



# Why our ancestors never invented telescopes



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## Dates:

Received: 27 July 2020

Accepted: 29 July 2020

Published: 17 Nov. 2020

## How to cite this article:

Mokgoatšana, S. & Mashego, G., 2020, 'Why our ancestors never invented telescopes', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6116. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6116>

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The Afrikaner civil rights organisation AfriForum argued, following a parliamentary adoption of land expropriation without compensation, that there is no history of Native South Africans having occupied every inch of the country that they now claim they want to repossess. The organisation's representatives argued that by their very subsistence agrarian existence, black people could not have lived in the platteland because their farming methods demanded access to rivers to water their crops. In the 1950s – 1970s, thousands of communities were uprooted in and around Pilgrim's Rest (Mpumalanga) and relocated to derelict parts of the homeland of Lebowa. Since the opening of the land restitution process, they have struggled to reclaim that arable land of which they were dispossessed for the benefit of Barloworld and Transvaal Gold Mining Exploration. A settlement has been reached with the claimants, and the land has been entrusted to Community Property Associations (CPA). However, there are contested memories about what constituted a forced removal and who qualifies to claim land in the repossessed spaces. The reclaiming of the vast tracts of land, some of which lie far from rivers, is answering some of the questions that form part of the current national discourse.

**Contribution:** This article continues the controversial debate of land claims, and the impact they have on communities. Unlike other studies that explore economic impacts, this article puts a spotlight on how dispossession not only uproots communities but destroys their livelihood and indigenous resources for food security, healthcare and traditional resources for medical practice.

**Keywords:** AfriForum; Mapulana; Bapedi; expropriation; Nasir Jones; Pilgrim's Rest; Motlatse; civilisation; apartheid.

## Introduction

One of the reasons traditional Mapulana initiation school had to last two full months was to allow for one moon cycle and one starry night. That duration was not what their forebears called *koma ya magwera* but *ya bodika*, which is both a tradition and culture of ethnic communities such as the Mapulana, Amandebele, AmaXhosa and others. Given that Mapulana initiation was, and continues to be, held during winter, it has little to do with the rapid healing of circumcision wounds during cold seasons but rather with the elements often confronted by initiates during this difficult season. Cultural practitioner and author Sekkie Makhubedu said on 25 May 2018:

'Circumcision and initiation schools were run in Winter because there are no snakes nor rainfall. It is easy to train initiates in dry terrain without any fear of snakes and to train them to swim when water is not muddied.'

The ancestral lands of Mapulana, which prior to forced removal covered the whole Mpumalanga Lowveld escarpment, have some of the harshest climates one can think of. Interviewed on 24 September 2017, writer and cultural activist Billy Malele remembers:

'We walked with our bare feet on snow until they cracked. Fires we made in valleys to reduce visibility at night and because tree leaves arrested most of the smoke by day.'

Snowfalls were regular during winter. Frostbite was a common cause of disability and occasionally death. Their huts, built with mud with grass roofs and wooden doors, reflected an attempt to ward off a marauding cold climate. During an interview on 14 June 2008, 93-year-old Bamponeng Mashego reflected back on her schooling days in the 1930s:

'We walked on foot for kilometres to school every morning, leaving a trail on the frozen grass.'

A Mapulana homestead was usually half a dozen to a dozen mud huts, often without windows, all connected through a *morako*, a wall half a metre to a metre high that was built around to connect all the huts, which were largely bedrooms and a kitchen. Inside the *morako* would be a *morutudu*, or a

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (UNISA) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (UL).

traditional bench built into the *morako*. The idea was that whatever sunrays the *morako* absorbed during the day would be transferred to the *morutudu*, and in the evenings it became a warm bench because it was not exposed to cold elements. It was thick; it absorbed heat during the day and emitted it at night – like a solar panel. Tshwane University of Technology Architecture researcher Gerald Steyn wrote in an article titled 'The indigenous roundavel – a case for conservation' (2006) that:

