

Part I

Stories from invisible villages

The rich home of words

The wall

South Africa's Limpopo Valleyⁱ surprises the unsuspecting traveller who enters it through the lush green valleys of the Soutpansberg. The damp, dark recesses of the mountains gradually open up to intense light shimmering over plains undulating towards the Limpopo River. It is not without reason that local Tshivenda-speakers refer to the Soutpansberg as 'Luvhondo nga sia liinwe la shango': 'The wall at the end of the world.'ⁱⁱ It shields the south from what Thomas Pakenham, chronicler of historical events and remarkable trees, describes as the lowveld 'at its hottest and drabbest. Nothing breaks the monotony of the thorn scrub except the occasional explosive moment when a large baobab breaks surface like a whale rising from the ocean.'¹

Pakenham's observation stems from a trip to a magnificent baobabⁱⁱⁱ situated outside the village of Sagole. Some ten years after his visit, one of South Africa's foremost outdoor and travel magazines² gave descriptions of the same route to this tree. Precise directions take the traveller through two villages, namely Folovhodwe and Muswodi, but they are not mentioned: it is as if they are invisible. Another popular travel magazine³ identifies the home of giant baobabs as the 'Limpopo outback.'

Ryszard Kapuscinski notes that 'the European in Africa sees only part of it, usually only the continent's exterior coating ... His vision glides over the surface, penetrating no deeper and refusing to imagine that behind every thing a mystery may be hidden, and within as well.'⁴ However, it is with instinctive conviction that the traveller initially fails to establish emotional attachment with marginal, arid land. My initial visits during the early 1980s to Folovhodwe and Muswodi left an indelible impression of a moonscape enveloped in searing heat and white dust, of inscrutable figures lounging somnolently in the narrow shadows of local bars and shops with ironic names like Little Paradise and Liquor Restaurant. Several questions presented themselves: How did people come to settle here? What value did they attach to their land? What were their dreams? What was their place in the world?

Trails into stories

My travels in the area during this time also took me to Mututuwaguvha, a deserted rock stronghold outside the village of Mutele.^{iv} This outcrop is almost unassailable: it can be approached only up two narrow footpaths that wind tortuously between boulders. The top reveals clear signs of ancient habitation: crumbling drystone walls, shallow rock depressions for the collection of rain water and a scattering of round grinding stones. The sheer cliffs of the citadel make it a superb defensive position. An unimpeded vista unfolds north towards the Limpopo River and Zimbabwe. And so the region started

ⁱ This name is used here to refer to the northern Vhembe district of South Africa's Limpopo Province. The area is bordered by the Limpopo River and the Soutpansberg. It is part of the larger Limpopo basin which incorporates swathes of land in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

ⁱⁱ Eastwood, E. & C. (2006:27) translate the name as 'The wall beyond the world,' and Pfanani Masase as 'The wall in the other side of the world.'

ⁱⁱⁱ Some claim this is the biggest baobab in South Africa.

^{iv} Mututuwaguvha was inhabited until 1936. John Mutele, interview at Mutele, 21 May 1984.

revealing itself, since this is the direction from which the ancestors of local Tshivenda-speaking inhabitants migrated in pre-colonial times to escape famine and conflict.

Footsteps have echoed across these sandy plains for centuries. And while human silhouettes no longer are visible on Mututuwaguvha's high promontory, tracks of ancient migration remain mapped-out in communal memory as Zimbabweans now try to escape the effects of the Third Chimurengaⁱ across the Limpopo River. These migrants not only are integral to the local landscape, but also the mindscape of its inhabitants. A Tshivenda *ngano* story narrated in 2011 by Elelwani Singo of Folovhodwe describes how a community in the Limpopo Valley fends off an attack by a group of 'cannibals' (*madyavhathu*) who subsequently rush back to Zimbabwe.ⁱⁱ And although local relations with Zimbabweans generally are amiable, their role in *ngano* is almost exclusively that of stranger and villain.

