

## **DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN POLITICAL POWER AND RELIGIOUS STATUS: MOUNTAINS, POOLS, AND DRY ONES AMONG VENDA-SPEAKING CHIEFDOMS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

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Like most traditionalists worldwide, traditional Venda-speaking people of southern Africa make a distinction, albeit not a rigid one, between mundane linear time and sacred cyclical time (cf. Eliade 1959). Whereas their recognition of linear time is crucial for the successful completion of everyday tasks, such as metal smelting or preparing food, their notions about cyclical time come to the forefront when recounting oral traditions or during ritual performances, public or private (though this does not negate the fact that technical tasks are accompanied by ritualized behaviors or that ritual ceremonies often involve matters of technological nature). Recognition of linear time allows traditionalists to acknowledge the existence of a more distant past (Figure 11.1a).

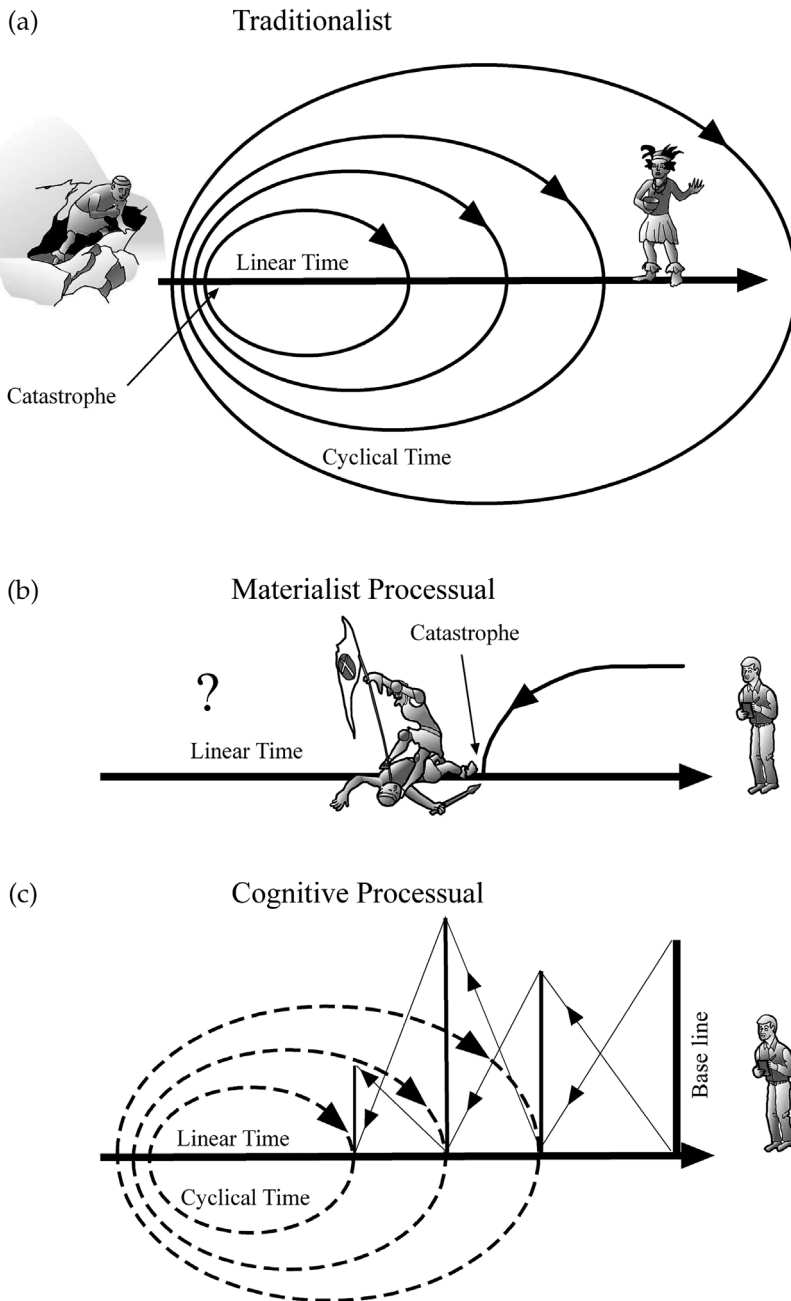
According to Singo Venda traditionalists, this distant past is replete with supernatural events, starting when a pool within a mountain cave gave birth to their first king, Nwali (Aschwanden 1982; Hodza and Fortune 1979; Wentzel 1983). The legendary Singo king Dimbanyika, son of Nwali, migrated south from Zimbabwe and crossed the Limpopo River to conquer Venda-speaking chiefdoms in the Soutpansberg Mountains. By beating a magical drum, known as Ngoma-Lungundu, the early warrior king of the Singo generated a sound that killed those autochthonous Venda people who dared resist this invasion (Mudau 1940). The drum

of the Singo royalty retained its magical properties as long as it was kept suspended above the ground. Singo hegemony over a vast area south of the Limpopo River crumbled when this drum accidentally touched the ground during infighting between king Thoho-ya-Ndou and his brothers. This catastrophic event in early Venda history is believed to have angered the ancestor spirits, including Nwali, so much that they withdrew from their everyday involvement in the affairs of the Singo royalty. The dropping of the drum, Thoho-ya-Ndou's defeat in battle by the hands of his brothers, and his disappearance into Lake Fundudzi mark the termination of the supernatural period in Venda history.

