

Landscape Management

The wisdom of the elders



Madalitso, thank you for sharing this shocking story of Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani. What a dramatic lesson about the importance of working with landscapes! Now, dear readers, it is my turn to take you to a meeting of all ages on the other side of the country, where our young people ask the elders to tell them what life and the land was like in former years.

The cool morning air brushed our cheeks, announcing the change in season as we walked towards the group of young people who had arrived early in the Magoli community in Hwange District in the west of Zimbabwe. They were chatting together in the shade of a large mahogany tree. Madalitso and I were there to facilitate an encounter between local young people and village elders.

The idea for this meeting arose out of conversations with the young people at our Earth Law workshop in Chimanimani. We had discussed the importance of living in harmony with nature and respecting each aspect of the earth as part of a living community. We had looked at the role of the rivers, and how, for many years, we have been planting trees with a factory-mind, forgetting how connected life is.

The young people remembered stories their grandmothers and grandfathers told of rivers filled with fish and a variety of birds sitting on the reeds.

And of plentiful harvests. Now, the fields were empty, the rivers were either silent or angry and the soil was baked hard and lifeless.

So, Joyce, Thulani and Henry, participants in the Chimanimani workshop from Magoli, shared their experience of the workshop at their local church youth club. This group then decided to host this workshop of all ages. They also invited the local Nechilibi Secondary School students to join them.

They wanted to hear again the stories of how their village had been long ago, to refresh their memories and to learn how their elders had managed their landscapes to harness water. They wanted to listen to how they encouraged and thrived in biodiversity and how they built their communities to be resilient, living in harmony with their surroundings.



The elders and the youth, the past and the future, meet at last

Senior village head Ncube opened the meeting. He welcomed everyone and then proceeded to pray. His prayer was the same prayer waiting on all our lips.

“Dear Lord, help our weak hands and hearts and give us courage to stand together. Not for ourselves only, but for those whose lives depend on what we decide to do now. We have lost the wisdom you gave us. Today our ancestors’ graves are out in the sun, because of the lost trees. Give us strength and understanding today, so that we may rebuild what has been broken down, that we can find again what we have lost. May our hearts be open, and our ears listen to the stories here today. Amen.”

And then the process began. While some of the young people organised themselves into writing, drawing and singing groups, others worked on preparing the meal we would later share. Madalitso and I spoke with the elders, asking them to decide who would tell their stories. We asked that they help the young people to learn about the past by describing the landscape, the festivals and celebrations, the

food, the birds and the plants. Thankfully, we had decided on an open-air meeting, because the energy, excitement and voices rose higher as the elders became immersed in reminding each other of the stories of their past. It was almost impossible to get them back to the main meeting.

We were ready to begin the sharing, but the excitement and talking was difficult to contain. Suddenly Gogo Mamoyo got up. Her tiny body was frail and wrinkled from age and hard work, but her eyes were bright. Slowly she began to sing a song my grandmother used to sing. She started softly, and soon the others joined in. Their deep voices, filled with memories of sorrow and joy, echoed under the canopy of the great mahogany tree.

The song spoke of King Lobengula crossing the Shangani river and being taken by the flood. It says the Shangani has many waters that would take care of generations. That is why it could sweep away a king.

The Song from Gogo Moyo

Kudala Kwakungenje,
(Things were not like this long ago)

Umhlab’uyaphenduka
(The world has really been changing)

Kwakubus’ uMambo loMzilikazi
(We were ruled by Mambo and Mzilikazi)

