

MAKASVA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE, RAINMAKING AND HEALING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EASTERN ZIMBABWE.

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Introduction

Modern use of archaeological sites for traditional ceremonies and ritual practice, particularly rock art sites in places like Matobo Hills, Tsodilo Hills and Drakensberg World Heritage Sites, has been observed in southern Africa. The role of living communities in the active use of; and engagement with archaeological heritage through ritual practice is the subject of this paper. We focus on the use of sites for rainmaking ceremonies with specific reference to *Makasva*, a rainmaking ceremony still practiced in the Zimunya communal lands in eastern Zimbabwe. Continuity in ritual activities suggests that communities in these landscapes draw on the past to reconstruct and negotiate their present identities. However, such use clearly shows the processes of integration and remaking of both value and practice in the moulding of such identities. It is evident that communities draw on material culture from earlier periods such as the Stone Age in the construction of their ritualized worldviews. The Shona-Kalanga cultural landscape where the case study is located is rich in examples of engagement of the past in contemporary ritual activity. We examine the symbolic meaning of these rituals, their significance in the lives of contemporary communities and their relationship to the archaeological heritage in these landscapes. It will be argued that future management of these sites can benefit from our understanding of the worldviews of the living cultures that incorporate them into their cultural heritage.

Traditionally, archaeologists in southern Africa have tended to separate the study of the farming communities and Stone Age hunter gatherer lifestyles. This has been partly out of chronological necessity and partly an influence of the training of the archaeologists which reproduced this paradigm. However in the study of the African past, the study of later hunter gatherer people can not be really separated from their iron using farming counter parts (Denbow 2004). It is increasingly becoming evident that the two groups share many commonalities that intergraded into each other especially in their rites and rituals. This paper looks at one aspect of these commonalities, which is the ritual significance of rock shelters in rainmaking ceremonies. It is based on observations of the integration of Stone Age cultural material, especially in the form of rock art sites, into the socio-economic dynamics of the present day farming communities. We examine one rock art site that has become the centre of rainmaking ceremonies for the Shona people of Zimunya communal lands in eastern Zimbabwe. We also draw comparisons to other rock art sites that are sacred within farming communities in other parts of the Southern African sub-region, particularly Mozambique and Botswana, and examine how different social aspects of those communities seem to integrate with Stone Age sites (cf. Ouzmen & Smith 2004).

Zimunya

The Zimunya communal land is found in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe near the Zimbabwean-Mozambique border. Geographically, the area is characterised by a high mountainous topography which makes it one of the wettest and coolest regions of the country, receiving a mean annual rainfall exceeding 2000mm. However, the Zimunya area itself does not receive as much rainfall because it lies on the lee side of Vumba-Tsetsera mountain range which affects the orographic rainfall. It is very erratic, with an annual average of 700 mm. The people of Zimunya however, believe that the bad years are usually the result of anger on the part of their ancestral spirits because of some misdeed in the community. Thus, in order to ensure that there is adequate rain every year, they have to propitiate their ancestors by conducting rainmaking ceremonies. The rain season in much of southern Africa including Zimbabwe is between November and March. Thus, the rainmaking ceremonies are held between August and October, just before the onset of the season.

After several seasons of archaeological research in the area between 2002 and 2005, it was realised that several of the archaeological sites found during surveys, especially rock art sites are regarded as sacred by the present day Shona people in the area and one such rock art site, Dzimbabwe hill, is a major rainmaking centre of the Zimunya community. Although smaller ceremonies are held elsewhere at the village level, the main ceremony for the chiefdom is held at this painted hill. Archaeologically, however, it is generally accepted that the rock art was drawn by Late Stone Age Hunter-Gatherer communities who used to inhabit the whole of southern Africa before the coming of the Bantu people about 2000 years ago. In common with many other contemporary Bantu speaking people in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in southern Africa, the people of Zimunya state that they have no cultural or other links with the rock art. They state that their own ancestors, whose occupation of the area can be traced back to the 19th Century, found the paintings there and generally attribute the art to “maBushmen”. This raised important questions with regards to why rock shelters that contain LSA rock art are regarded as sacred by them and why culturally important ceremonies such as rainmaking are focused on such sites. This was especially interesting against the background that there is no direct cultural continuity or relationship between the LSA hunter-gatherers, the producers of the art and the contemporary Bantu farming communities. It was against this background that it was decided to document the rainmaking ceremony in Zimunya in order to gain insights into possible links and connections between the LSA material culture, LSA use and perceptions of the landscape and the contemporary communities.

