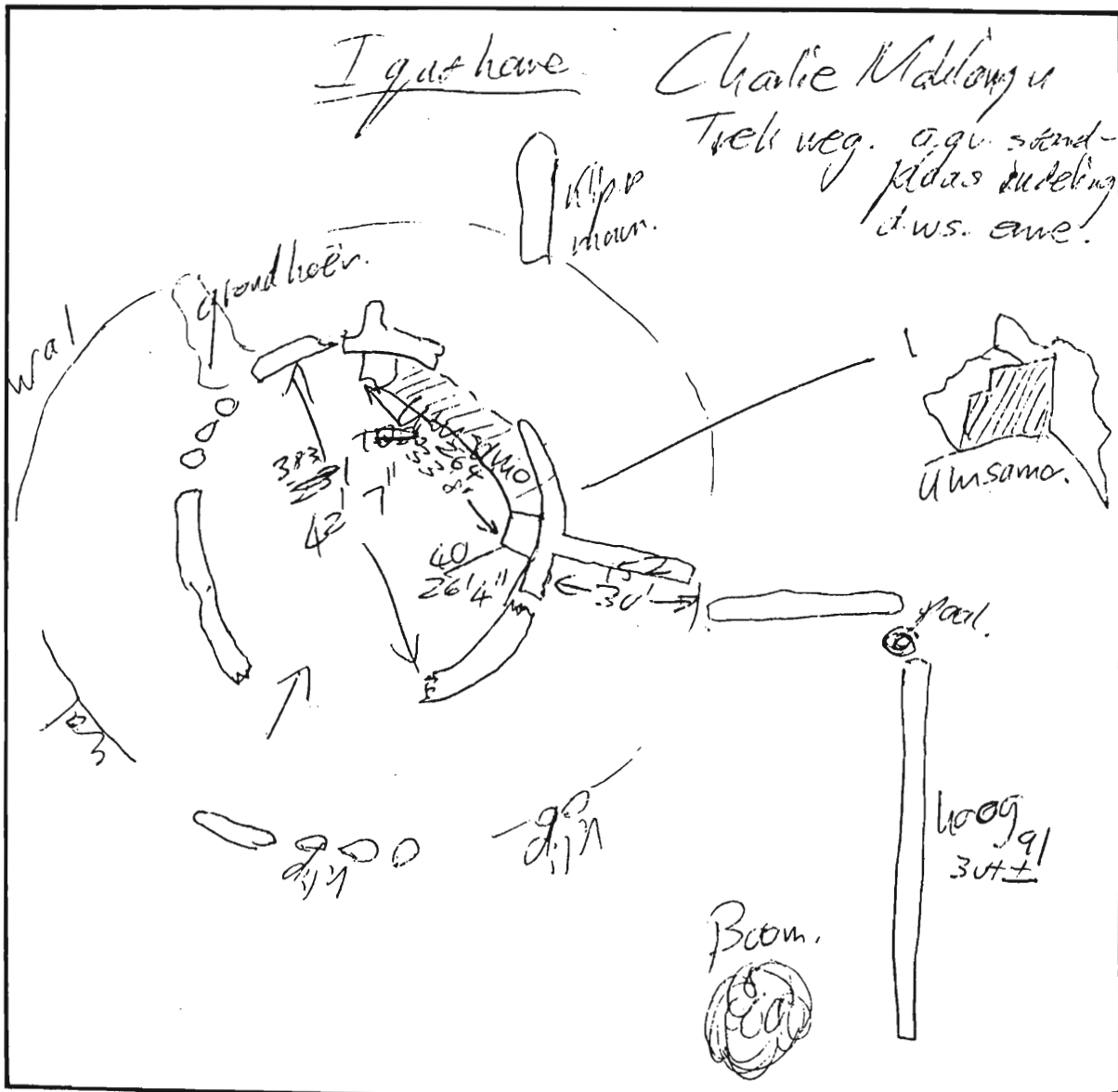
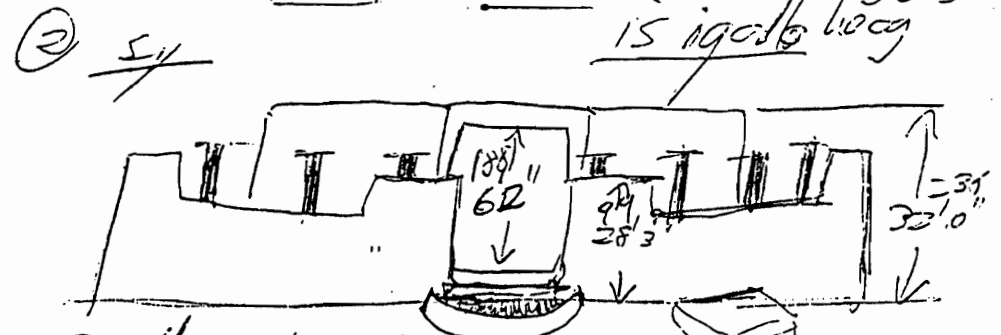
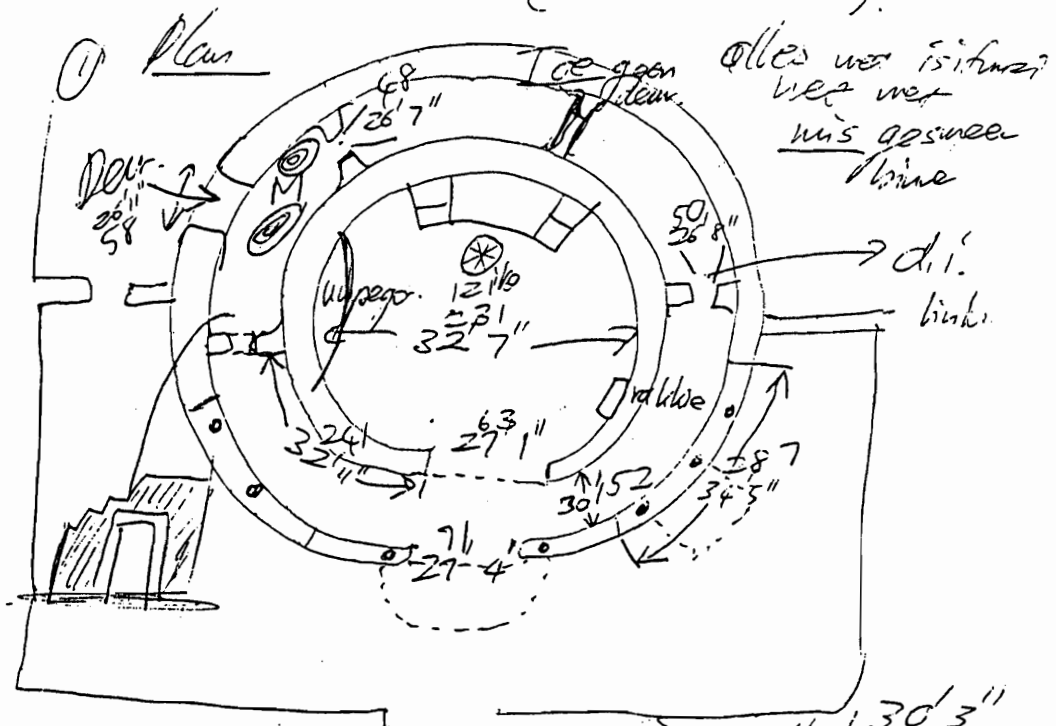