The rondavel is the tangible manifestation of a complex value system that combines custom, kinship, climate, resources and settlement geography, rather than the mere construction of shelter. (p. 24)

At the centre of the homestead would be the *sebipi*, or a fireplace where all cooking and boiling is done and the family gathers in the evening to listen to folk tales from older adults. And on hot summer nights, the *morutudu* served as a bench far away from the fire. Families would be braaing maize, corn or peanuts. Maize was braaied from the searing charcoal of wood or dry cow dung referred to as *ditla* – not with a live flame. Writer Linda Crampton (2019) wrote that:

The manure is used as a rich fertilizer, an efficient fuel and biogas producer, a useful building material, a raw material for paper making, and an insect repellent. (para 2)

In the context under research, our ancestors used it for its fuel and biogas qualities – a scientific realism no post-colonial anthropologist wants to acknowledge as being progressive way before the First Industrial Revolution.

Peanuts would often be braaied using *sethibo*, or the thick lid of a three-foot pot, or if extracted from their shells using *sethalego*, a flame braaing method taught to male initiates at a school. This method can turn any corn into popcorn. Then the option would be either to pour a little water and salt or to just do a dry braai; this option was discouraged, though, because the idea was to learn to produce plenty using minimal resources or raw materials.

The homestead would have one narrow entrance with the inside of the *lapa* polished (*go ritiwwe*) with – here it comes again – *boraga*, or wet cow dung. The floor of the *lapa* would carry cryptic designs synonymous with the occupants of the homestead and their belief system. Similar trivial designs would also be visible on the walls of the *morako*, huts and *dipitsa* [clay pots]. They were iconic of an era past. An era that missionaries and the colonialists are trying hard to airbrush from the cultural history of the original people. Commenting on this age-old artwork in relation to Ndebele paintings, the founder of the Africa Meets Africa Project, Helen Smuts, remarked (Dall 2018:para 7):

Wall painting flourished because it helped a woman proclaim who she was. But it is a visual language which is so sophisticated that it can be used to teach geometry.

## The purpose of initiation

This is intended as a background to the 2 months that Mapulana initiates used to spend on the mountain. It had to

be a mountain, in a gorge or below a cliff, and there had to be a body of water not far away – often a *metji a legakwa* [lake]. Icy water that froze a centimetre or two on those winter nights. All this infrastructure had an important role in the education that young men received in the school.

Firstly, the location of the school: a mountain was intended to be as far away from prying eyes as possible. And the vantage point meant that they could see invaders from a distance. It was a military and skills academy, which meant that those not part of it had no business knowing about the happenings in the institution. Author Makhubedu-Chiloane (2018) says:

Mapulana started initiation schools while they lived closer to Maswati after realising their young men were cowards.

This supports the narrative that it was some form of military training. Another cultural historian, Jonathan Malele, said on 04 August 2014 that the first person to introduce initiation and circumcision among the Mapulana was King Mahlabalerole.

Secondly, the school had to be located in a gorge or below a cliff, so that when fire was made at night no one could see any light or smoke from a distance. During the day the burning logs would emit thin smoke that was easily absorbed by surrounding shrubbery and could not be seen from a distance. So, it was difficult to pinpoint the location of an initiation school. The river served as a training facility for submerging yourself when being chased by the enemy during the day and for submerging yourself and surfacing only your eyes and nose on its banks when hounded at night so the enemy could not see you. On 08 January 2018, a 60-year-old man who did not want to be named related:

[*Ya rune twaba ne re e maka boshego hala go kgomolele go itse tu. Ele gore re kgone go sesa se wutame lebopong la noka re ntshe dinko tso fela.*]

The enemy will assume you have drowned and turn back, only to be reminded by a spear piercing their spine to teach them not to turn their backs on their enemies.