Dzimbabwe hill, the rainmaking shrine

Dzimbabwe Hill (Plate 1) consists of several rock shelters. However, only one of them has rock art made up of three large panels as well as LSA stone artefacts on the shelter floor. The art includes both human and animal figures. Interestingly, it is also one of the only two sites out of over 100 rock art sites found in the Zimunya that have depictions of giraffe. The dominant painted animal is kudu, which is a ubiquitous animal in the rock art of Zimunya (Nhamo 2005). The density of the LSA stone tools on the surface shows that the

shelter was intensively used by the hunter gatherer communities. However, as the site is considered sacred, no archaeological investigations by way of excavation could be carried out. Excavations at other rock art sites in this area have yielded dating evidence indicating LSA occupation around the 8th millennium BC.

In addition to the LSA material, there is evidence that the site was also used during the Iron Age. Another shelter next to it has house remains and pottery showing its use as a settlement site in later prehistoric times. The rain custodian also informed us that the hill was also used for settlement by his ancestors before they moved to the plains below the hill, following which it has been used as a burial place and for rituals associated with rainmaking. At present there are six graves of former rainmaking spirit mediums of the Zimunya chieftaincy and as noted above, this is where the main ceremony of the whole chieftainship is conducted.



Plate 1. *Dzimbahwe Hill, Zimunya.*

The rainmaking ceremony

The whole community of Zimunya contributes the grain and labour for preparing the beer that is offered to the ancestors for the rainmaking ceremony. The grain is collected by the chief who in turn hands it over to the rain spirit medium. Women who are past child-bearing age convene to brew the beer. On the day of the celebrations, six pots of beer are brought to the hill and a pot is offered to each ancestor buried at the site. Some of the beer is splashed onto the rock paintings. The ceremony is characterised by singing and dancing (Plate 2). Only adult members of the community are allowed at the shrine because vulgar

language is used in the songs and speeches addressed to the ancestors as a way of provoking them to release the rains. The accompanying dances are overtly sexual, and clearly show an association between rain and sexual activities. It is said that on hearing the vulgar songs, the ancestors get aroused and then release the rain. Similar practices and beliefs have also been observed in other parts of eastern Zimbabwe, showing that it is a widespread practice (Jacobson-Widding 1990; 2000:181). Sanders (2002), also has a detailed discussion of this symbolism of fertility in east Africa.

