

CHAPTER 63

THE ZIMBABWE CULTURE AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

*Origins, Development, and Consequences
of Social Complexity in Southern Africa*

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, ‘social complexity’ refers to the development of social formations synonymous with ranked forms of organization that appeared south of the Zambezi from the late first millennium AD. As this happened, some societies were mobilized under political leadership in order to build public works and produce surplus food for people living in urban centres. Political leaders were also able to levy taxes from trade goods to generate surplus wealth that was used to finance public projects such as stone-walled monumental buildings. These southern Zambezi societies were part of a regional network tied to global commerce involving eastern Africa and Asia, and were organized in the form of chiefdoms and states displaying different levels of sociopolitical stratification. Population aggregations resulted in some settlements attracting up to 5,000 people or more, especially from the 10th century AD. The population in these towns displayed an array of specializations, producing goods and services, supported by a hinterland involving farmers, miners, hunters, metalworkers, and other specialists. The bigger settlements were the residences of chiefs or kings. The largest of these sites were probably capital centres, where central authority or government was based, supported by an administrative authority and in some cases an army. Archaeologists have used stone-walled architecture to define the territorial limits of some of these political formations.

This chapter discusses chiefdom and states in southern Zambezia, from Toutswe (700–1300) and Mapungubwe (1200–1300) in the Shashe–Limpopo Basin, through Great Zimbabwe (1300–1550) and then Torwa-Changamire (1400–1830) and Mutapa (1450–1900)

(Fig. 63.1). States are ultimately political and socioeconomic experiments that to a large measure are highly authoritative and consumptive. As such, they are bound to fail, disbanding, collapsing, or declining because of the strain that they exert on their subjects. Hence, greater cultural complexity is not the ideal, but rather an exceptional attainment. Importantly, the southern Zambezi region also saw the development of lesser societies that were impacted upon or spawned by these centralized societies, such as in Nyanga (see Stump, Ch. 46 above).

EARLY CHIEFDOM AND STATE SOCIETIES IN THE SHASHE–LIMPOPO BASIN

The Shashe–Limpopo Basin covers some 415,000 km² of eastern Botswana, northern South Africa, southern Zimbabwe, and southern Mozambique. The Limpopo River roughly flows through its middle as part of a total journey of about 1,800 km before discharging into the Indian Ocean. Where the Shashe River, which drains much of eastern Botswana, joins the Limpopo it forms a spectacular confluence and an extensive floodplain. Political centralization occurred here among agropastoralist societies in a broad area covering western Zimbabwe's plateau, the middle Limpopo Valley, and the eastern fringes of the Kalahari

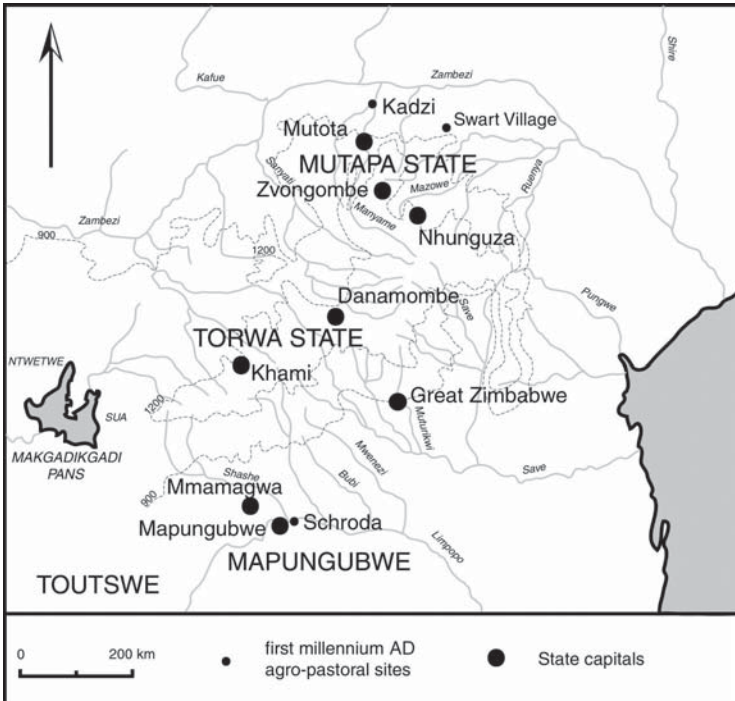


FIG. 63.1 Map showing some of the archaeological sites, chiefdoms, and state societies discussed in Chapter 63.