## The sky as a canvas

The intention of the full moon cycle was to allow a complete lesson in lunar education, to understand messages hidden on the lunar surface. Mapulana children were taught to see the mother holding the baby on the moon from when they could look to the sky. They were taught to understand why a full moon has a glowing halo around it and that it symbolises the renewal of spirit and purpose. In olden days, women were reported to have their periods synced with the full moon. That is disputed today. Conversations between men became intense; shepherds would spot each other from a hundred metres away in the still of the night, and dogs would bark that annoying gory jackal howl on such nights. The English asked, 'what worries the dog when the moon shines?' However, Africans do not ask such stupid questions. There is a prevailing narrative that selenology and to a larger extent astronomy were academic areas of study attributed to

Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, who used a telescope to see four planets.

However, our ancestors never invented telescopes. This was not because they had little interest in discovering faraway galaxies and planets lying billions of light years away. It was mainly because seeing was not believing; they believed without having seen. In the Bantu languages, they had *isibhamu*, *sethunya*, *sethuthupi* before they saw the source. They were not like Europeans, who needed to see an arm spitting fire to call it a firearm or a *vuurwapen*. Our ancestors did not invent because they were on speed dial. They invented faith instead of telescopes.

During a full moon, few stars can be seen as beautiful galaxies and the Milky Way are flooded by the halo of the moon. The moon speaks to humans, and humans respond in kind on such nights.

On a starry night, the sky offers a dark canvas on which millions and billions of stars of varying sizes paint their art to the awe of humankind. Millions move without colliding; others blink, whilst some appear static. However, when you were at a Mapulana initiation school you would be given astronomy classes about the stars (*mashlafola*, *naledi ya masa*, *mphatlalatsane*). It was the stars that told you what time it was and reminded you what ritual you should perform. If you were a worshipping person, you did not need a watch to know it was time to bow; people did not need a compass or a rooster crowing to know that it was time to bathe the kids or cook or light the torch [*sesa*]. Throughout the night there are various stars with messages hidden in them. No star exists for aesthetic purposes. Every brush stroke on that dark canvas has coded signals. Paulos Chilwane (21 April 1999) remembered:

'When we walked there'll be times when we would be asked what a star was saying and we were expected to know it's time to return back to the school because it was four o'clock. What we were looking at was *Naledi ya masa*. In an hour it will be *mahube a basadi* [before dawn]. Then *mahube a banna* [dawn], which comes with the birds chirping.'

Comets, shooting stars and so on carried messages. Up until the early hours of the morning, Africans had an opportunity to have conversations with these stars because they all represented an important space in their spiritual ecosystem. The stars listened, and in no time we reaped the fruits of our faith in them as servants of our gods. Psalms 147:4 says:

He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them.

This godly relationship is repeated in many other scriptures in the Bible, notably Genesis 15:5, Isaiah 40:26, Psalm 8:3 and Psalm 48:3. Gods have always spoken to people through signs because human ears are incapable of hearing unfamiliar sounds, and their eyes are blind to seeing unfamiliar sights. Jeremiah 5:21 says:

Hear this, O foolish senseless people who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear.

When I was young we were warned not to count the stars because we would wet our mats when we slept. With hindsight and further probing, it emerges that adults were reserving the right to communicate with the spirit world to themselves and discouraging us from starting early and ending up like the Three Wise Men from the East, who were astrologers who received messages about the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The Three Wise Men, to those who do not know, were Africans named Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchior.

So, messages have also been hidden in the sun, as you have seen it dancing on the morning of Kwanzaa or the first day of harvest (*pulamatijobogo*), or you have observed the moon smile on the night a baby is born (which is the first day of life). Those who got their civilisation late call people they admire 'stars', whilst they equally claim that those who die reincarnate as stars.