Traditionalists among the Singo Venda believe that ever since the termination of the early period they can only access the supernatural through ritual and libations (Mudau 1940). Even though Singo traditionalists believe in a definite break from the supernatural past, they see the supernatural as keeping up with the present; the sacred normally intersects with the profane during annual ritual occasions (Blacking 1969). In terms of this underlying logic of cyclical sacred time, the final supernatural event in time would reflect the first (Figure 11.1a); many traditionalists among the Singo Venda believe in a millenarian fashion that Nwali would emerge from his mountain birthplace to reestablish the Singo Empire when the world comes to an end (Gottschling 1905; Stayt 1931).

Like traditionalists elsewhere, traditional Venda people maintain that the distant past cannot be understood in terms of everyday processes that are known to operate in linear time. There are two main reasons for this belief. First, traditionalists see processes operating in the supernatural world, or in cyclical time, as ultimately responsible for historical events in this world of linear time (Figure 11.1a). Second, traditionalist oral histories represent the catastrophic collapse of early history as creating a barrier between early supernatural history and more recent mundane history. This catastrophist view of the past differs from the Enlightenment uniformitarian view, which holds that the same processes observed in recent linear time also apply to the remote past.

Materialist processual archaeologists use uniformitarian principles when they reconstruct prehistoric behavior in terms of ethnographic parallels (Figure 11.1b). However, materialist processual archaeologists tend to ignore the religious beliefs of indigenous traditionalists. Several reasons seem to explain their rejection of religious notions (see critiques in Whitley 1998). First, processual archaeologists see religious views as epiphenomenal and consequently as having indirect to no value for understanding past material processes, such as metallurgy or ceramic production. Second, for many processual archaeologists linear time and change in material cultures equal change in religion, especially considering the assumed dependence of religion on a material base. Third, many



**Figure 11.1** Different views of religion and time: (a) traditionalist, (b) materialist processual, and (c) cognitive processual.

processualists cite colonial conquest as a catastrophic event that created a barrier between history and prehistory. One result of this position is the processualist tendency to dismiss indigenous traditionalist accounts of the past as mere post hoc explanations.

Realizing that the traditionalist belief in cyclical time and ritual observance favors religious conservatism, cognitive processual archaeologists tend to emphasize the continuity of religious notions (Figure 11.1c). Within this paradigm the passing of time or change in material culture do not necessarily imply change in religion (e.g., Bloch 1977). Whereas cognitive archaeologists might accept a link between a material political-economic base and religion, the historical record suggests that religion has a relative autonomy and therefore does not necessarily change with shifts in the associated political economy. But the relative autonomy of religion does not mean that archaeologists can automatically project religious notions in the past or that they can uncritically assume that past religious notions are mirror images of the present; only by means of empirical investigation can cognitive processual archaeologists trace the continuity or discontinuity of religious views back into the remote past. Starting at a base line constructed from observed and documented ethnographic and historic sources, the cognitive archaeologist can look at the archaeological record for material points of similarity and difference. By “triangulating” back into the past in this fashion the archaeologist can construct secondary base lines, some of which might be similar to the starting line, while others might be radically different. I propose that this brand of cognitive processualism can map the relationship between political power and religious status among the Venda-speaking peoples back into prehistory.

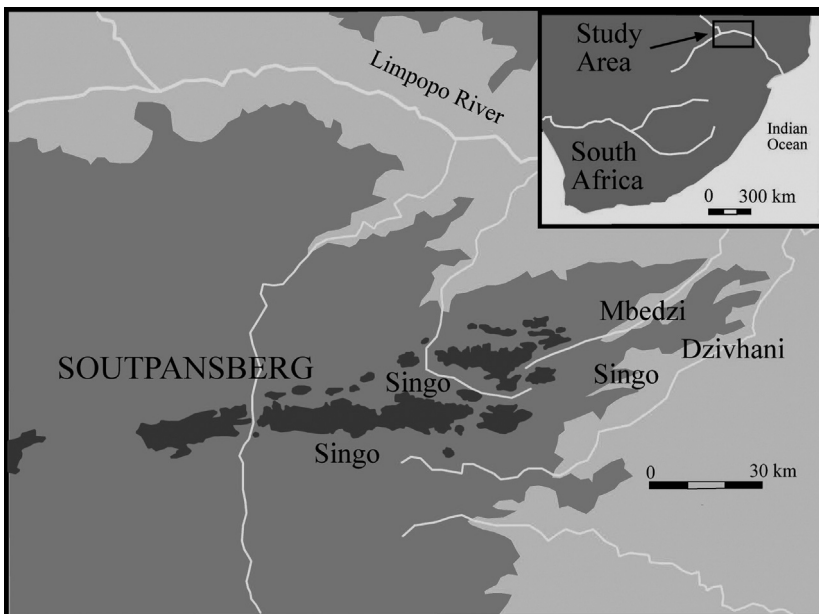
## Origin Stories and Burial Modes

Venda autonomy was terminated by the beginning of the twentieth century with the military subjugation of the last independent Singo ruler, chief Mpephu. Missionaries have had various degrees of success in converting traditionalist Venda to Christianity (Beuster 1879; Grundler 1899; Ralushai 1977). It might be erroneously assumed that conversions introduced a complete break from traditional religion conceptions. Moreover, population shifts and underdevelopment brought about by conquest, crop failures, epidemics, and migrant labor may be interpreted as introducing new religious notions among the Venda. For example, some scholars maintain that the Singo Venda peoples’ account of their early history was influenced by other traditions and religions, ranging from Malawi origin stories (Wilson 1969) to the biblical account of Exodus (Wessmann 1908). According to these views the European subjugation of the Venda people brought about a change of catastrophic events that drove a wedge