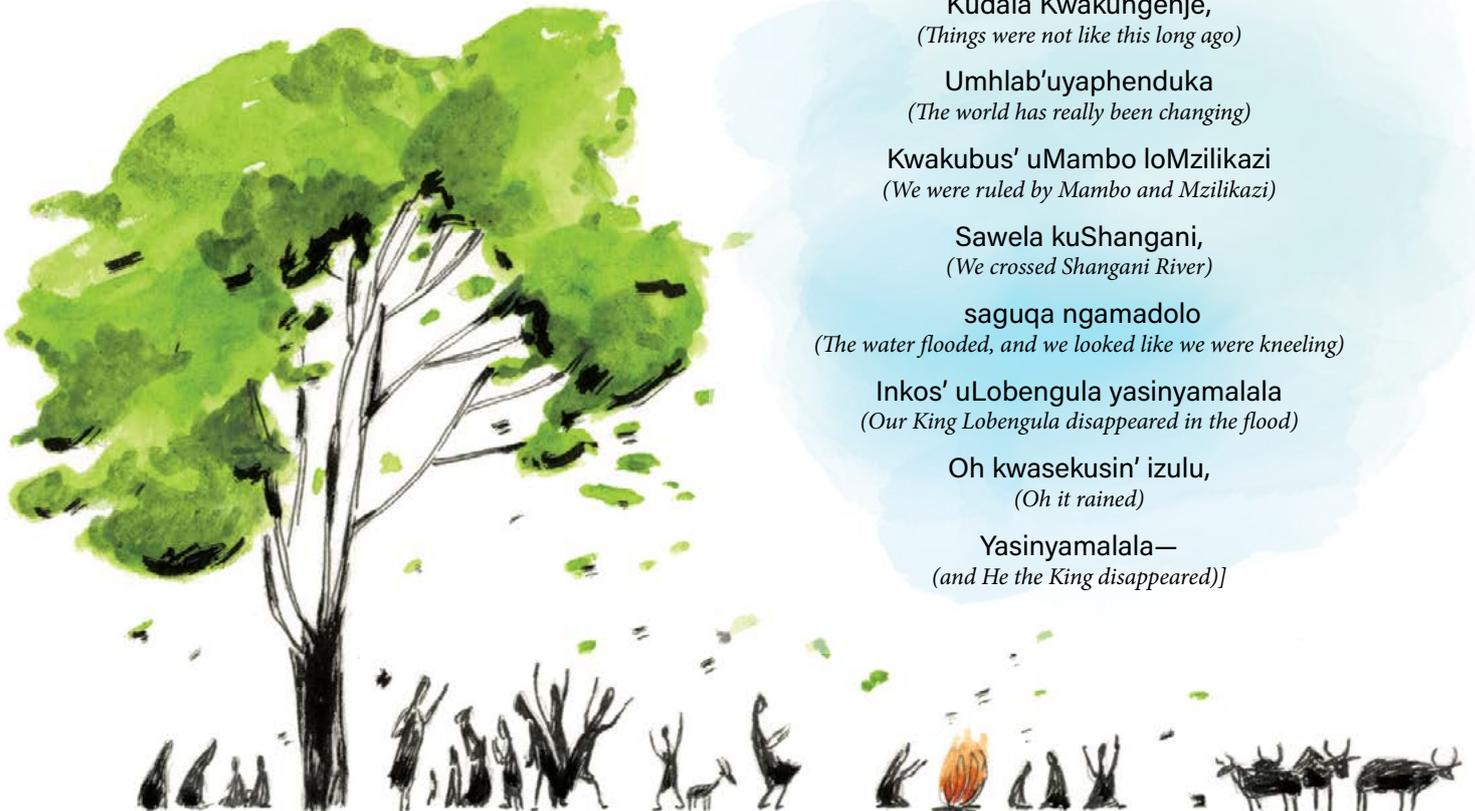
Sawela kuShangani,
(We crossed Shangani River)

saguqa ngamadolo
(The water flooded, and we looked like we were kneeling)

Inkos’ uLobengula yasinyamalala
(Our King Lobengula disappeared in the flood)

Oh kwasekusin’ izulu,
(Oh it rained)

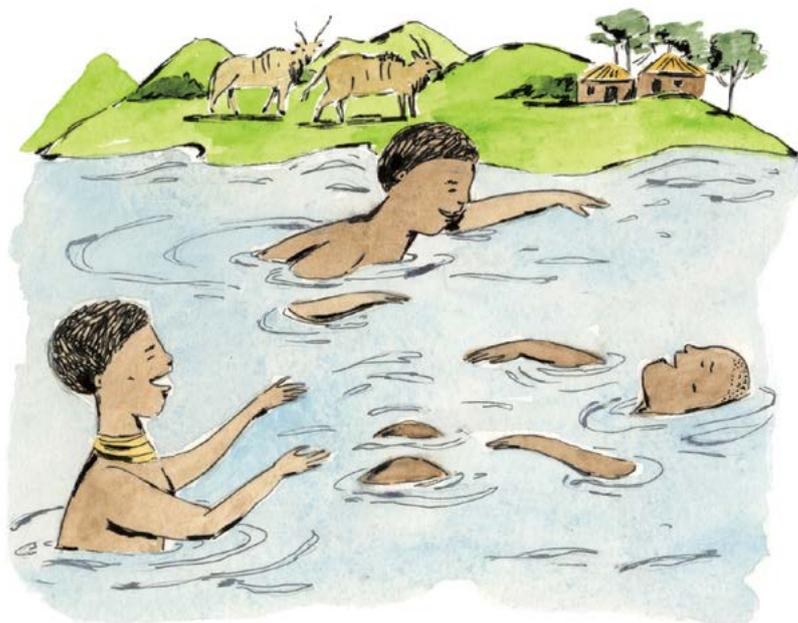
Yasinyamalala—
(and He the King disappeared)]



