The study of sacred leadership at Mapungubwe involves an analysis of how the emerging elite centralised rainmaking and other public rituals. These developments occurred in the Shashe-Limpopo basin between AD 1000 and AD 1300. Mapungubwe was the last in a sequence of capitals in the basin. The first was Schroda (AD 900-1000), followed by K2 (AD 1000-1220) and then Mapungubwe (AD 1220-1300). This sequence corresponds to a series of cultural, socio-political and economic transformations that led to class distinction and sacred leadership, two distinctive features of the region’s early state system.

The development of Mapungubwe was a local indigenous accomplishment that occurred in the prehistoric period but in the relatively recent past. This offers possibilities for using current indigenous knowledge to develop relevant ethnographic models. Over a period of four years, I explored Venda, Sotho-Tswana and Shona traditional agriculture strategies and belief systems through their oral histories, cosmologies and practices. I identified three systems of rainmaking practices. Practice A is associated with kin-based chiefdoms. Practise B exists among class-based polities with sacred leadership. Practice C represents the devolution of complexity after the disintegration of the Zimbabwe culture. These data provide models to clarify the roles of rainmaking and agriculture in the evolution of Mapungubwe.