Figure 4: Field notes: Reconstructing an archeological site

Iq adwana (lungsaan) Nauditi Mulanga.  
 (Nou dood: Tob.)



③ Uurapebga diknebs  
 is dit me n' wisk het me  
 wad die vryemak met n' pen

Diagram 3: A small sketch of a mechanical part, possibly a door handle or latch, with arrows indicating movement or force. One arrow points left, another points right, and a third points down. There is an 'X' mark to the right.

Figure 5: Field notes: Measuring an occupied rondawel-type structure



(Delius 1989: 229). The Ndzundza, however, soon had to face another threat in the area, namely that of white settler expansion. They put up resistance on two occasions (1849, 1863) which culminated in a final conflict (the 1883 Mapoch War) and the lengthy siege, which led to their final defeat. The Ndzundza saw their royals captured and imprisoned, their land confiscated and divided amongst the Boers, and they themselves were indentured to the extent that members of the same homestead and functional lineage found themselves divided and scattered as far west as Rustenburg in the Western Transvaal (see Van Vuuren 1992: 35).

Indentured life on the farms had serious consequences for the settlement pattern of the Ndebele. Constraints and limitations laid down by white farmers meant that the natural composition of the extended family was not allowed. The immediate effect on the larger homestead complex was that no two or three generation homesteads were permitted at all, neither were neighbouring homesteads as in pre-war times. This meant the disruption of daily and regular socio-economic, political and ritual interaction (Van Vuuren 1992: 479). The historian, Delius (1989: 234-5), is of the opinion that although this disruption occurred initially, it seems that landowners did permit larger settlements after all, reasoning that the pattern complied with that of rural Afrikaner settlement pattern itself. This made the re-establishment of kinship and lineage networks possible in the immediate aftermath of the war. One should also remember that larger family groupings made more extensive labour exploitation by landowners possible.

