

A lifetime in ruins: the farm life of blacks on the Mpumalanga Highveld

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The ruin of the homestead represents place making and an understanding of the layered landscape where former labour tenants resided. Ruins comprehend narratives which deal with the socio-political circumstances of the time, such as displacement and the subsequent loss of house in the case of former labour tenants. Presently labour tenants and their descendants who registered land claims activate life histories through the mnemotechnic capacity of the ruin of the homestead, graves, and domestic and agricultural space. Ruins also carry sentiments of kinship and identity. The degree to which the ruination of house and homestead has taken place impacts directly on the quality of memory. Case studies will illustrate how this affects the calling up of the past.

Key words: ruins, homestead, kraal, labour tenants, mnemotechnic, memory, land, landscape, dating, Ndebele

'n Leef tyd in ruïnes: die plaaslewe van swartes op die Mpumalanga Hoëveld

Die ruïne van die woonstede verteenwoordig die gedagtes van plekmaking en gelaagdheid van landskap waar toenmalige plakkerdiensbodes gewoon het. Ruïnes omvat naratiewe wat te doen het met sosio-politieke omstandighede van die tyd soos verskuiwing en die gevolglike verlies van huis in die geval van sulke plakkerdiensbodes. Tans aktiveer hierdie mense en hulle nasate wie grondeise geregistreer het hul lewensverhale met behulp van die mnemotegniese kapasiteit van die ruïnes van die woonstede, grafte, huishoudelike en landbouuimtes. Ruïnes dra ook sentimente van verwantskap en identiteit. Die mate waartoe ruïnering van huis en woonstede plaasgevind het, impakteer direk op die kwaliteit van geheue. Gevallestudies illustreer hoe dit die herroeping van die verlede beïnvloed.

Sleutelwoorde: ruïnes, woonstede, kraal, plakkerdiensbodes, mnemotegnies, geheue, grond, landskap, datering, Ndebele

The concept of 'ruins' implies sad beauty, majesty, glorious memory, tragedy, loss and historical import" (Mah 2000: 399). The ruins of the African homestead and cattle enclosures represent a multiplicity of voices and identities. Firstly, homestead ruins represent a sense of space and place making, and an understanding of the layered landscape where people resided. Secondly, ruins represent layers of memory which narrate inter-community relationships and relationships with neighbours and landowners. Many of these narratives deal with the socio-political circumstances of the time, such as displacement and the subsequent loss of house as in the case of former labour tenants. In the present time, former labour tenants and their descendants who registered land claims engage and activate life histories through the powerful mnemotechnic device of the remains of the homestead, cattle enclosures, graves, and domestic and agricultural space.

I argue that the ruin as a tool engages and amplifies senses of seeing, touching, tasting and the olfactory. The ruin simultaneously reifies a sense of kinship, community and lost community as well as notions of tribal identity. The degree to which ruination or the degradation of house and homestead have taken place impacts directly on the quality of the product of memory. The scale of degradation of the natal house and homestead ruin also inform us on the issue of a changed landscape. Case studies will illustrate how this affects "calling up" of the past.

Another conversation on the power of the ruin is encompassed in the regularity of past visits to the remains of the natal homestead. To many black Africans, the ruin and the grave serve as powerful media through which ritual libations are performed. I will argue that the ruin serves as a means to integrate the tangible and intangible domains of heritage.

The African settlement and ruin as a romanticised and mystified entity

Pioneer travellers)and adventurers who reported on African architectural phenomena simultaneously engaged with ruin architecture at the time as early as the sixteenth century. The first reports in the West on house and shelter ranged from semi-scientific and objective reports to Western prejudice. A few individual Europeans reported on their encounters and discoveries of African society and its built culture. Oliver (1971: 2-4) argued that much of our databases on dwellings, including vernacular architecture emanating from the contributions of self- taught amateurs, are a result of these first encounters. Such were the comments of travellers like Dapper who in 1686, upon his travel to Benin, stated that the houses and villages were equal to those of the Dutch as far as cleanliness was concerned. he Swedish naturalist, Andrew Sparrmann, recorded in 1785 that “Hottentot” houses were neat and inartificial in their construction argued Oliver (1971: 10). He contends that the early databases of these pioneers have become indispensable inventories on Khoekhoe and San settlements. Campbell’s (1822) descriptions and sketches on the Hurutshe (Tswana) citadel of Kaditshwene provided a solid base for archaeological and historical contributions of Boeyens (2000: 3,11,12). A photograph entitled “Un village des montagnes” by the missionary Casalis (1930[1859]: 348) of a (Ba) Sotho dwelling provided us with invaluable insight on the physical appearance of early houses.

Other adventurers, for example, were less complimentary. Oliver (1971: 8-9) indicated how Rene Caille in 1830 visited Timbuktu and found a city consisting of “nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses built of earth” and likewise followed Clapperton, in 1857 who found the city of Kano largely disappointing. He also quoted Sir Richard Burton who portrayed the African building as follows: “Circularity (he argued) was a result of barbarians’ deficiency in inventiveness” (Oliver 1971: 9). The irony of these early travelogues was that they still contained more detail on African architectural forms than their colonial administrator successors were to deliver in the 1800s and early 1900s (Oliver 1971: 11).

The ruin and remains of the African shelter also gave rise to speculation, imagination and fabrication on its origins and place in world history. In cases where the living representatives or reliable oral traditions were unable to provide factual information, travellers and their colleagues back in Europe speculated on the origin identity of such ‘lost’ civilisations.

