

TEACHING ON SITE WORKSHOP

Sustainable Cities Past and Present –
Lessons from Pre-Colonial Urban Settlements in Africa

Great Zimbabwe Heritage Site
2-6 October 2023

Workshop Report Executive Summary

SARDC
Southern African Research
and Documentation Centre



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The teaching of history at most universities and other learning institutions in southern Africa – and indeed most of the continent – has hitherto focused on the delivery of lectures focusing on theoretical aspects of historical events and places. Without the privilege of personal visits to the places and access to online videos about the events or monuments in question, the actual appreciation of historical sites and events is left to the imagination of the learner – sometimes with wild imaginations and distortions.

It is against this background that the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC), with support from the Global Centre of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability (SMUS) at the Technical University of Berlin, hosted a five-day, in-person workshop at the Great Zimbabwe Heritage Site in Zimbabwe to provide archaeology and history students from three southern African universities with a comprehensive understanding of historical sites such as Great Zimbabwe. The workshop focused on both theoretical aspects and practical exploration of these monuments.

The official opening of the workshop took place in Harare where Zimbabwe's Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science, Innovation and Technology Development, Professor Amon Murwira underscored the importance of heritage-based education. He spoke about the Heritage-Based Education 5.0 philosophy adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe, which aims to promote teaching that focuses on the use of the local environment and locally available materials to develop the economy. The Heritage-Based Education 5.0 is a five-mission education design that adds Innovation and Industrialisation to the common tripartite missions of colonial education that focused on (1)Teaching, (2)Research and (3)Community Service.

After the opening ceremony in Harare, participants travelled to Masvingo where the rest of the workshop was held on-site at the Great Zimbabwe Heritage Site. Participants comprised lecturers and students from Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe, University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania, University of Pretoria (UP) in South Africa as well as lecturers from Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), Humboldt University of Berlin, and the Technical University of Berlin. There were also representatives from National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ).

Key observations from the workshop included:

- **Decolonisation of Curriculum.** There was a recognized need for the decolonisation of Africa's education curriculum to incorporate heritage issues, providing a more inclusive and representative education.
 - One of the suggestions was the need to introduce heritage studies as early as possible in schools – perhaps as early as Grade One – to ensure that learners have a solid foundation of who they are as a people and to value that which they have inherited.



- In the same vein, there is need for caution as countries move towards decolonisation of the curriculum, noting that there are some aspects of the existing curricula that may need to be retained as others get discarded.
- **On-site Teaching.** The use of on-site teaching as part of the curriculum for history and archaeology students was highlighted. This hands-on approach provides practical experience and context that is interdisciplinary in its approach to teaching and learning.
 - In the interest of promoting heritage-based education, there is need for a multi-sectoral approach in which learning institutions can work out some arrangements with organisations responsible for managing heritage sites such as NMMZ and South African National Parks (SANParks) or Tanzania National Parks (Tanapa) to facilitate the Teaching On-Site concept. Such arrangements may include consideration to making heritage sites such as Great Zimbabwe accessible to students free of charge.
- **Further Research.** There is an urgent need for further research on Great Zimbabwe to gain a deeper understanding of life in the pre-colonial city-state. Much remains unknown about the Great Zimbabwe civilisation and there are potential research opportunities to better understand life and activities in the medieval city-state. These include, among others, the architecture, the manufacturing and trading system, and what led to the collapse of the medieval city-state. This research can provide insights into historical societal structures and lifestyles.
 - However, the research should be done in context. It is important to interrogate the sources of information and base interpretations on sound local evidence. Interpretations need not to be imported as this could lead to misinterpretation. Effective research methodologies should be rooted in African value systems that recognise local sources and processes, including governance and spiritual structures.
- **Review of NMMZ Act.** It was noted that the NMMZ Act of 1972 is outdated and out of touch with some of the contemporary issues.
 - One of the issues raised is that the Act only caters for archaeologists and not historians. This omission was reflective of the thinking at the time of the enactment of the Act that black Zimbabweans had no specific history outside of that which could be gleaned from archaeological findings around the country. As a result, the Act only provided for the work of archaeologists and not historians.
 - Cognisant of this shortcoming, the NMMZ has expanded its mandate to cover historical issues while awaiting the outcome of the review of the Act. The thinking behind this is that the work of historians complements that of archaeologists.
 - It was also noted that the Act is silent on spiritual and ethnographic matters, which are important issues that researchers must investigate to have a fuller understanding of any African society. NMMZ's



mandate has also been expanded to include spiritual and ethnographic issues although this is not yet provided for under the statutes governing its operations.

