MAPUNGUBWE RECONSIDERED: EXPLORING BEYOND THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE MAPUNGUBWE STATE

Executive Summary

Exploring beyond the rise and decline of the Mapungubwe state.
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Dedicated to Professor Victor Ralushai, an inimitable elder and an industrious scholar of African knowledge systems and their contemporary application.
(1935–2011)
Mapungubwe Institute (MISTRA) conducts research on strategic issues pertinent to the development of South Africa. Its focus includes efforts to unlock the full meaning of historical experiences and their relevance to the present and to the future. In humbly deciding on the name of the Institute, the founders of MISTRA were inspired by the knowledge, only now emerging in its full splendour, of a community that inhabited the environs of the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers in the 10th to 14th centuries (AD). The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape is one of the profound treasures of southern Africa’s social and archaeological history, appropriately declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2003. Contained within this landscape is indispensable information on pre-colonial state formation, social hierarchies, architecture of stone-walled towns, mineral processing and intercontinental trade.

And yet, the Mapungubwe state rose, towered over its environs, and then declined – long before European colonial incursions. What exactly were the social dynamics in this polity? What technologies did it utilise? How did it relate to neighbouring communities and to societies further afield? Indeed, why was this ‘civilisation’ unable to sustain itself? In this research study, Mapungubwe Reconsidered, MISTRA seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge about Mapungubwe, straddling such issues as the relationships between humans and the environment, management of mineral endowments and the form and impact of southern Africa’s global intercourse in this historical period. Beyond these issues are profound social constructs about state legitimacy, quality of leadership, social stratification, gender relations and the consequences of material self-gratification.

Mapungubwe Reconsidered combines methodologies of archaeology, political science, economic history and international relations to weave, in a unique way, a storyline that enriches current knowledge on the history of southern Africa. This transdisciplinary approach is immeasurably enhanced not only by the cooperation among experts located in various universities; but also through entangling, in an unusual embrace, the methodologies of academia, policy-planning and community treasures of knowledge contained in oral history.

And so, through workshops, colloquia, conferences and peer review processes, detailed papers have emerged examining the dynamic nature of geographic borders and citizenship, centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in nation-formation, trade and production, and an environmental heritage of challenge and promise. Contained in this publication is a synthesis of these papers, which will also be published.

If this initiative attempts to prompt a ‘reconsideration’ of the Mapungubwe experience, this is not because it posits entirely new data. Rather it builds on existing knowledge.
in a collaborative journey of unlocking the riddles of our past. There is no doubt that new information and analyses will emerge in future on Mapungubwe and other such settlements in southern Africa. How we utilise all this knowledge, as a basis for an unending process of knowledge-generation – and how society disseminates it in formal and informal ways through our educational institutions, the arts and our innovation systems – will define whether we are worthy inheritors of the Mapungubwe relay-baton. Indeed, whether we succeed in transforming the Mapungubwe Heritage Site and similar locations into centres of knowledge, will determine whether our efforts to improve the human condition endure, grounded on the firm foundation of knowledge that is as indigenous in location as it is global in application.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the core researchers who chaperoned this project, the extended team that offered counsel throughout its evolution, the reviewers who critiqued the work and the generous donors who have made this project and other MISTRA undertakings possible.

Joel Netshitenzhe
MISTRA Executive Director
The research for this project was a collective, although at times unwieldy, endeavour. The project started under the leadership of Peter Delius, who was succeeded by a core group of archaeologists and historians. Ultimately, however, it was project co-ordinator, Jeffrey Sehume, who ensured that it was completed.

Reviews by John Calabrese, David Killick, Cynthia Kros, McEdward Murimbika, Innocent Pikirayi, Jeff Peires and John Sharp ensured that the research content was sound.

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Professor Victor Ralushai played a key role in the early stages of this project. His passing left a substantial gap in the research team, and in our knowledge about the history of the Limpopo region. We dedicate this volume to him.

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Mapungubwe Hill, where a small number of the region’s elite lived, rose above the capital of the first state in southern Africa. It has also loomed large in the consciousness of South Africans since at least 1933 when journalists reported on the first archaeological excavations on the hill. Over the years interpretations of the significance of Mapungubwe have changed. These have ranged from portraying it as a traditional African kingdom, to a sophisticated state that formed part of international trade networks.