In Southern Africa the origin of the Zimbabwe ruins gave birth to several popular speculations but, conversely, also to an extensive and ongoing scholarly discourse over decades (Huffman 2007: 362-407). Myths and legends which supported so called mystical or lost cities and civilizations such as Alan Paton’s “Lost city of the Kalahari” (only published in 2005) in particular, triggered a world of imagination. “King Solomon’s mines” (Haggard 1886) is another example. The urge to discover and succeed often triggered pilgrimages to mystical places - ruins - perhaps in search of the Centre as Eliade (1996: 196) argued or to indulge in ritual passage through portals (gates, corridors) crossing new thresholds) as Van Gennepe (1996: 532) argued. Cohen argued that pilgrimage and tourism into the Other “restitute[d] him, physically and mentally, for the performance of his ordinary roles” (1992: 53). Mythological ruin sites, such as 1600 century slave courters in West Africa, the Glastonbury ruins and StoneHenge, the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe, and others provide regular impetus or discovery along the schemas which the authors above suggested. Whether myth follows imagination and divine intervention, or the reverse, what we know is that adventurers often capitalised on such legends.

Even localised myths in the white community often do not escape the popular medi]. Near Roosenekal in Mpumalanga, South Africa “Die Huisgenoot” magazine in the late 1950s

reported on pots filled with diamonds guarded by ancestral spirits which were hidden in the Mapoch's Caves in Mpumalanga (Van der Walt 1952: 22,23,42). Fed by the local Ndebele oral tradition on the Namrhali oracle, this further mystification by white locals comes as no surprise (Van Vuuren 1992). Alongside ancient or unidentifiable stone and earthen ruins, stone circles and fortifications, natural phenomena also did not escape the mythical imagination: bottomless rivers and pools, dangerous caves, treacherous mountain passes, and so on. New found discoveries of ruins always seemed to be spurred on by a quest to locate the centre of governance, of the ruling class and of past royal dynasties. The "re-discovery" of the Mapoch Caves in the late 1960s was of regional importance and the site was declared a National Heritage site in 1969. It was not until 1998 that the first full-scale archaeological study (including excavation) on two Ndzundza-Ndebele sites was conducted (Schoeman 1997). It is the ruins of ordinary Ndebeles, however, which became marginalised despite their powerful narratives. These were the ruins which I have walked as an anthropologist since 1978 and whose testimonies will be discussed (Van Vuuren 1993).

What causes the ruin of settlement and shelter? In colonial Africa and South Africa, a number of causes of ruination require our attention; the ruination of the Ndebele settlement requires special attention.

The cause(s) of the ruin in South Africa

The earthen house of the Ndebele of South Africa evolved through three major typological stages: a pre-colonial grass (beehive) dome, followed by a cone-on-cylinder ("rondavel") type, and the current square and rectangular shapes. These developments should not be seen in terms of precise datable stages, but rather as succeeding stages which often overlapped as earlier types were gradually phased out (Van Vuuren 1993: 51). The settlement layout of the Ndebele homestead changed considerably over time. The pre-colonial model (the grass dome) was similar to other Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi) patterns, which archaeologists term the "central cattle pattern" (CCP) (Huffman 2007: 25). This pattern, which is typical of the patriarchal and bovine order, consisted of a cattle byre (kraal) in the middle surrounded by the homes of wives and children, storage huts and similar facilities. The houses of the wives of the polygamous male head were usually arranged in order of rank and seniority (Van Vuuren 1983: 49-51).

The layout patterns changed considerably after 1883 (the Mapoch War), particularly as a result of the introduction of large courtyard walls (*iirhodlo*) and square and rectangular house forms (called *iirhaesi*: derived from "house") (Van Vuuren 1983: 44-45; Meiring 1955: 26-35). The cattle kraal (*isibaya*), now four-cornered in shape, still occupies a central position, but the general layout resembles an elongated "n" shape. The pattern, although still in existence in rural areas, has largely disappeared. The influence of western building technology on the Ndebele earthen house became visible during the decades of labour tenancy on the farm. Apart from the quadrangular shape of the house windows, doors, nails and wire were regularly used, as well as modern thatching techniques.

The earth building technology (EBT) of the Ndebele displayed a variety which is evident in wall and floor construction. Compare Houben and Houben (2000: 5) in this regard. The choice of earthen application depended largely on the availability of natural resources around the building site. Since 1883 this choice of site was mostly determined by the farmer landowner as will be discussed later. The house ruins which I encountered since 1978 exhibited clear differences in terms of their durability. Apart from the duration of the period of ruin certain

earthen technologies outlive others. Walls built from wicker (or wattle and daub) disappear to the extent that little evidence is left which could determine the width and often the height of walls. Earth and stone walls display a somewhat longer life lifespan, providing the stone were not recycled for other purposes. Rammed earth (*pise le terre*) walls display a remarkable duration in life time. On a recent visit to the remains of a Ndebele homestead on farm Zeekoegat in the Middelburg district the entire homestead complex consisting of some eight houses were markedly intact. Most of the walls were on the original height. The encroachment of natural vegetation was the only cause for collapse of other walls such as the outer courtyard walls (*iinrhodlo*).



Figure 1
Example of a collapsed stone wall
(source: photograph by the author).



Figure 2
Remains of an earth- and- stone wall on the farm Doornpoort, Stoffberg
(source: photograph by the author).



Figure 3
Profile of a rammed earth wall on the farm Zeekoegat
(source: photograph by the author).

What forces cause the displacement of humans and thus the production of the ruined shelter? The forces of human displacement are either natural (floods, fire, drought) or of a human nature (war, political interventior). Humans who relocate voluntarily experience lower levels of stress and traunt. A number of factors contributed to involuntary resettlement or displacement in South Africa.

