

CULTURAL SHIFTING-SANDS: CHANGING MEANINGS OF ZIMBABWE SITES IN ZIMBABWE, SOUTH AFRICA AND BOTSWANA.

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Introduction

Zimbabwe culture sites are mostly the remains of cities and towns of Shona states that existed between 950 and 1835 A.D. Over 350 of such sites are scattered mainly on the Zimbabwe plateau, but also in the lowveld areas of northern South Africa, eastern Botswana and central Mozambique. These sites belong to three phases of what archaeologists have called the 'Zimbabwe tradition.' Current archaeological research shows that during the first phase, called the Mapungubwe phase (9-11th centuries), and which is a bit obscure, a complex state system began to develop. It was followed by the Great Zimbabwe phase (1250-1450), when the state was controlled from the capital, Great Zimbabwe. During the third phase, called Khami (1450-1835), the state had fragmented into two: Rozvi state, based at Khami, and Mutapa state, based at Kasekete. Rozvi state controlled much of eastern Botswana and a splinter group of this state, the Venda, built sites like Dzata in South Africa.

The meanings of these Zimbabwe sites have changed from pre-colonial times to the present and these changes have depended on who has managed them. In all cases, these sites were used in making power visible to the "common person." The common person in this case represents different groups of people among the subjects of pre-colonial kings and chiefs, citizens and subjects of a colonial state (settler and the colonised native), citizens of the post-colonial state as well as the tourists who visit these sites. This power that manifests itself in Zimbabwe sites has been the target of pre-colonial ruling elites, colonial governments, nationalists, postcolonial politicians and the odd charlatan. This interest has been the source of conflicts faced by heritage managers while managing these sites. For all these groups, including the colonial government, these sites have been a source of identity.

In pre-colonial and early colonial periods these sites were revered by local communities to the extent that very few people could visit them. Many of the sites had traditional custodians in the form of mediums who limited access to commoners, foreigners and women. They were also a source of conflict between colonial governments and communities, with the latter fighting to control the sites, and hence control the cultural changes that came with colonialism. To control local indigenous populations, colonial governments usurped this aspect of local history to deny locals a past that they could use to carve a new identity that could be used to overthrow the colonial government. The sites were thus declared to be of Arab/Jewish or Phoenician origin.

In the post-colonial period the new states and ethnic groups realized that they could derive from these sites the power to give the nation an identity. Hence, in Zimbabwe the state was named after the premier monument, Great Zimbabwe, and in South Africa the highest award for 'South African citizens who have accomplished excellence and exceptional achievements on the international stage' is the 'Order of Mapungubwe', Mapungubwe being the earliest phase of the Zimbabwe Culture (Sinamai 2003:107).

Changing meanings of Zimbabwe culture sites

Four Zimbabwe sites have been selected for this study, viz., Great Zimbabwe and Manyanga, in Zimbabwe, Dzata in South Africa and Domboshaba in Botswana. These four sites have shown how intangibility has changed from pre-colonial times right up to the post-colonial period. All these sites seem to have had some form of management even before colonialism. Great Zimbabwe had two clans looking after it at the advent of colonialism and Manyanga also had custodians in the form of spirit mediums from the remnant Moyo/Ncube clans in Nkayi/Silobela districts. The sites were highly respected and one could not just visit them without a good reason or permission. At Great Zimbabwe rituals were still being carried out when the first antiquarians arrived. Richard Hall, who was later appointed as the first curator of Great Zimbabwe, observed the Duma, one of the clans claiming custodianship, offering a sacrifice of black oxen on the Hill Complex. (Hall, Neal 1902: 131). The sites were sacrosanct and could not be approached without the appropriate rituals. Willie Posselt visited Great Zimbabwe in 1889 and reported that "when we came within sight of the ruins... my carriers sat down and solemnly saluted them by clapping of hands... [The] place was still regarded as hallowed to the spirits of the great". (Posselt, 1924: 74).

After the colonisation of the Zimbabwe plateau, the site was taken over by the new state and turned into a recreational area that black people could not visit. Interaction with the site, however, continued in the form of clandestine visits, usually at night. It became a symbol of the new colonial government. The colonial government buried its first heroes at the site and Rhodes even contemplated being buried at this shrine. Symbols from the sites were turned into icons of the nation, with the Zimbabwe birds appearing on the flag, coat-of-arms and coins right up to 1980. The colonial state sought to gain an ideological benefit by showing that the original builders of Great Zimbabwe were superior to the natives and in many ways related to the new rulers. With the imposition of western models of heritage management, the traditional model did not disappear, but evolved.