The Ndzundza-Ndebele never regained their fatherland, and even within apartheid's homeland plans they were not 'ethnically' recognized under the infamous Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 – meaning no designated homeland. Only in 1977 were they integrated into the Bantustan constitutional framework and given a homeland far outside their land of origin. For those Ndebele who were resettled like millions of other blacks in the country, or forced by circumstances to settle in KwaNdebele (e.g., the ethnic discrimination caused by Bophuthatswana in the late 1970s), the return to a voluntary settlement pattern never materialized. Instead they found themselves bound by the same prescribed constraints as on the farms, yet this time by settlement rules imposed by homeland planners in the typical mode of the agricultural betterment initiatives which took place elsewhere in the country. The grid-iron, street and block, and rectangular settlement pattern, never allowed for organic fluidity within household and homestead structures – instead it caused disturbances of an

incalculable nature to the social fabric. One should, however, not ignore the influence of social change and acculturative influences on the macro level in South Africa, already in existence at that time.

It becomes clear then that historical and political events on the macro level since 1883 had a profound influence on Ndebele settlement patterns. The spatial arrangement of structures, limitations in terms of building area, restrictions on the natural growth of the household, and constraints on freedom of choice on the design and outlay of buildings, were few. When establishing a chronology and evolution of Ndebele settlement types one has to take cognisance of these influences on the macro level.

The following two case studies will endeavour to illustrate how the application of oral historical sources and ethnoarchaeological data helped 'filling' in the necessary gaps in setting up a chronology of settlement types. The first case study deals with the pre-Mapoch War (1883) settlements, whilst the second one tries to establish a picture of settlement types in the immediate period after the war and the first few decades of this century. Historically, this period poses problems for historians in general: 'The years from 1883 to 1914 constitute a yawning gap in our understanding of the history of the society' (Delius 1989: 233-234). For some reason the Ndzundza have disappeared from official documents and neither did they raise the interest of missionaries.

## 5. RECONSTRUCTING THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN

### 5.1 CASE STUDY 1 – THE GRASS HUT

#### 5.1.1 Introduction: Structure chronology

Ndebele settlement structures evolved through three major development stages: a pre-colonial beehive grass construction, followed by a cone-on-cylinder (rondawel) type and current square and rectangular shapes. These developments should not be seen in terms of precise datable stages, succeeding stages could exist concurrently and earlier types were gradually phased out. Frescura (1985: 265) is probably correct in dating the end of the first stage at 1883. Oral evidence, however, shows that cone-on-cylinder type structures already existed before this date. The genesis of the third stage could have been towards the 1940s or 1950s (also see Frescura 1985: 265).

#### 5.1.2 Initiation cycles as dating method

Written documents and photographs combined with oral data from informants supplied

ample evidence for a solid reconstruction of the second stage, the cone-on-cylinder types, as our second case study will prove. The real problem was that no written evidence existed on the first settlement structures, and initial interviews with Ndebele informants confirmed that knowledge of this type was almost non-existent. The challenge was to find a way of tracking down knowledgeable people in a short period of time and to assess, filter and verify their respective testimonies. In any fieldwork process finding these experts can be a painstaking and a long drawn out process which could take months. Identifying knowledgeable people in Ndebele society meant that informants of a certain age category would be suitable potentially in terms of their alleged knowledge of Ndebele settlement pattern in the very early stages of this century, specifically that period which Delius mentioned – 1883-1914.

This period was crucial in terms of establishing the nature of settlement outlay and grass hut constructions at the time of their disappearance. The real problem arose from the fact that elderly people in pre-literate societies are seldom aware of biographical dates, e.g., date of birth, date of inception of life cycle rituals, date of decease of relatives, etc. But, fortunately, these societies exhibit 'highly developed powers of memory, and hand them down their traditions in a form made suitable for oral transmission by the use of rhyme or other formulae for linking material together' (Vansina 1965:4).

At this point it became clear that the Ndebele's system of initiation regiments and its cyclical recurrence every four years could be particularly useful in determining the associative ages of individual men who underwent initiation, particularly so because all initiated men at least remember the name of their initiation regiment. The notion of cyclical name giving is salient in east African societies like the Nandi of Kenya, although unique in southern Africa amongst the Ndebele. The oral-historian David Hennige (1974: 4) regards this type of dating valuable: "analysis of age grade systems may usually proceed on the same principles that are used for evaluating genealogies and kinglists, since age grades or sets represent a nonbiological 'generation' of more or less conventional length."