War portrayed both an internecine and colonial nature. The Mfecane upheaval was marked by the dislocation and annihilation of thousands of indigenous people and the destruction of movable and immovable property over almost the entire Southern Africa. Worse than in the ancient and medieval city there were little left behind in terms of grotesque stone architectural heritage. The Ndzundza-Ndebele were also caught in the wave of destruction of the Mfecane and they nearly annihilated by Mzilikazi's forces around 1822. Under Mabhoko they redesigned elements of their original settlement architecture, and built protected villages and fortifications in the impenetrable mountainous area in the Steenkampsberg. Here they successfully weathered onslaughts from the Swazi and the Boers on two occasions and the Ndzundza-Ndebele rose to a regional force. In 1883, they finally surrendered after a protracted war against the Boers (Van Vuuren 1992: 118-123, Van Jaarsveld 1985: 237, Delius 1989: 234-5).The stronghold of Erholweni was partially destroyed with explosives to prevent re-grouping efforts by the Ndzundza, commonly known as Mapoggers by whites in the region (Van Vuuren 1992: 124-130). The aftermath of the war is important to this discussion. The entire conquered Ndebele community was split into small families and indentured on white owned farms on the Highveld between 1883 and 1888.

This Diaspora had a significant long-term impact on their settlement pattern and architecture, and the sociocultural fabric and relationships with white people. Serious constraints were imposed on the settlement of indentured labourers after 1883. It was decreed that no Ndzundza settlement 'kraal' would be permitted in the heartland area. Despite recommendations that families not be separated, this did occur. The number of homesteads per farm (no more than five) was determined by the Squatters Act of 1883. Delius, however, argues that the presence of

four or more families per equal number of clustered Boer families secured the survival of the three generational Ndzundza homestead (Delius 1989: 234).

In colonial Africa, and under the guise of development, major population displacements occurred globally and in Africa. The construction of the Kainji dam in the Niger River in northwest Africa in the 1960s saw the displacement of 44 000 indigenous people. Similar displacement has been caused by the damming of the Zambezi River since the late 1950s. On both sides of the Zambezi River in present Zambia and Zimbabwe, some 38 000 people were displaced. The worst of this displacement for this riverine Gwembe Tonga community was not only physical loss of house, but also resettlement in an alien climate and soil (Colson 1971: 1-4). To this day, this community has been unable to come to terms with their resettlement.

The political history of the ruined village in South Africa has become a fruitful arena for interdisciplinary discourse over decades. There was a range of legislative powers which controlled the settlement, employment and mobility of black people in South Africa from the late 1800s. Some of these were the ZAR Resolution 359 of 1891, Resolution 1004 of 1903, the Squatters Law No 21 of 1921, the Crown Land Disposal Ordinance of 1903 and the Land Settlement Act (No 12 of 1912). After 1910, four sets of legislation were promulgated to control labour tenant and squatters, namely the Native Land Act (No 27 of 1913), the Masters and Servants Act (No 26 of 1926), the Native Service Contract Act (No 24 of 1932), and the Native Trust and Land Act (No 18 of 1936) (Van Vuuren 2010:11) Section 26 (10) of the Native Trust and Lands Act regulated the conditions for residence of Natives (black people) on land outside the so-called scheduled of Native areas or Released Native areas. Such a native must be a registered owner of such land, a servant of the owner of the above land and a registered labour tenant. The conditions of residence and settlement were not regulated by the Act. Stemming from their earlier historical disposition as indentured labourers, 20th century Ndebele labourers were in no condition to decide on settlement and residence. By and large the farmer determined the location of a new homestead (*umuzi*) or “kraal”, the size of the homestead (which was determined by the size of the family and the number of potential labourers, access to natural resources such as water and firewood, the number of livestock permitted, as well as grazing and planting conditions.

Ndebele labour tenants experienced regular disagreements with their landlords and they were often engaged in serious conflicts over livestock. White owners accused their black tenants of having too many head of cattle and trespassing on their grazing land¹. In the majority of current land claim cases which have come to my attention, conflict over grazing land caused most tenants to either relocate voluntarily or to be evicted.

Notwithstanding the post-1883 restrictions on settlement size, it appeared that the landlords on some farms permitted or did not have control over or knowledge of the existence of sizable clustered homesteads. Called *abakhelwane* (neighbours), these homesteads often consisted of three generational homesteads under the control of a male head, known as the *umnomuzi*. Madlephu Sindane (80) who was born on the farm Zeekoegat and left in 1968 displayed a vivid memory of the seven neighbouring homesteads around him as well as the present whereabouts of the descendants of those families (in genera). On farms such as Rooikraal, Waterval, Wonderboom and Zeekoegat in the Middelburg district, the existence of such vicinages was visible during site visits and on aerial photographs which date back to the early 1950s. Petros Mahlangu of the farm Rooikraal (near Groblersdal) explained that the homesteads were some distance (2 to 4 km) away from the white farmhouse and that some farmers hardly bothered to familiarise themselves with the ‘statte’² of their black neighbours. On the nearby farm, Kruisrivier, Linah Mahlangu’s

oral testimony in 2007 produced a clear grid)of both the identity and position of homesteads of her former neighbours over a period of 50 years. She also offered vivid recollections of the whereabouts of the present descendants. During our walkabouts, most labour tenants knew exactly who their former neighbours were, and often when and where they resettled. Such a memory is never activated by accident; neither is it coincidental.

Vansina (1985: 176-178) describes the accuracy of the memory (system): “It will put these (data) in sequential order which resembles an expression of measured duration, but in fact it is a creation of memory: the epoch. It places events or situations in one time frame or another and sometimes transposes them which constitutes an anachronism.” Finnegan (1992: 114-115) dispenses with the idea of rote memory, which is mystified, romanticised and “kicks in” when needed.