Local populations did not abandon the site, but continued to regard it as sacred. It was not only to be used for rituals, but also in claims of land, leadership as well as political power. Groups like those wanting to revive the ancient Rozvi kingship found new ways to interact with their heritage. In the 1930's, for instance, one claimant asked for six blocks from a wall at Great Zimbabwe to incorporate into a new building to be used as a 'temple' (Beach 1994:204). This apparently made this temple a hallowed space as it was legitimized by history. Later, when the 'community' that revered Great Zimbabwe grew to include Africans and even Black people in diaspora, the site became a symbol of identity. New rituals, like asking for ancestral blessing in the war of liberation, the naming of the new nation of Zimbabwe, and, after independence, the Great Zimbabwe Unity Galas, were all formulated to give depth to the new nation. These new rituals are, however, contested by those who feel that their role at the site is being eroded. Chiefs around Great Zimbabwe have vehemently opposed the Unity Galas as they feel that a sacred site is being used for entertainment purposes.

Manyanga, with more oral traditions than most other Zimbabwe sites, is much better known. The site was the last capital of the Rozvi state, where the last king was either killed by Ndebele warriors or committed suicide, depending on the tradition that is followed. After this defeat, the site was left under the custodianship of one of the princes (Lozani), whose descendants claim to be custodians of the site even today. The fact that this was the site of the last stand of the Shona kings against the Ndebele meant that it was revered as key to the revival of the Rozvi kingdom. As the last residence of the kings, it was sacrosanct, with several sacred sites within short distances of the site. It is also known that the Ndebele Kings paid tribute of black cattle to the mediums based at the site as a sign of respect to the deposed royals. After independence, Manyanga was a point of interest for communities in Nkayi as well as Silobela. The site represented several sacred places within the landscape. These sites were not only viewed as ritual places but as markers of territory as well. In land claims the site was viewed as the evidence of previous occupation by local communities.

Dzata, on the other hand, was under the Mphephu clan, which was the royal clan of the Venda living near the site. The site was revered as the seat of the mythical king Thoyoyandou, who is said to have united all the Venda groups that had migrated at different times from the Zimbabwe plateau. In the early 1920's and 1930's the Venda chiefs seem to have been reluctant to visit their ancestors' capital. Fouche, an archaeologist who collected artifacts from the site, reports that "the chief himself can not visit it, it appears to be regarded as unlucky" (Fouche 1937: 22). Fouche, who later excavated Mapungubwe, collected a few potsherds from Dzata and showed them to Chief Mphephu who "recoiled in horror from them." (Fouche 1937: 22). The then-South African government even declared the site a National Monument on the basis of the "great reverence in which these ruins are held by the natives..." (National Monument File 9/2/269/016).

By the early 1960's, however, the site was not revered in the same way –it became the venue of what was to be known as Dzata Day Celebrations. These festivities were meant to celebrate "the unity of the Venda Nation." Instead of "recoiling in horror" the chiefs led the people in the celebration of unity at the site.

These celebrations played into the hands of the apartheid South African government, which by then was promoting a new policy of "separate development" in which African groups were divided into 'nations' or Bantustans. Venda was declared an 'independent country' in 1978 and the celebrations at Dzata became an important tool for the new government. New rituals were formulated, like the planting of trees at the site to show allegiance to the president. Opposition arose as it was felt that the site was being used to promote the apartheid theories of the South African government. The site began to lose its lustre as stones were taken from the site to build houses and fences were stolen as the site was now perceived by the local community that had earlier revered it as a tool for the elaboration of the Bantustan ideology of the South African government.

During the post-apartheid period the site has again gained its prominence. Though the Dzata Day celebrations have stopped, the site is again revered as a symbol for Venda nationhood. Recently, the Venda have started to push for a King of the Venda Nation. The site of Dzata has again featured prominently in the politics of selection of the King. Faced with a King who was part of the struggle for democracy (Tshivhase) and a king who is a son of a puppet of the apartheid government (Mphephu), the choice was simple: "the seat of the overall VhaVenda king is at Dzata, where Mphephu lives." (Tsedu: 2003)

Domboshaba was linked to the Matobo sacred landscape and rituals were sometimes carried out at the site before emissaries were sent to the Higher Deity in the Matobo Hills. Very little is known about its importance to local communities, but the site was probably used for rituals for the communities living near it. It is also known that independent (i.e. indigenous) churches use the site for prayers. Recently, however, the site has become an important identity symbol for the Kalanga minority of Botswana. With rapid development provided by the stable Botswana economy and the policy of promoting one vernacular language (Tswana) along with English, many communities feel that their cultures have become threatened. Minorities, especially the Kalanga, started to view policies as detrimental to their cultures, hence the need to protect them. The Kalanga have formed a revivalist group, the Mukani (Arise) Action Group, to protect their culture. The group has targeted one of the Zimbabwe culture sites, Domboshaba, as a point of unity for the Kalanga community. Since 1999 the group has held well-attended cultural festivals at the site. Though the group advertises these festivals as being for Kalanga dances, folklore and language, their major role is to promote Kalanga nationalism. The Mukani Action Group has even lobbied government for development in Kalanga areas as well as for affirmative action in the government employment sector.

