

Lecture 13 - Pre-Colonial African Cities

African Architectures: Rethinking the Architecture of the House of Stone

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Vedzimbahwe is ChiKaranga for “those of the houses of stone.” It is a name that all the various groups that speak the common root linguists call ChiKaNdaMaZeKo (ChiKaranga, chiNdau, chiManyika, chiZezuru, and chiKorekore) speak. The house of stone was a signature of their collective lineage, while the common language acted as one of several technologies of fostering commonality and nationhood. The name Zimbabwe (chiZezuru for “big house of stone”) is derived from the name *dzimbahwe*. Hwe is short for ihwe (stone), which in chiZezuru is pronounced bwe or ibwe. As they looked around for a symbol to rally different ethnic groups—including non-ChiKaNdaMaZeKo groups like amaNdebele and amaTshangana (19th century migrants from KwaZulu, South Africa) and maHlengwe (migrants from Musambike, or Mozambique)—the black nationalists fighting for independence in the 1950s chose *dzimbahwe* and its walls, which became the name of a republic in 1980, called Zimbabwe.

The word “Shona” was a name European itinerants gave to people who spoke ChiKaNdaMaZeKo. They lived in the high plateau between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers, before the coming of the foreigners or *ntebele* (SeSotho), under the leadership of Mzilikazi ka Mashobane, in the 1840s. European travelers then corrupted *ntebele* into *Ndebele* and naturalized it as a designation for Mzilikazi’s followers. The original meaning of “Shona” is *tshona* (Zulu for “to go under”; *amatshona* (those who go under) was the name the Zulu-speaking followers of Mzilikazi gave the ChiKaNdaMaZeKo-speaking peoples collectively, in reference to their tendency to take refuge in and fight from caves. Mzilikazi’s people came increasingly to derisively refer to *amatshona* as *amasvina* (those who are always dirty) or *amaroli* (literally “blanket draggers”) or *orabarola ngubo* (those who drag their blankets), meaning slaves (Taberer 1905, Selous 1893). I will use *vedzimbahwe* as a deep vocabulary that elders used to refer to all ChiKaNdaMaZeKo-speaking peoples as we grew up.

Itineraries to and from *veDzimbahwe*

Dzimbahwe was a product of the migration of Bantu starting 3,500 years ago from northwestern Africa through eastern and central Africa, across the Zambezi to populate southern Africa. Today descendants of the Bantu identify themselves as indigenous people and the owners of the land from whom white settlers forcibly grabbed the land from 1890 onwards. However, the original inhabitants of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia, and Angola are the San, who call themselves Sho, Basarwa, or Khwe, whom the Bantu displaced. The first wave of Bantu arrived on the Zimbabwean plateau about the fifth-sixth century CE, settled and established farming communities in areas like Ziwa and Gokomere. By the seventh century CE, these people had spread out all the way to the Mozambican and South African coastlines. Another wave of migrations from West Africa moved through the equatorial forest and settled in the western Zimbabwean plateau, eastern Botswana, and northern South Africa in fifth-sixth century A.D. (Brandt 1984; Ehret and Posnansky 1982; Vansina 1995; Oliver 2009; and Ehret 2001; Alves et al. 2011; Castri et al. 2009).

Both “waves” of Bantu migrations had spread out by seventh century CE to take advantage of the favorable geophysical environment of the central watershed. The “Ziwa” farmers moved onto the area around what is now Harare to farm on the fertile soils and pastures, well nourished by the good rains and almost perennial streams. The “Gokomere” farmers settled in the woodlands on the south-southwest edges of the watershed in the Matopo hills and the Shashe-Limpopo basin up to Musina. Archaeologists call these successor settle-

ments “Zhizo” farming communities, the name being simply a placeholder for a people whose name will never be historically known. In the seventh century CE, these two communities had settled enough to produce commodities to trade with the Indian Ocean coast. Among the innovations generating such surplus were iron, copper, and gold mining, smelting, and smithing, as well as ivory hunting and carving. These outcomes of local innovation were traded with Asian merchants for Chinese and Indian wares like glass beads, cloth, and ceramics. By the seventh-ninth century CE, this local production and surplus value had attracted the attention of the Arabian traders, who set up settlements along the eastern seaboard and increasingly acted as middlemen between the production centers in the hinterland and incoming overseas merchants (Hall 1987).