Desert. Currently, this environment is arid to semi-arid—an observation that underlines the importance of understanding how this region was transformed into productive farmland and what encouraged populations to aggregate here in major centres. We know from studies of past climates that the region experienced increasingly wet conditions from the onset of the second millennium to about AD 1300, a change that undoubtedly attracted farming communities to the Shashe–Limpopo floodplain (Tyson and Lindesay 1992; Tyson et al. 2000, 2002; Holmgren and Oberg 2006; Huffman 2007, 2008; Smith et al. 2007). Manyanga (2007) argues that the societies that lived in this region had capacities to withstand perturbations from instances of climate or economic shocks and to rebuild and renew themselves continuously.

From about AD 900 the middle Limpopo Valley, farming communities who made Zhizo-type pottery inhabited southwestern Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana. These communities lived in sizeable homesteads and villages, some possibly small towns, such as Schroda, Ratho Farm, Leokwe Hill, and Pont Drift in the Limpopo Valley and Mothudi and Mmamgwa (Fig. 63.2) in the upper and lower Motloutse Valleys respectively of eastern Botswana. Some of these centres, such as Schroda, have considerable evidence of ritual activity as exemplified by ceramic figurines, and also received glass beads from the Indian Ocean coast (Wood 2000, 2011), possibly in exchange for animal skins and ivory, as part of regional networks of trade, resource exploitation, and redistribution of goods that also included iron ore mining in the Tswapong Hills of eastern Botswana. Not only was the Basin's broader landscape suitable for cereal cultivation, but its mopane trees and grasslands also encouraged the raising of livestock—something that developed particularly strongly further west in the Lotsani and Motloutse Valleys and the Tswapong, Tshwerong, Shoshong, Serowe, and Toutswemogala Hills of eastern Botswana. From Schroda and Ratho Farm in the middle Limpopo Valley and extending further west towards the Kalahari margins, lineages established ranked societies, minimally chiefdoms, especially at Toutswemogala, Taukome, and Bosutswe, where sites with Zhizo type pottery attest to increased population and considerable social transformation. It is highly likely that the first chiefdoms and state societies in southern Africa developed around these sites.



FIG. 63.2 An extensive Zhizo settlement in the valley west of Mmamgwa Hill, eastern Botswana (photograph, Innocent Pikirayi).

Around AD 1000, when eastern Botswana was already witnessing considerable social and possibly political transformation, new polities of the same rank and extent developed in southwestern Zimbabwe and the middle Limpopo Valley—events associated by archaeologists with the presence of Leopard's Kopje pottery (Huffman 2005, 2007, 2008). Bambandyanalo (K2), Den Staat, Leokwe Hill, Mmamagwa Hill, and Ratho Farm all show clustering of sizeable settlements that can be called towns and, judging from the number of pens and depth of cow dung present at them, also housed sizeable cattle herds. This process of urbanization provided competition for resources among later Zhizo type settlements in eastern Botswana, as Leopard's Kopje sites in the middle Limpopo Valley seem to have had better access to foreign goods whose transshipment into the interior they controlled by virtue of their position along the river and relative proximity to the coast (Manyanga et al 2010).

Leopard's Kopje sites surveyed in the middle Limpopo Valley display a hierarchical spatial pattern of town centres at the helm of numerous villages clustered as well as scattered in the floodplain (Manyanga 2007, Huffman 2007). This suggests a level of political organization synonymous with chiefdoms who were exploiting and competing for resources found in the area. Like their Zhizo counterparts further west, they were now rearing large herds of cattle. One of the largest settlements, Bambandyanalo, grew in size (to over 8 ha) and shows social and economic specialization, as attested by evidence for ivory working. However, while informative as to the lifestyle, demography, and health of the site's inhabitants (Meyer 1998), the quite extensive available skeletal sample does not provide much evidence for social stratification, although ethnographic data suggest that some of the people buried in the cattle pen were probably of high status. Social stratification, however, becomes clear at nearby (1km distant) Mapungubwe Hill, which was inhabited from c. 1220 to 1300.