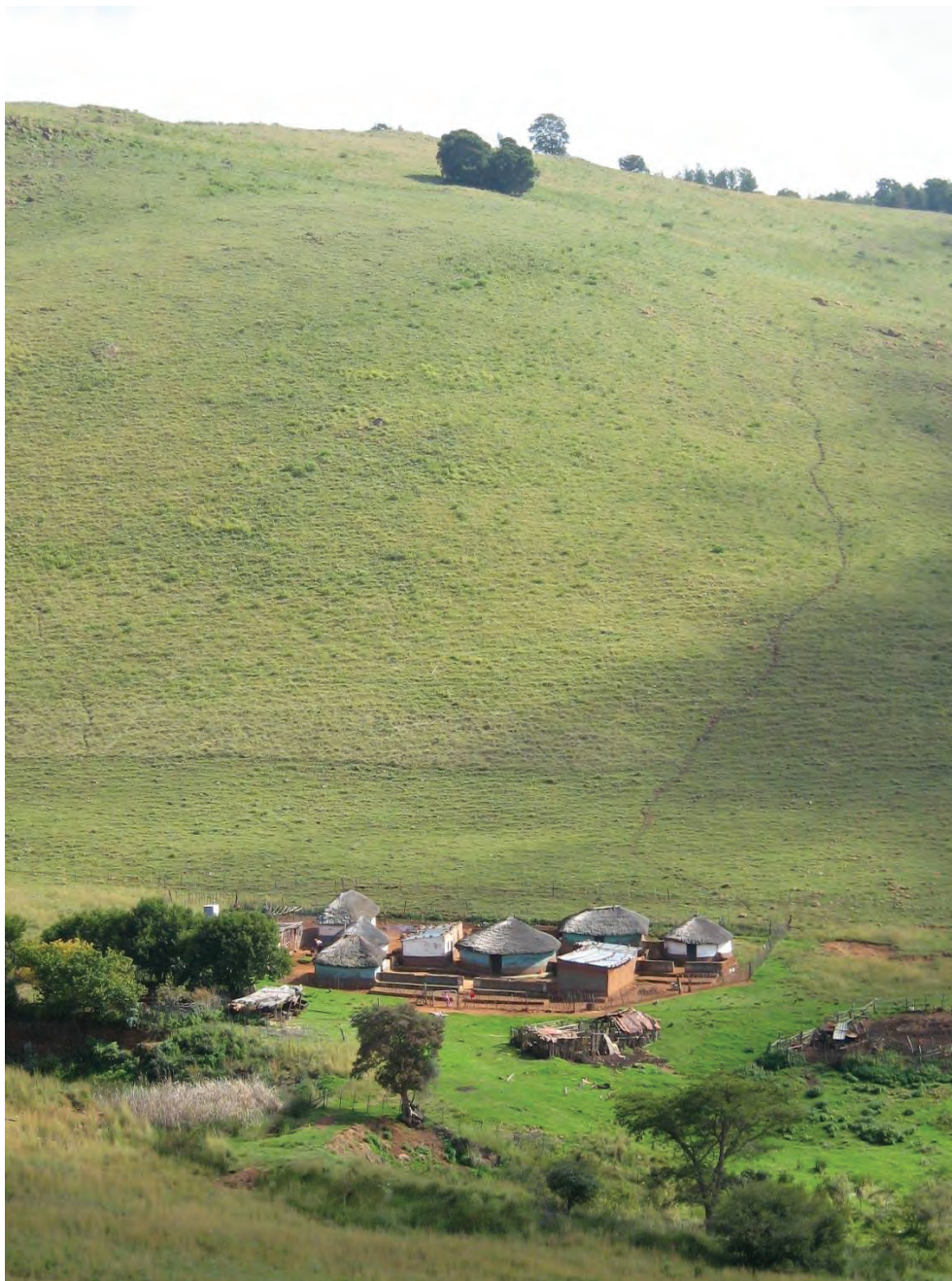


Figure 4

The landscape around a Ndebele homestead near Stoffberg. The footpath above links to that of a neighbouring homestead on the same farm (source: photograph by the author).

The application of Chapter 4 of Act 38 of 1927 provided for the removal of labour tenants from farms. All large-scale evictions of labour tenants in terms of the 1936 Act and its various upgrades were documented and archived. The above Act was comprehensively amended in 1968 and the labour tenant system was abolished in Middelburg and Tzaneen under Government Notice 1335, Gazette 1830. In 1969, labour tenancy was abolished in 25 of the 85 districts in the former Transvaal. By 1970, it was abolished in 41 additional districts in the former Transvaal, 23 districts in the former Natal and in all of the former Orange Free State districts. It was a move to abolish the status of squatters and replace the system with permanent labourers. As a result, thousands of black people left the farms in fear of becoming “illegal squatters” and facing eviction. Most former black labour tenants on farms were evicted as individuals or in small groups and they subsequently left for the homelands in search of land. The abolition of labour tenancy caused some 141 219 people to relocate between 1970 and 1979 (The SPP Reports 1983: 120-121).

What do Ndebele labour tenants remember of the period of tenancy on the farms and how do they construct these events?

Ruin as memory: homestead, graves and fields

This memory of land and its human products and produce needs to be understood in the historical context of loss of land and former territory in the colonial and apartheid period. The discourse on memory and its manifestations in phenomena such as land, place and object, among others, has developed into a considerable scholarship in recent decades (Casey 2000; Connerton 1989; Cubitt 2007, Ermscher 2004; Halbwachs 1980[1925], Jiminez 2003, Nora 1989; Schama 1996; Wertsch 2002). Likewise, the debate on land and land restitution in South Africa has enjoyed considerable attention since the 1990s (eg James 2007, 2009; Claassens & Cousins 2008; Spiegel 2004). These insights have been influential in the ensuing discussion.

