

SOME NOTES ON GRAIN STORAGE IN THE NORTH-WESTERN TRANSVAAL*

S.M. MOIFATSWANE

*Department of Anthropology and Archaeology,
National Cultural History Museum,
P. O. Box 28088,
PRETORIA, 0132*

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ABSTRACT

Clay granaries found in various inaccessible locations in the Northern Transvaal are described. Consideration is then given to contemporary ethnographic information concerning granaries in general among neighbouring peoples. It is suggested that because the inaccessible granaries have no ethnographic parallels they could have been built during times of stress before the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of a number of clay granaries (Fig. 1), found in various inaccessible locations in the Makgabeng area of the Bochum district in the northern Transvaal (Fig. 2) prompted an investigation into the origin of these structures. Other types of granaries, eg. baskets, were also found in some of these shelters. They were, however, mostly disintegrated.



Fig. 1. Granaries found in a rock shelter in Makgabeng (1989).

Local spokespersons have no knowledge concerning the origin of these granaries and they speculate that they might have been built by people who fled from Blouberg in 1894 during the war fought between chief Leboho of the Hananwa and the ZAR under Gen. Piet Joubert. This, however, seems unlikely for two main reasons: firstly, the type of granary has not been recorded anywhere in

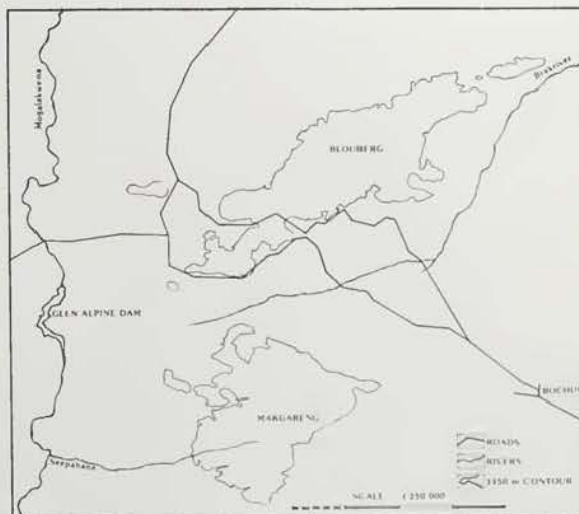


Fig. 2. Map showing the relationship of Makgabeng to Blouberg.

Blouberg itself; and secondly the war in 1894 lasted only about two months, too short a period for people to produce a crop as well as build and use the granaries.

Though the Makgabeng was inhabited variously by Ndebele, Koni, Birwa, Tlokwa, Tshadibe and other Sotho/Tswana-speaking people during historical times, it is not possible to relate these sites, with the possible exception of one, to any of these groups. Though very little pottery was found in association with the granaries, small pieces that were found on one site seems to indicate that it is of Tswana origin.

The occurrence of granaries constructed in various ways and from widely different materials is well-known

in southern African ethnography. Granaries have been described by McDonald (1940), Walton (1956), Van Zyl (1958), Redelinghuys (1968), Van der Waal (1977) Van Schalkwyk (1985) and Frescura (1981) but not in systematic matter.

The purpose of this paper is to describe unusual granaries from the north-west Transvaal and to ascertain why they do not appear in the ethnographic record. Also, the description of these and other granaries may help archaeologists interpret excavated features.

GRANARY TYPES

The type of granary under investigation here, called *sefala*, is made from clay, approximately one meter high, with a diameter of 1,5 meters and is found mostly in caves or rock shelters. Five different sites containing such granaries occur within a couple of kilometers of each other in the Makgabeng area. Three of these sites are found in very isolated places but the other two occur on sites with extensive stone-walling. Unfortunately most of the granaries have been broken by herd-boys and only the really inaccessible ones are still intact (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Location of one of the granary sites (1989).

Two other sites with similar *difala* (plural of *sefala*) are also known. One is in the Haakdoorndraai Nature Reserve near Marken, northwest of Pietersburg. From a published photograph (Levy 1987) there seems to be a superficial resemblance between these and the ones found in the Makgabeng area. This, however, is not the case with the second group found near the hamlet of Villa Nora (Judson 1965) not far from the Haakdoorndraai site. The big difference here is that, in the latter case, many of the granaries seems to have been double-storied as a 'floor' of wood was built in between the two openings



Fig. 4. Some 'double-storied' granaries near Villa Nora (1965).

(Fig. 4).

In the area under consideration, the north-western Transvaal, three other types of containers were until recently also used for the storing of grain. The most common of these are the large baskets called *diseho* (Fig. 5) which are woven from grass and bark. A basket big

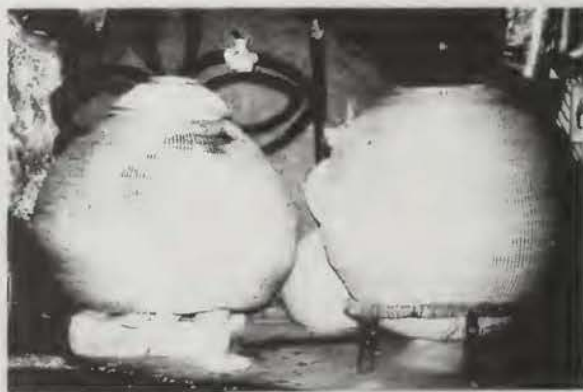


Fig. 5. Woven grain baskets kept in a house (1988).

enough to contain 10 bags of grain can take up to 6 weeks to complete, excluding the time spent collecting the material. In the past these baskets were buried in the cattle kraal (*lesaka*) but are now stored inside the house or under the veranda. The Ndebele of the Potgietersrust area used to keep them on a small platform constructed from poles covered with a loose roof of grass (Fig. 6). Colin Rae, a minister who accompanied the ZAR forces during the campaign of 1894 against the Hananwa, writes



Fig. 6. Manner in which the Northern Ndebele kept their grain baskets (1922).



Fig. 7. Holes in a cattle kraal from which granaries were removed (1989).



Fig. 8. The pot-like container for keeping beans and lentils (1991).



Fig. 9. Old type of granaries used by the Northern Ndebele (1922).

in his diary of how they went to abandoned villages in Blouberg, excavated the grain baskets from the cattle kraal and used the grain to feed their horses (Rae 1898). Figure 7 shows an abandoned cattle kraal, last used c. 1940, where the holes from which the disheho were taken when the people were resettled below the mountain are still visible.

A pot-like container (Fig. 8), also called sefala, is made of a mixture of ash and cattle dung, and is not fired like ordinary clay pots. The smell of the dung and ash protects the grain and other seeds from insect infestation. These grain pots are kept in an ordinary hut or under a veranda and are used for storing seed for the following year's planting or for keeping products such as beans and lentils.

From old photographs in the National Cultural History Museum a third type of granary known as letlolo (Fig. 9), can be identified as having been used by the Ndebele people of the Potgietersrust area. This was in the form of a small hut with a removable roof. Similar granaries to these are also known to have existed amongst Sotho groups (e.g. Molepo) in the area and are still used by some Venda.

CONCLUSION

Of the four types of granaries found in the area, only three are known ethnographically. This seems to suggest that the clay granaries were built prior to the settlement of the people now found in the area. The inaccessibility of these containers seems to indicate that they date from a period of uncertainty, probably before recorded traditions which forced people to hide their food resources.

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