In the Ndebele system of cyclical age grades teenage boys (*abasegwabo*) are initiated every four years and a regimental name (*indanga*) is allocated to a specific year's age group immediately after initiation. Initiation lasts three months and entails circumcision amongst other things. The Ndzundza section ran a cycle of fifteen names in a fixed order which is repeated after every fifteenth initiation. Every cycle's duration is then approximately

sixty years. The Manala section of the Ndebele has a system of thirteen repetitive names which implies a fifty-two year cycle. It is possible to determine the installation dates of all previous regiments today by (1) way of backward calculation from known recent installations (e.g., 1979), (2) oral reconstruction and cross verification, and (3) the insertion of installation dates mentioned in historical records (Van Vuuren 1992: 103, Delius 1989: 12-13).

Certain variables may, however, interfere with the duration of the cycle, but never with the order of allocation. Oral sources note that war and internal strife, the two Anglo-Boer Wars, as well as the First and the Second World Wars, severe drought and death in the ruling house influenced the fixed time of four years between cycles in the past. This implies that a specific initiation was postponed indefinitely, thus lengthening the duration of the total cycle. All these interruptions are well remembered in present oral history. In the recent past (1979-1985) authorities in KwaNdebele have shortened the four year period to three years to meet the demands of parents and students trying to arrange their initiation before they write their matriculation examination (see Van Vuuren 1992:101-102).

As previously stated, Ndebele men not only remember their own regimental names but all those of male ancestors as early as the fourth previous generation and, of course, those of their own descendants. Most men also display a remarkable lateral memory of the regimental names of patrilineal relatives. What is furthermore salient is that many women know the regimental names of collaterals and those of their own patrilineal male relatives. Ndebele women also closely associate themselves with their own male age contemporaries with whom they grew up. They can therefore be asked about their own 'regimental names', meaning the age category with whom they associate. Once the regimental name of any individual is established, and adding the fact that males are initiated at ages of more or less eighteen to twenty, it becomes fairly easy to calculate the approximate date of birth of people.

The following table of Ndzundza-Ndebele regimental names give an indication of the extent to which the cycle repeats itself in three-fold, and how certain dates are calculated and fixed (see Table 1).

What also emerged from oral information was that almost all previous rulers' regimental names were known in the form of praise poems, so providing a verifiable cross control mechanism to the correlation between cyclical names and associated dates of inception. In practical terms: if a man called A was initiated in the PHOKO regiment, we know that this took

| NO. | REGIMENTAL NAME | CALCULATED INSTALLATION DATE |         |         | (a)   | (b)                            | (c)            |
|-----|-----------------|------------------------------|---------|---------|---|--------------------------------|----------------|
|     |                 | CYCLE 1                      | CYCLE 2 | CYCLE 3 | HISTORICALLY CALCULABLE                     | FOUR YEAR CYCLICAL CALCULATION | ORAL TRADITION |
| 1   | DUBA            | 1856                         | 1915    | 1975    | DURING WW1<br>X                             | X<br>X<br>X                    | X<br>X         |
| 2   | DLOWU           | 1860                         | 1919    | 1979    | YEAR AFTER WW1<br>X                         | X<br>X                         | X<br>X         |
| 3   | DLHARI          | 1864                         | 1923    | 1982    | YEAR AFTER 1922 STRIKE                      | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 4   | NYATHI          | 1868                         | 1927    | 1985    | X   | X<br>X<br>X                    | X<br>X         |
| 5   | RUDLA           | 1872                         | 1931    | 1989    |   | X<br>X<br>X                    | X<br>X         |
| 6   | GAWU            | 1876                         | 1935    | 1993    |   | X<br>X<br>X                    | X<br>X         |
| 7   | DZIBHA          | 1880                         | 1939    |         | WW2 STARTS                                  | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 8   | THULA           | 1886                         | 1943    |         | HISTORICAL REFERENCE                        | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 9   | DLAZA           | 1888/86?                     | 1946(7) |         | HISTORICAL REFERENCE 1 OR 2 YEARS AFTER WW2 | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 10  | RHASA           | 1892                         | 1951    |         |   | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 11  | DUKU            | 1896                         | 1955H   |         | HISTORICAL REFERENCE                        | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 12  | SINYA           | 1899                         | 1959    |         | 2ND ANGLO BOER WAR STARTS                   | X<br>X                         | X<br>X         |
| 13  | PHOKO           | 1903                         | 1962&63 |         | DEATH OF CHIEF MAYISHA                      | X<br>X                         | X<br>X         |
| 14  | PHASWANA        | 1907                         | 1966    |         | X<br>X                                      | X<br>X                         | X              |
| 15  | NGHANA          | 1911                         | 1970    |         | X   | X<br>X                         | X              |

Table 1: Ndzundza-Ndebele regimental names

place in 1962/63, and if he was initiated at the approximate age of 18, he might probably have been born in the year 1944. This places him in an age-time category within which he would know and remember, for the purposes of our study, certain sets of information on Ndebele settlement structures (Van Vuuren 1987: 166).

