

1223 CE. EXCEPT IN MAPUNGUBWE they didn't count years that way. Those who lived on the lowlands – be it in the town below the hill, on the outlying farms and villages or at the mining compounds – counted them in carnivals of harvests and cycles of drought. The patricians on top of the hill counted them in generations of kings, of famous rain doctors and of important families about whose lineages bards sang; beginning from the timeless past when Mwali whimsically moulded the first human being with the black clay found only among the reeds of the Land of the Black Sun, and commanded her to life, using lightning as His hands and thunder as His voice. But for the traders from Arabia who came through Sofala and for the Swahili of Kilwa it was 620, counting from the year their great prophet Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina.

It was the year of the mirror. Not that there was a sudden proliferation of them in the town. There were only two known mirrors in Mapungubwe, the most celebrated one a work of Persian craftsmanship with an ornate wooden frame and blown glass coated with gold leaf at the back. It transformed all who stood in front of it into golden figures. It was brought into the town by Abdul wa

Salim, the Swahili trader. He gave it to the Royal Sculptor, Rendani son of Zwanga, in exchange for one of his three tame leopards and an elephant-load of ivory. It hung in one of the King's chambers where members of the Royal House could admire their own silly grins in gold. The second mirror belonged to Chatambudza whose claim to fame was his bachelorhood, his flair for spinning a yarn and a floor that shone as if rock rabbits had peed on it. Men often joked about his finicky tidiness and women wondered at the secret of the shimmering floor. There was no secret really. It was made of a mixture of fine dolerite gravel and black clay, like a lot of the floors in the town. After plastering the floor he rolled over it a smooth granite rock that was normally used for grinding millet until the floor was compact and hard. And then he used marble pebbles from the Limpopo River to polish it until it was smooth and shiny. The secret, therefore, if you want to call it a secret, lay in his patience and in his strength, for he pressed very hard and rubbed for a long time. He did this every new moon to keep the shimmer fresh, and he did it with his own hands even though it was regarded as women's work.

Chata's mirror – everyone called Chatambudza Chata – was also brought by the Swahili trader. It was part of a consignment that he was transporting to Mapungubwe, but due to poor packaging it broke into smithereens when his caravan of mounted oxen got bogged down in the rocky gullies of the land of the Makonde. Rendani's was saved by the solid frame and thick glass. Abdul wa Salim could only retrieve one piece about the size of two hands. He disposed of the rest of the shards in the Sabi River. That was the mirror that Chata bought for a gold ingot. It was different from Rendani's mirror. For one thing it was not framed since it was a

broken piece of a larger mirror. But also the glass was not coated with gold leaf but with molten silver. It therefore did not render golden images but likenesses that looked more like real life.

The Swahili trader had promised to bring more mirrors on his next trip, which caused quite an excitement in the town. The maidens would no longer have to go to the pond to look at themselves. Many full moons later when the trader returned with a consignment of glass beads from India people were disappointed that he had not brought the promised mirrors. He had decided that they were too risky a business after all because on the long and rough journey they were likely to break again. It had been a great loss when the first consignment had broken, despite the fact that he had mitigated it with the leopard, gold ingot and elephant tusks. He could have got much more if he had been able to supply each one of the grandees on top of the hill with a golden mirror of his own, and cheaper hand-held ones to commoners like Chata who could afford the luxury. The townsfolk hoped that if wa Salim could not fulfil his promise, then other Swahili traders who frequented the region would be wise enough to see the profitability of mirrors and would meet the demand.

Despite the disappointment, Mapungubwe continued to talk of the year as the year of the mirror.

For Chata it really was the year of the mirror. People observed that he had become much enamoured of his own image. Often he could be seen sitting on the veranda of his house admiring what he saw in the mirror. The wicked ones giggled and asked one another what there was to admire. He was a stumpy but muscular man with a broad face and a dark brown skin that looked quite thick, as if you would have to cut very deep to make it bleed. But he was not ugly. A

man could not be ugly, especially if he was hoarding as much gold as Chata was reputed to be hoarding.

On one such occasion he sat on a stool under the shade of his thatched veranda shaving off his beard while smiling at the mirror. The white foam of the mixture of wood-ash boiled in lard (which he also used for bathing himself) made him look like an elder as he scraped the hair off his chin with an old iron knife. Occasionally he rinsed it in the water in a clay basin next to his stool. He looked up when he heard voices of children chanting and laughing; a gang of little girls was singing and mocking an older boy. The boy was all grey from head to toe as if he had been rolled in a midden; his tanned loin hide was all tattered and dirty. He was wide-eyed with fear and was trying to get away from his tormentors. Chata had seen a lot of him. Boys his age were already looking after cattle in the meadows or were apprenticed to smithies and miners. But he was considered too slow for any trade and so he spent the whole day wandering in the town.