The “Zhizo” are the ancestors of vaKaranga of southern Zimbabwe, who in the tenth century A.D. established centralized political systems, starting with locations archaeologists denote “Schroda” (placeholder name) at the Shashe-Limpopo confluence. These settlers then moved to another site placeholder-named “Bambandyanalalo” further west (but south of the Limpopo), perhaps economically distressed at the declining trade with the Swahili. In any case, archaeologists speculate, “Bambandyanalalo” probably became overcrowded after the eleventh century, forcing its rulers to shift the settlement to Mapungubwe, again south of the Limpopo, in the twelfth century. By 1300, the centers of power had shifted to Dzimbahwe (Great Zimbabwe). It is often assumed that these farmers spread out into the Chivowa, Gumanye, and Dzimbahwe hills of what is now Masvingo not in the sense of walking there (foot-migration) but incremental spread of new homesteads, villages, fields, and pastures in that direction (Pikirayi 2001). Recent careful attention to the conduct of power among vaKaranga (including speakers of chiZezuru, chiKorekore, chiManyika, and chiNdau) suggests that different successors to the throne did not have to move “to the White House” or “State House” in the western sense, but rule from their own homesteads. It seems likely that Chikowa, Gumanye, Dzimbahwe, and even Manyanga (seat of later Rozvi power) were homesteads of succeeding incumbents, contrary to earlier interpretations (Pikirayi 2001; Huffman 2005).

For this reason, speculations that mid-fifteenth century shifts in the geographic locus of power were a result of the declining power of a specific, fixed dynastic center where every incumbent ruled from may well be wrong. The state itself could well have continued to flourish, except that it was being rerouted through control points the new ruler designated. This may account for the proliferation of not one but many dzimbahwe; each incoming incumbent ruled from one (Maund 1891, 1892). The traditions of Munhumutapa suggest that Nyatsimba Mutota, a prince and heir, had left Dzimbahwe (Great Zimbabwe) to find salt in the Mavhuradonha Mountains (Mt. Pfura?). Instead he established his own capital there and began ruling from there, as did his successors. This new seat of power, archaeologists and historians say, thrived on the demand for gold and other local products that the Portuguese settlements on the Zambezi provided, thus shifting trade away from the Save River route leading between Dzimbahwe and Inhambane. The out-migration of Mutota is also attributed to environmental decline.

However, in chiKaranga (what is now called Shona culture), it is the tradition that when a father has many sons, they never settle within the homestead, but to found their own as they become men, marry, and prepare to start their own families. Either the father accompanies the son and drives the peg (*hoko*) into the ground marking the homestead and giving it stature (*chiremerera*), or the son, being a warrior-prince, took a detachment of fighters under his command and marched on foot or on bullback, to a far away place, to conquer, subdue, and drive a peg in the ground marking his own homestead, village, and province. Sometimes it simply became a province of his father’s vast domains (part and parcel of Karanga territorial expansion), or an independent domain (*Zvarevashe*).

When establishing a village, a chiefdom, or a kingdom, the founder had to fortify his sovereignty not merely with military force or political offices in charge of every kingdom. Sovereignty chiKaranga-style was not merely a material, geophysical, political, or interhuman thing; the spiritual was, alpha to omega, the backbone and armor of power, life, and livelihood. The powers of the chief and the whole *dzinza* (clan) and *imba youshe* (dynasty) resided in *makona* (clan medicines). *Zimbuya guru* (great ancestress), popularly known as

mbonga or *sviba*, kept these charms and was the most important person in the community after the chief. To consummate the powers of makona, the king had to have intercourse with one of his sisters, who was to remain single –even celibate except for ritual purposes –for the rest of her life. In-so-doing, she became keeper of makona and the most important woman in that community, to be defended to the death if ever under military attack.

These spiritual fortifications do not usually constitute the narratives of Dzimbahwe or Munhumutapa precisely because their writers were either expatriate scholars engaged in surface rather than deep readings of African cultural practices, or African scholars who simply rehashed such narratives. The latter group, comprising pioneering black scholars like Gilbert Pwiti, Innocent Pikirayi, and Weber Ndoro, may probably revisit their interpretations in light of a younger generation of archaeologists and historians who take chiKaranga seriously not just as a source of “information” for their own erudition, but as philosophy (Chirikure 2010; Mavhunga 2014; Chikowero 2015). What if Dzimbahwe was abandoned because the war medicines of the ruling house had been comprised, had become powerless, the oracle said so, it was haunted by *zvipoko* (ghosts), or there were too many *varoyi* (witches)? What if the heir to the throne (perhaps Nyatsimba Mutota himself or his son Nyanhewe Matope) could not return to his forebears? *dzitsi* (stem, or homestead) to rule from there, but chose to rule from Dande instead? None of these interpretations in any way prevents us from accepting that such movement and relocation of the seat of power enabled the new ruler to capture and monopolize trade with a presence that had displaced the Swahili as middlemen: the Portuguese. Nor does it prevent us from seeing this innovative strategic relocation as one among several others in the Zambezan neighborhood, with the settlement of Ingombe Ilede on the Kafue-Zambezi confluence also exporting copper to the east coast in the late fourteenth century, one century prior to the rise of –and its own demise at the hands of –Munhumutapa (Pikirayi 1993; Pwiti 1996).