## An apartheid context

Here is why this information is important. From the 1950s through the 1970s, thousands of Mapulana were forcefully removed from the Pilgrim's Rest, Botjhabelo, Graskop, Sabie and Lydenburg areas to be settled in this new derelict place that was to become part of the Lebowa homeland. The new settlement was called Mapulaneng, or 'place of Mapulana'. The idea behind the removals was appropriation of land without compensation from the majority Native population to a settler minority. Whilst on the face of it, it looked as if it was wholly done for economic expediency, as Barloworld moved in with gum and pine plantations, one of the untold reasons was to divorce this African nation from its land, culture and traditions – in simple terms to uproot Mapulana from their connection to ancestors and land and to commit cultural genocide whilst also whitewashing their history from the face of the earth. Africans slaughter animals, and repeated drenching of the soil with animal blood creates a hotspot of spiritual connection, which colonialists wanted to break.

We value where our umbilical cord is buried because it is not just a piece of ground but a shrine. And when more than four generations have lived in a certain settlement, with graves behind the homestead and umbilical cords dotting the settlement, there is a spiritual presence that nourishes the family's existence. That is what the apartheid regime wanted to break and replace with missionary religion after the Tomlinson Report recommended that religion could be one of those tools used to defeat black resolve. So, the Mapulana were moved to Bushbuckridge.

We all know how when Mapulana became part of Lebowa, they were forced to assimilate into Bapedi and learn Sepedi in schools and churches as a way of destroying their identity and culture. We all know how Sepulana was suddenly referred to as a dialect of Sepedi or Sesotho sa Leboa and sold to millions of Bapedi, who to this day still

argue that Sepulana is a dialect of their language, thus saying that the Mapulana are subjects of their kings and queens because *polelosenmotwana* is for people under a *letona* or *induna* not a people with kings, queens and customs of their own.

That is an argument for another day, but the purpose of this article is to explore how such beliefs, when they are sold to the African people and bought today, contribute to arguments by right-wing Afrikaner organisations that black South Africans have no legitimate claim on the land they fought and died for. A people who raped and massacred the First People are quick to stand up for the land rights of the San and Nam communities because it suddenly makes political capital.

An article that appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine (Levy 2019) noted:

The Glen Grey Act was the first piece of legislation to enshrine in law the residential separation of the races. It was also the basis for the notorious Natives Land Act of 1913, which in its final form allocated a mere thirteen per cent of all arable land to the black majority. This land was held in 'native reserves', under the authority of African chiefs. There were no individual property rights on the reserves, so no land could be sold – which meant that black people could make no money from their assets.

Immediately after the African National Congress adopted a resolution at its Nasrec conference in 2017 for expropriation of land without compensation, AfriForum came out guns blazing with an argument that based on available anthropology South African blacks were never commercial but subsistence farmers and that subsistence farming relies heavily on the availability of water sources. We all know that commercial farming is said to be more scientific, with reliance on pesticides, genetic modifications, boreholes and other foreign methods that Africans did not use before white colonial rule. AfriForum Chief Executive Officer Ernst Roets said:

Everyone agrees apartheid was a horrible system. I'm sure it's less than one per cent within the white community that thinks otherwise. It's wrong to say that dispossession happened to all black people or that it was committed by all white people across the entire surface of South Africa. Of course, then people say, 'Oh, so you're pro-apartheid'. No! We are free-market people. (Levy 2019)

Roets argues that only black people with proven land claims should claim land, which means that only those who have eviction orders deserve an audience. He is very aware that the apartheid regime of his forebears never gave any individual order to black people and that the chiefs it put in charge of the 13% were not authorised to issue title deeds without Pretoria signing on such an arrangement – which it rarely did.

The argument that blacks cannot farm without water sounds like logic in 2019. When you go to what was the

Mapulana ancestral land prior to the forced removals, you will notice that the whole area is linked by the Motlatse River, or what settlers renamed the Blyde. It is a waterlogged settlement, where the Motlatse snaked across tens of villages, pouring into a canyon below Thaba-Tharo, or the so-called Three Roundavels, and all the way to Blyde Dam in Tswateng, today called Swadini by the settler minority.