Warnings to avoid strangers like them is one of various functions of *ngano*. These stories belong to the *cante fable* narrative category, which integrates prose with songs and chants. This ancient expressive form is known in Indian, Arabian, Persian, medieval European as well as other African cultures.⁵

Ngano performance enables people to 'interlace their everyday experiences with an awareness of the poetic, of the deeper hidden elements in human life and of their place in a wider order of things.'⁶ We are mistaken not only in habitually quantifying culture, but also doing so in exclusive concrete terms by listing memorials, historical buildings and battle sites. However, there is no self-evident link between a 'drab' environment and the human imagination. Like the villages they inhabit, many local *ngano* performers appear invisible. They are poor and live in humble conditions, yet their stories reveal complex inner worlds – cultural mindscapes saturated with tight, often conflicting social relations expressed in lavishly metaphorical forms at odds with the hot bareness of the land. This frequently overlooked corner of Africa in fact also is 'the rich home of words.'⁷



The Limpopo Valley

ⁱ The Third Chimurenga follows on the Second Chimurenga (1965-1979), the war against imperial Britain. It is an effort since the turn of the 21st century to effect 'economic liberation.' Taking the form of land redistribution and the nationalisation of commerce and industry, it has been marked by economic depression and political turbulence.

ⁱⁱ *A vha a tshi shavha. A vha o wela seli ha Zimbabwe.* (They fled. They crossed back to Zimbabwe.) Folovhodwe, 17 June 2011.

Repossessing stories

The discussions accompanying the *ngano* in this collection treat them as a gateway to the local landscape and some of its histories which are ‘woven into the artistic image.’⁸ The ethics of narrative documentation no longer scaffold the colonial control that insight into folklore once aimed at.¹ Pallo Jordan remarked thirty years ago that urbanisation had ‘excluded the majority of the people from access to the traditions that once shaped their societies.’⁹ And so indigenous knowledge systems, also embedded in artistic performance, remain important in Africa, although now for a very different reason: they are instrumental to the autonomous negotiation of identities in a globalising world. For some the African past ‘has to be recognised for what it was. It must be reconciled with the present, then promoted in the future.’¹⁰ The cultural charter of the African Union accordingly emphasises the need to preserve and promote cultural heritages, respect for regional identities and the role of elders as cultural stakeholders,¹¹ while a recent local conference on African oral history aimed at addressing the declining ‘warmth of human contact’ accompanying mass communication.¹²

These concerns and visions speak of a sense of disorientation, of an inability to recognise ‘navigational points’ in a changing world. They require ‘working through those difficult questions about who we are, how we live together in difference and what we consider the human to be.’¹³

Beyond *ngano*

Following a conventional approach, the personal particulars of narrators whose stories appear in this collection initially were plumbed mainly for the insight they provide into *ngano* as socially mediated artistic expression. But whereas previous collections¹⁴ in this series were culled from different districts in the Soutpansberg, most of the stories included here emanate from Folovhodwe and Muswodi. Conversations with their narrators unexpectedly crystallised certain distinct shared experiences. While populations in the central Soutpansberg had limited direct contact with the colonial world, those living in border areas were affected extensively, even traumatically, by the influx of white settlers since the early 19th century.¹⁵