### 5.1.3 Finding the knowledge for reconstruction

As previously stated the challenge was to obtain enough data on the Ndebele grass hut and related structures, as these were believed to have become extinct around the time of the Boer-Ndebele confrontation of 1883. A few test interviews during the initial fieldwork period of 1978-1979 revealed that Ndebele men, and women who by association, were initiated after the DLHARI regiment of 1923, could provide very little and/or doubtful information on the nature, construction process and materials

used in the grass hut. These latter categories, however, proved to be valuable sources of information on the early cone-on-cylinder type dwellings.

It was therefore decided to explore the oral information of people belonging to the DLHARI (1923), DLOWU (1919), DUBA (1915/17) and NGHANA (1911) regiments. At that time (1978) it was unlikely that people who belonged to, and associated with, the earlier regiment of PHASWANA (1907) were still alive. Both in and outside the homeland of KwaNdebele only three DUBA men could be traced, along with a NGHANA man in the Stoffberg area, who, after an extensive effort, was found to be unable to contribute at all due to senility (Van Vuuren 1987: 166). It was decided to use the oral testimonies of the three DUBA men. Important here was the fact that they never knew each other nor were they aware of each other's existence, and furthermore they were born in

three different localities in the Delmas, Bronkhorstspuit and Middelburg districts. The three men were separately interviewed, and later jointly, in an effort to correlate the respective testimonies.

Information revealed that all three of them knew the grass hut since childhood, and that two of them were present on occasions when one was constructed. They could even recall the indigenous terms (*umtlhathana*, *umhlo-nywa*, *phasi*) for the type of dwelling. On occasion and without request, one of them (during an interview), drew an elementary sketch of the plan and, by using little sticks, made a rudimentary construction of the frame.

The following important and illuminating data emerged: (1) the approximate diameter and height measurements of the grass dwelling, (2) the spatial arrangement of all other structures in the homestead (*umuzi*) complex, e.g., animal enclosures, dividing structures, access areas, etc., (3) ethno-terminology for these other structures, and (4) construction material and its preparation (Van Vuuren 1987: 167). All these data refuted the original hypothesis that the early Ndebele grass hut was construction-wise similar to that of the Zulu type grass hut. Instead, and quite surprisingly, there proved to be more similarities with Southern Nguni grass type dwellings (Van Vuuren 1992: 94).

#### 5.1.4 Verifying the oral evidence

The research on the settlement chronology of Ndebele structures was, from the outset, part of a wider project, namely the creation of a Southern Ndebele open air museum. It was thus possible to control the oral data *in situ* in the process of construction of dwellings for the open air museum. Two of the three elderly informants agreed to assist in the construction of the first prototype of the Ndebele grass hut. They were assisted in the gathering of material and the building of this first prototype was completed in three days, excluding plastering. The first stage, the framework, took less than ten hours, and the first layer of thatch was completed before sundown. The two elders mostly served in an advisory capacity, instructing the others on the bending process of horizontal saplings, tying up methods, measurements between vertical and horizontal saplings, the difficult construction of the arched entrance as well as the indigenous way of thatching, by then unknown to most people. Frescura (1985: 88) describes this style as: "the simple principle of holding down the grass cover by means of a series of grass or fibre ropes laid to form an overlay".

Towards the end of 1979 a man from the NGHANA (1911) regiment, an earlier regiment

