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The story of the Māndesho people, from a long time ago until the present day

We, the Māndesho people, always knew beyond doubt that without each other we would perish. We knew that we needed to work together in order to harvest the resources of the land, and that we also needed to unite from time to time against other groups who wished to gain control of our resources. Because we knew that our security - even our survival - depended on working together, the idea of ceasing to be part of the Māndesho was horrific, unthinkable, and over a period of several hundred years the notion of belonging developed many complex facets.



For example, customs grew up to bring strangers into our people, to recognize newly married couples and to welcome children. Belonging links were also forged by building community, for example by throwing a party or helping someone to build a house. Another aspect of belonging stemmed from blood and marriage ties, and because we had a similar appearance and spoke a common language and dialect, and there was also a bond in knowing all of our people knew the stories about how the world was created and what deities had been instrumental in the process, and the stories about our ancestors and their daring exploits and the places they lived and from whence they came. These stories reminded our children and grandchildren of connections that they had with the land in which we lived and also with land beyond the horizon and even beyond the sky. Sometimes the stories even contributed to our survival, since cautionary tales warned of the dangers of over-exploitation, military histories taught strategy, and knowledge was gained of the names and relationships to kinfolk who might offer assistance in a tight place. It was important that this learning did not die, and so there were special occasions when stories were re-told and ancestors specially remembered.

Life was hard for us, and work was an important part of membership of the Māndesho. Although some tasks were better suited to male or female, old or young, often the same person had to do several jobs, perhaps ranging from doing a bit of hunting and fishing one day, to hoeing the land the next, through to going to war when the need arose. But, whatever

work people did, everyone knew that their efforts counted towards staying warm and safe and eating better, and everyone felt valued and appreciated. You must remember that working was not merely engaging in pointless tasks for the sake of keeping busy! Work was a shared enterprise to ensure survival, directed towards a common vision for the future. Even the old people felt they could be of some use in this shared enterprise, though their 'work' was often just sitting in the sun and looking after the grandchildren and telling stories all day.



In order to survive, our people needed each other but we also knew how dependent we were on the bounty offered by land on which we had settled or which we used seasonally. People wanted the security of knowing that this bounty could be relied on from one year to the next, and so it came to be accepted that if a particular family had used a piece of land

for an appreciable length of time then they could keep using it until they no longer needed it. Working land was a way of showing we had rights in it - it was part of our customary title - and in this was justice (because it meant land was used by those who had done the work of clearing), and good sense (because those who have worked land know its potential better than anyone else). So, we Māndesho grew familiar with the place in which we lived or moved to seasonally, and in this familiarity resided a deep-rooted source of security. Familiarity is hard to quantify, but when we walked down the well-used path to our fields some of us knew that the duration of the walk was sufficient to smoke a pipe, or to whistle a certain tune or add three rings to a woven mat, and everyone knew that turning to the left as you came out of the trees brought into view the hill where prominent Māndesho ancestors were buried. Such predictability was immeasurably reassuring and it was also part of our customary title to that land - our people's familiarity bore witness to our strong rights. Yet another part of "title" was when families even buried the birth cord or sometimes the placenta of their children to symbolise their connection with the land.

I have mentioned customary "title" several times, and you will have seen that we saw title not only as being about strong rights to land but also about belonging to strong communities. In those days, if your community was not strong your people would not survive, so we invested in our community just as much as we invested in our land. Which was the more important of the two, I have often asked myself, the

investment in people or place? But I know the answer to my question: despite strong connections with place, the survival of our people as a whole has always been more important than the rights of individuals or the use of particular land. We Māndesho have always been a practical people, and in the past if a better chance of survival was afforded elsewhere then we moved, and either concocted ceremonies to keep our ancestors happy or simply took their bones with us. We felt connected with land in a broad region; the idea of connection with particular land only came later. Even when we stopped moving, and settled in one locality, we acknowledged that rights to specific land might not be ours for life; for example where land was no longer needed by a family it might pass to another family with greater need.



The Māndesho were just as pragmatic about the management of land. Everybody knows that several males in charge of the same territory will fight, it doesn't matter if you're dealing

with birds, cattle or humans, so although whole communities shared the rights to resources such as thatching reeds, control of specific land always stayed with individuals and their immediate families, with the proviso that if they no longer needed it and didn't keep working it, they might lose it. When parents grew too old to work their land, it was not cut up into unworkable pieces; either the entire area, or at least portions large enough to be usable, were left to individuals - sometimes the oldest, sometimes the youngest, and sometimes other family members with special claims. However, those who did not inherit land never had to fear starvation because, so long as a person was prepared to work, they would never be denied food and a place to stay - meeting the needs of all who belonged to the Māndesho was an over-riding responsibility. Belonging is being part of a people who knew you before you even knew yourself, and it is being where you don't have to act a part, you can be completely yourself. Such belonging is more important than boundaries or anything else in life.