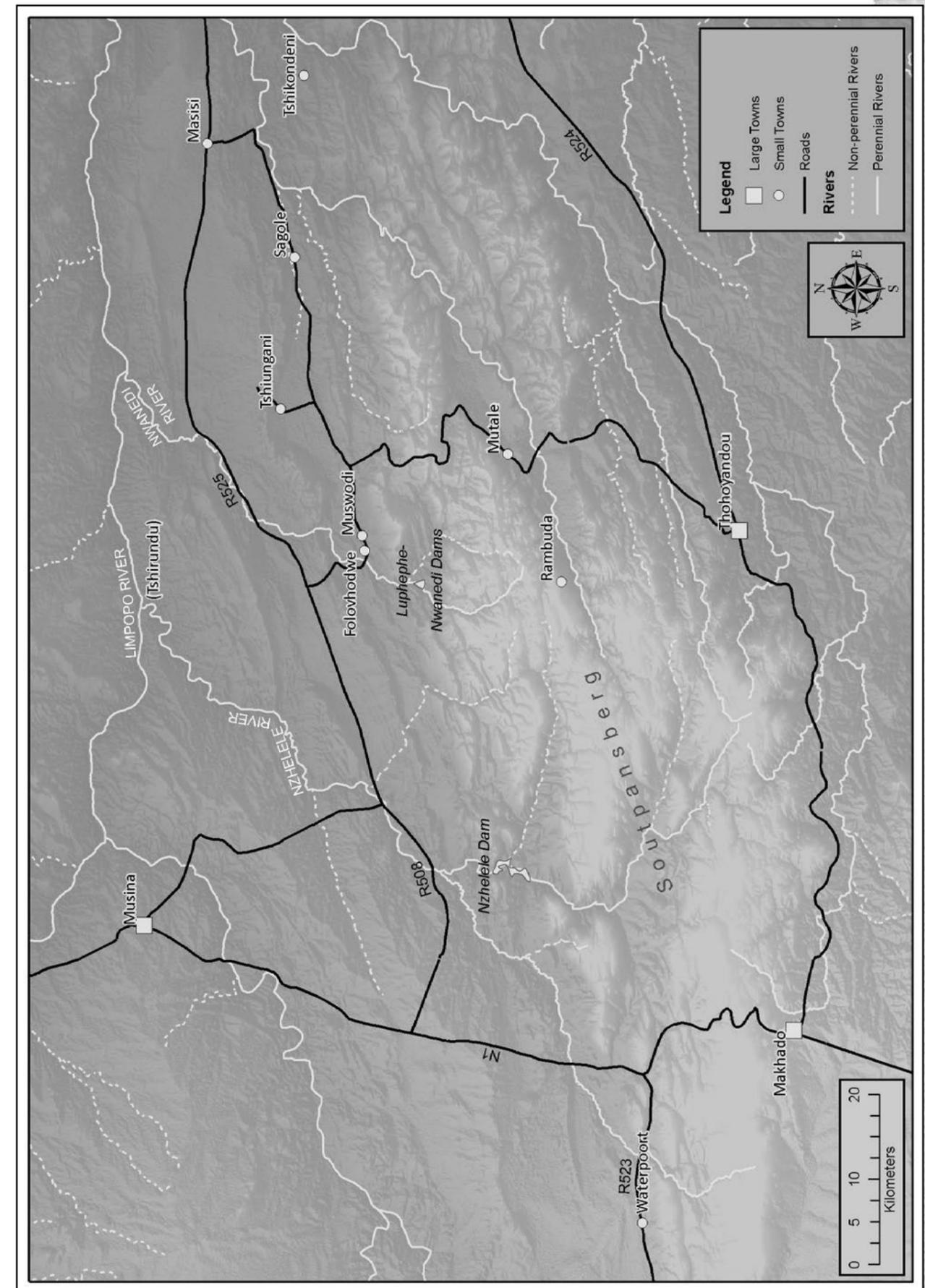
Land invasion in the Limpopo Valley in the first half of the 20th century led to the expulsion of certain local populations. I first became aware of some of these removalsⁱⁱ when documenting the history of a sacred drum belonging to the Nefolovhodwe ruling family.¹⁶ However, I was unaware of their full extent and consequences.

The meanings of the stories in this collection accordingly not only are traced in narrative images that have wider, even universal relevance, but also in local lives linked firmly to the forces that have shaped the land. They offer a glimpse of how people may be swept along almost unnoticed in the currents of larger historical processes. However, they also show how people attempt to shape the place they live in, partly by means of their stories.

This, then, not only is a collection of *ngano* narratives, but also of stories about and around them. These stories aim at persuading uncertain travellers that the often unforgiving plains north of the Soutpansberg need not be alien, that they can assume strange beauty, and that it is possible at the end of our exploring to arrive where we started, to ‘know the place for the first time’¹⁷ and leave with a better understanding of the links between ourselves and invisible others.

ⁱ Bloomhill’s observation (1960:107) that ‘intimate knowledge of African tradition and folklore is necessary to rule the Africans wisely’ contrasts ironically with the disintegration of colonial rule in Africa during the second half of the 20th century.

ⁱⁱ See ‘The Land Acts,’ p. 33.



Part IV Life sketches and stories



Anna Matlari

Please pass me my beads. I like to work while I chat and tell stories.¹ I live here at Muswodi-Tshisimani. My place is near Tshililo Liquor Market and Muswodi Primary School. The headman's homestead is just across the road. We go there for meetings and pension. Because I struggle, I make necklaces from beads. I also use the beads to make pouches for cell phones. The beads are very small, but I still see well and my fingers are strong.