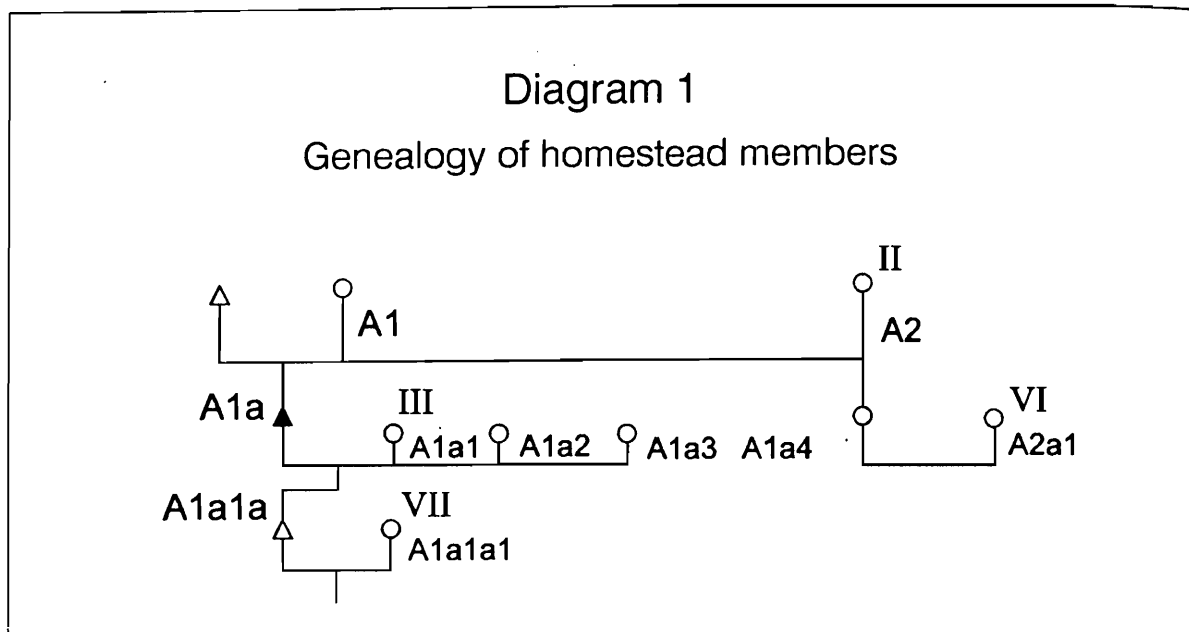
than that of the original three informants, was found to be living on a farm adjacent to the museum. He had a sound memory and when taking him to the first prototype he confirmed its authenticity in terms of the shape and measurements, and construction methods, and provided additional information on variations in the verandah at the entrance, known as the *amawoba* or *amaturi* (Van Vuuren 1983: 89). He also confirmed the existence of a shelter consisting of branches as the forerunner of the later reed enclosure, the *isirhodlo*.

## 5.2 CASE STUDY 2 – THE CONE-ON-CYLINDER

### 5.2.1 Introduction: Defining sequence and variations

Earlier, we discussed the working hypothesis of a threefold evolution in Ndebele settlement types (see 5.1.1). The concurrent existence of both cone-on-cylinder or rondawel type structures with the earlier grass hut, makes it difficult to establish a fixed date for the first appearance of these second phase types (also see Frescura 1985: 265). The evolution of settlement structures surrounding the dwelling, like courtyard enclosures, huts for children and visitors and structures for animals, seemed to have run parallel to that of the main structure. Oral evidence during the actual reconstruction of grass hut types, confirmed the existence of courtyard enclosures around the main dwelling from the earliest of times (Van Vuuren 1983: 136). For this reason Frescura's (1985: 265) claim that the adoption of courtyard walls was due to Pedi (Northern Sotho) influence seems unqualified and denies own invention and the early existence of these structures, which have always defined the homestead in its socio-religious terms.

The time span of cone-on-cylinder types in Ndebele settlement pattern was approximately sixty to seventy years (pre-1883 up to the 1950s). At the time of the initial fieldwork period (1978) only four of these types existed inside the KwaNdebele homeland, of which two were still occupied. Outside the area and in the wake of six month's travelling around farms on the Transvaal Highveld another fifteen of these structures were traced, of which only eight were still occupied (Van Vuuren 1983: 85, 96). Despite these finds and the apparent and potential information they could disclose on structural features, the following gaps remained: (1) there seemed to be numerous form variations over a sixty to seventy year period, (2) the sequence and chronology of these variations were not clear, (3) only half of these examples were still occupied and could be properly documented by



measurement and supplementary oral information from the occupants, and (4) finally, many of the archaeological remains of the remaining half needed to be excavated to provide enough evidence such as floor plan, diameter, dimensions of adjacent structures, etc. which was time-consuming and simply impossible at that stage in time. These were all of a structural-architectural nature.

The second challenge was of a socio-historical nature, namely to obtain data on spatial arrangement of all structures within the homestead, the occupation of these structures by members of the homestead, the daily routine and living area utilization by occupants and accompanying changes in spatial behaviour over six to seven decades.