The organisation is led by urban activists who have realized that the only way to bring the rural population to support them is to use the site that they revere.

Conclusion: Defining Intangibility

Zimbabwe sites have barely been separated from the political environment of the sub-region. The way these sites have been presented, interpreted and used from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period shows that the sites have been for long linked to the centres of power.

In the colonial and postcolonial periods the Western model of heritage management is often imposed on a traditional model. The traditional model does not, however, remain static; it shifts as it compromises with the new models, maintains its position and fights off irrelevance. Hence, the old rituals are replaced by new ones. Where these sites were private sacred spaces, frequented only by the royal classes and mediums, they are now opened up to the common person. With these sites, however, the emerging nations want to create new rituals that involve the larger community, the nation. The traditional model accords significance not only to the preservation of the structure, but to the cultural and religious values that constitute a part of the technology of power. The demands for more interaction with Great Zimbabwe by the Nemamwa clan have often been accompanied by demands to restore the Nemamwa chieftainship. The sites are thus a manifestation of power - power to control or to effect changes within the community. The wider community, the nation, behaves likewise. It appropriates or ignores heritage for a project of 'national unity'. The past is meant to drive citizens to excellence and show the world the antiquity of the nation, as well as the speed at which its people climbed the evolutionary ladder. The sites thus become a part of the narrative of the nation. Communities, who view the sites as safeguards of their culture, have often challenged these national narratives.

The above shows that subsequent changes in the political atmosphere of the region resulted in changes in meanings of Zimbabwe culture sites. Each generation uses the past differently, making different claims, ignoring some of the old ones and creating a past relevant to the political environment of the time. These new claims are, however, always challenged by those spheres of power that see modernity as something that erodes their traditional world. This creates multifaceted contests that have often pitted the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, the community and the nation, the rich (who would rather use the site for recreation) and the poor. The way in which one views the sites is determined by one's standing in society.

The management of heritage is often inseparable from issues of power and ultimately from local and national politics. The sites are a manifestation of power and all who need power, either to control a small community or the whole nation, often turn to them for legitimisation. The values that are accorded to a heritage site by these different groups are presented as if they co-inhabited peacefully with each other, yet the above shows political contests that show up in land claims, legitimisation of power of the state and greater participation in the economy.

Values represent people's beliefs, opinions and ideologies. A community demanding to carry out rituals at a site may be expressing the need to protect aspects of its culture which it feels are under siege by modernity.

Heritage management thus transcends the mere restoration of sanitized monuments. It has to balance power spheres in a way that allows all values of the site to be respected. Heritage managers have to assess the power and politics behind the claims by the state, communities, tourists and even individuals within communities. That way they would realize that ignoring values actually amounts to ignoring people's opinions and ideologies. They would also realize that communities and nations are not homogeneous and thus it is not always possible to just talk of 'managing sites with local communities'. It is in understanding all facets of the 'community' or 'nation' that heritage managers can understand the multifaceted system of value ascribed to these sites.

ABSTRACT

Heritage managers have for long failed to recognise the intangible aspects of immovable cultural heritage. With new developments in archaeology's expanding disciplines, which have largely been influenced by fourth-world politics, many can now identify the intangible values of sites. Heritage managers continue, however, to face problems in the management of sites because of the failure to understand the simultaneous existence of different systems of value overlaying their official meaning. They have also failed to identify the origins of these attachments to a site and why there are constant clashes between other numerous competing values.

This paper will examine sites in South Africa (Dzata), Botswana (Domboshaba) and Zimbabwe (Great Zimbabwe and Manyanga) to show that the 'intangibility' of a site is in constant movement, as it compromises with other competing values. It will show through the study of these sites that "intangibility" is simply a manifestation of power within a cultural landscape. Power is made visible to the common man or to the state through values that are ascribed to cultural heritage sites. This power may be used to control change within communities, or to effect change within that same community or nation. Thus, for traditional authorities, it is easier to control the community if the religious values of the site are intact, and for the state it might be easier if a site is made to represent the nation in new ways. Managing heritage sites like those mentioned above thus requires an understanding of the origins of values attached to these sites by different sections of the community/nations. This paper will use the aforementioned sites to prove that when one examines the ascription of values to these sites as manifestations of power, managing them becomes easier.

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