Mathako Mthombeni once took me to his natal homestead on the slopes of the Tautesberg. The detail of his memory of the settlement was such that I could compile a drawing which included the exact positions of his grandfather’s three wives’ houses, the position of the courtyard (*isirhodlo*), the remains of the cattle kraal and the six graves of kin, the granary, the midden of the ash heap, as well as the location of the neighbours Kabini, Skosana and Sibiya (Mahlangu) (Van Vuuren 1983: 56). He walked through the tall *iqunga* (Tamboukie grass) to a few peach trees behind the Sibiya homestead and laughingly related how as young boys, they stole old Sibiya’s peaches soon after dark. He also showed me the snuff boxes and a kettle on the grave of his grandfather, Saka, where they *phahla*-ed (venerated the ancestors) meaning) before the initiation of that year. Mthombeni walked across the linked overgrown settlements with ease and pointed to landmarks, footpaths, fields and gardens, and related a range of stories (see later) he remembered while growing up there. He left the site after 1955, but paid regular visits in the company of his *ukgari* (father’s eldest sister). His family was evicted shortly before 1962. Mnemonic devices or aids manifest in markers and objects in the landscape, as does song, praise and music (also see Vansina 1985: 44-46). A landscape “develop[s] mnemonic connotations of an associative kind” over time, saved in individual or shared minds and “preserved in oral story telling” (Cubitt 2007: 192-193, 196,).

The Mahlangu family, who settled on the Rooikraal farm near Groblersdal, took me to their natal homestead. The walk to the remains of the homestead, which took less than 20 minutes, was along a path through dense Bushveld. Along the way, the family spokesperson

Petrus pointed to footpaths which lead to the neighbouring homesteads of the Sithole, Sibiya and Mtsweni families who apparently do not visit their ancestral graves. The graves of six members which included the founder, April Mahlangu, were fenced and adjacent to the now almost invisible cattle kraal. Some had recent headstones, others were engraved in cement and a few consisted of heaped stones. There were no identifiable homestead remains. There was also a stone on the site which was used for dressing thongs as well as grinding stones and the remains of a broom. Mahlangu had no recollection of the position of the homesteads other than the order of homesteads of the wives of his grandfather. As a result of frequent visits and fortunate good relationships with previous and present owners, the Mahlangu family remained in ‘contact’ with the landscape to a large extent.

Others are not so fortunate, due to difficulties in accessing the farm or absence of knowledge on the location of the site. This is often caused by the untimely death of relatives who had close links with the site. Others simply lost interest or had no desire for ritual contact with the natal homestead. A further factor is change and transformation in landscape. The example of the Thaga family comes to mind; this family lodged a claim for the Bloempoot farm. Koos Thaga (aged 60) was born on the farm where his parents and grandparents worked as labour tenants for a numbers of white owners. In their claim documentation they allege that they were there before the white people worked the land. Koos left the farm at a relatively young age (20 years) to settle in the neighbouring trust land under the local chief. They allegedly received a “trekpas”³ from the owner. Koos never returned to the farm and he claims that his family was denied access by the owner. In 2008, he and a few elders accompanied the author on two occasions to the site of the homestead and the graves. He struggled to locate the site of the homesteads of both his father and that of his mother’s people. The first homestead now consists of an orchard and a new access road to the processing shed runs across the site. His mother’s grave is now barricaded by a game fence, and a group of graves are now split by this fence and an access road. He never knew the location of his grandfather’s grave, as his parents never showed it to him. Most of the six graves on the site are unmarked. The Thaga experience echoes Spiegel’s experience with land claimants in St Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal. He found it difficult to recognise former settlement attributes in a landscape where all recognisable landmarks were wiped out by a modern plantation, in what he termed a ‘bodily amnesia’ (2004: 6).



Figure 5
Remains of a homestead on the right which was split by a fence and a dirt road
(source: photograph by the author)

John Mghidi's family who claimed land on a farm in the Witbank district of Mpumalanga struggled to access the exact location of their ancestral graves as a result of the gross intervention of open-cast mining on the farm. In this case it was not the direct impact of earth removal which changed the landscape around the original homestead and family cemetery, but the secondary interventions brought about by new access roads, site offices, pump stations, and so on. Even after we crisscrossed the areas around the presumed homestead, they were unable to find any recognisable cues. In such cases, the potential of the mnemotechnic capacity of objects and objects in context with the self-created landscape disappeared or [diminshed] and had no function. In comparing the un-intervened landscape of the bush (wilderness) with the cultivated forest, Spiegel (2004: 7) argued that the wilderness, although seemingly impassable, represents the recognisable moment in bodily memory and not the passable and accessible forest "where memory is still traceable".

The human body often serves as a source of inspiration for orientation, direction and measurement. "Where I stand now, Sothakazi explained, my father's first wife was on the left, ngebunene⁴ (right hand sector) uNaMtsweni. At the back over there was the isibuya (cooking space/kitchen). This house later collapsed and it was rebuilt behind over there where the trees are now. Behind me was the cattle kraal. On the left was uNaSkosana the second wife she died early. Look at the foundation; it was an *iqathane* "(Ndebele type of cone-on cylinder house).⁵ This notion of embodiment in space is not uncommon in Africa as Tilley (1999: 45) reminds us: "Human metaphors in architecture are grounded in the use of the body as a model for comparable structural, decorative and symbolic forms". In the same vein, spatial orientation and direction stemming from the bodily metaphor are reflected in architecture. In this case as Casey (2000: 189) argues, the body serves as a pivotal point of reference in landscape. The human body puts us in touch with memory and place, and becomes a mnemotechnic device in landscape. Spiegel, while writing about his St Lucia project (2004: 8), contended that landscape needs both memory and "parts of the body", and it is not autonomous without it.