between the ethnographic present and the preconquest past. One outflow of such perspectives is that archaeologists can never hope to understand the proto- or prehistoric religion of the Venda. However, widespread similarities in core religious concepts among the Venda and neighboring groups, particularly the Shona of Zimbabwe and the Northern Sotho, suggest considerable antiquity. This is supported by similarities in religious customs as documented in accounts that predate mission work, conquest, and migrant labor (e.g., Beuster 1879; Da Silva Rego and Baxter 1962; Liesegang 1977).

Venda clans, or *mitupo* (singular *mutupo*), distinguish between themselves primarily by referring to their place of origin and by the way in which they bury their chiefs (Ralushai 1977). In this paper the following three *mitupo* are used as examples (simply because their practices and archaeology are best documented): the ruling Singo *mutupo* that inhabits the south-central, central, and southeastern Soutpansberg; the Mianzwi Mbedzi *mutupo* that inhabits the eastern Soutpansberg; and the Dzivhani Ngona neighbors of the Mianzwi Mbedzi (Figure 11.2).

The prominent Singo *mutupo*, whose members variously claim to come from Matangoni Mountain (Mudau 1940) or from Mbelengwa Mountain (Mudau 1940) in Zimbabwe, bury their chiefs within a mountain, or



**Figure 11.2** Map of the Soutpansberg region showing the location of the *mitupo* mentioned in the text.

*thavha*. Prior to the 1900s this burial location was within a mountain cave. After their conquest by the Boers, the Singo placed their deceased chiefs in a hut that is located on comparatively high ground behind the chief's stone-walled royal compound. Whether they bury their chiefs in a cave or in a hut, the Singo divide royal burial into distinct stages. An important component of all royal burials is to dehydrate the bodies of the deceased chiefs on a specially constructed platform and then collect the bones for final placement in the high-lying cave or hut (Ralushai 1977). It is said that a new chief has to swallow a river pebble that dropped from his dehydrated predecessor's stomach. According to tradition, this pebble initially came from a crocodile's stomach. The transmission of the pebble in this fashion symbolizes continuity of chieftainship.

The Mianzwi Mbedzi rainmaking *mutupo*, most of whose members claim to come from Manaledzi Pool in the central Mutale River valley, also bury their rulers in this pool. The Mbedzi first place the body of their deceased ruler in a shallow grave. After a while they exhume the bones and throw these directly into Manaledzi Pool. Other prominent *mitupo* with roughly equal status as the Mbedzi, such as the Tavhatsindi and Famadi, first cremate their deceased rulers before scattering the ashes into specific river pools, or *thivha*. In light of their origin stories and burial practices, it is perhaps not surprising that these people claim that they do not have a mountain; they claim that their mountain is a river pool (Ralushai 1977).

Venda people generally, and the Singo in particular, fear and try to avoid the Dzivhani Ngona *mutupo* from the Mutale River area. Dzivhani Ngona people do not like to talk about their place of origin and have no set burial mode for their leaders. Deceased Dzivhani rulers are typically placed in a hut or sacred grove outside their settlement. These locales are feared and avoided, especially by non-Ngona *mitupo*. Like other so-called Ngona groups in the Soutpansberg, these people have the lowest status among the Venda, but are nevertheless feared as powerful sorcerers (Ralushai 1977). Such Ngona groups are also known as "dry ones," or *zwiomo*.

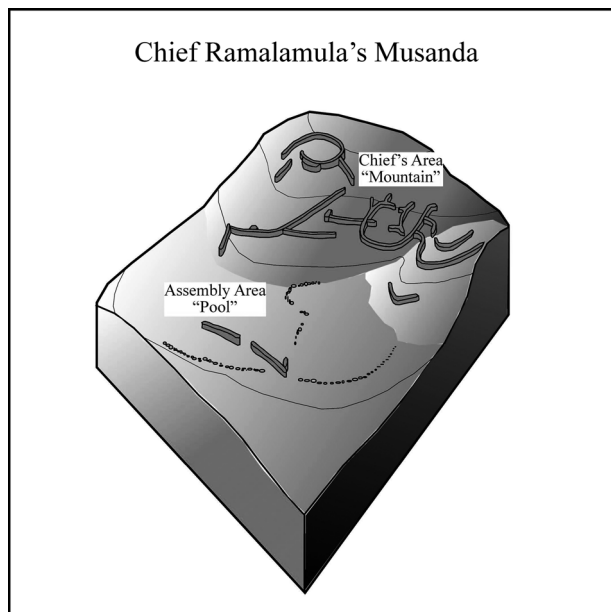
### The Dual Powers of Venda Chiefs as Expressed in Royal Settlements, Artifacts, and Oral Traditions

As a divine ruler who enjoys the supernatural sanction of the ancestor spirits, the death of a Singo chief is considered disruptive to the natural order. For this reason a chief's departure is kept secret from his followers (Mudau 1940). Hidden behind the stone walls that enclose the royal compound from the commoners' gaze farther downslope, the royal family and their functionaries try their utmost to conduct burial rites and

succession disputes in private. Only once the departure of a deceased chief becomes known to the general populace and a successor is chosen, do the royalty block the entrance to the high-lying royal residence and make a new one within the stone wall barrier.