The stories of the elders pour forth

Then the moment of storytelling began. The students took out their notebooks and pencils, ready to hear, write down and draw whatever they could.

One by one, the elders started to talk of the past and as they spoke they transformed in front of our eyes. They seemed almost young as they went back on their journey to a dreamland of youth, plenty and safety. We watched and listened in awe, disbelief, admiration, and yearning, as they took turns to share their stories.



Gogo Aneni

I remember how the Siamulavu River used to flow with abundant clean water and life. On hot October days, my brothers and I would jump into the river. All the children in the neighbourhood would be there swimming and fooling around. Then we would dry off in the late sun on our way home, laughing and joking, each with a fish in hand for supper.

Gogo MaZondo

What I loved was when I could go with my mother and her friends to collect thatching grass. There were stipulated times for harvesting thatching grass, and in that time the herdsmen knew not to let livestock go to these areas before we harvested. The grass grew and flourished all around our village, so the women didn't have to camp in faraway places to gather the grass. They would sing and share stories as they collected grass to thatch the roofs and to make brooms and baskets. They went out in the morning, some with babies on their backs, others with freshly baked bread made from millet and sorghum (called amaqebelengwana) and groundnuts in bags to share. And then they would be back in time for the afternoon meal of maize, rapoko and wild mushroom soup.

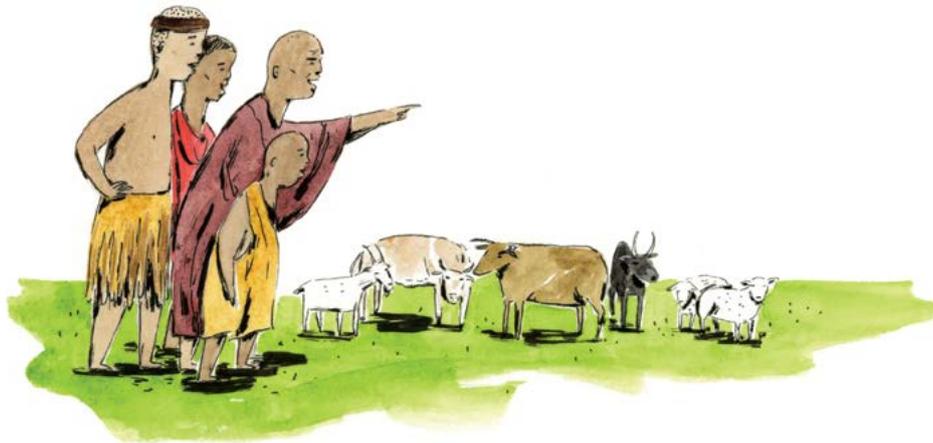
Elder Ncube

Yes, I remember when we walked in the fields with our sticks and knives, to find bulbs and aloe leaves. We would easily see bushbuck, eland and sable antelope grazing and we would hear the baboons barking in the mountains. We were sometimes afraid of walking at night because of the wild cats. We would count ourselves lucky if we spotted the blue swallows making their nests in the holes dug by the aardvark or ant bear.

Mr Munkuli *We had chickens, goats and sheep. My father and uncles planned our homesteads well, making sure that the women and children were safe, with enough space to keep the animals inside enclosures. The grandfathers would find and inspect pastures, showing the young men where and when to move the animals to new pasture. There was good neighbourliness, and everything was negotiated and agreed upon, so there were few disputes.*

Mr Lunga *Yes, I remember old Mr Ngaki who had a herd of over 200 cattle. He was a wealthy man whose home was everyone's dream. There was always a celebration taking place at his house, and everyone was always invited. We would all sit outside under the mahogany and teak trees telling stories, dancing, and playing games. As children we looked after Mr. Ngaki's cattle, because we knew that he would reward us with rich meat stew and sadza.*

To us listening, this seemed like fiction. We knew amongst ourselves that currently the village could barely carry sixty cattle, let alone goats and sheep.