A big change for the Māndesho came when strangers with fair skins arrived from Europe. Although they were at first rather helpless in our native bush, these strangers brought with them useful things like pots and blankets and guns and horses, and they also brought with them new crops. A Māndesho person could exchange labour or articles they had made for some of these goods. Perhaps you noticed that I did not say the Māndesho *people*, I said a Māndesho *person*! Yes, the goods exchanged did not go to the tribe, they went to individuals or, at most, families. That may not sound like a big

difference, but I believe that thinking about a person on their own, apart from the tribe, was what began to turn our world upside down. It happened so gradually that few stopped to consider the implications, and it was also just one subtle change in an era of change because as time went on there was talk of treaties and then new laws were made and, little by little, we began to alter the way we lived. Some of the Māndesho did not like what they saw coming, and resisted, but though some battles were won there was really no going back. Also, where there was marriage with the strangers, the line became blurred as to who were Māndesho - everyone knows that children provide more security than any treaty.



And so decades rolled by, and wars were fought and people multiplied until before you knew it the twenty first century had arrived and here we are today. Things are quite good, at least on the surface. Even the poorest of the Māndesho now

usually have enough to eat, and in their homes you can turn on a tap and get water and flick a switch and a light comes on. The State now does some of the things families used to do, like giving money if you're old or sick or don't have work, and providing places to stay, but for us old people I sometimes wonder if we weren't better off in the old days when there was still a real job for us to do. It gave purpose to life, and let us know that we belonged. Some of us still do voluntary work for the Māndesho, but most of the young people are too busy and feel they are better working at what pays the rent or the mortgage. They sometimes visit the remaining land, and they even give a bit towards projects we're busy with, but when they visit the traditional land they're mostly in holiday mode, as if Māndesho business is no longer part of real life. My own feeling is that if young people were more secure about belonging, and about their long history and their customs and language, it might stop them going off the rails so much and becoming depressed or stealing or joining gangs. Our Māndesho language is coming back, now, and that is a good thing, but our customs still tend to slide into disuse where there's no need to use them. The Māndesho elders once got together and tried to write our customs down before they were lost, but some people now view them as history and not relevant today. The only time people still use the old customs in earnest is when they think it will give them more security because, make no mistake, all of us are concerned with our survival and we'll use anything from obsolete customs to new laws to anything else if we believe it will increase our security.

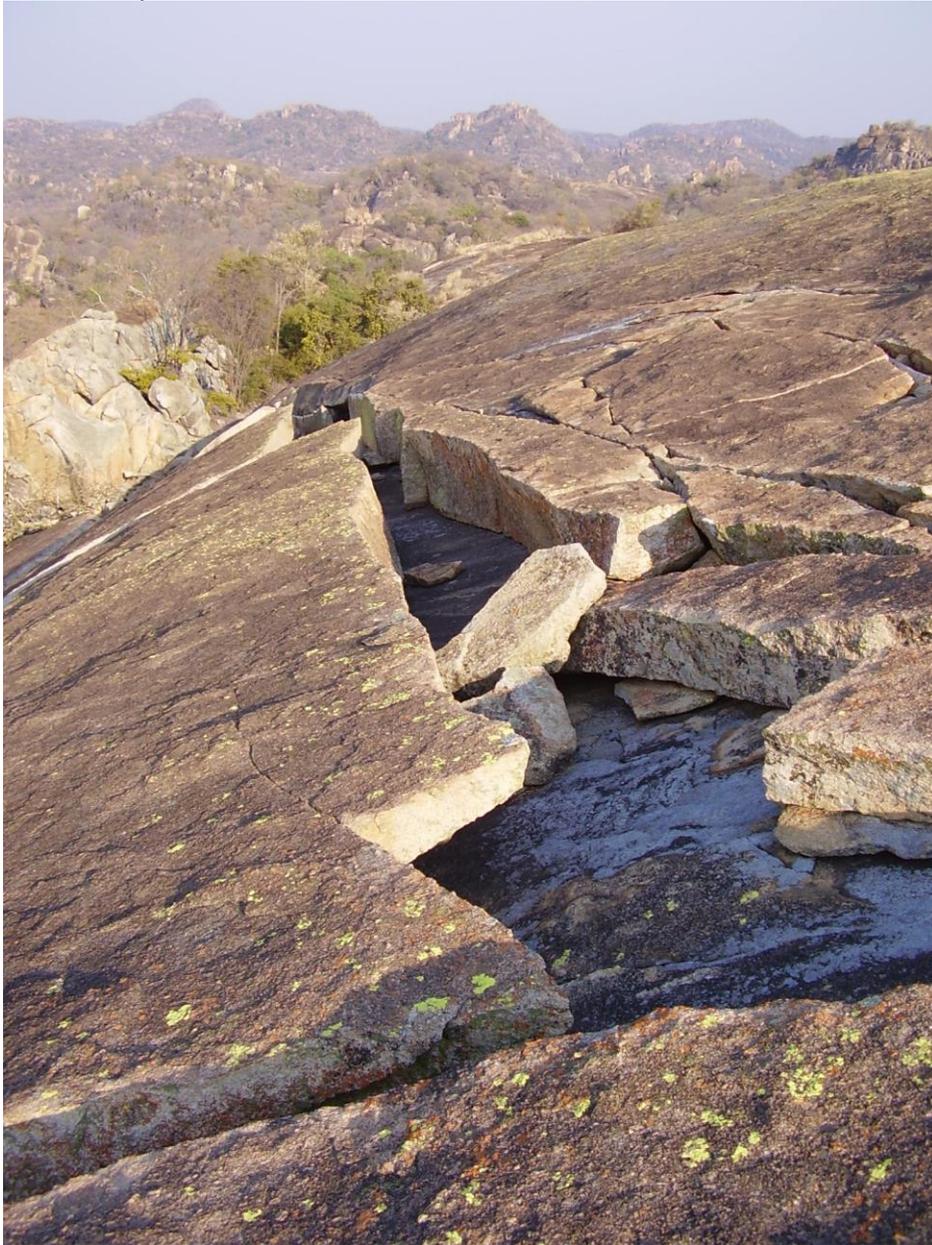
I have sometimes asked myself what I feel about "belonging" to a State, and I have concluded that being a citizen isn't the same as belonging to the Māndesho. Nowadays, the only time citizens really act like a tribe (apart from sports matches!) is when another country threatens and they have to forget petty differences and fight together. But a deep sense of belonging has gone, and with it has gone our responsibility for others. Yes, that responsibility for others is something that customary law did much better than the modern State does, I must say. When customs were written down in the law books, apart from getting some of them wrong the lawmakers managed to pin down most of the rights but they missed out on the duties and responsibilities, which is understandable, I suppose, because it's difficult to write a rule that says belonging is as important as life itself.