Ruins are not the sole tangible repository of/for memory, but also areas of cultivation such as vegetable gardens. The location and size of ploughed fields (*amasimu*) were essentially determined by the arrangement that labour tenants had with the landowner. These were in close proximity to the homestead and Ndebele labour tenants relied largely on summer crops such as maize, potatoes (on the Highveld) and sorghum⁶. On a number of occasions, white farmers allowed their workers to use the farm tractor and some provided seed. The ploughing activities also should not have interfered with that of the landowner⁷. Around the homestead a variety of crops were planted: pumpkin, various types of spinach (*imbuyane, irude*), tomatoes and non-edibles such as gourds (*indrönyane, ikhapa*) for use as containers. Ndebele men and women who grew up in the Stoffberg region and the Middelburg Highveld, and who have since resided in KwaNdebele, repeatedly expressed the desire to return to the fertile soils, good pastures and high rainfall of these regions. Liesbet Sibiya was such a case. She explained: "At KwaMadlayi we could eat all round the year and we always had enough for storage. Here in Matshirini (KwaNdebele) everything is scorched by the sun! We cannot grow amadrönyane (gourds), or amabele for beer, and the farm had springs and we always had enough beer for the *iqhude* (initiation)".⁸ Upon approaching the remains of his grandfather's homestead Mathako grabbed a fistful of soil and said: "Look at this 'fat' earth. It smells good not like that barren sandy soil at KwaSimu (KwaNdebele); and what's more, when it rains here you smell the earth and grandfather would say: we'll plant tomorrow!" These memories are vivid and engage the entire sensual cortex, sense of smell, hearing, view, touch, and so on. Franklin (2002: 186) contends that landscape evokes a multiplicity of senses: the oral, storytelling, olfactory and social exploration.

The Zulu term, *ukuzwa*, is descriptive and all-encompassing: “to hear, listen, taste, smell, sense, live, be alive” (Dent and Nyembezi 1969: 519).

Johannes Ndobela, en route to the grave of his founding ancestor, explained that he needed to pass the waterfall in order to collect water and that this water would provide him with insight and vision once we were at the site. On another occasion *imbongi* Sokhulumu explained that he never visits the ancestral land without his staff, as without them, he will not be able to recite (the praises) as he did on many occasions (Van Vuuren 1993: 37). Sorhulumende Mthombeni had the habit of collecting a plastic bag of soil from around his ancestral homestead before returning home. Mjezi Mabhena, on the two occasions we visited the archaeological remains of the Manala royal settlements, picked up two stones (not artefacts) from the site in order to “show the people back home where he came from”. The capacity of objects as mnemonic instruments in some of the cases above can be viewed as enhancing and heightening. Objects, however, have to have a lingering capacity; they have to create a sense of permanency of memory back home. The water and the staff, in contrast, were mediums of enhancement and enlightenment. Both water and staff were tools of access to specific files of memory, an “ability to disseminate” (Cubitt 2007: 195). The generative capacity of the ruin as a mnemonic entity also manifests on the level of EBT. Much of our knowledge base on EBT processes and material usage emerge during site visits. The range of choices of which earthen processes to use, what natural resources were available, the problem of restrictions in terms of material and spatial layout of the homestead only come to light upon such site visits (Van Vuuren 1983: 62-68). The life history of the ruin eventually deals with more than the social history of its residents.

On the farm Zeekoegat near Loskopdam, the Sindane family paid regular visits to their ancestral homestead and graves which they abandoned in 1968. Although the ruins are mostly overgrown, the vegetation around the graves seemed under control during our visits early in 2011. On the graves of the founder Nesana Sindane, objects such as plastic snuff boxes, a porcelain cup and an enamel bowl were found which are used as vessels during ritual libation. The Sindane family explained that they have been visiting the graves at least once annually. Earlier we saw the example of the stone which was used by the Mahlangu family to dress thongs. The categories of immovable items which are drawn from the landscape may be cultural or natural. Jiminez (2003: 140) argues that objects and things are created in conjunction with space and place making, for example: a ceramic vessel conveys a specific message in its capacity and position as a beer container in the interior of a house. The house and the vessel, its contents and its position in the house exist as a result of social life. Nevertheless, there is another dimension to the memory capacity of object places such as graves and memorials. James suggests that the ancestor motif has become strong among land claim communities with a concern to be buried close to the ancestors, as this will “re-establish communion with them in the death”. ‘Graves have become very important as”sites for the concentration of social memory” (James 2009: 7)



Figure 6
Grave of the Kabini family on the farm Doornpoort
(source: photograph by the author).



Figure 7
Grave of the founder of the Bhuda homestead
(source: photograph by the author).

Mnemonics in the landscape around the homestead are powerful repositories of content and meaning, providing, it seems, that they obtain the status of regulae exposure to the human min]. If the landscape fades into obscurity for the human memory and it is not exposed to repetitive exposure, mnemonics have little effect. Once the mnemonic landmarks disappear, the memory almost becomes completely disempowered. The ruins of the homestead and the graves of the residents interlock the memorised past with the present as far as the ritually significant genealogical link is concerned. There is concern among those families who fail to secure this interlock.

Time and the ruin

Elsewhere it was argued that most rural settlements in the Ndebele community can be reasonably accurately dated. See Van Vuuren (1993, 2010). This sense of time and dating of the year of origin of a homestead or house, its development and its abandonment have proved crucial in the dating of architectural form, usage of earthen material, EBT processes and, in particular, the social history of events. The Ndzundza-Ndebele allocate 15 regimental names (*iindanga*) in a fixed cycle to males who are initiated every 4 years. The cycle repeats itself after approximately 60 years. It is possible to back date each regimental date of installation to at least the 19th century. In reaction to the question: *Uwendangabani?* ('What is your regimental name?'), an initiated Ndebele man will answer: *NgiliGawu*. He thus identifies his age group category as Gau (1935, or in the earlier cycle 1893) as well as his approximate year of birth, 1915. Women generally marry men of more or less their age. Men remember their own *indanga* names as well as those of the members in their male lineage. Ndebele women also associate themselves with the regimental names of their husbands for comparative purposes. Almost all initiated men and women have the ability to remember the regimental names (*iindanga*) of kin, in-laws, friends and neighbours across the entire social network. The memory grid of regiments spans both vertically and laterally.