A Singo Venda chief has dual powers; one is political and the other ritual. A chief not only has ultimate control over political decision making, but he also officiates at annual renewal rituals (e.g., Kuper 1982). Political intrigue and decision making primarily occur on the comparatively private “mountain,” or *thavha*, which is the high-lying area characterized by a labyrinthine network of stone walls (Figure 11.3). A public annual ancestral dedication ceremony, or renewal ritual, known as *tshikona*, occurs in the assembly area within a walled enclosure that is below and in front of the chief’s “mountain.” The assembly area, or *kboro*, is also known as a “pool,” or *thivha*. It is here that premarital initiates are reborn during the *domba* (python) dance, very like the apical ancestors during creation (Blacking 1969).

In Venda and Shona cosmology a mountain is seen as male, hard, isolated, and consumptive (e.g., Lan 1985; Van Warmelo and Phophi 1948). The same people view a pool as female, soft, populated, and generative. The juxtaposition of the political/male sphere and the ritual/female sphere within the royal settlement, or *musanda*, is thus a spatial



**Figure 11.3** The distinction between “mountain” and “pool” in Chief Ramalamula’s *musanda*.

expression of a chief's dual powers. These dual powers are also alluded to in stories about outside threats to the safety of the chief and his *musanda*. Medicated sticks or bullfrogs buried below the entrance to the assembly area are intended to deter malicious outsiders from entering the *musanda* (e.g., Davison 1984; Du Plessis 1945). These medicines are supposed to turn the assembly area into a pool that magically hides the chief's mountain within. However, if the intruder proves to be too strong for the medicines, the chief's mountain might disappear permanently inside the pool. This account is a metaphorical allusion to the fact that the chief can use his ritual potency to trick his enemies and so retain his political power. However, if the enemy proves too strong, the chief loses his "mountain," or political power, but retains his "pool," or ritual status.

The duality between politics/mountain and rituals/pool evident in royal settlements was also expressed at the much smaller physical scale of a royal artifact. This artifact is a carved wooden divination bowl (*ndilo*) that was stored within the chief's royal "mountain" quarters (Nettleton 1984). Use of such bowls apparently ceased in the early twentieth century. These bowls were used in public only when a big calamity threatened the well being of the entire chiefdom, such as during severe droughts or after a death caused by lightning. Venda informants say that when the chief's specially appointed diviner (*mungoma*) filled the bowl with water, then it represented a pool hiding the royal *musanda*; the submerged knob in the center of the bowl signified the chief's compound, or "mountain." Bas-relief motifs carved on the bottom of the bowl represented areas within the capital town (Figure 11.4a), such as the cattle byre. Relief motifs on the outside rim represented the different Venda clans. It is said that most people within the chiefdom, royals and commoners, were present in the public assembly when the bowl was used to divine the cause of misfortune. Zigzag and concentric rings carved on the underside of the bowl represented ancestor spirits who lived in the underworld below the assembly area, or "pool."

Just as when outsiders threaten the *musanda*, a divination bowl filled with water marks a crisis occasion when the chief's ritual, or "pool" role predominated over his political, or "mountain" role. The self-similarity between the royal settlement and the royal bowl demonstrates the ubiquity of the symbolic opposition between mountain-related politics and pool-related rituals. Soapstone bowl fragments with zebra and cattle motifs carved around the exterior of bowls from the 700-year-old hill ruins of Great Zimbabwe (Summers 1971) are reminiscent of the divination bowls of Venda royals (Figure 11.4b). The discovery of these fragments within prehistoric royal quarters suggests that divination and associated beliefs have considerable antiquity. It is interesting that ceramic similarities and Venda oral histories strongly suggest a link between the Singo chiefs and vestiges of the Zimbabwe empire of Shona-speakers.





**Figure 11.4** (a) Carved wooden *ndilo* divination bowl from the Soutpansberg, (b) carved soapstone bowl fragment from Great Zimbabwe.

The dual powers of powerful Venda chiefs, or kings, are also expressed in oral traditions of the early supernatural period recalled by Singo traditionalists. Like powerful Shona chiefs, the powerful Singo king Dimbanyika subjugated the indigenous Soutpansberg communities by stepping like a giant from one mountain top to the next (Blacking 1969). When the ambitious Dimbanyika “overstepped” at Tshiendeulu Mountain (Figure 11.5a) and incurred the wrath of his sons, it is said that he disappeared in the mountain (some say that his resentful sons trapped him in the cave). Whether the mountain spontaneously fell on the king or whether ambitious princes set a trap (Dzivhani 1940; Motenda 1940), this story is reminiscent of euphemistic references among the Shona and Venda to the death of a chief as “the mountain has fallen.” Some Venda insist that Dimbanyika still lives within a cave in the mountain, and like his father Nwali, would one day emerge to reestablish Singo hegemony. Certain caves that formed in weathered sandy and clayey sedimentary layers within the quartzite formations of the Soutpansberg contain streams and pools. Such mountains with pools are indeed apt natural models of chiefly political power that contains ritual potency.

