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The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage

Joost Fontein

University of Edinburgh, j.fontein@ed.ac.uk

Neil L. Norman

College of William and Mary, nlnorman@wm.edu

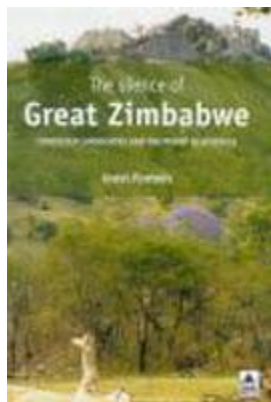
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Book Review



Joost Fontein, *The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage*. New York: UCL Press (dist. by Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA), 2006, 264 pp., \$34.95 (paper) ISBN 978-1-59874-221-3, \$89.00 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-59874-220-6.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Neil L. Norman, Ph.D., College of William and Mary

Almost all metrics, used to measure strife and human suffering, indicate times are very difficult in Zimbabwe. In the past year, reporters from the *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have documented "super-hyper-inflation" with percentages in the millions, outbreaks of Cholera, and political unrest associated with widespread accusations of voting irregularities in favor of long-time president and elder of the dominant Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party Robert Mugabe. Just as an uneasy power-sharing agreement began to take hold between ZANU-PF and the main opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai was severely injured and his wife killed in a massive car accident near Harare (McGreal 2009). Accounts of political turmoil describing Zimbabwe are plentiful in the popular media. Likewise, academic paths leading to Zimbabwe are well-worn by researchers investigating major political and economic restructuring and related issues of regional unrest. The narratives of such events often focus on the action of colossal figures such as Mugabe and Tsvangirai and the concentric waves of political power and intrigue radiating around them. In a similar fashion, the iconic archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe, from which the modern state derives its name, has most often been chronicled in terms of its importance to early international trading networks and the impressive wealth that pooled in elite areas of the site as well as pejorative -- and now debunked -- arguments that groups from outside of sub-Saharan Africa constructed and managed the site. In *The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage*, Joost Fontein attempts to shift the investigative gaze away from the actions of national political figures and away from regional and trans-regional political economies to an intensely local level. This, he accomplishes through rendering a local history of Great Zimbabwe that documents how local Shona speaking communities (i.e., the Nemanwa, Charumbira, Mugabe clans) living near the site "construct" it as a font of historical memory and a politicized landscape around which authority is contested.

The engagingly written monograph is a revised version of Fontein's dissertation, which was supervised by Jeanne Cannizzo. Fontein conducted research for the project between 2000 and 2004 and focused his study in the area immediately surrounding the site of Great Zimbabwe located in the central/southeastern region of the state of Zimbabwe. As part of the study, Fontein conducted interviews with 70 people of whom 20 were established *masvikiro*, or religious specialists who claimed to have spirits occasionally possess them. Not surprisingly, *masvikiro* figure prominently, as will be explored below, in political discourses

regarding ancestors. Fontein supplements solid fieldwork with archival research in both Zimbabwe and European archives. His stated goal for the project was to position himself between the debates and discussions among the Nemanwa, Charumbira, and Mugabe clans, who all claim ownership or direct affinity to Great Zimbabwe. However, he found himself embroiled in the politics of the Great Zimbabwe, specifically local debates over conflicting narratives of the past.