“Chenayi Chenayi with twisted eyes ... Chenayi Chenayi walks like a crab,” the little girls chanted as they followed him, dancing and clapping their hands. Chata thought the chant was rather silly; yes, the boy was bow-legged but he did not walk like a crab. He was cross-eyed, though. He should have been smart enough to take a different route when he saw the little girls playing house on the pathside because he knew that they always teased him. They were bound to find something funny in him, including his name which was a girl’s name. Chata’s eyes followed the kids for a while and then he resumed shaving his face with much deliberation and aplomb.

“Hey, leave the boy alone. What kind of children are these who are so cruel?”

Chata looked up to see Marubini shooing away the children. They ran away, variously giggling and goofing about and guffawing.

Marubini was with two of her friends, Chido and Danai. They were all carrying big balls of brown clay. They must be from the quarry; somebody was going to make pots. Their legs, arms and tanned kudu-hide skirts were smudged with mud. Despite this, Marubini looked as beautiful and as graceful as a dancer at a harvest festival. Her smooth ebony skin highlighted the whiteness of her teeth and of her sclera. Her head was shaved on all sides except on its crown where long hair grew in strands that were locked in red ochre. Her limbs were long and sinewy like those of hunters who ran long distances chasing game.

“And Chata says nothing about it,” said Marubini to her friends, but loud enough for Chata to hear. “He sees the children playing cruel games on the boy and he says nothing.”

“Marubini, leave the children alone; they’re just having fun,” said Chata, laughing.

“Ask him to show you his mirror,” whispered Chido to Marubini.

“You think playing cruel games on the poor boy is fun?” Marubini asked.

“Ask him, Marubini. He has it right there with him,” whispered Chido impatiently.

“O! Marubini of the eyes that twinkle like stars,” said Chata in an obviously sarcastic tone. “They would not be children if they were not cruel.”

“He likes you,” whispered Danai, giggling.

“Chata likes only himself,” said Marubini. “And what does he know of children when he has none?”

That was the refrain in the town: *Chata likes himself*. But unlike

Marubini the women of the town meant it as a compliment. The expression was used for those who were tidy and clean.

“I heard that,” said Chata. “I would have as many children as the stars in the sky if you were to marry me.”

Then he broke out laughing. The two girls laughed as well, but Marubini was infuriated.

“I told you he likes you,” said Danai.

“He likes stars too,” said Chido. “To him everything is like stars.”

“He’s a silly man,” said Marubini. “He thinks he’s the joker of the town. More like the idiot of the town, really.”

“Can we see your mirror, Chata?” asked Chido after coming to the conclusion that Marubini had no intention of making that request.

“Of course,” said Chata. “Come and look.”

“You know how the women will gossip that we were seen going to a man’s house,” said Marubini, trying to stop her friends.

But for the two girls the allure of the mirror was too strong. They placed their balls of clay on the grass next to the footpath and tiptoed to the veranda as if that would shield them from the busybodies of Mapungubwe. Chata let them look at themselves while he held the mirror. He dared not give it to them lest they dropped it and it broke. Where would he get another mirror if that were to happen? Marubini stood on the road for a while, but when she saw how her friends were enjoying themselves giggling at their images she walked warily to the veranda and took a peek at her image. Pride swelled in Chata’s bare chest. It heaved excitedly, but the girls were not paying attention to its rippling muscles or its hairs that looked like grains of black corn scattered on its surface. They were enthralled by their own images and made silly faces and

laughed joyfully.

Truly, a mirror was the bringer of happiness.

FOR CHATA VERY FEW things were as satisfying as the gazes of the townfolk – especially womenfolk – as he wove his way through the town. His gait was unhurried and confident; he waved at a group of women here and whistled a greeting to a young man there. He passed a compliment to a satisfied elderly man about the rich sorghum harvest piled on the threshing floor in front of a house. In turn, two grandmothers basking in the sun outside a neighbouring house passed a compliment on his attire. Younger women would not dare pass such compliments directly to a man lest they be considered forward or even loose. Three nubile girls whispered and giggled their admiration among themselves. But one of them was sane enough to bring her peers back to reality by observing: “Who would want to be Chata’s wife anyway? He loves only himself.” The second one concurred: “Why else would he still be unmarried at his age?” The third one added a new dimension to his faults: “In any case, he is born of the Vhasarwa people. Who wants to be a daughter-in-law of the Vhasarwa?”

But they all agreed that even though he was of the lowliest birth anyone in Mapungubwe could imagine he looked like royalty in the calf-length silk kanga wrapped about his waist and strings of cowrie shells and glass beads hanging from his neck across his bare chest and more cowrie shells making percussive music on his ankles. It was common knowledge that his mother was a !Kung woman,