The significance of Mapungubwe – and the range of interpretations of its importance – means that it provides a site for intellectual reflection about the nature of South African society and the myriad development challenges that confront our fledgling democracy. To do this MISTRA opened and facilitated a dialogue between hitherto often inaccessible specialist academic researchers on pre-colonial societies, and those whose main focus is on policy and planning issues in the present.

This intellectual project is important because contemporary debates about development in South Africa often lack a clear understanding of the deeper history of the society. This incomprehension has sometimes resulted in a failure to understand the way that trajectories of change within southern Africa impact upon development interventions. An understanding of South Africa’s deeper, pre-colonial history will allow South Africans to locate issues and debates in an African context.

The archaeology and history of the first state in southern Africa – Mapungubwe – is a rich resource for understanding the kinds of challenges that have confronted southern African societies in the past and comprehending the solutions – both successful and unsuccessful – that were crafted to deal with them.

The first step in exploring the history of Mapungubwe, as a resource in the present, was the MISTRA launch publication – Mapungubwe a Living Legacy. The ‘Mapungubwe Reconsidered’ project now takes the next step to further deepen our understanding of the Mapungubwe state and other pre-colonial societies. Our objective was to expand and elaborate on key social and economic themes that speak to the past and the present, which could only be touched on briefly in the initial publication. This has the potential for generating insights that will allow for innovative thinking in policy and planning, which might address the development challenges facing South Africa.

To do this the project brought together a team of scholars from a number of disciplines, including archaeology, history and indigenous knowledge. The project attempted to establish synergy and productive engagement between these scholars.
The approach that shaped this project forms part of a broader intellectual project in South Africa that endeavours to bridge these disciplines in order to construct the past using different sources.

A series of nine papers was commissioned to explore the rise and decline, and functioning of Mapungubwe, as well as other pre-colonial societies. These highlighted dimensions of its past that resonate with contemporary issues. All of these papers relate to a fundamental problem which is as true for today as it was 1000 years ago: how to make society succeed in a profoundly uncertain world.

These nine papers used insights derived from archival sources and indigenous manuscripts – which are essentially oral texts – to deepen our understanding of archaeological sites and to bring to life the pre-colonial African societies that lived there by revealing something about their identities and technologies, about social relations between the young and the elderly, and between men and women, as well as about relations with other people in the region. Not only did these manuscripts add texture, they also attached human voices to the material remains – bones, ruins, fragments of pottery, and metals – and made them speak to each other in complex and creative ways. These papers have been synthesised into this report.

Scholars involved in this project used the research methodologies of their own particular disciplines, including archaeology, history, anthropology and economics. However, what made this project unique was the cross-fertilisation of ideas based on the accumulated knowledge and research questions of a number of related but too-often isolated disciplines. Thus, before moving into our exploration of the past, Chapter two explores how we know about Mapungubwe’s past, and whether these sources are adequate to address current concerns.
The four chapters that follow after Chapter two are firmly located in pre-colonial history and archaeology. Chapter three discusses the shaping of pre-colonial society in southern Africa, and how this can help us understand the processes at Mapungubwe. Fundamental to these was interaction between hunter-gatherers, herders and farmers. These processes were complex and location specific. In chapter four Lekgoathi and Schoeman show how society was not only divided into groups, but that there were many internal conflicts, cleavages and networks of cooperation. Grappling with the complex membership of Mapungubwe and other post-colonial societies, as well as the cleavages that divided them, is important because some of these had lasting effects on South Africa’s political systems and values. It also raises questions about the failures and successes of contemporary South Africa.

Social complexity was central to the Mapungubwe state, but equally important was the scale and nature of the economy. During the rise of the Mapungubwe state southern Africa entered the world of international trade. In Chapter five Maanda Mulaudzi explores whether participation in the Indian Ocean trade system played a role in the making and eventual decline of the Mapungubwe state; and the related topic of metal manufacture and trade is the focus of chapter 6. In this chapter Shadreck Chirikure provides a detailed exploration of metal manufacture and trade in the Mapungubwe state.