Dimbanyika's son, commonly remembered as Thoho-ya-Ndou, expanded Singo rule throughout the Soutpansberg and beyond. His jealous brothers opposed his rule and with the assistance of local Venda chiefs they created a unified front that proved too powerful for Thoho-ya-Ndou. In a legendary battle near Lake Fundudzi (Figure 11.5b), they defeated Thoho-ya-Ndou and he reputedly disappeared into the lake. His watery death is a variation of Shona and Venda stories of chiefs, or "mountains," who are overcome by pools and so lose their dominant political position but retain their ritual potency. It is interesting to note that Lake Fundudzi was actually formed when a mountain next to the Mutale River valley collapsed along an unstable fault-line and so blocked the flow of the river. This small lake, or large river pool, is an apt landscape metaphor for political decline and retention



(a)



(b)

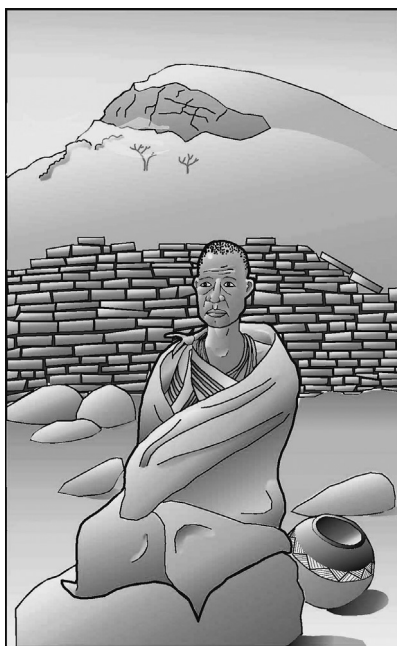
**Figure 11.5** (a) Tshiendeulu Mountain, reputed burial place of Singo kings in the early eighteenth century, (b) Lake Fundudzi in the upper Mutale River valley.

of ritual status. Like at specific river pools elsewhere in the Soutpansberg, the mountain inside Lake Fundudzi is said to rise above water level during annual *tshikona* ceremonies (e.g., Stayt 1931). Descendants who visit these pools not only claim to see the old capital town of their former chiefs on the rising mountain, but also hear the sounds of drums, flutes, and sheep. Overall, at these annual ceremonies on the edge of river pools or within abandoned assembly areas, participants appear to commemorate and reactivate the former glory of their ancestors.

Although Thoho-ya-Ndou's departure marked the end of an extensive Singo trade-based polity centered on Dzata in the Nzhelele Valley, this did not end Singo political expansion in the Soutpansberg, bearing in mind that Thoho-ya-Ndou's brothers established their own dynasties in different portions of the region. Based on royal genealogies recalled in oral histories, the collapse of the Singo Empire occurred around AD 1750 (Loubser 1990). Descendants of the Tshivhase Singo dynasty in the eastern Soutpansberg eventually conquered the Mianzwi Mbedzi under the Luvhimbi dynasty of rainmakers in the nineteenth century (Ralushai 1978). Prior to the Singo conquest, the Luvhimbi chiefs were prominent players in long-distance trade with the Indian Ocean. After the Singo conquest the main sister of the last Luvhimbi chief took over as leader of the Mianzwi Mbedzi. This sister became an influential rainmaker for the Tshivhase Singo chiefs and also a ritual functionary at Singo premarital *domba* ceremonies. It is said that when they were conquered by the Singo, the Mbedzi *musanda* turned into a pool (Blacking 1969). Ever since the death of the last male Luvhimbi chief, his sister and her descendants, known collectively by the dynastic name of Tshisinavhute, were buried in Manaledzi Pool, not far from their *musanda* in the Mutale River valley.

During my archaeological fieldwork in 1986, the then current headwoman Tshisinavhute revealed to me that her male ancestors were buried in a sacred grove on Tswingoni Mountain (Figure 11.6) and not within Manaledzi Pool as mentioned in documented oral histories. I also learned that Tshisinavhute, who was married to a Tshivhase Singo chief, had political ambitions and wished to be buried in the mountain grove of her Luvhimbi male ancestors instead of Manaledzi Pool of her female predecessors.

On the opposite, southern side of Tswingoni Mountain, descendants of the Dzivhani Ngona told me that they once lived near Tswingoni and Tshilavhulu Mountains in the Mutale River valley. It is intriguing that the Dzivhani remember Tshilavhulu Mountain as "the pool of water" and as a former burial place of their early chiefs. The ruins of the earliest recalled *musanda* of the early Mbedzi Luvhimbi chief in the Soutpansberg is also located on Tshilavhulu Mountain. Although not mentioned explicitly by informants, this implies that the Mbedzi replaced the Ngona at the Tshilavhulu Mountain settlement. Moreover, certain published Mianzwi



**Figure 11.6** Headwoman Tshisinavhute at the Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni Ruins on the slopes of Tswingoni Mountain.