Recent accounts of Great Zimbabwe *pro forma* addresses several generations of wholly uncomplimentary and at times blatantly racist characterizations that focused on its ancient foreign -- most often white -- origins. In Chapter 1, Fontein nimbly, albeit briefly, summarizes what he describes as the "Zimbabwe Controversy" or a "Cavalcade of Fact and Fantasy" and points the reader to a much broader body of scholarship addressing issues of origins. After the historiographical summary, Fontein develops the argument that as a result of the European Enlightenment, a linear and progressive perspective of time and the past became embodied in the development of the modern humanities and social sciences. He argues that archaeology and history enact "disembedding mechanisms" to appropriate knowledge of the past, through claims to "professionalism" and "objectivity," and in effect, marginalize other ways of perceiving the past through a sense of place, the body, memory, etc. Fontein suggests that given the long history of colonial and racist renderings of Great Zimbabwe, where the existence of a local African past was often denied, it is justifiable for trained archaeologists to use claims to "science" and "objectivity" to debase biased constructions of the past. Yet far from simply debating and deconstructing documentary artifacts of the colonial past, Fontein frames his exploration in the present in terms of how the related enterprises of managing Great Zimbabwe and the production of knowledge regarding it are both dominated by such disembedding mechanisms that deny or deemphasize local understandings (p. 12).

In Chapter 2, Fontein addresses this lacuna and introduces the concept of "history-scape" as an object of analysis that address the fact that conflicting debates over Great Zimbabwe are located within a shared discursive as well as physical landscape. To the present, Great Zimbabwe is thoroughly steeped in the local negation of political authority and until recently served as a burial site for clans whose claims of ownership and custodianship of the site are in direct conflict with governmental officials. Yet, the widespread distrust by local Shona-speaking communities of governmental officials did always work to lessen heated debates and tension between and within given clans. In these debates, oral traditions and competing histories of Great Zimbabwe are mustered, manipulated, and tied to larger national and international discussions to make claims of authority within a continually shifting social field. Fontein suggests that it is the dominance of a "professional" archaeology and the "quest for objectivity" maintains the silence associated within this social field by keeping stories of Great Zimbabwe untold to a wider audience and the voices surrounding the site unheard.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Fontein explores the local history-scape surrounding Great Zimbabwe, specifically the arenas in which histories are produced and those people who recount and contest such histories. Fontein argues that members of the Shona communities consume the past on a daily basis, while those people within a clan who are considered to

be particularly knowledgeable about its past and exercise a degree of control over both the narrative and local political processes. Based on the logic of how history is constructed and curated, ancestors are intimately involved in both the historic past -- events with which many were involved -- and moments in the present when those events are recounted. Nonetheless, these local understandings of the past are far from "traditional" or "popular" in that when politically expedient local historians and political contestants freely borrow from or recast "academic" accounts. Fontein's liberal use of block quotes from field notes provides a subjective depth to explorations of these debates.

For those groups living around Great Zimbabwe, spirit mediums, or *masvikiro*, are considered to occupy a liminal space between physical and cosmological worlds and a social. Semi-private consultation sessions with *masvikiro* and public *bira* celebrations -- where animals are sacrificed and commensal feasts are enjoyed -- are two regularly reoccurring events when communication with the ancestors is in high relief against the quotidian rhythm of daily village life (cf. Schmidt 1996). As such, these public and private ceremonies are critical to the performance and negotiation of political power as well as keeping the ancestors engaged in the process of creating histories. For Fontein, at least part of the silences referenced by the title of his book relates to the quiet, anger, and loss that results from the breakdown in communications between ancestors and their descendents. Thus, he argues that is critical to consider how spirituality or sacredness can be embodied in the landscape, in much the same way that landscape can be embodied in the past. Specifically, Fontein documents accounts of the ancestors turning their backs on the communities surrounding Great Zimbabwe, because of perceived desecration of the site. Fontein's collaborators suggest that customs not followed and ceremonies not enacted are related to the voices at Great Zimbabwe ceasing. When Fontein asked "what are your earliest memories of Great Zimbabwe?" Aiden Nemanwa responded "It used to have a voice" (p. 89). Sacredness in this example was reinforced by whisperings of ancestors emanating from the walls of Great Zimbabwe.