My daughter Constance and her family live not far away. Constance is one of those who make *malabi* for Tambani.² You have met her young daughter Rofhiwa. She knows some *ngano*. But she does not yet tell them in the proper way.

Waterpoort near Makhado is a place many old people know. Our people always lived there. But when white farmers came, we started to work for them. This is where I was born in 1928, on the farm King's Kloof where my father worked. His name was Lukas Maphalaphatwa. He ploughed and planted tomatoes. He worked hard and became foreman.

My mother also worked on the farm. Her name was Nyakhakhu. She had five children – three daughters and two boys. I am the third child. My two sisters live at Ha-Mashau, in the south. My parents joined them there when they became too old to work.

I liked living on the farm. The farmer was called Flip. His wife was Drina and their daughter was little Maria. When I was a child, I looked after Maria. Later I worked in the kitchen. I cleaned and cooked pumpkin, meat, sausage and potatoes. I had to lay the table. After eating, they rang the bell. They called me to take the dishes to the kitchen. When Flip was working in the fields, I put Maria on my back and took his food to him.

I did not go to school. There were no schools, there was nothing. But there were so many people working on farms that we were able to have our *domba* initiation school at Mulambwane. We learned about secret things. We made and sang with the *lugube*.³ We sang:

*Tshitaka tsha Gole ndi dzunde.
Ndi dzunde la Nyamutshenuwa.*

Chief Mphaphuli's cemetery is his field.
The field of the scared woman.⁴

We also sang with the *lugube* which is made from iron.⁵ This *lugube* we bought from the shop. We liked to sing with it when walking around. My mother was the one who sang and told me stories. Children today go to school. There is almost no time to tell them the stories of old people.

My husband was Piet Matlari. My father wanted fifty pounds from him for marrying me. Piet was poor, and fifty pounds were a lot of money. When marrying, the bridegroom's family bring the money to the in-laws. They put the money on a carpet or a reed mat the old people used. Then they roll up the carpet. If the money is



still there the next day, the in-laws are happy with it. The wedding can then go ahead.

Piet and I worked for many years on the farm Hardepad⁶ at Waterpoort. The farm was owned by the Fick family. It passed from Petrus to Steven to Lammer.

We were happy when the Ficks gave us venison to eat. They shot kudu and bush pigs that raided their fields. Piet always had to collect the carcasses with a tractor.

Piet was a good worker and later became foreman. When he wanted to find another job, Lammer refused. Those days people needed a pass to change jobs. Lammer did not want to sign the pass. But Piet left anyway. It was a difficult time. Piet could not find other work, so he came back to the farm. After some time, Lammer signed his pass. Piet then worked on the roads for a short time. He came back to the farm again, until 1986. Then he came to live at Muswodi. He died in 2007.

I had ten children – five girls and five boys. I struggled to send them to school. One daughter has died, and two sons. My girls live all over: Kutama, Nzhelele and Muswodi. My son Samuel lives with his wife in Johannesburg. The other son works at Tshikondeni Coal Mine. Then there is my son Freddy: he and his wife both work in Polokwane. I live here in their home with their three young sons. Their parents cannot look after them while working, so I am raising them.

Long ago, because people were so poor, they did not want to pay tax.⁷ When the police came to catch them, they ran into the mountains. Nobody could find them there. But if you were caught, they took you to jail at Zebediela. To get out of jail, people rubbed their eyes with snuff. Then their eyes became red and they cried. The police would become worried. They gave them money for medicine and told them to go.

When I was still young, pension was one rand. People living at Waterpoort had to walk to Makhado for pension. It took more than a day to walk there. So they slept on the road. One day, when people got to the office, they were told that the blind also could ask for pension.

I worry that so many of our people are dying. Some are ill. Others kill themselves, like one of my sons. Their hearts are heavy because people in the family argue. Men do not like us women to be too strong; they become worried. My husband was drunk once. He became angry and hit me in the face. I lost a tooth – see the gap in my mouth.

I go to the ZCC. I feel safe there. Our services take place on a Wednesday and Sunday afternoon. We pray for health and drink tea together. I go to Moria every year. I am glad that the mobile clinic also stops at the ZCC site.