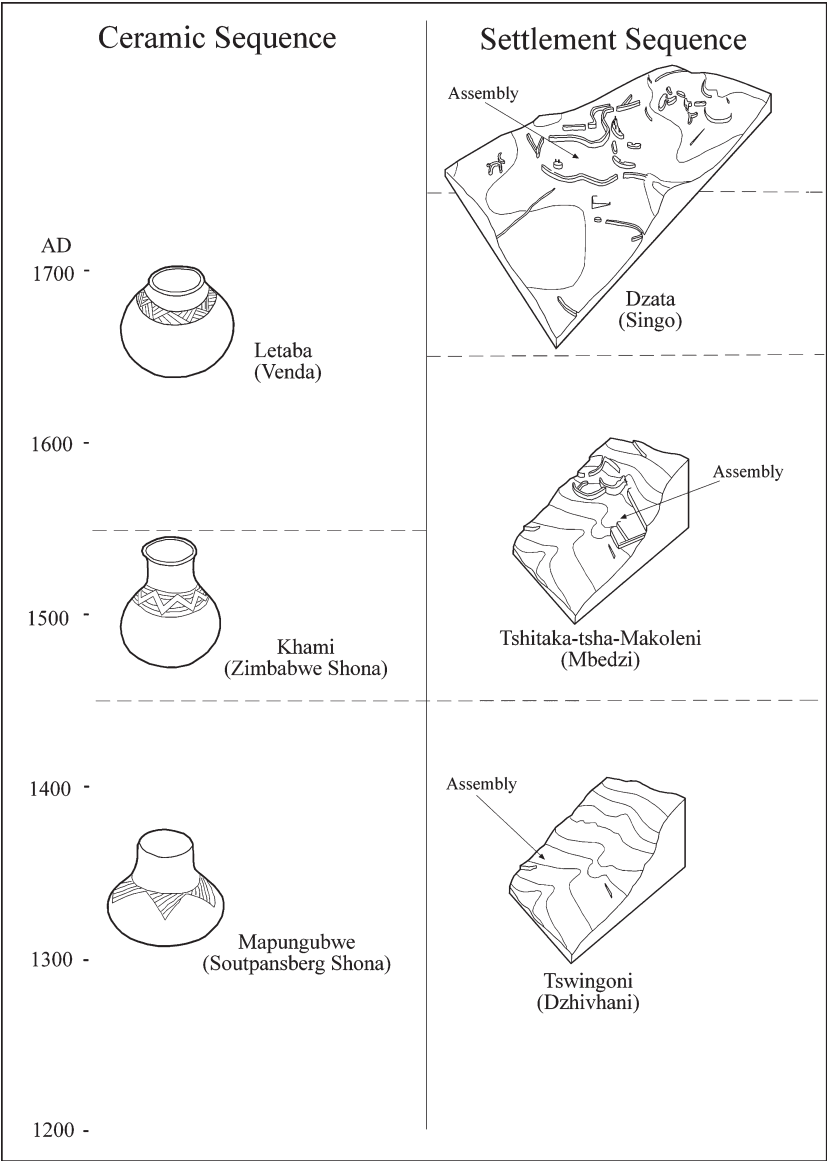
Mbedzi oral histories claim that they did not originate from the local Manaledzi Pool, but came from the more distant Malungudzi Mountain in Zimbabwe to the north of the Limpopo River (Ralushai 1978).

On closer scrutiny then, Dzivhani and Mbedzi informants acknowledge origins and burial locales that differ from commonly mentioned ones. It is argued here that this ostensible incompatibility in traditions actually reflects changes in political power and ritual status of the Mbedzi and Dzivhani. The archaeological record, furthermore, reflects these changes and gives dates as to when they most likely occurred.

### The Archaeological Record

According to the “long chronology” of the most detailed royal Singo genealogies (e.g., Van Warmelo 1932), the Singo rulers had settled in the Nzhelele River valley of the central Soutpansberg by the late seventeenth century AD (Loubser 1991). Radiocarbon dates from Dzata, the first Singo capital town in the Soutpansberg and center of the Singo trading empire, support the “long chronology.” A few Khami type ceramics with

diagnostic chevron designs occur at Dzata and its satellite towns in the Soutpansberg (Figure 11.7). These ceramics are similar to seventeenth-century ceramics made by Shona-speaking communities in Zimbabwe.



**Figure 11.7** Ceramic and settlement sequence in the Soutpansberg for the last 800 years.

The appearance of the Khami ceramics alongside indigenous Letaba-type ceramics at Dzata and contemporary sites in the Soutpansberg accordingly implies an influx of people from the north and therefore supports those Singo accounts that claim origins in Zimbabwe. It is during their reign at Dzata that the Singo buried their powerful kings in Tshiendeulu Mountain. The abnormally big size of Dzata (20 hectares) and the concentration of ivory and other long-distance trade items at the site support oral recollections of it being a prominent capital town. The big assembly area suggests that it was an important ritual center as well. The concentration of walls at the back and higher portion of the settlement represented the “mountain” where the Singo king resided, whereas the clean-swept assembly area lower down the gradual slope represented the “pool” where subjects from across a widespread area attended rituals such as *tshikona* and *domba*.