In chapter seven Amanda Esterhuysen brings us back to the present with her overview of the history of the formulation of heritage and environmental legislation in South Africa. She contends that our legislative framework is not appropriate to help us manage South Africa’s heritage, particularly in a context as complex as the Mapungubwe cultural landscape. In the final chapter we reflect on how the themes explored by this project resonate in the present.
This report explored the complexity and workings of the Mapungubwe state, combining perspectives of historians and archaeologists. Mapungubwe forms a pivotal part of our history and its study is worthwhile not only for its own sake but because it is ‘good to think with’.

It is ‘good to think with’ because understanding the processes by which Mapungubwe evolved and declined helps us to think about our present, and the potential ‘lessons’ that we might learn. Gaining insight into the conflicts and cleavages in pre-colonial society; the ways that different groups interacted; the impact of climate, environment, innovation and trade to the growth and decline of a state, all contribute to a better understanding of the present and the challenges we face. It helps to adjust people’s perceptions of the pre-colonial African past, which are all too often shaped by ignorant attitudes. It challenges the pervasive myth of the primacy of ‘tribal’ identity in the past, and the exclusivity of ethnicity: a myth often abused by political leaders from colonial times through to the present, across Africa.

An imagined African past: Changing perceptions of Mapungubwe, and Africa

Our approach to the past is shaped in the present. Early studies of Mapungubwe tried to explain its prominence by emphasising external influences – it was influence from Egyptian or Arab traders that allowed this African kingdom to rise. The formation of a complex state in Africa was thought to be ‘exceptional’. Although these early studies fall short in our present understanding of Africa, they were nevertheless challenging the perception at that time that it was impossible for a state as complex and wealthy as Mapungubwe to be of African origin. The widely held perception of pre-colonial Africa at the time was of a backward, static and unchanging continent.

Over the last 100 years scholars have moved forward in their thinking about Mapungubwe (and Africa in general). Their methodologies are now far more inclusive, with African art, oral traditions and oral history being an integral part of learning about the past and present. Unfortunately, popular conceptions of Africa have been more difficult to shift. Worryingly, the image of Africa as backward and/or unable to develop without outside

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8. This phrase has been often used since LeviStraus (1963: 89) suggested that animals are good to think with. Since then ‘things that are good to think with’ have ranged from trees (Bloch 1998: 39) to ‘whitemen’ (Baskhow 2000: 281) to Science (Harding 1996: 15).
assistance (for example in the form of aid, and funded development ‘projects’) is still pervasive today. This has profound negative consequences for the continent. One example is the provision of ‘food aid’ to African countries, which in exceptional situations, such as famine, is a necessity, but in ordinary circumstances takes the form of ‘dumping’ of surplus production from Western government-subsidised farms. This undermines local production and local economies. In general, it is fairly commonplace that negative stereotypes of Africa help to undermine investment in and trade with Africa in the present.

The counter-interpretation which has emerged is equally unhelpful – the romantic view that pre-colonial African society was egalitarian, harmonious and free of any significant conflict. This view encourages thinking along the lines that a ‘return’ to old values and customs would solve Africa’s problems. It is particularly dangerous when this manifests as forms of ethnic nationalism. The mirage of a utopian pre-colonial Africa that was destroyed by colonialism easily shifts into an abdication of responsibility in relation to weaknesses of the past and the present.

Both of these portrayals are deeply flawed and hamper constructive engagement. A more nuanced understanding of the African past should help us, policy makers included, to better navigate the challenges of the present. The aim of this report was to attempt to provide a nuanced view of Mapungubwe, and pre-colonial southern African society more broadly, in order that it may help us think clearly about present-day challenges and their resolution, without falling to the stereotypes born of a poor understanding of history. Mapungubwe also has many contemporary resonances, and gives a sense of the historical depth of, and potential lessons regarding, some of the challenges facing South Africa today.

We have avoided a narrow focus on the hackneyed ‘rise and fall’ question, because this helps to perpetuate that idea that pre-colonial states in Africa were exceptional. Instead, we focused on the internal workings of Mapungubwe society and explored the social and economic dynamics of this state. The themes explored resonate strongly in the present. The focus is specifically on citizenship, conflicts and cleavages, leadership, production, sustainability and trade. Finally, we consider the issue of heritage management.