On and around Mapungubwe Hill—situated, like Bambandyanalo, near the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers—archaeologists have identified a pattern synonymous with the emergence of 'sacred leadership' (Huffman 2005, 2007) and the emergence of a ruling elite. The central part of the hilltop housed a palace demarcated by stone walling, which was also used to define entrances to elite housing areas at the foot of the hill (Fig. 63.3). Here, houses were less clustered, with a lot of space between homesteads. The area below also housed what has been identified as a court area (Huffman 2007). A perimeter enclosed commoner housing further down the hill bottom to the west. The inhabitants of this town, who probably numbered more than 5,000, traded in copper, iron, ivory, glass beads, and gold, which is the reason why their rulers were so wealthy. The burial evidence from the hilltop shows considerable social stratification. Twenty-three graves were found here, of which three were associated with gold objects (Tiley 2004). One burial, that of a woman in a sitting position wearing gold bangles around her ankles, had over 12,000 gold beads. A second was that of a man, also in a sitting position, wearing a necklace of gold beads and cowrie shells and accompanied by some objects covered in gold foil. The third burial was also that of a man, buried with a wooden headrest and objects made of gold foil tacked onto a wooden core, which included a bowl, a sceptre, and a rhinoceros.

Archaeological surveys attest to the presence of Mapungubwe-type sites on both the Limpopo River floodplain and adjacent plateau areas (Manyanga 2007). Most homesteads were located on the floodplain and may have exploited this rich, silty environment for cereal cultivation and livestock rearing, attracting people into this region of southern Africa. Grain bin foundations found at both Leopard's Kopje and Mapungubwe type sites attest to the intensification of cereal agriculture during the early second millennium AD. From the distri-



FIG. 63.3 Mapungubwe hilltop, South Africa, showing the palace area (photograph, Innocent Pikirayi).

bution of Iron Age sites in the middle Limpopo Valley and from observations of some communities currently living in the Basin, it seems likely that exploitation of floodplains and adjacent drylands took advantage of the opportunities each of the respective ecologies provided. It was also a mechanism designed to limit the constraints imposed by flooding as well as dryness.

The Limpopo floodplain attracted farming populations when conditions became wetter. According to the archaeological evidence, agriculture intensified in the middle Limpopo floodplain during the K2 period (c. 1000–1220) (Huffman 2005). Palaeoclimate proxy data show that rainfall had increased to 500 mm, slightly higher than today's level (Smith et al. 2007), encouraging the planting of sorghum, millet, beans, and cowpeas due to increased moisture conditions in the valley. Archaeological evidence also attests to an expanding population during this time, which may have affected agricultural production (Huffman 2005).

Water management in the Shashe–Limpopo Basin was also regulated by ritual and ceremony. An important feature of this arid environment is rain control (Huffman 2008, Schoeman 2006), i.e. the use of ritual to manage nature and stimulate rain. Archaeological research has identified a number of steep-sided hills in the Basin, with dolly holes, cupules, natural cisterns, and rock tanks, associated with sorghum remains and pottery. It appears that these were used to brew beer and that K2 people were behind some of these rituals, as they were in control of farming activities in the basin, although hunter-gatherers, as 'first people' of the land, could have officiated at them (Schoeman 2006), comparable perhaps to the territorial cults discussed by Ranger (1973) for more northerly areas of southern Africa. Despite the demise of Mapungubwe as a centre of political power in the area around AD 1300, communities in the middle Limpopo Valley may have continued to cope with an unpredictable environment through a combination of forecast and ritual. Elsewhere, on the Zimbabwe Plateau, a new centre of power emerged in the Mutirikwi Valley, which is part of the Save–Runde catchment. Why the state society based at Mapungubwe disintegrated after AD

1300 is not easy to answer at this juncture, but available palaeoclimatic data do not suggest that this was due to environmental deterioration (Smith et al. 2007).

THE RISE, DEVELOPMENT, AND DEMISE OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

With the demise of Mapungubwe, Iron Age farmers akin to early Karanga speakers developed chiefdom-level societies at Chivowa and Gumanye Hills in south-central Zimbabwe (Sinclair 1987; Pikirayi 2001), transforming themselves from simple kin-warranted domestic corporations relying mainly on land and cattle to long-distance traders. With this newly acquired wealth, they financed the building of stone walling. By about 1270 a wealthy elite had emerged at Great Zimbabwe, which laid the foundations of an elaborate urban complex and the centre of a state, constructing stone buildings of unparalleled scale and magnitude from about 1300 (Garlake 1973). For the next 150 years, Great Zimbabwe became the dominant political authority south of the Zambezi (Huffman 1996, 2007).