The Letaba style pots found at Dzata and its satellite towns developed locally in the Soutpansberg area from existing Shona and Sotho ceramic traditions. The earliest Letaba pots come from sites such as Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni, former capital town of the Luvhimbi Mbedzi dynasty. According to radiocarbon assays of associated charcoal, the earliest Letaba ceramics date to the mid-sixteenth century AD (Figure 11.7). Since Letaba ceramics are closely associated with sites known to have been occupied by Venda speakers and are still made by Venda-speaking potters today, the development of these ceramics most probably marks the emergence of the Venda language as it is spoken today (Letaba pots combine elements of Soutpansberg Shona motifs and Sotho shapes, the Venda language combines elements of Shona grammar and Sotho vocabulary). The presence of Letaba pots at the Mbedzi capital show that they probably spoke Venda prior to the arrival of the Singo, as indeed mentioned in some oral histories (Motenda 1940; Mudau 1940). But the Zimbabwe style ruins of Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni also contain Khami type pottery from Zimbabwe, features that support those origin stories that mention the Mbedzi as migrating from north of the Limpopo River (Ralushai 1978). Located on the comparatively steep slope of Tswingoni Mountain, the walls of Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni contain a “mountain” residence for the chief and his functionaries and an assembly “pool” area that is slightly lower down (Figure 11.7). The mid-sixteenth-century date for the stone-walled capital is probably later than the arrival of the Luvhimbi dynasty from Zimbabwe, since the earliest Luvhimbi chiefs lived at Tshilavulu Mountain prior to their construction of Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni.

Deposits directly underneath the stone walls and associated Khami and Letaba ceramics at Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni contain an earlier ceramic style known as Mapungubwe. These Mapungubwe ceramics occur in layers that have been dated to between the late thirteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries.



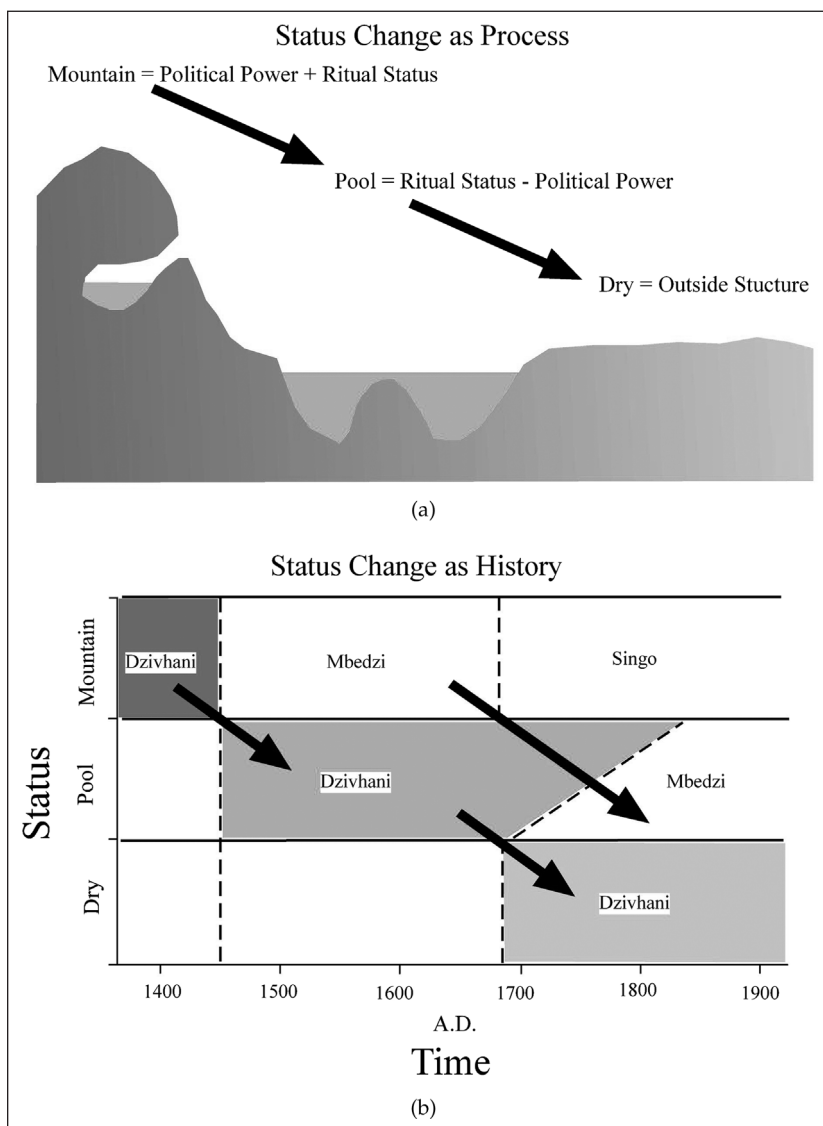
The layers have far fewer walls than the Mbedzi period occupation but some terraced walls lower down the slope date to the Mapungubwe period occupation of Tswingoni Mountain (Figure 11.7). As at other prominent Mapungubwe period sites in the Soutpansberg and Limpopo River valley, terraced walls separate the assembly area from the royal area on the uphill side (e.g., Huffman 1986).