1. Kriel (1971:19) notes of Chishona *ngano* that ‘certain lengthy but non-strenuous tasks like basket weaving also affords good opportunities [for narration], especially for the longer type of story.’

2. *Malabi*, from Afrikaans *lappies* (cloths), a reference to the applique blocks embroidered by the Tambani Embroidery Project (www.tambani.co.za; see ‘Tambani,’ p. 29).

3. A musical bow performed by girls during puberty (see Kirby, 1968: plate 63B; Kruger, 1986:17-45).

4. This is a hoeing song. According to oral testimony, chief Mphaphuli monitored compulsory work (*dzunde*) by his subjects in his fields strictly, causing people to fear him (Kruger, 1986:40).

5. The Jew’s harp.

6. Lit. Hard Road.

7. Annual family tax of one pound was introduced in 1903 (Nemudzivhadi, 1985:25).

The girls in the baobab

Salungano! Salungano!

This is where the story starts!

This story was told by my mother.¹

There was an old man called Mr Tshisimba. Now, about this Mr Tshisimba: he woke up with the sun every day and went to the veld with the chief’s cattle. When it was late afternoon, he returned with them.

Now, there were girls who had gone to collect firewood. There were ten of them. Those girls were roaming far away in the veld.

It was a hot summer day. Now, the girls became thirsty. They were collecting firewood where Mr Tshisimba was herding the cattle. He was lounging lazily against a big baobab. This tree had a hollow high up in which water collected when it rained. Mr Tshisimba used to drink that water when he was herding the cattle. He would knock pegs² into the tree and then climb up. When he finished drinking, he would come down and pull those pegs out.

So, Mr Tshisimba was sitting comfortably against the tree while his cattle were grazing. Hah, now: those girls wanted to leave with their firewood, but they were thirsty.

Ah! Mr Tshisimba coughed to draw their attention: ‘Axa!’³ He coughed again: ‘Axa!’ Then the girls saw him reclining against the tree.

‘Hey! Hello Mr Tshisimba!’

‘Good! Hello! My girls! My wives! Don’t you look pretty when you are collecting firewood! So, how can I help you?’

‘Oh dear! We are crying Mr Tshisimba!’

‘What is the matter my girls?’

‘We are thirsty. We are dying of thirst! We are begging for water!’

‘Shame, my children! You know, if you all agree to be my wives and love me, I will insert my pegs and you can climb up the tree to drink water. You will drink and sit up there, you will drink and sit up there.’

I say, the girls agreed between themselves to marry Mr Tshisimba so that they could get water. And so they replied, ‘Really, Mr Tshisimba, we love you! Truly, we love you! We cannot turn down such good fortune. We will be your wives. Just give us water. We must drink because our home is far.’

‘OK, good!’ Mr Tshisimba knocked his pegs in one by one. The girls climbed up. They drank water and rested in the tree. They were pleased because they were no longer thirsty. Then they shouted, ‘Hey! You, Mr Tshisimba! Do you really think we could be in love with an old man? One with white hair and cracked skin?’⁴ No, no, no, no! We cannot love an old man! We cannot return home and marry you!’⁵

So, Mr Tshisimba got up and took out those pegs of his: *tomo-tomo-tomo-tomo!* He put them next to the tree and sat down again.

Those girls started to sing:

[Narrator]

A ri tsha ni lamba Madzinga, haye!

Ndi ri, a ri tsha ni lamba inwi Madzinga haye.

Hee, mulisa wa mahombe nyanga Rathovhele.

Ee, ee! Madzinga Tshimbale.

[Chorus]

Tendeleka, tendeleka!

We will not reject Madzinga!

I say, we will not reject you, Madzinga.

The lonely herder who looks after the cattle of the chief.

[Name of the old man]

Walking up and down!⁶

Mr Tshisimba was sitting down there, laughing. The girls were sitting up there, begging: ‘We are not rejecting you! We are not turning you down, Mr Tshisimba! No, we love you! Don’t you hear us singing? *A ri tsha ni lamba Madzinga haye! ...*’

Yes, yes, Mr Tshisimba was satisfied again. He was laughing happily because those girls were saying they loved him. So, he knocked the pegs in one by one. Those girls: they all climbed down peg by peg. They picked up their bundles of firewood and put them on their head. They sang:

[Narrator]

Ndi ri, a ri tsha vha funa, wee, Madzinga!