- Another topical issue is the need to capture, in the revised NMMZ Act, a number of emerging issues such as the advent of new research techniques including the use of drones and radar penetration technologies, as well as to align it with the Research Council of Zimbabwe Act (RCZ). There is concern that the requirement for researchers to first seek approval of the RCZ before undertaking any research in Zimbabwe is putting too many layers for people wanting to do research. The current arrangement has created a huge bureaucracy, resulting in major delays in execution of research projects. It was felt that the review of the NMMZ Act would enable the organisation to reassert its position as the authority that oversees historical and archaeological research.

- **Reading Culture.** There was encouragement for students to adopt a strong reading culture to enable a better understanding of historical issues. They must also strive to read the texts critically and compare the various sources, considering the potential subjectivity of the messages. It is important for students to interrogate the validity, reliability and relevance of sources to the theme or topic under discussion.
- **“Silences in text”.** Students should look out for those issues or items that have been marginalised or are not talked during discussions or in writings about a particular subject.
- **Sustainable Urbanism.** The following issues were highlighted during the workshop:
 - There is need for a review of the classification system for cities and towns to replace euro-centric classifications.
 - There is need to understand what made pre-colonial cities and towns more sustainable compared to modern urban centres. Urban sustainability was characterised as a set of inter-related cogs that make up a system which allows cities to function properly without collapsing. A slight change in or misfiring of one of the constituent parts of the cogs of the system would cause the entire system to collapse. What are those cogs or key pillars of sustainable urbanism? This is an area that needs further scholarship.
 - Pre-colonial cities such as Great Zimbabwe had mastered the art of reducing the impact of overpopulation, using a mechanism of allowing the city “to breathe” with respect to the number of people within the inner city at any one time. There were thresholds in terms of the holding capacity of these cities, beyond which they would collapse. In this



regard, there was dispersed urbanism where some people would move out of the city at certain times to stay in outlying areas. There was a controlled entrance point, referred to as *Mujejeje*, through which those coming into the city would enter. This ensured controlled access to the city and only those who had business to do would be allowed entry. This is a potential research topic in urban history in terms of cities having breathing space.

- There was also a mechanism to protect the environment by limiting economic activities such as mining and construction. Some scholars argued that mining was only allowed at certain times while the rest of the year was reserved for agricultural activities. This was because some mining and building at the time involved the use of firewood, which affected the environment. This presents important lessons for researchers and planners in modern cities.
 - Another observation was that modern house designs are not energy efficient. Most current designs make use of materials used such as glass, corrugated iron sheets and tiles, which mean that the household requires a lot of energy for heating and cooling purposes. To ensure the sustainability of modern urban areas, there is need to embrace simple and energy efficient designs. One of the lessons from Great Zimbabwe is that the thick walls of the Great Enclosure made the interior cooler by preventing heat from penetrating.
- **Selected Emerging Issues in Teaching History and Archaeology.** There were a number of emerging issues highlighted during the workshop that may need further reflection as learning institutions move towards the review of the curriculum for archaeology and history studies. These included:
 - *Gender and Heritage.* There is need to interrogate the roles played by women in the conservation of heritage in ancient civilisations such as Great Zimbabwe.
 - *Climate and Heritage.* The collapse of civilisations such as Mapungubwe and subsequent studies to establish whether agriculture played a role in the society has raised questions about the possible impact of climate variability on the sustainability of ancient urban centres. Was Mapungubwe a victim of changes in weather patterns, given that it is in a dry or drought-prone area? The original inhabitants must have chosen that location because there was enough water along the Limpopo River. Should the impact of climate on heritage be one of the issues to be included in the revised curriculum?
 - *ICT and Heritage.* Changes in Information Communication Technology (ICT) have necessitated changes in the methodologies used during historical and archaeological research. It is important for the curriculum to reflect these changes.