Number and regimental name	1 st cycle	2 nd cycle	3 rd cycle	4 th cycle	5 th cycle	6 th cycle	7 th cycle	8 th cycle	9 th cycle
1 Duba		1556	1616	1676	1736	1796	1856	1915/7	1975
2 Dlowu		1560	1620	1680	1740	1800	1860	1919	1979
3 Dlhari		1564	1624	1684	1744	1804	1864	1923	1982
4 Nyathi		1568	1628	1688	1748	1808	1868	1927	1985
5 Rudla		1572	1632	1692	1752	1812	1872	1931	1989
6 Gawu		1576	1636	1696	1756	1816	1876	1935	1993
7 Dzibha		1580	1640	1700	1760	1820	1880	1939	1997
8 Thula		1584	1644	1704	1764	1824	1886	1943	2001
9 Dlaza		1588	1648	1708	1768	1828	1888	1947	<u>2005&6</u>
10 Rhasa		1592	1652	1712	1772	1832	1892	1951	2009
11 Duku		1596	1656	1716	1776	1836	1896	1955	(2013)
12 Sinya	1540	1600	1660	1720	1780	1840	1899	1959	
13 Phoko	1544	1604	1664	1724	1784	1844	1903	<u>1962&3</u>	
14 Phaswana/Rhorha	1548	1608	1668	1728	1788	1848	1907	1966	
15 Nghana	1552	1612	1672	1732	1792	1852	1911	1970	

The underlined dates explain the double installation of the same regimental name as a result of the death of a king during the same year of the regular installation. The second installation is much smaller in number of initiates and it carries the notion of ritual and symbolic cleansing.

This type of data and its application pose exciting possibilities. Regimental dates (e.g. Duku, or Liduku or Amaduku) provide us with a calendar which can be spliced into place, settlement and house, historical events and life-histories. Within the landscape and life of the Ndebele farm labourer the life-history of a single house (and its ruin), homestead and grave can be dated - the biography of any resident including the trauma of eviction and displacement, socio-cultural events of the past, change of ownership of the farm, cataclysmic events such as prolonged droughts, fire and floods and memorable regional events. The following two case studies will illustrate the argument. In an interview with the late Bova Klaas Skosana in 1985 he related that the little town of Stoffberg “came to a standstill” while they as young men were attending their male initiation ritual. The first light aeroplane landed in a clearing not far from the initiation enclosure and almost everybody in town assembled around the plane and the pilot. He was initiated in the Gawu regiment during the winter of 1935. The landing took place a few days after their circumcision, in May 1935.

In 1994 a request came to the author to assist the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) with an investigation of a case where a farm worker, John Skosana, faced eviction from a farm near Draaikraal, Roosenekal in 1994. During interviews the above dating grid was applied to recall events, dates and age. His evidence was as follows: “My father Abram came here in the summer after they, the *Maduba*, went to the mountain. He was buried just after the *Amadzibha* went to the mountain. The *ipetjhana* stayed here until the death of... Mayisha died then, I remember. Later the farmer said we must go ...I think this was before the *Marhorha*, my brother’s son I had to take him”. When regimental dates are spliced into the text, the adapted account reads as follows: “Abram built this homestead during the summer months of 1915 (*Duba* regiment was initiated) and passed away approximately before April 1939 (*Dzibha* regiment was initiated. Initiation lasts from April and July). Abram’s youngest brother (the *iphetjana*) stayed on until 1962 (The death of king Mayitjha II). The farmer evicted them sometime before 1966 (Phaswana regiment was initiated)”. The approximate dates of birth of men could be determined by subtracting twenty years from the initiation date, which meant that Abram was born around 1905. The homestead was thus occupied for approximately 51 years from 1915 to 1966. During fieldwork unravelling the social life and life history of the remains of rural homesteads was particularly rewarding.



Figure 8
A grinding stone helped locating the former homestead of the Matjhiyana family

The type of memory which is invoked and activated here, as illustrated above, does not emerge automatically as Ndebele men and women walk the land of their ancestors. However, it has the ability to emerge on a cognitive level and also away from the physical landscape. Nevertheless, the conscious drawing of the date “files”, as embedded in individual and collective memory, seems to complement a person’s individual recollections during site visits to the ancestral land.

Invention and innovation of memory and landscape

Memories of labour tenants undergo change and adaptation. For the quest for an identity - tribal, national, postcolonial, nation building - these reinterpretations aim to evoke notions of equality, superiority and a “first people” presence, that is, the urge to be layered at the bottom as the founders. The instrumental recognition and re-appropriation of labour tenants’ memories are now caught up in the land reform process in South Africa. James (2009: 11) remarked that “Land in South Africa has become a ‘text’ which has become rich with symbolic meanings, and its restoration has become a fulcrum both for contestation and for some convergent interpretations between cosmopolitan and localist ideas about the nature of citizenship”.

The oral databases which emerge from the memories of elders have become prone to manipulation on various fronts. Firstly, there is evidence that local politicians of the ruling party get involved in the claiming process (James 2007: 91). The officialdom in the Regional Land Claim offices in the various provinces act on behalf of some claimants (James 2009: 2) and help them to “fill in the form” and “what to write” as Piet Mghidi explained: “They said we must meet in Groblersdal and they will tell us what to fill in. They also said we should not claim as family but under Mabhoko” (the Ndzundza chief)⁹. Petrus Sindane reiterated the above and added that they were advised to rather claim as a community. This also raises the question as to what extent memory is manipulated, event and land imagined. Claimants for the farm Kafferskraal near Groblersdal mobilised themselves under an emotionally charged entity called *Sibuyela ehkhaya* (“We return home”) community, while another claimant family near Groblersdal chose to be the *Abeswa bakaNyai* community or the “Descendents of Nyai Mahlangu”. In Middelburg, the Matjhiyane family selected their prose name (*isinanazelo*) to become the Amaphofu community. On Zeekoegat the claimants chose a place name for a nearby “kloof” called KoDiye as name for their collective yet invented community. These inventions fall into the context of what James (2009: 6) terms the “re-engagement with the glorious African past” and a “self-conscious reworking of history”.