### Citizenship, conflicts and cleavages

South Africa is struggling to overcome the ‘racially’ and ethnically defined citizenship that was fundamental to Apartheid. Many find it difficult to imagine a society with fluid and open citizenship. Some forcefully reject the concept. Racism is far too common, as is xenophobia. The destructiveness of these attitudes is embodied in the kneeling figure of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, the 35-year-old Mozambican who was burned alive during the violence in South Africa in May 2008.

South Africa’s inability to deal with population fluidity and complexity is not unique. This is an African problem, as it is a problem of many nations and regions of the world. Mahmood Mamdani (2005) reminds us that it is often assumed that economic, cultural and political identities and boundaries must coincide, and that states should be nation-states. This assumption has sometimes resulted in the ideas that encourage xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. In this context, there is ‘the growing tendency for indigeneity to become the litmus test for rights under the postcolonial state, as under the colonial state … we have built upon this foundation and turned indigeneity into a test for justice, and thus for entitlement under the postcolonial state’ (Mamdani 2005: 9).

Indigeneity was not a criterion for citizenship in pre-colonial Africa. Chapters three and four explored how Mapungubwe and the rest of pre-colonial South Africa has long been the site of profound interaction – co-operative and conflictual – between individuals and communities that were shaped by different economic, political and cultural realities.
Fundamentally, the archaeology of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape reflects multiple inputs from a variety of communities: from the hunter-gatherers to the farmers. In this process, unique forms of integration and identity-creation were attained. This challenges the notion that states in the past were based on a rigid conception of ethnicity. But in spite of, or because of, this long history of fluidity, a range of political and economic inequalities shaped access to power and resources. Some of these inequalities were informed by ethnicity. Others revolved around the division of labour and multiple hierarchies (political status, class, skill, gender, age, etc.). These cleavages and conflicts intersected and played themselves out in complex ways and should not be oversimplified.

This complex, internally divided and at times conflicted society stands in contrast to the romanticised, culturally deterministic and timeless assertions about pre-colonial society – often phrased as ‘in African culture’. The complexity of the Mapungubwe population underscores Mamdani’s call that the ‘… only way out … is to rethink the institutional legacy of colonialism, and thus to challenge the idea that we must define political identity, political rights, and political justice first and foremost in relation to indigeneity. Let us reconsider the colonial legacy that each of us is either a native or a settler. It is with that compass in hand that we must fashion our political world’ (Mamdani 2005: 17).

**Leadership and authority**

Chapters four and five underline the dynamism of pre-colonial societies. They are subject to constant processes of fusion and fission. These dynamics – the ability of people to leave one group and be incorporated into another – also served as outlets in conflictual situations, and as constraints on the rulers. Then and now, the authority and legitimacy of a state depends on whether it is able, in appropriate balance, to play its role as an instrument of cohesion and coercion. Fundamental to this is the legitimacy of the leadership. It is quite possible that it was a loss of legitimacy that formed a crucial part of the fall of the Mapungubwe state. Perhaps this loss of legitimacy can be seen in the increasing inequality evident in Mapungubwe society. A key component of the emergent order in the Mapungubwe state was the relocation of the leaders’ residences onto Mapungubwe Hill. This elite accommodation formed part of a monopoly over rare and exotic items that displayed their wealth. Control over long-distance trade formed an important component of this wealth. These sources of wealth were also used to reward their large entourage of minders.

In spite of these networks of reward and privilege, the Mapungubwe rulers’ ability to prevent the splintering of their polities was short-lived. The Mapungubwe state only lasted 70 years. The preceding K2 polity, with its cattle and trade-based economy in which inequalities of wealth were less conspicuous, lasted 200 years. Ultimately, it seems the Mapungubwe leaders were not able to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects. Their apparent failure in this regard, along with shifts in trade and climate, may well have played a decisive role in the decline of the Kingdom.