Fontein spends much of chapters 3, 4, and 5 exploring historical and modern "desecrations" have silenced the ancestors. In excavations between 1902 and 1904 many "recent" burials were removed to access older archaeological material. Likewise, the well-publicized removal of carved soapstone birds from Great Zimbabwe to museums in Europe dislocated objects held sacred to local communities while the fencing of the site to deter looting and promote conservation had the effect of separating local communities from the site, which in turn had the effect of cutting off the ancestors from "their" communities. Moreover, Shona speaking groups living near the site consider the act of cementing over Chisikana springs to accommodate the construction of a golf course, as also having the effect of displacing the spirits that lived there.

Parts of the cultural potency of the site relates to the fact that at least some of the ancestors and spirits residing in and around the site relate to, and were involved with, relatively recent events with national and international implications. For example, Fontein demonstrates that throughout the colonial and post-colonial period Great Zimbabwe has been constantly drawn into revolutionary and nationalistic endeavors. In Chapters 6 and 7, Fontein demonstrates that during the First *Chimurenga*, the Shona word for struggle or

resistance, against British rule of then Rhodesia, the site was central to discussions, planning, and actions associated with revolution. Fontein explores issues of nationalism and links Great Zimbabwe to broader issues of monumentality including, the use by ZANU (after 1988 ZANU-PF) officials of archaeological imagery in efforts of resistance to white minority rule of then Rhodesia. The ZANU logo during resistance was an image of the iconic stone birds of Great Zimbabwe with the words "let's rebuild" listed below. Fontein then goes on to investigate how Great Zimbabwe has been used locally in differing constructions of the past to legitimize a military invasion/conquest through colonization, anti-colonization, and the nationalistic liberation movement. He suggests a relative failure of the post-independence government to engage with and act upon the view of Great Zimbabwe as a national sacred site, from whence the authority of ancestors was bestowed upon the liberation, as a shortcoming which was also recounted by members those living around the site.

Great Zimbabwe has been invested with new significance after it was named a world heritage site. Fontein explores the issue of professionalization of heritage management at a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Chapters 8 and 9, including the micro-politics of reconstructing walls and structures at the site as well as incorporating a modern Shona village in the interpretation of the archaeological site that flourished from the 13th to 15th centuries AD. Chapter 10 contains Fontein's concluding remarks including his characterization, following Barbra Bender, that politicized landscape such as Great Zimbabwe are always in a state of becoming.

In summary, Fontein's effort represents a solid and timely contribution to the investigation of Great Zimbabwe. The focus and orientation of the book directly address recent calls for African archaeologies sensitive to the local production of history, and which permit intellectual space for those histories to exist alongside other academic accounts (Schmidt and Walz 2007). It will be read with interest by researchers interested in heritage management, engaging local descendant communities, the politics of the past, and the role of monumentality in nationalistic endeavors. Although his writing style is crisp and his literature summaries substantive, those not familiar with the larger debates surrounding Great Zimbabwe would be advised to read this text alongside other accounts (e.g., Garlake 1973; Pikarai 2001). The few images included in the text, particularly those of Fontein's collaborators, did a good job of reinforcing the major themes of the text and orienting the reader to the site. However, there were several inconsistencies and omissions between the in text citation and the bibliography. Moreover, the text left this reviewer wanting more: specifically I would push Fontein to address how the Shona communities living around the site use more quotidian artifacts and architectural elements in the construction of, and debate over, local histories. Fontein's collaborators are living within a massive archaeological settlement system in which more mundane aspects of the Great Zimbabwe settlement complex are, presumably, plentiful. The question remains of how such items are referenced vis-à-vis the production of local histories. In a clear voice, Fontein reminds historians and archaeologists that issues of scale are critical in historical inquiry, specifically the histories and discussions of those living in smaller scale communities who rarely have an authoritative platform. However, it is equally important to keep in mind the different scales of society that existed in the archaeological past and foreground them in the

mosaic understanding that is developing of Great Zimbabwe. With these minor critiques noted, it is important to conclude with the point that Fontein's work gives new, and much needed, insight into Shona understandings of the connections between the recent human suffering in Zimbabwe and the "silenced" site of Great Zimbabwe.

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