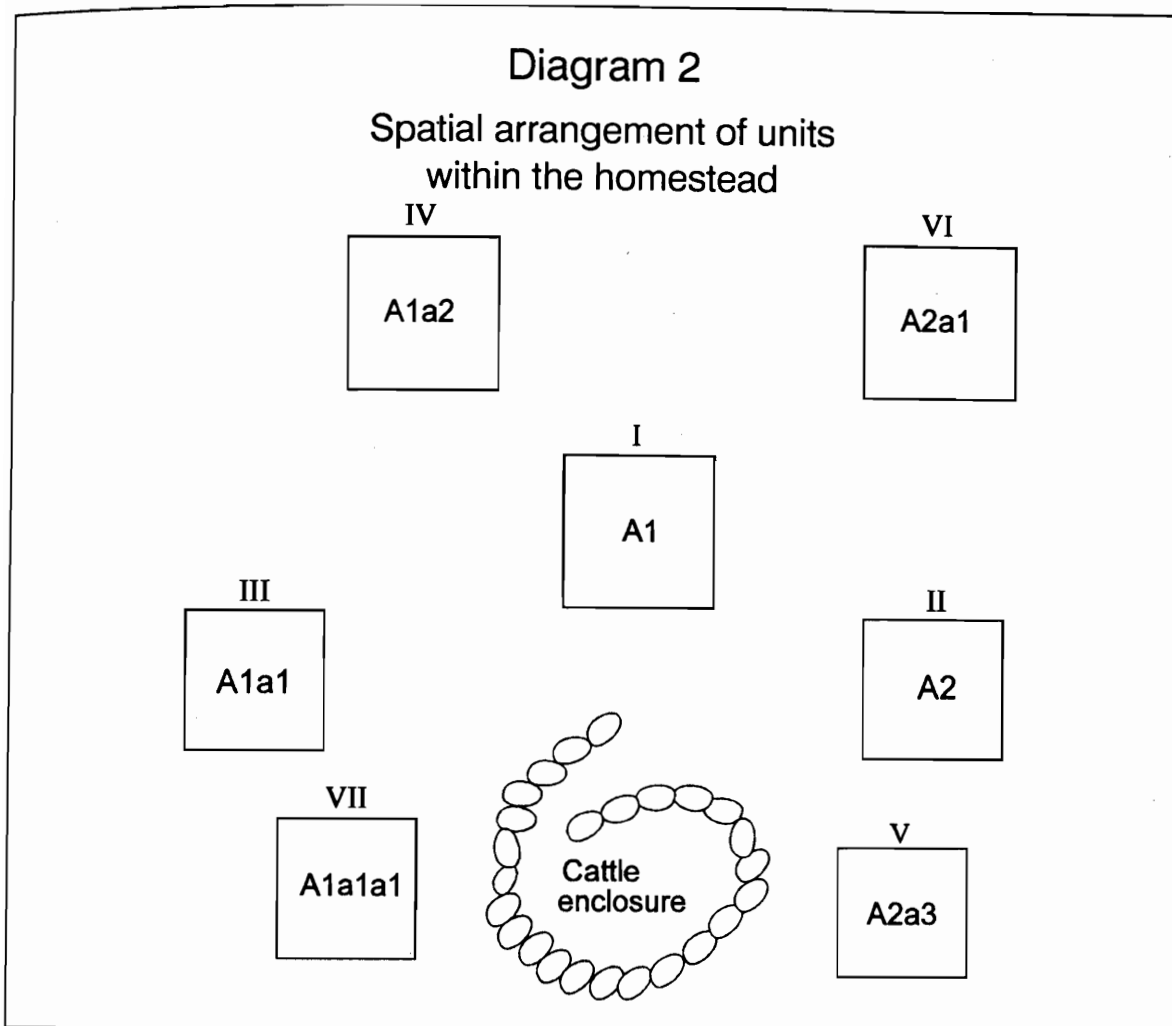
### 5.2.2 *Talking at the ruins: kinship, the homestead and reconstructing settlement life*

A strategy was decided on whereby architectural and socio-cultural phenomena during the time when the rondawel type dwelling was prominent, could be reconstructed by comparing contemporary material with that of the first decades of this century. By determining the composition of any present household and that of the homestead (*umuzi*), and drawing up plans of each member's spatial occupation, one could, by using a genealogy as a guideline, follow the migration of the domestic group back in time. In fact, at the time of the research, informants on more than one occasion suggested this themselves. 'Talking at the ruins' soon proved to be extremely successful in the sense that (1) genealogical data could be constructively, physically and visually applied *in situ*, (2) incomplete genealogical information could be rectified and adjusted, (3)

importantly, the arrangement of members within the homestead could be determined, as well as the positioning of other structures, (4) where total structural collapse of walls occurred and other demarcations disappeared, informants (being the early occupants of that site) could still draw lines of the original plan and link that structure with a person in the genealogy. The following two diagrams explain the method to some extent (See Diagram 1 and 2).