The modern State has also changed the whole question of boundaries to land. Nowadays I don't need to take the grandchildren to see all the places where the Māndesho collected food and remind them where the ancestors were buried and where the boundaries are, as my grandparents did. Nowadays, a land authority keeps records of boundaries and they *say* they can find a boundary position at the press of a button, though I have a long memory and I know they don't always get it right! But, so long as we keep paying the rates (which are high - I guess it all depends whether you see this as heritage land or farmland) our land rights seem safe enough and we don't even need to keep visiting or working the

land to show it's ours. That makes things easier but it's certainly no recipe for feeling any connection with the land. The worst law ever to come out was the one which said land rights should be divvied up equally, because if you've got lots of owners it's almost impossible to know who to contact if you want to do anything with the land, and if you *do* get stuck in and work the land, inevitably a whole lot of others want their share of the profits even if they haven't lifted a finger. Things operate differently in the towns, of course, because land there is just a place to stay. There, you have just one family owning land or leasing it, and there's not room to grow enough food to live on so you need a salaried job. A job gives you a little bit of the good feeling of working and feeling you belong, but you can be retrenched at any time or else you can resign, so it's completely different from belonging to a tribe. Nor is it the same when you belong to a sports club, or a church, or a neighbourhood which has a street barbeque each year. The Māndesho still call themselves a tribe but it's not as if you'd die if you didn't belong any more, and that means you can't insist on rules because people can opt out of belonging when it gets uncomfortable. The State has its rules, but custom did the duties and responsibilities thing much better, and that's probably why custom hasn't died out completely - we still need it.

So that's my story, one of survival through belonging. When people talk about land tenure custom today they often focus on the remaining land and forget about the part belonging played. You still get belonging in families, of course - a family

has to accept you as you are, and you have to accept them - and belonging also still happens in other circumstances where you feel you belong even when it hurts or is not convenient, or where you need each other to survive.



I'll end with something very strange - even when people think the Western culture is the best thing that could have happened, every now and then they seem to notice something important is missing. This often occurs at a time when

something wonderful happens - like the birth of a child - or something dreadful - like when there is serious illness - or even just when there's a special occasion like opening a new building. That's when they sometimes seem to realise that they've got this whole bunch of rights but they've lost all the stuff that made life worth living. And that's when they ask us old Māndesho over to do some of the old ceremonies and perhaps say prayers and sing, because they feel the need for some sort of ceremony to give meaning to life but they've forgotten the words and the actions. This all makes me think that maybe the best use for the remaining traditional land is as a place where people can be helped to recapture a sense of belonging; of being connected with other people, with the natural world, with the wisdom of age and with the satisfaction of useful work. We have always been a pragmatic people, and we must realise that the role of our traditional land has changed - the remaining land no longer has to meet our physical needs so we shouldn't try to make it, rather we should use it to supply what general land cannot offer. You'd need money, of course, but I can't help wondering if some of the less important land couldn't be partitioned off and leased - not sold - to individuals or families, to help generate revenue. This might enable the most precious core of that land to be used in a variety of ways aimed at reminding us of something we may be in danger of forgetting today, namely that life can take on new meaning when we work together and feel we belong together and are responsible for one other. That would be the best possible ending to my story.