If such a land claim is challenged in the Land Claims Court, the memories of claimants on events after 1913 are challenged to the extreme. Oral evidence finds itself weighed against in the hard core literate world of legal jurisprudence. During the land claim case for the Kafferskraal farm in the Groblersdal district in September 2002, the advocate for the defence intended to put to test Mbulawa Mahlangu’s knowledge of the 1918 Beaumont Commission and whether the late chief Jafta Mahlangu told the commission of his wish to settle on the Blinkwater farm. For the purpose of our discussion, Mahlangu’s answer was significant: *Angilwazi lokhu* (“I don’t know about this”), and “It did not reach my ears”. His statement conveyed the message of authenticity of oral information which he received from his ancestors. Elsewhere the same Mbulawa accredited the elders for his knowledge of tribal history and how he walked the ancestral land (Mahlangu 1987).

Ermscher (2004: 38) argues that landscape materialises as a mental construct, which changes over time; landscape thus emerges as a “living canvas”. A single landscape “gaze”

might engage a plough, a ruined homestead (called *amarubhi*), a peach tree or a footpath and recall powerful memories.

Conclusion

The ruin of the artefact house manifests as a kingpin in the repository of memory. We have seen that human memory needs the ruin in order to culminate into a heightened experience of the memorized past. This past encompasses events, people, places and objects in both the cultural and natural landscape. The ruin thus does not only disseminate the tangible domain of the memorial past but also the intangible. Memory of landscape engages the ruined house and homestead and vice versa. Ruin is both artefact and agency and it presents itself as a vehicle which has a certain unpredictable carrying capacity.

To Westerners, the ruin is an end and the end goal is its preservation. To Africans, I contend the ruin manifests as an abstractification of the artefact ruin. The ruin does not decree as a physical artefact and on site in itself. Its design, construction and material are secondary scripts. For Africans - such as ordinary citizens from the Ndebele community who endured arduous decades of labour tenancy - the ruin becomes a means to an end, a primary script (symbolic). While the Western tradition often focuses on the preservation and conservation of the ruined site, Africans are ostensibly less concerned with the former. The oral or written text of the ruin for the West implies the reconstruction of the artefact; for Africans, the reconstruction hinges on the text and how various early oral narratives are weaved into the artefact. This process provides fruitful grounds for imagination, innovation and inventions of additional texts. In this sense the ruin as mnemotechnic object needs only to be “more or less there” regardless of its state of visible decay or almost non-existence. The Western heritage tradition is obsessed with reversing the process of decay, to intervene, to restore and reconstruct, and to gather as much data to support the restoration process. African ruins are presented as ephemeral, their oral texts not, and the texts are constantly open to reinterpretation and innovation. Around the ruin news myths and legend are often created as add-ons or substitutes of earlier ones.

In South Africa within the controversial arena of land restitution, the ruined residences of farm workers on rural farms present two sets of diverse sentiments and orientations. To the white farmer, the homestead of black workers represented the cultural ‘other’ and included notions of primitiveness, outside the white household, the *umuzi* was an ephemeral and temporary (of earthen material) phenomenon - a “stroom”, and it had to be built on a distant part of the farm. Since 1994 the dimension of fear has set in and many farmers have become unwilling to allow ritual libations in view of looming or potential land claims on their properties. The ruin and the grave have thus turned into a symbol of insecurity, political instability and loss of power on the part of the whites. To claimants, former labour tenants and their descendants, the ruin has become a symbol of hope.

To black farm workers and labour tenants such as the Ndebeles of the Mpumalanga Highveld, the ruin represented a number of socio-cultural institutions. On the social level, the ruin echoes kinship, family, household, social networks, child rearing, generation and the lifecycle. On the religio-ritual, level the ruin brings memories of rites of passage, cosmology, a god and ancestors and spiritual well-being. In the domain of identity the ruin evokes sentiments and memories of identity of kinship and family, for example: “we the Kabinis” regionalism (e.g. the people of KwaMaza) and of course ethnic Ndebele identity - Ndzundza-Ndebele or simply Ndebele. As a politicised artefact, the ruin and the homestead of the past carries the oppression

of the past: labour tenancy, apartheid, forced labour, racism, displacement. After 1994 this turned into hope, security of tenure, restitution.

Finally, we can argue that a paradigm shift towards the profound meaning of the African house and homestead needs to take place by institutions that involve themselves in the land restitution debate. These ruins are not ‘impressive’ and ‘grandiose’ in the visual sense but they beg attention in terms of respect, recognition and preservation. As far as preservation is concerned the time has arrived for provincial heritage agencies to acquaint themselves with the ruins of ordinary people.

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Notes

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| 1 | Livestock limitation was a major issue in Betterment schemes in South Africa. | peripheral). orientation, is convincing. Symbolically, the left/right dichotomy often accounts for the categories of left (evil/female) and right (good/male), and front (the living world) and rear (the ancestral world) (Kuper 1980:14). |
| 2 | From ‘stat’ indicating an African homestead or village. | |
| 3 | The ‘trekpas’ was a written or oral notification that the labour tenant and/or family received instructing them to leave the farm. | 5 |
| 4 | This dualism in orientation is not uncommon in the South African homestead, particularly among Nguni-speaking communities such as the Zulu, Swazi and Xhosa (Kuper 1980). The left/right-hand dichotomy varies in terms of the position of the body, that is, whether or not it faces the entrance of the homestead. In the Zulu and Swazi communities, left/right dichotomy is the opposite from the Ndebele (Kuper 1980:9). Kuper’s (1980:15) suggestion of a dichotomous orientation, that is, a diametric (left/right) and concentric (inner / | 6 |
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