Great Zimbabwe reached its peak during the 14th and 15th centuries, when elaborate stone walling that symbolized wealth, power, and status was extended towards outlying areas (Fig. 63.4). With an estimated population of nearly 20,000, Great Zimbabwe was the largest metropolis in southern Africa. Composed of elite residences, ritual centres, and houses of commoners and artisans, it covered more than 700 ha. The first stone-wall complex (the Hill Complex) was raised on a whaleback hill at the centre of the site. Here, two large enclosures and intervening smaller enclosures abut from the natural granite boulders and defined the living spaces for royalty. A ritual spearhead, iron gongs, and soapstone bird effigies attest to the presence of elite individuals. Commoner settlements within a perimeter wall at the base of the hill soon became overcrowded, triggering further expansion beyond. Royalty also



FIG. 63.4 A view of Great Zimbabwe showing the Great Enclosure, and some Valley Enclosures (photograph, Innocent Pikirayi).

moved downhill to the more elaborate elliptical enclosure (the Great Enclosure). The largest single stone-built structure in southern Africa, it has a girdle wall 244 m long, 5 m wide, and 10 m high. It encloses sub-enclosures and parallel passages, with a conical tower marking the focus of the settlement. This massive structure represents the peak of development of Great Zimbabwe. Five enclosure complexes to the northeast and east were built in the valley this time (Valley Enclosures), but rose to prominence towards the terminal phases of the settlement. A second peripheral wall on the western precincts attests to the continuously growing city. Stone enclosures in the periphery either housed members of the ruling family or catered for increased administrative functions of the metropolis.

The success of Great Zimbabwe is seen in the fact that it presided over a regional and international economy that exported gold, ivory, and other valuables in return for Persian and Far Eastern stoneware, earthenware, and porcelain, Indian glass beads, and cloth (Wood 2011). The site wielded enormous influence over much of southern Zimbabwe plateau, reaching the Save–Runde confluence and possibly beyond into the Mozambican coastal plains, where Zimbabwe-type capitals exist. This influence could only have happened through management of the local agricultural economy, which, though largely dependent on seasonal rainfall, should also have taken advantage of the unique moisture patterns associated with the semi-arid region in which the site and other capitals were located.

But then, how did such a complex society come to an end? Explanations of Great Zimbabwe's demise remain speculative (Garlake 1978; Pikirayi 2006; Huffman 2007). A simple climatic hypothesis (such as the supposed impact of the Little Ice Age) is certainly incorrect (Huffman 1996); yet Great Zimbabwe's size does suggest that, over time, its significant population could have impacted on its water supply and hydrological budget and thus on agricultural production (Holmgren and Oberg 2006). The long-term impacts of cutting down trees for construction and for use as firewood in cooking, heating, and metallurgy (especially iron smelting and forging) may also have been substantial, as suggested by the absence of *Brachystegia speciformis*—an important source of firewood for domestic cooking, iron smelting and stone quarrying, house construction, and roofing material—from the site's immediate surroundings (Pikirayi 2001: 67). Alternatively, or additionally, political disruption may have been the principal reason behind Great Zimbabwe's decline, particularly competition in its hinterland for resources such as grain, gold, and ivory following the rise of the Torwa state to the southwest (Huffman 2007).

Social organization and spatial symbolism

According to Huffman (1981, 1982, 1985, 2008), it is possible to understand the spatial correlates of Great Zimbabwe's social structure using a binary-coded cognitive framework supported by ethnography. Huffman argues that the kings at Great Zimbabwe resided in the Western Enclosure of the Hill Complex, while the Eastern Enclosure served as a ritual centre. The Great Enclosure in the valley is interpreted as a centre for initiation (see Huffman 1985, 2010, 2011). Huffman argues that it was used for circumcision and acted as a premarital school for boys and girls (known in Venda as *Domba*), citing the existence of symbols for different age groups from the young to the old and ritual objects that supported an initiation centre hypothesis. The Valley Enclosures are interpreted as residences of the royal wives, who occupied this area for the duration of the site's florescence (Huffman 1996, 2010, 2011), under the authority of the most senior or 'first' wife (Huffman 2007).