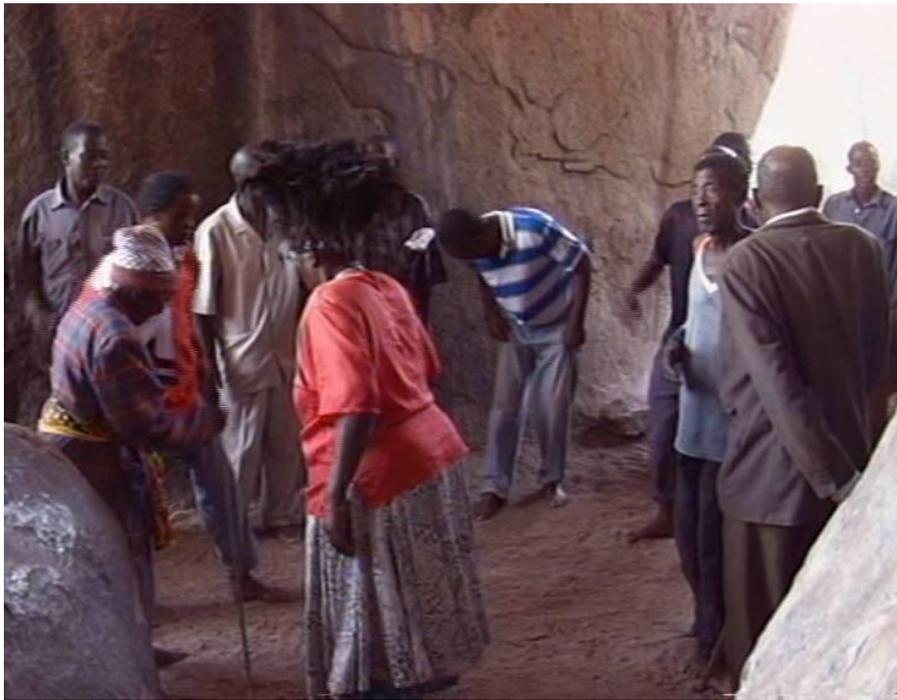


Plate 2. *Part of the rainmaking ceremony at Dzimbahwe Hill.*

After the ceremony at the shrine, people reconvene at the homestead of the rain spirit medium and continue dancing and feasting until late into the night. It is believed that if the ancestors accept the offerings, there should be a shower of rain before the end of the day and heavier rains should fall within three days. Although we did not get a shower after this particular rainmaking ceremony, it did rain within three days of the ceremony!

Discussion

Rainmaking ceremonies, such as the one briefly described above, are a common feature of southern African societies. Ranger (1973) discusses what he termed Territorial Cults of central Africa which were also centres of rainmaking. The Matopos in the south west has been one such significant shrine in Zimbabwe since the 19th century. Today it is still being used but to a lesser extent due to the Christianisation of various communities. Several other “cult centres” have been observed in other parts of southern Africa, such as in Malawi and Zambia (Ranger 1973).

Most of the discussions about these rainmaking centres have focussed on their role in the historical development of contemporary communities, especially their encounter with Christianity (Alexander and Ranger 1998). The physical contexts in which they take place have not been seriously considered. Among the different societies in the region, they have been known to be conducted at shrines that vary from pools, mountains, sacred groves to particular trees. These all constitute natural landscapes which are transformed into cultural landscapes. The actual rites and those who conduct them may also differ between places. In this paper, we have made the observation that these ceremonies take place at archaeological sites that have rock art and other material manifestations of LSA hunter gatherer communities. It now appears that there are several such sites in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the region that are used for rainmaking and other rituals. The Matopos Hills in western Zimbabwe, well known for their LSA rock art sites are also known to be a major regional abode of Mwari (God) in southern Africa. The local people regard the rock art site of Nwsatugi in the Matopos as the place where Mwari passed through on the way to the Njelele shrine, where he now resides. Njelele remains the centre of rainmaking ceremonies as well as other religious activities and is visited by many people from within Zimbabwe and from Botswana. The site of Silozwane is also still being used for these rainmaking ritual practices. Elsewhere in the country, some few kilometres to the north of the city of Harare is the famous rock art site of Domboshava, declared a national monument in the 1960s. Up until the time when the practice was prohibited by the colonial government and more recently by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, the rock art site was a significant place for rainmaking for the local Chinamora community (see Pwiti & Mvenge 1996). Mhakwe in Wedza in east central Zimbabwe is another site which was also used for rainmaking ceremonies (Matsikure 2002/3). It is now abundantly clear therefore that the rock art site in Zimunya is one of several such sites being used by contemporary communities in Zimbabwe for various rituals and ceremonies.

