CHAPTER XIII

Religion is never merely metaphysics (Geertz 1975:126).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Achievements and Challenges

I end this thesis as I started, with a quote from Geertz. The principle he expresses informs my understanding of the role of rain-control in SLCA societies. When I embarked on this research I did not expect the hunter-gatherer material culture on farmer rain-control sites. Neither did I imagine that I would find K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics that dated after AD 1250. Confronting these discordant facts have led to new insights, whilst re-iterating how deeply ritual is entrenched in the socio-political context of society.

The core aim of this thesis was to address a lacuna in the archaeological knowledge of Leopard’s Kopje farmer rain-control. Until now, rain-control was one of the least understood farmer rituals. To change this, I combined an investigation of archaeological remains with insights gained from relevant rain-control ethnography, and I identified the K2 SLCA rain-control signature. My identification of the specific signature will facilitate future surveying for as yet unidentified rain-control sites in the area. We can also re-examine known hilltop sites.

This rain-control signature was not static, but changed in tandem with socio-political transformations in Leopard’s Kopje society. I track these changes, and how the transitions articulated with the ritualised landscape. One of the key steps in socialising the rain-control landscape was ‘removing’ rain-control hills from nature. This was materialised in the construction of farmer features in the rain hills. Important features were gravel-floored structures. I suggest that these indicate a shift from ritual to residential, with rain-controllers appropriating the power of the rain places, possibly to their own advantage.

Insights gained from the rain-control sequence allowed me to explore why Mapungubwe was chosen as the royal residence. I also suggest that the move onto the hill might not be the materialisation of full sacred leadership, but rather of class distinction. I propose that sacred leadership was materialised in the construction of the palace and Mapungubwe ceramics after a drought. This
insight, combined with understanding the K2 rain-control signature, means that we can re-examine the material culture and features from the lower levels of Mapungubwe. This re-examination might help us comprehend material culture and features that previously were unexplained.

I demonstrate that viewing rain-control material culture as materialised ideology allows us to gain new insights into the ideological transformations that guided the shift from the K2 polity into the Mapungubwe state, as well as responses to this process. The interwoven relationship between ritual, ideology and politics provided an entrance into how K2-Mapungubwe state ideology was transformed.

In the process of establishing the signature of rain-control sites, this research demonstrated two key components in rain-control in southern African farming communities. The first is that rain-control is not a once off event; rather it is part of an annual cycle of activities that might return to the same place. Second, rain-control is enacted differently through time and space, with local imaginings and conditions informing the materialisation.

A key variable in rain-control imaginings is that hills are just one possible choice out of a set of four possible places (hills, pools, caves and graves). Rain-controllers at different times, or drawing on different power, could choose sites other than hilltops. It is particularly relevant for the Zhizo period because Zhizo ceramics are largely absent from SLCA hills. This insight opens up a new way to look at shelter or cave deposits in the valley. Two obvious sites to investigate would be Little Muck Shelter, with the extensive cupule-field on its doorstep, and Tshisiku Shelter with a row of cupules on the shelter wall and farmer grainbins.

The combination of a focus on the materialised with a landscape-based approach allowed me to access contact between the different communities. By exploring the relationship between worked stone and ceramics, I have shown that hunter-gathers played a role in K2 rain-control. The specific materialisation of SLCA rain-control was shaped in this interaction. My research, in combination with Van Doornum (2005), suggests that the relationship between Leopard’s Kopje farmers and hunter-gatherers was complex, and not only antagonistic as has been suggested before by Hall & Smith (2000). This realisation highlights the
importance of studying hunter-gatherer material culture on farmer sites, and vice versa.

Separating K2 from K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics is difficult. Meyer (1980) indicates that the transition at Mapungubwe hill was subtle and often only manifested in a change in frequencies. Thus far transitional ceramics have not been studied on commoner sites, and we do not know if the frequency changes are similar. It is important that this is done. There is also a need to define criteria for separating K2 and transitional ceramics. Analysis of the hilltop assemblages indicates that decoration moved lower onto the neck-shoulder area might be a useful marker. When using this as a marker, however, one needs to keep in mind that a small percentage of ceramics from K2 already have decoration in this position. Excision might not be as useful. It was assumed to be unique to K2 assemblages, but I found excised bowls and beakers throughout the sequence. This included vessels with design motifs (Fig. IX33), decoration placement and jar shapes (Fig.IX37) more common in Mapungubwe assemblages.

I also found that the hilltops contained K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics that date to the post AD 1250 period. This association raises several questions about the ceramic and settlement sequences in the valley. Further research is needed to establish whether the association of K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics with mid-Mapungubwe hill occupation dates is an anomaly, or part of a broader pattern. If it is part of a broader trend, we need to re-examine our understanding of the sequence, the rate of ceramic change and the hegemony of the Mapungubwe state. The first step in gaining this understanding is more extensive archaeological research on the plateau. In addition, an extensive radiocarbon dating programme is needed for sites with K2 and K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics located away from the capitals.

Summary
The ideological roots of the Mapungubwe state are found in earlier ritual and socio-political processes in the SLCA. The ideology manifest in the spatial layout at Mapungubwe germinated during the K2 occupation. Initially rain-control was located in nature and linked to hunter-gatherers. Through time, rain-control was slowly reclassified from nature into the farmer environment. Eventually some rain-
control hills might have become specialist elite residences. The final step in taking rain-control out of nature was locating it at the capital. This nationalisation and centralisation of rain-control was part of a long-term process of both economic and political centralisation. Changes in rain-control practices were probably made to seem natural, as it was part of the materialisation of a new ideology. The continued use of the rain-control hills on the plateau for a while, suggests that people from the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area did not immediately embrace the new state ideology.