Then elder-man Ndukwana stood up in the middle of the crowd. His face was serious and unsmiling, turning the whole mood of the meeting.

“Traditionally we had standing rules and orders from the Chief and the elders of our day. I remember my grandfather saying I should not pound the ground because my mother would break her back! It was only later that I realised that we should be careful how we tilled the ground, because when it rained, topsoil would be washed away. Our land lost its value and has the gullies we see today. This was not the only ‘myth’ or taboo, there were many other rules. We managed our relationship with rivers, mountains, wildlife, cropping and harvest. But what changed? I’m not sure I know; but I do know that it was beautiful.”

As the stories continued, the students wrote down anecdotes, descriptions, and drawings of people dancing, healthy children playing, vibrant local economies, lush grasses, rivers, birds and the wildlife being spoken about. The story telling was dotted with singing - describing the landscape and expressing the joy that filled the hearts of those that lived in those times.

Ndukwana's words caused many elders to look down, as though to say they were sorry. Sorry for having lost the wisdom, sorry for having been misled, sorry for what was no more. There was a desperate longing to bring it all back. But one by one, the elders began to say that what has gone has gone but that there had to be another way of bringing back landscape health for all living things, including the people of Magoli and beyond.



The elders acknowledged that they had lost the relationship with their surroundings as things kept changing. People flocked to the towns and cities as land was turned to urbanised use and industrial agricultural practices, robbing the soil and the communities of life and livelihood.

Truth or fiction? A moment of reckoning...

Up to this point, the young people had all been silent, either writing, drawing or just listening. Then Thulani stood up.

“I can't believe that the elders can be so untruthful. All we have ever known is a lifeless community. People are leaving homes in ruins as the young run to the city for better lives. A few of us remain. There is no way that such abundance ever existed. There is just no way! Could the ancestors or God be mad at us, and why? Because it sounds like we are under a spell. This is too much for me to accept!”

The elders looked at the young man with sadness, trying to persuade him that their stories were true – that there once was abundance on this very land!

Thulani quietly spoke, “When we were in Chimanimani, we saw and heard painful stories of how water killed people and swept away homes and soil and left them as refugees in the land of their birth. Yet in this part of the country, the skies decided to keep the rains to themselves,

and the little rain we had ran off, wasted! So, how possible is it for us to achieve again that picture from the stories? How can we ever get it back! How possible is it to bring back the abundant landscape?”

Ludo stood up, “It is clear that everyone agrees there is no way back to the old way of living. Things have declined too much. We cannot bring back the past, however if I remember Baba Ndukwana's statement, we can bring good from the past. Can we not borrow the values and attitudes they had. Our culture had positive things that we can use even today.”

One elder blurted out, “The world has changed so much and so many of our cultural practices have been watered down. We have all lost the old ways!”



A future story begins to sprout

One of the students, Twalumba, jumped to her feet.

“I know that a lot of misfortune has been brought by letting go of the old ways and diluting our culture, but new ways of learning and communicating with each other are possible. In school, we’ve been learning that there is hope for landscape management to produce food and fibre. Today’s world has brilliant people, organisations and communities who have experimented and discovered real solutions. Are we not able to restore many good values and practices from the past AND embrace new knowledge? Let us learn how others,

who have suffered like us, are coming out of their troubles. I want to, don’t you?”

Twalumba’s words echoed through the trees as everyone paid attention to her. They nodded, agreeing that being open to learn what others are doing seemed like a good way forward.

At this point I stepped forward. The air had cleared. A new possibility was opening. The students met and came back with new intentions written on sheets of newsprint:

We will -

1. go out and collect stories of success and good practice from people and communities in our countries and across the African region.
2. come back and share the different practices with you and our communities.

The elders and young people in the community agreed that next time they met they would dare to embrace a new dawn in managing their farms and wider landscapes!

They also asked the committee to invite influential people to the next meeting, who could partner with the community and support the new practices going forward.

Then Gogo Mamoyo started singing and the whole group joined in - young and old. And on that joyful note the meeting closed. The warmth and sense of community continued as we all gathered together to share a meal provided by each household that came to the meeting. We went home nourished both in our tummies and hearts. It felt that the change was already beginning.