However, that the Mapulana had an abundance of water for their livestock and farming does not mean that the Balobedu have no legitimate claim to their ancestral land because they lack such vast natural resources. The Balobedu have always had Queen Modjadji, whose rainmaking powers are legendary. Research indicates that even the all-conquering Zulu king Shaka once sent his emissaries to request her blessings. How did the queen make rain? She asked for it. African communities, when they wanted to start farming on their New Year, which for many, before the Gregorian calendar, was the sighting of the first moon in September, went to their kings and queens to ask for rain. Legend has it that the traditional leader would call sangomas and *izithunywa* to converge at his kraal. Families with adolescent virgin girls would be requested to avail them for the rainmaking ritual. They would be sent to a well (*sediba*) to fetch water in calabashes made of cow hide or wood and bring it to the kraal. At the kraal a musical item would be performed requesting rain. After soaking tree branches in the water and sprinkling it, even before they arrived at home rain would pour until the early hours of the following day, which would then free the *matjema* [farming groups] to start tilling the ground days later.

Rain would come down every night until the crops surfaced. That is when it would be intermittent. As a result, Africans never needed to live closer to rivers to farm the land. Africans had the power to summon rain to water their crops. That is why the first crops, *dipulamajibugo*, were always sacrificed to the gods in gratitude for the rain and bumper harvest.

This explains what writer Makhubedu alludes to in her book *Tjiba Ho Wo Tjwang* (Makhubedu-Chiloane 2017), where she spells out practices that were believed to jinx rain and were discouraged. Among them, she says:

Playing drums during Summer. Planting beans before the end of the year (this means before September when the New Year started). Hanging a broom on a tree. To till after the very first rain (known as kgogolamooko). (p. 61)

The wonders of Mantsholo Pool, named after a legendary founder of the clan are largely reported by various commentators including Marwick (2013:219), Palmer (1990:36) and Mbosizwa (2016).

## Evidence of white superiority

Now, if we bring such evidence to the fore, we move beyond the AfriForum narrative that the ruins and graves



of our ancestors, which we use as evidence of settlement, are nothing but proof of nomadic communities that cannot claim a piece of land as having been permanently settled uninterrupted for a reasonable amount of time. The history of African people and land is not limited to human occupation but conquest of the former occupants – even if that land was now left unoccupied for livestock pasturing purposes. Africans were always a community, living in close proximity to each other, but did not discount their ownership of the land their livestock grazed on.

Let us look at another misunderstanding that is perpetuated by colonised African people who validate the flawed argument of AfriForum and white nationalists. The homelands of Lebowa, Gazankulu, Venda and what was called ‘central government’ were in some cases separated from each other by a national road that cuts through their belly. When you are in Bushbuckridge, the former Mhala region of Gazankulu and the Mapulaneng region of Lebowa are separated by the R40 national road. When the border was decided, it separated families from their farmland and relatives barely 40 m away. Whenever Bantu administrators were excited, they would arbitrarily allocate more land to another traditional leader and have it gazetted, as was the case with Malele and Nxumalo in Bushbuckridge. The aim was either to appease or to stir conflict among the two ethnic communities. However, even though historically, even in battle, Africans chased each other over the mountain or beyond the river, which inadvertently became the new boundaries capable of being militarily defended, the apartheid government created unnatural facts on the ground. You suddenly had public roads becoming political boundaries. African borders were mountains, hills and rivers. Africans never had a border on a plateau or platteland because it would be impossible to justify as a line of control in military terms. In Sepedi, there is a saying that *phukubje ya tshela moedi ke mpsana*. Throughout the whole world, except in occupied territories such as Jammu and Kashmir, Palestine, Crimea and so on, there is a landmark that separates one from the other. Some were respected by colonialists, whilst others were facts that Natives created on the ground.

However, today you have traditional leaders who want to hold on to such spoils and are ready to drag their fellow Africans to court to contest the apartheid spoils of traditional land allocated on a flat land. And once such cases are won, white nationalists use them as precedent in their challenge for the legitimacy of land arbitrarily given to them by their white minority government. Nothing interests a racist like two Africans fighting over a piece of land gazetted by the apartheid regime.