Huffman's model presents a picture of a society in stasis for 200 years. Beach (1998) made recourse to Shona ethnography and history of political succession to argue that the ruler's residences changed during Great Zimbabwe's 200-year florescence. From this perspective (see also Pikirayi and Chirikure 2011), the Great Enclosure was not an initiation centre, nor were the valley enclosures residences for royal wives. Instead, they were centres adopted by successive rulers. This endorses the idea of a shifting focus during the Great Zimbabwe development, placing serious doubts on the structuralist hypothesis. The combined archaeological sequence and architectural chronology is consistent with an expanding and shrinking settlement (Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008; Collett et al. 1992), and is supported by the distribution of material culture found inside the stone walls of Great Zimbabwe. In particular, the presence of metalworking slag and iron blooms, all falling within the domain of male activities, shows that there was a sizeable male presence in the lower valley enclosures. The *Domba* ceremony—a ceremony introduced among the Venda through centuries of interaction with the Lemba and Sotho–Tswana societies—was not held regularly because it was dependent on the number of young people ready to participate and the nature of the harvest, and initiation centres thus tended to be impermanent structures built of perishable materials. Such an institution is unlikely to have left significant archaeological signatures. By contrast, the Great Enclosure is a permanent building whose construction took place over a long time. It had a broad-based material culture that included local pottery, spindle whorls, symbolic objects, metalworking evidence, and lavish imports. This assemblage is similar to that found on the Hill Complex and in the valley enclosures (Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008).

LATER ZIMBABWE CULTURE STATES IN THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN ZIMBABWE PLATEAU

During the 15th century Great Zimbabwe lost some of its influence to developments in both the northern and western parts of the Zimbabwe Plateau. In the southwest, Khami emerged as a powerful centre of the Torwa state focused on southwestern Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana, while in the north the appearance of other centres constructed along similar lines to Great Zimbabwe suggests a movement of people from the south coinciding with the foundation of the Mutapa state (Beach 1980; Pikirayi 1993).

The Mutapa state

The Mutapa state (c. 1450–1900) in northern Zimbabwe is extensively covered in Portuguese written sources (Mudenge 1988; Beach 1994) that refer to it as lying within a region referred to as the 'Rivers of Gold'. Early Portuguese explorers into the interior reported stone-building activity in the Mutapa state, identifying these structures, known as 'Symbaoe' (*zimbabwe*), as the residences of the ruling elite. Using archaeological data, Portuguese written accounts can shed light on the decline of Great Zimbabwe, triggered by changing patterns in the trade in eastern Africa. Archaeology can also enlighten the introduction of merchant capitalism in northern Zimbabwe, evidenced by imported artefacts dating from the 16th century, and assist in the identification of local material culture, such as pottery associated with these imports.

Such associations are crucial in relating local pottery to known ethnic groups such as the Karanga, mentioned in Portuguese written sources as the people of the Mutapa state.

Archaeological research in northern Zimbabwe has revealed the nature of contact between the Zimbabwe Plateau and the Indian Ocean, as well as the nature of settlements associated with this contact since the 16th century, with one focus the African–Portuguese site of Baranda near Mt Fura, a known source of gold, and other sites in the middle Ruya–Mazowe Valley (Pikirayi 1993, 2009). Whereas previous research in northern Zimbabwe could not positively identify local populations represented by the ceramic evidence recovered from sites associated with African–Portuguese trading settlements such as Luanze, Dambarare, Rimuka, and Angwa, at Baranda traded items such as imported ceramics and glass beads dating from the 16th century were associated with local pottery attributable to the Zimbabwe Culture. This discovery provides a new insight into the relationship between the Mutapa state and the Zimbabwe Culture, as Baranda, which is synonymous with the Portuguese trading settlement of Massapa, represents the emergence of non-stone-walled royal courts in northern Zimbabwe at a time after the cessation of stone-building activity at the beginning of the 16th century.

The decline of the Mutapa state was apparently triggered by the highly exploitative nature of the Portuguese merchants and conquistadores in northern Zimbabwe, as attested by their direct interference in royal succession and the destructive nature of goldmining. The appearance of fortifications may indicate decreasing sociopolitical complexity during the late 16th and 17th centuries, when crudely built stone defences were erected on hilltops in the Ruya–Mazowe Basin (Fig. 63.5), the heartland of the Mutapa state (Pikirayi 2009). Detailed Portuguese accounts of fortifications refer, however, to the Lower Zambezi, where people built wooden stockades, and provide only vague references to stone-walled fortifications in northern Zimbabwe. Ceramic evidence from the hillforts nevertheless points to the Budya or related Tonga groups from the Lower Zambezi as their builders, following their movement into the area in response to the turmoil generated by the expansion of Portuguese estate holders further downstream and the southward expansion of the Marave and the Zimba (Pikirayi 2001, 2009).



FIG. 63.5 Some of the fortified settlements on Mt Fura, northern Zimbabwe (photograph, Innocent Pikirayi).