The biggest impediment to an innovative and critical introspection into Zimbabwe’s and indeed southern Africa’s precolonial history is the almost slavish acceptance of Marxist modes of production and state-centric interpretations of human-human and human-environment interactions. Archaeology serially focuses on the state and the economy prime among other things, to the extent that the rise and fall of civilizations are reduced to economics and the environment’s capacity to keep it going. That metanarrative has been the single most serious impediment to archaeology’s otherwise best-placed capacity to anchor a history of African technology and innovation. The reason may well be that it is inevitably still also trapped in evolutionistic templates that force African archaeologists to have to start their chronology from a Western-centric notion of how things began, as opposed to an African notion of time and the origins of things.

Thus the story become one of the mobility of the physical environment from big bangs and volcanic eruptions (de-spiritualized as the white man would want it to be), then the origins of species (as Darwin said and Robert Leakey and others prophesied), then hominid evolution, then hunting and gathering, then making tools in stone, then iron, then building in stones, then farming, then state formation, and so on. Nowhere in this scheme is the African perspective of the origins of the earth and its constituents ever considered; it is already presumed a myth, a fiction. From Zhizo, to Bambandyanalo, to Mapungubwe, to Great Zimbabwe to Mutapa, it is already one teleology towards a version of cultural evolution already appropriated in the Western register. There is nothing more to say.

To return to migrations –it seems that the issue of foot mobilities in the founding of Dzimbahwe across Zambezia is not one of migrations per se but also of families outgrowing their natal home and, as children became adult, marrying and setting up their own household as culture dictated. As chiKaranga says, *chava chigondora chava chimombe, kusagona kutunga urema hwacho* (a bullock is a bull, inability to fight is its own laziness). Mutota was staying true to this dictum. As he marched north towards Mount Pfura to realize his own manhood, he carried with him the innovative traditions of his ancestors, and in so-doing carried *dzimbahwe* with him, and built it in Dande. So did many other *veDzimbahwe* (the name given to male vaKaranga): they carried the architectural tradition of stone masonry with them and built their on *rusvingo*

rwemabwe (stone walls) around their homesteads. He brought his ancestors with him; he brought Dzimbahwe with him, for when vaKaranga migrated from one place to another, they took soils from the graves of their ancestors and their ancestral homesteads and reburied them in new cemeteries and new homesteads. That way, there was no alienation between ancestor and living forebear; the ancestors not only came along with the itinerants even as they stayed watch on those left home. They also guided the itinerants, for as indicated elsewhere, life –let alone journeying –among vaShona (vaKaranga) was guided mobility (*kutungamirirwa*). Thus, when all trade shifted away from the Limpopo-Save axis to the *feiras* (markets) along the Zambezi via the courts of Munhumutapa, such good omens were attributed never to supply-and-demand or political power alone, but to *kutungamirirwa nemhondoro* (ancestral spiritual guidance).

The Falsehoods Begin

When civilization took the form of sophisticated technological innovation, the white traveler usually found this too good to have been come from the mind and hand of the black man. First emphasizing that they found certain buildings in “ruins” (thereby blurring the quality of the craftsmanship), the white man next moved quickly (having asked no one) to conclude that they had no further information about such “ruins” and their history. Thus rendered of murky origins, the “ruins” could then be subject to instant, on-the-spot speculation as the traveler sat munching a roasted buck or buffalo sirloin steak by the campsite. The Englishman Theodore Bent readily decided that the builders of Dzimbahwe were southern Arabians.

Shona Ancestors: Bent (1892): they were negroes, naked except for panther skins; they filed their teeth and were cannibals; they fought with long lances and had ambushes for game. They had no religion except that sort of witch doctor occasionally addressed them and bade them remember the prowess of their ancestors.