By failing to understand the powers vested in our ancestors, or refusing to acknowledge them because we

have been christened, we are weakening the social fabric of our own communities and our resolve. We play into the hands of those seeking to disregard the thousands of years during which we claimed Africa as our continent. We applaud white inventors for inventing telescopes to study the universe, oblivious to the fact that we did not need those because the universe was never a strange phenomenon to us; we were one with it and held nightly conversations with the stars. We asked for blessings and received plenty. Our reference was never an anthology of 66 books but everyday proof of the existence of a higher power. We called that power *Modimo* and its plural *Badimo* (*Bao ba lego godimo*) because all answers to our questions were up there, Godimo.

Science, by its Western definition, is a construct of Westerners, but Africans are a prescientific people. Modern science, it is argued, was discovered in 1752 by Tycho Brahe with the discovery of ‘a new star in the night sky above him’. It might have been new to him but not to those who lived before him, as further narratives claim that many experts recognise Ibn al-Haytham, who lived in present-day Iraq between AD 965 and 1039, as the first scientist.

Both arguments are insignificant to Africans, as they only support the conclusion that they are a prehistoric and prescientific people whose feats cannot be explained through the methods devised by the Greeks and those who came late into knowledge. Africans have no reason to celebrate Louis Pasteur or the Wright brothers, and they have no reason to claim in the 21st century to be ‘the first to climb Kilimanjaro’ or any first. They were first in everything. Rapper Nas said in a song with Damian Marley titled ‘Africa Must Wake Up’ (Marley & Marley 2010):

Africa must wake up, the sleeping sons of Jacob/For what tomorrow may bring, may a better day come/Yesterday we were kings, can you tell me young ones/Who are we today? yeah, now.

## Conclusion

We should never subscribe to the modern notion of ‘the first African to do this and that’. Nobody knows who was the first African to go to space because there are many ways of going there; no one knows who was the first African to summit Kilimanjaro; no one knows who was the first African to revive an economy without Bretton Woods institutions; and so on. We have been here before; we invented what we needed during the Ice Age, Stone Age, Iron Age and so on; we did not invent what we did not need – and telescopes were the least of the things we needed because we enjoyed conversations, not peeping Tom shows with the stars. Cultural writer Bongani Madondo once wrote, after spending an afternoon in the studio with the late sage Busi Mhlongo, that observing the rituals and spirituality that went into the process of music making, he drew the conclusion that ‘[w]e [Africans] were in church before we went to church’ (Madondo

2010). Missionaries did not bring God to Africa; they only brought confusion.

In closing, we present the lyrics to 'Africa Must Wake Up' (Marley & Marley 2010):

The black oasis, Ancient Africa the sacred  
Awaking, the sleeping giant, science, art is your creation  
I dreamed that we could visit old Kemet  
Your history is too complex and rigid for some Western critics  
They want the whole subject diminished  
But Africa's the origin of all the world's religions  
We praise bridges that carried us over  
The battle fronts of Sudanic soldiers  
The task put before us, *do you hear me now?*

[Chorus: Damian Marley]

Africa must wake up, the sleeping sons of Jacob  
For what tomorrow may bring, may a better day come  
Yesterday we were kings, can you tell me young ones  
Who are we today? yeah, now

[Verse 2: Nas]

Who are we today? The slums, diseases, AIDS  
We need that all to fade, we cannot be afraid  
So who are we today?  
We are the morning after, the makeshift youth  
The slave ship captured, our diaspora is the final chapter  
The ancestral lineage built pyramids  
America's first immigrants  
The kings, sons and daughters from Nile waters  
The first architect, the first philosophers  
Astronomers, the first prophets and the doctors were us, us

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this research article.

### Authors' contributions

S.M. and G.M. both contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

## Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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