The Torwa–Rozvi states

Broadly contemporary with the emergence of the Mutapa state on the north of the Zimbabwe Plateau, the Torwa state (c. 1490–1650) developed in southwestern Zimbabwe and adjacent areas of eastern Botswana (Beach 1980). With its control of these areas, Khami, its capital, may have played a considerable part in undercutting Great Zimbabwe's major gold resource base and diverting its trade to the Indian Ocean coast, mostly via the southern plateau (Pikirayi 2006; Huffman 2007). Important sites here continued, but developed, the traditions of stonewalling seen earlier at Great Zimbabwe, including a proliferation of decoration in chord, check, and herringbone patterns and the construction of solid daub houses on tiered platform surfaces. Although Khami principally dates to the period covered by Portuguese documents, it is never directly mentioned in them. The same sources do, however, suggest that it was founded by rebels or outsiders (*vatorwa*) from the Mutapa state during the second half of the 15th century, such that by about 1494 a dynasty called Torwa had successfully established itself in an area referred to as Guruuswa. Later Portuguese sources report the destruction of Torwa's capital, presumably Khami, in the mid-17th century during a civil war, after which a defeated Torwa ruler appealed to the Portuguese based in the trading station of Manyika for help. The small Portuguese army sent in response was, however, soon driven out of the Torwa kingdom, the centre of which then shifted to Danangombe in central Zimbabwe (Beach 1980: 200–201; 1984: 82). There, the Rozvi dynasty was firmly established by 1680, and stone-walled centres of the Khami type appear in this area, from which the Rozvi dominated much of the Zimbabwe Plateau (Beach 1980; Mudenge 1988).

Disruption and disintegration

Until the 15th century, archaeological evidence seems to suggest that large social formations in the form of chiefdoms and states took over social and economic management of most subsistence-based village societies in southern Zambezia. In this way, they exercised a managerial role over society in social experiments that facilitated wealth creation, ensured loyalties, enhanced networks of interaction and provided protection against hostile neighbours. Aggregating to the size of chiefdoms and states was an exercise that was ultimately resource-consuming and entailed sharper social and political hierarchies, which in turn required considerable resources to sustain them. The arrival of European merchant capital in the early 16th century presented southern Zambebian social formations with considerable challenges, as it favoured and encouraged individual participation in trade and wealth accumulation. Social disruption became commonplace.

The disintegration of the Mutapa state in the late 16th and 17th centuries was largely a result of competition for resources around the gold and ivory trade, and certainly involved the Portuguese conquistadores. This resulted in rapid loss of political power, corresponding loss of territorial control and influence, and challenges from the periphery (Pikirayi 1993). The polities of Budyia in northeastern Zimbabwe, Barwe in the Zambebian lowlands, Manyika in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe, Teve in the Mozambican plains, Duma in south-central Zimbabwe and Nambya, and Shangwe and Makonde on the northwestern plateau all reflect these challenges to the sociopolitical authority associated with the Zimbabwe Culture. The last vestiges of those states (especially the Rozvi) were then effectively destroyed

on the arrival in the region of Nguni predatory and mobile states such as those of the Ngoni (led by Zvangendaba) and Ndebele (led by Mzilikazi) in the early 19th century, following which (in 1890) Zimbabwe itself was colonized by the British.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Southern Zambebian states were spheres of cultural interaction and influence, with people sharing roughly the same culture and displaying their identities in material culture forms. Stone architecture was used for this purpose and, along with pottery, was used to negotiate some of these identities. Southern Zambebian states were also tributary in character, extracting surplus production from economically relatively independent producers by political or military coercion. This is how they exercised their hegemony and power. Their ideologies were created and maintained for the specific purposes of supporting the ruling elite, their power, and their achievements and imposing on society as a whole an 'official' understanding or perception of the world around and beyond. This facilitated the continued dominance of the elite's structures of governance, and justified coercion or persuasion in the collection of tribute, taxes, and other essential resources, as well as conquest in the drive for territorial expansion.

The Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent regions were also environmentally sustainable landscapes (*sensu* Selman 2008) that were largely resilient for much of the period in which these social formations existed. In this regard, the perception of social complexity as the scale of practices characterizing human society measured in terms of differentiation and centralization, stratification and diversity, inequality, and heterogeneity seems to be both practical and workable. Future research may need to focus on how we should understand decline or collapse in this context, and on how societies and leaders made important and impacting decisions in this regard and others.

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