Outside Zimbabwe, the site of Chinhamapere in the Manica Province, Mozambique and also a national monument is a very significant rainmaking site. Every year a rain making ceremony is performed at the site (Saetersdal 2005 & this volume) and traditional beer is splashed onto the painted human images on the rock face as part of the offerings to the ancestors.

Other uses of rock art sites

As noted above, rock art sites are regarded as sacred and spiritually powerful places and are also being used in other different ways for the well-being of contemporary Bantu communities, besides rainmaking. In Botswana, the rock art sites at the Tsodilo Hills have historically been used for rainmaking, while the rock art sites in the Moremi Gorge are regarded as an integral part of the sacred cultural landscape. In recent years, rock paintings from sites in eastern Botswana and parts of Zimbabwe (Manyanga, *pers. comm.*) have begun to be used by traditional healers for healing purposes. Painted rock face panels are pecked in an effort to scrap off the painting from the rock, which is believed to contain powerful healing properties. The painted rock fragments are crushed into a powder which

is then mixed with other ingredients to make traditional medicine.

Cultural relationships, continuity or coincidence?

Throughout the whole ceremony in Zimunya we did not observe any indications of direct connection or relationship between the rock art or the stone artefacts and the rainmaking ceremony. When we inquired into the possible relationships, the response from the different people at the ceremony was that there is no link and it was reiterated that rock art was “Bushman” and the ancestors found it there. What was important about the shrine was the rock shelter and the fact that the ancestors are buried there.

Research in southern Africa has shown that rock art was especially located at places that had religious meaning to the painting communities. Among hunter gatherer communities, ethnographic accounts show that some rock art shelters became important ritual centres due to the potency derived from the painted images in them (Lewis-Williams 1994; Ouzman 2001). The rock paintings are now generally regarded as reflections of hunter gatherer cosmology. Most of the images often show animals or events associated with out of body travels, and many other metaphors. The shamans who saw these visions believed they can transcend from the world of their communities to the spirit world, and rock shelters were thought to be the medium, among others, of this interface and transition. The potency in the animals drawn on the rock shelters could also be harnessed through dances in the shelters by members of the community (Lewis-Williams 1994). Rock shelters were therefore important because of their role as the medium for the transformation, and as medium on which visions were communicated back to the society. Of equal importance in this context is the observation that rock art is also central to rainmaking among the hunter-gatherer communities where some of the animals painted have symbolic links to rainfall. For example, in Namibian rock art, the giraffe is interpreted as having been important in rainmaking while elsewhere, including the art of Zimunya, the kudu, among other things signified different types of rain. The female kudu symbolised gentle rain while the male kudu symbolised violent storms.

Among the contemporary Bantu communities, rock shelters offer cool places for the burial of spirit mediums and chiefs. Such shelters are the ideal environments for the habitation of the spirits of the land. Although the burial of chiefs and rainmaking spirit mediums in caves and rock shelters may not be a wide practice, it is certainly associated with the historical and contemporary eastern Shona people (Ranger 1987), and other societies. It has also been archaeologically documented as the commonest burial practice of the prehistoric Musengezi culture of central north eastern Zimbabwe (Pwiti & Mahachi 1991). Thus, there is a shared cosmology between the LSA hunter-gatherers and historical and contemporary Bantu communities in their perception of rock shelters. Both appear to ascribe a high degree of spirituality and power to such places.

Researchers working on the contact period of hunter gatherers and farming communities have indicated the role that the former could have played in bringing rain to farming communities, on which they were so dependent for their crops and domestic food animals. In Namibia for example, rainmaking for the pastoral communities appears to have mainly

been the preserve of hunter-gatherer men who through time were able to negotiate important and powerful positions for themselves among the pastoralists (Kinahan *pers comm*). Elsewhere, this could have led to the politicisation of rain making leading to its eventual association with territorial cults. It is unfortunate that in Zimbabwe there is no suitable ethnography to assess the role of hunter gatherer communities among farming communities.