**Production, sustainability and trade**

Chapters three and four highlight that the Mapungubwe state ‘thrived on the backs of efficient farmers engaged in a thriving domestic economy that was largely based on new, highly productive agricultural and pastoral farming’. These farmers maximised production through methods ranging from effective management of floodplain moisture, to planting drought resistant and adapted crops as well as mixing crops with differing growth and moisture requirements. Simultaneously, cattle were moved seasonally to avoid overgrazing (see Smith 2005; Smith et al. 2007, 2010). Through these innovations farmers were able to produce a surplus and sustain the 9000 people in the town and surrounding homesteads in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape.
There is no doubt that similarly adaptive agricultural innovations are important in order to ensure that we continue to produce enough food for all in South Africa. In fact they will become critical in the face of climate change, which will negatively impact on rainfall patterns and temperature regimes.

This core farming economy was supplemented through long-distance trade, which is explored in Chapter five. The focus of these trade networks initially had a regional emphasis, with traders travelling far to obtain materials such as metals that were not available locally. Regional trade developed into long-distance trade that linked Mapungubwe into the international Indian Ocean network. Long-distance trade became one of the drivers of the evolution of the SLCA community: it expanded the wealth base and helped enhance the complexity of social organisation.

Trade with the outside world was often accompanied by exposure to new ideas and methods practised by the Arabs, Portuguese, and others. African societies were open to adopting new techniques in the context of the trade, as seen for instance in the adoption of Indian cotton spinning techniques in Mapungubwe.

However, other forms of knowledge, such as metal production, pre-dated trade. Iron, copper and gold were produced using techniques that spread into southern Africa about 2000 years ago. These metals were clearly produced by Africans, not Indian or Arabian immigrants, as has been proposed by some writers. But, the increased production of some metals was a response to external demand introduced through the Indian Ocean trade.

The downside of trade is that it promoted a ‘certain level of dependency that left Mapungubwe at the mercies of any shifts in international trade’. This resonates strongly with contemporary world economic challenges. Trade exposed the Mapungubwe economy to factors outside of its control, and it did not have adequate mechanisms to cope with unforeseen changes. The change in coastal trade centres, and thus in the trade routes, may have led to Mapungubwe’s decline.

There are a range of similarities between Mapungubwe and present-day South Africa in this regard. The Mapungubwe metal economy, however, was very different from contemporary metal production. Mapungubwe added value to metal mined and produced elsewhere, and controlled the export of these goods to international markets. Mapungubwe’s vulnerability lay in the fact that it did not have full control over the source of gold. Present-day South Africa has a different problem. The country contains valuable sources of metals, and mines and exports these; but it is other countries which add value and thus create the wealth and expertise that is necessary for economic growth.

A heritage of challenges

South Africa’s extraordinarily deep and rich history has left fascinating residues that have the power to illuminate and entrance both the citizens of our country and visitors to it. Chapter seven shows that despite the promise of the South African Heritage Act of 1999, heritage sites are poorly protected in practice.

To ensure that future generations also use heritage sites ‘to think with’, South Africa needs to strengthen its capacity to preserve and protect these sites – not just in terms of legislation and regulations, but essentially on how these are given practical effect – and this is a task not just of government. The initiative of the Higher Education Ministerial Team on Humanities and Social Sciences to investigate how to turn heritage sites into knowledge centres is critical, and the Mapungubwe heritage site, amongst others, should stand this initiative in good stead.
Conclusion

Contemporary debates about policy and development often lack a clear understanding of the nature and dynamics of pre-colonial societies. This leaves them open to manipulation by those who insist that Africa should look to the West for instruction and ‘development’; or by those who call for a ‘return’ to ‘traditional’ values and the way things were before colonialism, often linking this with discriminatory ethnic-based nationalism and patronage. The example of Mapungubwe shows that the past was not idyllic, it had its problems, society had its internal conflicts and cleavages, and leaders were fallible. But the society was also dynamic and adaptive. The leaders of Mapungubwe for a time were able to capitalise on opportunities, and the members of that society were innovative. There are strong resonances between South Africa’s pre-colonial past and the present. Clearly, Mapungubwe and other pre-colonial societies can enrich our paradigms and help inform new approaches to current challenges facing South Africa. In this way, society’s march to the future will be based on a strong foundation in which indigenous knowledge and global insights merge to benefit all of South Africa’s people.