Shona Ancestors: Hungwe/Chapungu and Gora/Vulture: “The outer wall of this temple was decorated with birds carved on the summit of soapstone beams five or six feet in height; of the six and from its beak we can easily see that it is intended to represent a vulture. Two have decorations down the back and round the neck, and one has four circles out on it, two on the wings and two below, presumably to represent incubation and fertility.” (Bent 1892)

Frederick Selous

The German Heinrich Schlichter (1893) disagreed: only “a very rude people possessing no written characters and doing all their building by eye and without measurement” could have built such a bad structure. Selous speculated:

“Well, we will suppose that two or perhaps three thousand years ago a commercial people penetrated from Southern Arabia to Mashonaland. They were acquainted with the requirements of the civilized nations of Asia at that period and understood the value of gold. This metal they discovered amongst the hills and in the streams of Mashonaland. It time these Arabian merchants gained a footing in the land and taught the black aborigines to mine for them. Their principal station was at Zimbabwe, where they built, with the forced labour of the aborigines, a temple for the worship of Baal, and a strongly-built and well-situated fortress. But I take it, that, like the Arabs in Central Africa at the present day, these ancient Arabians brought a few or no women with them, but took a very handsome allowance of wives from amongst the aboriginal blacks. For a long period intercourse was kept up with Arabia, and during this period the gold seekers spread over the whole of South-eastern Africa from the Zambesi to the Limpopo, everywhere mixing with the people, and teaching them their own rude arts of wall-building and gold-mining. In the course of time, we will suppose, that events happened in Arabia which put an end to all intercourse with the distant colony in Mashonaland, and as time went on, as the alien race were still in small numbers, compared with the aboriginal blacks, and as they had none of their own women with them, they gradually became completely fused, and nationally lost among the

aborigines.... At any rate I am absolutely convinced that the blood of the ancient builders of Zimbabwe still runs (in a very diluted form if you like) in the veins of the Bantu races." (Selous 1893).

In other words, it was not even possible for Selous to speculate that the black race might have built Dzim-bahwe. If any such existed in their genes, then even such genes were not originally from Africa but of outside origin:

"On my theory the blood of the ancient worshippers of Baal still runs in their veins; very much diluted, no doubt, but still in sufficient strength to occasionally produce amongst them men with light-brown skins and high features, and sometimes of great intellectual power. After a certain lapse of time, when the higher race had become entirely fused and practically lost amongst the lower and more numerous aboriginal people, the worship of Baal died out, and was superceded by the old religion of ancestor worship which still prevails.... But I maintain that the wall-building and gold-mining, originally learnt from the ancient Arabians, were carried on continuously from the first inception up to the middle of the present century" (Selous 1893)

No Evidence of High Civilization

Selous concluded:

"In the foregoing pages, I have endeavoured to show that there is no evidence that any high form of ancient civilisation ever existed in South-Eastern Africa at all, whilst many facts go to prove that the two industries or arts which are supposed by many to separate the ancient inhabitants of the country from the Bantu people living there at the present day, namely, gold-mining and wall-building, have only been abandoned very recently" (Selous, 1893: 316).

"The original builders of the temple came from a country where that form of worship is known to have been practised in very ancient times; but I do not believe that this foreign race, in its pure state, spread over the whole country between the Zambesi and the Limpopo, and did all the gold-mining and wall-building that has been done in that vast territory, and was then utterly destroyed and supplanted by a more barbarous people. The evidence available seems to me to be far stronger in favour of the theory which I have advanced of the gradual fusion of a numerically small number of a race of traders and merchants, who were themselves in a low state of civilisation, with the aboriginal inhabitants of the country. Thus alone can I account for many things: the long continuance and the gradual deterioration noticeable in the wall-building in Mashonaland; the ingrained inherited impulse which causes the Barotsi of the Upper Zambeesi, who are an offshoot of the Baritsi of Mashonaland, to still carve the same chevron patterns on their pottery, on their knife sheaths, and on their wooden pots and bowls, that the ancient worshippers of Baal represented in stone-work round the Temple of Zimbabwe and carved in soapstone hundreds or thousands of years ago. Add to this that the wooden bowls themselves still retain the same form as the ancient ones carved in soapstone; that the wooden carvings of animals made at the present day, and the rude bas-reliefs on the soapstone bowls are the products of the same school of art, and the fact that the Bantu races inhabiting Mashonaland and adjoining countries to-day are subject to atavism or reversion to a type of man, which is Asiatic or semitic rather than negroid, and it seems to me that only one theory is possible, which is that the ancient builders of Zimbabwe were not first destroyed and then supplanted by an inferior race, but that they became gradually fused with a lower race, which still bears traces of its admixture with the more intelligent people.... It is not to be wondered at that the native races inhabiting [Mashonaland] should have abandoned some of their arts and industries, and become the timid and broken-spirited people which they are now (Selous 1893: 317)