Apart from the advantages of taking elderly people to their original places of occupation and even birth, they could provide additional information on the wider settlement pattern: linking neighbouring homesteads with each other, describing the nature of the vicinage in general in the area, and providing an idea of the settlement pattern in pre-colonial times and before the 1883 war. (Many of these sites were geographically close to the Roosenekal area). As far as natural resources are concerned, information could be obtained on available trees and plant material used for house construction, the ethno-terminology attached to these, and the nature of arable land. During each of the excursions and 'talks', memories and lamentations emerged which reflected 'better' times when the Ndebele still occupied their own land and when they could still plant and keep cattle, before being forced by circumstance to move to KwaNdebele.

Visits to these earlier sites, mainly in the Stoffberg-Groblersdal and Middelburg districts, were repeated two to three times but on separate occasions other informants were taken along. In doing so previous oral testimonies could be verified and/or altered. 'Talking at the ruins' physically implied the measuring of all structural attributes of what was still



remaining. The immediate problem here was that vertical measures were hardly possible due to the decay of the majority of structures. In this respect the help of the informants on site proved indispensable, as they could give indications of the approximate height of inner and outer walls (also see Van Vuuren 1983: 111-2, and Table 4, p. 260).

Eventually, real and estimated (orally reconstructed) dimensions of the following structural criteria or features could be obtained: dwelling diameter, width of corridors between inner and outer walls, heights of both inner and outer walls, number and positions of entrances to the hut, as well as storage facilities. Since deserted homesteads seldom provide information on the materials used (these are all removed: roof poles, thatch, wall poles are broken out for firewood, etc.), information on, for instance, roof construction of the cone-on-cylinder depend on oral descriptions and this was verified when these were to be reconstructed on site at the museum in Middelburg.

### 5.2.3 Verifying the talking

To some extent putting the above-mentioned information 'on the ground' was unproblematic since enough skilful builders of the ron-

dawel or cone-on-cylinder type were still alive. By now the sequence or intra-chronology of types was clarified and the evolution of adjacent structures like courtyard walls was established too. When construction of the rondawel types commenced it was considered appropriate and historically correct to display examples of all the form variations of these types – building five different types, including examples of the only documented ones by the Pretoria based architect, A.L. Meiring. In the process of construction the builders, consisting of elderly men who had previous experience and younger assistants, were only guided in terms of diametric measurements, form evolutions and thatching method (also see Frescura 1985: 88) – these stemming from the already existing statistical and numerical data collected while visiting several archaeological sites.

This exercise proved that one could increase the quality and quantity of exemplary material, initially only four cone-on-cylinder dwellings, to the maximum possible by applying living oral evidence in addition to ethnoarchaeological methods. Reconstruction

thus becomes less speculative and more verifiable.

## 6. CONCLUSION : PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS

It seems clear that the central focus in the documentation of indigenous architecture should be the design of a multi-orientated methodology. Since settlement studies are essentially chronological and historical, as we are confronted with physical-structural attributes which might have evolved from elsewhere in the past, such a methodology necessarily entails the application of oral evidence from people associated with a settlement pattern. In combination with such an effort, the same people associate themselves with settlement 'times' of the archaeological and historical past. This explains the almost indispensable use of ethnographic information which helps the archaeologist in widening the spectrum of a total interpretation. Moreover the understanding of settlement behaviour on the socio-cultural level lies in information that oral-historical and *in situ* ethnoarchaeological data may provide, or as the oral historian Jan Vansina (1985: 197) reminds us: "Their contents [oral traditions] may cover all aspects of human activity from demographic data of various sorts to data about art."

The researcher should, however, be aware of the many pitfalls in the use of oral data: neglect to cross-control various testimonies, the danger of telescoping disparate events, the problem with the encyclopedic informant, and distortions due to personal innovation and invention for political and other reasons, are but a few (see Rasmussen 1978: 35, Vansina 1968: 9, 1985: 152-3, amongst others). In the field of ethnoarchaeology and ethnographic analogy the researcher is limited in terms of her/his interpretation when the site and its available living informants fail to establish a genealogical link. Such efforts have always been more beneficial when there is a living genealogical link to such an archaeological settlement, often more so when it is regarded as of socio-religious importance.

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