Conservation and management of sacred rock art sites

The use of rock art sites by contemporary communities presents serious challenges to the professional heritage manager. The problems associated with managing archaeological cultural places imbued with intangible values have been discussed from various perspectives by a number of scholars (see Layton (ed) 1993, Pwiti & Mvenge 1996, Pwiti 1996, Ndoro 2001, Katsamudanga 2003; Manyanga 1999, 2003). On the one hand is the now generally accepted position that cultural heritage resources belong to the local communities and as such, they should derive benefits from them. In this sense, the practice in Botswana for example, of using the paint from rock art sites for curing illness is supposedly derived from a sense of a link with the past and a sense of ownership. On the other hand, modern heritage management deplors the damage done to the valuable art as a result of such traditional use of heritage resources. It is illegal to engage in any act that alters or damages the archaeological heritage.

With regards to rainmaking ceremonies, it is well known that droughts are a frequent phenomenon in southern Africa. Rainmaking ceremonies are therefore a constantly required practice. Thus, denying local communities the right to propitiate their ancestors at these places is tantamount to inviting a disastrous agricultural season. However, we have observed that the rainmaking ceremonies normally involve splashing beer on the rock art. This practice will moisten the art and in the long term, result in damage to the painted images. In addition, many of these places have also become burial grounds for the rainmaking spirits. It is thus a serious case of cultural suppression to ask the contemporary communities to hold their ceremonies elsewhere or to stop them from splashing beer onto the paintings, especially when this is regarded as an integral part of the offerings to the ancestors. Perhaps the site of Domboshava is the best example of the problems associated with managing archaeological sites that are still being used in ritual practices. Pwiti and Mvenge (1996) presented a detailed account of the problems at this site. We will not go into detail regarding that site except to mention that at one point, a whole painted panel was nearly obliterated after oil paint had been splashed on it by unknown members of the local community. This came following the development of conflict between NMMZ and the local communities over the use of the site for rainmaking ceremonies, among a host of other issues.

Situations where archaeological heritage sites also have intangible cultural values to the local people also present challenges in terms of defining the heritage and its ownership. The shelter in Zimunya has burials of previous rain spirit mediums. Monitoring and management of such places has always been the responsibility of the related elders of the family. To the local community the burials of their ancestors and the ceremonies they hold

constitute the heritage at the site. The professional manager would be an “outsider” when it comes to managing such places. There is ample evidence that local communities resent the show of power by the professional manager who comes in armed with heritage legislations. At a recent “stake holder’s” meeting for example, traditional leaders in Zimbabwe have claimed that they are the owners of cultural heritage and have refused to accept the status of “stake holders” that NMMZ has tried to adopt in the effort to widen the spectrum of national heritage management by involving traditional authorities and local communities.(Pwiti & Chirikure In prep)

In some cases such as in Zimunya, the sacred shrines are well preserved due to the taboos imposed by local traditional leaders. The shrine at Madzimbahwe is visited only once a year by ordinary members of the community in order for them to participate in the rainmaking ceremony. No-one is allowed to visit the place again in the same year.

The ecological implication of traditional rituals is beginning to be appreciated internationally (Bernard 2003). The taboos associated with water and rain spirits have allowed continued existence of sacred groves and forests for a long time. While we discuss the management concerns of archaeological heritage in sacred areas, it is equally important to take note of the contribution of indigenous practices to both this archaeological heritage and the communities’ environment.

Summary

The spiritual cultural significance of rock shelters transcends the traditional archaeological research distinction between farming communities and hunter-gatherer societies of southern Africa. Several rock shelters are symbols of power to harness the potency of natural forces, the power to heal, and interface with the spiritual world. The power to control rain and to tame animals is so documented in rock paintings of the hunting and gathering communities. Likewise farming communities see rock shelters as domains of the spirits. While things are changing for some communities, others still cherish these virtues and would want continued practice of the rituals that assure the continued fertility of the land.

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