Madzimbahwe beyond Dzimbahwe

Selous 1893:

“I maintain that, so far from there having been an abrupt transition from a people who built the temple of Zimbabwe to a race who never put one stone upon another, the inhabitants of Makoni’s and Mangwendi’s countries in South-eastern Mashonaland, only ceased to surround their towns with well-built stone walls during the last generation, when they found that these walls offered but an inefficient protection against the Zulu hordes of Manikos, and his son, Umzila, by whom their country has been continually ravaged during the present century. The more ancient the towns appear to be, however, the better, speaking generally, they have been built; and in Makoni’s country, at any rate, there is clear evidence that there has been a gradual deterioration from a people who were capable of building walls which will compare with any part of the great Zimbabwe, to the very inferior hut-building barbarians of the present day. Makoni’s [Father of the present chief] town as it now stands is a monument of filth and uncleanness, and is undefended by anything but a small fence. His old town which I also visited, and from which I believe he was driven by Umtasa, was surrounded by a moat and loopholed mud wall, whilst the town, which it is said was built by his ancestor, Chipadzi, was surrounded by a well-built, loopholed stone wall. This is one of the best old walled towns I have seen. I visited it for the first time in October, 1890, and again last year. There are many other walled towns in the district, some of them reminding one strongly of the fortress on the wall at Zimbabwe.

Let me here make an extract from my diary, bearing date October 19th, 1890. “On that day I left Makoni’s and passed some very curious old ruins. First, there was a hill on which were built several concentric walls and the stone foundations of round huts, the whole being surrounded by a moat. A little further on, there was a small kopje composed of a few large blocks of granite, some of which were piled up in the centre in the form of a tower. The whole of this kopje was enclosed by a very well-built wall about 200 yards in circumference, 8 feet in thickness, and 10 feet in height. The stones composing this wall have the appearance of having been cemented together with mud, which is the first time I have ever noticed anything of the kind in South-eastern Africa. Through this wall there were four entrances, apertures about 4 feet in height, and 2 1/2 feet in breadth. These apertures were let into the base of the wall, and were roofed over with large flat slabs of granite. Inside this wall were the foundations of numerous round buildings. These foundations were all very well built of closely fitted pieces of squared granite, and were about 18 inches in depth. The huts that were built upon them must have been at least four times the size of the huts used by the natives at the present day.... In the centre of Umtasa’s deserted town on the Chodzani River, a town which he built himself, and from which he was driven a few years ago by the Abagaza, will be found a similar hut foundation, very carefully built of small slabs of granite, beautifully fitted without mortar or cement, which proves that the art of building (315) walls of carefully fitted granite stones is not even yet dead amongst the Mashonas.”

However, let me return to the walled town of Makoni’s ancestor. Besides the four entrances into the stronghold, there were numerous small holes let into the wall, some of which may have served as loopholes through which archers discharged arrows, but others, from their position I judge to have been intended for drains to carry off water. This stronghold is said to have been built by Chipadzi, the ancient chief of all this part of the country and an ancestor of Makoni’s. The name of the walled town is Chiteketi.

About half a mile from this old walled town was the burial-place of Chipadzi, one side of which was enclosed by a beautifully built wall about 10 feet high, of evenly laid and squared granite stones, most carefully fitted together without mortar or cement of any kind. This wall was an exact facsimile of the best built portions of the great Zimbabwe, and no one who has examined

carefully both these relics of a bygone age, can doubt for an instant that they were both built by the same race of people. This place is the Zimbabwe or temple of Makoni's people, and is spoken of by them as "The Zimbabwe." Here in time of national trouble the chief slaughters cattle, and makes propitiatory offerings to the spirit of Chipadzi, and private individuals make offerings of goats, fowls, or pots of beer. Now there is no tower or indeed anything to make one believe that this Zimbabwe was ever connected with Phallic worship. It was probably built long after the great temple, when the Arabian element had become lost amongst the more numerous aboriginal race, and when the people had replaced the worship of Baal by the still older form of ancestor-worship.

The enclosure is probably simply the burial-place of Chipadzi, but the wall could not have been better built had it been the work of the actual builders of the great temple.... The word Zimbabwe or Zimbabghi (the form used by the natives in the neighbourhood of the ruins) is in all probability derived from the words "umba" or "imba," a building, plural zimba, and "mubge," "stones," these words being used at the present day in Mashonaland. Thus Zimbabwe means the "buildings of stones," and there were no other buildings except grass thatched huts, came to have a special significance and may be best translated by the English word "Temple".

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