I say, we no longer love you
Madzinga!

Ri ri: a ri tsha vha funa Madzinga, haye!

We say: we do not love Madzinga!

Mulisa wa mahombe nyanga Vho-Rathovhele.

The lonely herder who looks
after the cattle of the chief.

Ee, Madzinga Tshimbale.

Yes, Madzinga Tshimbale.

[Chorus]

Tendeleka, tendeleka!

Walking up and down!

Yes, yes! Do you see Mr Tshisimba’s problem? Those girls had finished drinking water and climbed down the tree. But then they told Mr Tshisimba they no longer loved him.

And so Mr Tshisimba was left behind without getting even one wife. He returned with his cattle during the early evening. Do you see?

Ha mbo di vha ndi u fa ha lungano.

This is where the story dies.

Muswodi-Tshisimani, 11 June 2009

Translator Tshifhiwa Mashau is critical of Mr Tshisimba’s behaviour for three reasons: firstly, water is such a basic requirement that it may not be withheld from anyone; secondly, blackmail is reprehensible; thirdly, marriage proposals are to be made with due regard for proper procedure, and not in an impulsive, slapdash manner. Of course, this story primarily speaks to the listener as comedy, with clear elements of farce. The scenario of ten girls betrothing themselves all at once to an old man is meant to be ridiculous and amusing. And while feelings are hurt, no serious transgression takes place.

But the central purpose of comedy, namely to reveal the contradictions of human experience in a playful manner,⁷ requires consideration of a possible deeper truth: that of the plight of an elderly, destitute man. Although it has become not uncommon in contemporary life to see retired men herding cattle, this is a result of changing socio-economic patterns, and is not necessarily regarded as demeaning. However, in precolonial times the duty of herding was that of boys. When they were young, they looked after goats, and when they were older, cattle. Herding was a test of skill, endurance and courage (see ‘Mighty rooster’). This, therefore, was an important early step towards the attainment of full manhood. Boys passed through this phase to military training and then became adults with attendant responsibilities. Conversely, ‘old men looking after cattle would have been considered destitute in the olden days.’⁸ They also would have been targets of ridicule since they were supposed to be cared for by their family while they basked in the sun and gave advice in community matters.

In other words, this story may express some of the anxieties and obsessions of an old man who appears to live in penury without kith or kin. And so it may happen that, in typical comedy style, everyone around him sees a truth to which he is oblivious. Driven by loneliness, he lives in an ‘ego-centred dream-world’ from which he is then

‘brought abruptly down to earth’⁹ as the girls desert him and he returns to a silent home.

1. Krüger (1933/34:2-4) documented a similar narrative entitled ‘The chief’s herd boy.’
2. Because of their smooth, straight trunk, baobabs are difficult to climb. Stories about baobabs often feature the use of pegs (see Drake, 2006:38, 40).
3. The ‘x’ in *axa!* is pronounced like the ‘ch’ in **loch**.
4. Such cracked skin is caused when people sit too close to a fire in winter.
5. A women’s pounding song (*mafhuwe*) accordingly states (Kruger, 1986:258):

Iḍani u vhone: vho-mme anga vho lovha. Come and see: my mother has died.
Vho-khotsi anga vho siya mmbudza vha ri Before his death my father told me not to
ni songo sala na funa mukalaha. fall in love with an old man.

Guitarist Mashudu Mulaudzi from Tsianda in turn sings (Kruger, 1994:257):

Vha tshi vhona vhakalaha vha sa kalahi. Look at old men.
Ṱhoho ndi mmbvi. Their heads are grey with age.
Minwaha ndi mahumi They count their age in multiples of ten
a vha litshi u dzhoḷa. but they still engage in illicit love affairs.

Blacking (1969a:177-78) cites a girls’ initiation song called ‘*Lamba-mukalaha*’ (‘Refusing an old man’) in which girls indicate that they are turning down the advances of older men. This song was adapted from a *malende* choral dance-song popular during the late 1950s. It referred to the fact that younger migrant workers now could compete with older men in terms of financial security.

6. Describing the old man’s oscillations on the ground under the tree.
7. Booker, 2004:587.
8. Godfrey Dederen, correspondence, 15 August, 2011.
9. Booker, *op. cit.*:587.