The Dzivhani Ngoni people are the most likely candidates to have lived at Tswingoni Mountain prior to the arrival of the Mbedzi, including on Tshilavulu Mountain not far north of Tswingoni Mountain. If the Dzivhani claim that their former chiefs were buried on Tshilavulu Mountain is true, then the burials must predate the settlement of the Mbedzi immigrants on the mountain. Judging from the ceramic and radiocarbon record at Tswingoni, Dzivhani occupation must be associated with Mapungubwe ceramics that predate the sixteenth century. Historians and linguists associate Mapungubwe ceramics with very old Shona-speaking inhabitants of the Soutpansberg area, and the so-called Ngoni people such as the Dzivhani are descendants of these autochthones (Beach 1980; Ehret 1972). The more prominent Mapungubwe sites in the region have yielded evidence of “mountain” burials, assembly areas, and long-distance trade items from the coastal trade (Loubser 1991). Even though Mapungubwe period walls are comparatively scarce and simple, the mountain/pool dichotomy still seems to be present within Mapungubwe settlements that date back to the middle of the twelfth century. Prior to this date, which marks the beginning of a fully fledged long-distance trading empire centered on Mapungubwe Hill, mountain burials seem to be absent (Gardiner 1963).

### Status Misrepresented as Stasis

Variants of the mountain/pool symbolism as outlined above are present among most Bantu-speaking groups in sub-Equatorial Africa, but this dichotomy is perhaps nowhere as pronounced and elaborate as among the Venda and Shona-speaking peoples of far northern South Africa and Zimbabwe. According to the archaeological record this belief system can be traced back for nine centuries in the Soutpansberg. A change in the burial location from mountain to pool can be interpreted as indicative of a change in belief, however. Yet, the ethnographic record unequivocally shows that the two burial modes are part of the same belief system that is acted out on the landscape; mountain burials demonstrate ancestrally sanctioned political power, whereas pool burials accentuate religious potency. Internal logic, oral historical recollections, and archaeological evidence show that this is not a static system but a dynamic process. This process not only accentuates the ruling group’s current status and presents it as eternal, but it also masks the previous status of subverted groups.

The pool within the mountain signifies the religious potential of a political ruler; a defeated chief without a mountain retains or even enlarges his/her pool status and normally becomes an important ritual functionary for a new ruler (Figure 11.8a). The mountain within the pool signifies the political potential of the conquered chief; through renewed alliances with



**Figure 11.8** (a) Status change as process, (b) status change as history.



the current rulers a ritual functionary can always work his/her way back up the political system to regain mountain status. The case of the Mianzwi Mbedzi female rainmaker dynasty is but one of the better documented examples that illustrate this notion. However, a ruler without a mountain or a pool is outside this system and has no potential for upward mobility. The leaders of the Dzivhani Ngona are one of many such ambivalent figures in the Soutpansberg who live outside the periphery of the Venda political system. Yet, these seemingly powerless and impotent rulers, also known as “dry ones,” or *zwiomo*, are feared and avoided by mountain and pool leaders. One reason for this respect for the weak lies in changing political fortunes during historic and prehistoric times.

Archaeological evidence and certain oral testimonies indicate that the ancestors of the Dzivhani Ngona once occupied at least two prominent mountain-slope settlements in the Mutale River valley—Tshilavhulu Mountain and Tswingoni Mountain. Based on the comparatively big size of these Dzivhani settlements and recollections of their chiefs being buried in these mountain locations, the Dzivhani probably were once powerful rulers in the region (Figure 11.8b). Dzivhani rule lasted until the Mbedzi immigrants from Zimbabwe settled in the Mutale valley some 500 years ago. Subjugated by the Mbedzi, the Tshilavhulu Mountain of the Dzivhani changed into a “pool of water.” The Mbedzi first ruled from Tshilavhulu and later from Tswingoni Mountain until they in turn were subjugated by the eastern Singo Tshivhase dynasty in the nineteenth century. With their loss of political power and mountain status, the Mbedzi rulers were relegated to pool status. At the same time the Dzivhani lost their pool status to become the “dry ones.”

When traditionalists view status grades in terms of cyclical time alone, without consideration of politico-religious process or linear time, status grades appear as divinely ordained juxtaposed units (Figure 11.8a). However, viewed in terms of politico-religious process and punctuated linear time, status grades resemble stratified geological layers with an underlying dynamic (Figure 11.8b). In the latter sense, status grades among the Venda *mitupo* are a function of relative antiquity; those at the bottom of the hierarchy are the oldest. But the oldest are also in a sense the most potent, considering that they have the most intricate link with the land and its spirits. Perhaps in tacit recognition of the Dzivhani Ngona’s previous power, the ruling Singo people respect and fear these autochthonous people. Another reason why the Singo and their allies fear the various Ngona groups is that these ousted people no longer fall within commonly recognized politico-religious boundaries. Metaphorical allusions among the Venda emphasize the notion of socially acceptable boundaries; in the court language of Singo royals a chief is called a crocodile that does not leave its pool, whereas Ngona rulers are generally seen as anomalous

crocodiles, or sorcerers, wandering about on dry land (Nettleton 1984). Such allusions to mountains, pools, and crocodiles are indeed ancient; they are part of the same religious system that has informed the settlement layouts and burial practices of peoples that have lived on both sides of the Limpopo River for the last 900 years.

## Acknowledgments

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