

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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

Rain-control is one of the best known, but least understood rituals in the archaeology of African farming communities. The interwoven relationship between ritual, ideology and politics in the rise of a more complex political system in the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area (SLCA) (Fig. I1) is obvious (cf. Huffman 1986, 1996, 2000; Pikirayi 2001), even though it has never been explicitly articulated. This close relationship between ritual and ideology suggests that ritual can be used to gain insight into the political and ideological transformations in SLCA communities.

Understanding how K2-Mapungubwe state ideology was transformed is the aim of this thesis. I explore how changes in ideology allowed, facilitated and obscured the implications of centralisation and state formation, as well as responses to centralisation. I access K2-Mapungubwe ideologies through the archaeology of SLCA ritual. Specifically, I explore the local manifestation of rain-control and its relationship with the ideologies of farming communities in the period leading up to SLCA state formation, between AD 1000 and AD 1250. I achieve this by viewing rain-control as materialised ideology (cf. DeMarrais et al. 1996). Using this insight into the relationship between material culture and ideology, I examine the material culture and spatial manifestation of rain-control, the transition from ritual to residential sites, and how these transitions articulated with the ritualised landscape.



Figure I1. The SLCA indicated on a Google satellite image of southern Africa.

POPULAR IMAGES OF RAIN-CONTROL

Sacred Queens

Little archaeological research has been conducted on rain-control in southern African farming communities. The limited archaeological data mean that archaeologists have not been able to engage with, or challenge, lay images of farming community rain-control. I now focus on facets of these public views and use these to highlight important themes in the archaeological discourse.

Popular images of rain-control in southern Africa are primarily based on the mythologized Lobedu rain queen, Modjadji. She is a sacred leader, who controls rain from her capital in the Molotsi Valley in the Limpopo Province. The capital is located in the cycad forests of an area that normally has an above-average rainfall. Queen Modjadji is said to have been the inspiration for Rider Haggard's novel *She* in which he portrays Africa as savage and primitive, and asserts British male superiority over the primitive female 'other' (news.telegraph 2005). Both Queen Modjadji and Haggard's Queen Ayesha's powers are based on the ability to prevent death. Queen Modjadji prevents famine, and thus bereavement, through her ability to control rain and rivers, whereas Ayesha uses her supernatural powers to return life to the deceased and herself.

Haggard's Queen Ayesha, also known as *She-who-must-be-obeyed*, was a supernaturally beautiful, immortal African queen, who lived on an remote hilltop. Until the reign of Modjadji V, the Lobedu rain queen lived a secluded life, and was seldom seen by her followers. Like Queen Modjadji, Queen Ayesha was only seen every two or three years when she passed sentence on offenders. The rest of the time she was completely secluded, and nobody was allowed to look at her [cf. Haggard 1995 (1887)]. Queen Modjadji 'married' women to create political alliances, and children borne by these wives were seen as her children. Her advisors selected suitable men to father her biological children. She, however, never married these men. On her death she was succeeded by one of her 'daughters' chosen by the elders. Similarly, Queen Ayesha's children were fathered by husbands whom she never again saw after they fathered female children. Likewise, Queen Ayesha's daughter succeeded her [Krige and Krige 1943; Haggard 1995 (1887)].

Queen Modjadji and Queen Ayesha are, in a sense, ideal examples of African sacred leaders. Sacred leaders live secluded lives, their health is said to be linked to the welfare of the land, and they control both the political and the sacred. I further engage with this concept in Chapter III because sacred leadership features prominently in archaeological narratives on Mapungubwe, and it is thought to be instrumental in the successful establishment of the Great Zimbabwe states (cf. Huffman 1986, 1996).

The success of the Modjadji line has been the result of their perceived ability to control rain. This has prevented attacks from outsiders, who feared their ability to cause drought in their areas. Their sacredness, and associated mystique, also ensured internal Lobedu hegemony.

The stability of the Lobedu kingdom, however, has been threatened by infighting after the death of Modjadji V in 2003, followed by the death of Modjadji VI in 2005. Modjadji VI had received a formal education and had broken many of the traditional taboos; this included making rain in public in front of cameras (cf. Mopani News 2005, Fig. I2). It has been rumoured that royal elders poisoned her because her behaviour was unacceptable (Mail&Guardian online 2005a). Another rumour suggested she died from complications associated with AIDS (news.telegraph 2005). Interestingly, the house in which her coffin was kept mysteriously caught fire (Mail&Guardian online 2005b). Members of the royal household, who were interviewed at the time, said that the ancestors caused this fire because of the infighting in the family (news.telegraph 2005). Irrespective of the cause, the responses to her death illustrate that sacred leaders were dependent on an elite.



Figure I2. Copy of the Mopani News front-page. This edition published photographs of Queen Modjadji making rain.

Southern African rain-control is a widespread practice, and pre-dates the founding of the Lobedu kingdom and Modjadji dynasty. Queen Modjadji is a representative and indirect successor via the Venda kingdom of the Great Zimbabwe and Khami kings (Krige & Krige 1943). This thesis explores how rain-control became an ideological tool.

Sacrificing people?

The other popular representation of rain-control relates to human sacrifice. The obsession with sacrificing people forms part of a colonial narrative, which is still present in Western representations of Africa. In this narrative African people are not only portrayed as savage but also as cannibals (Wright 1995). Whilst actual humans sometimes were sacrificed (cf. Chapter IV on historic Shona rain-control), human sacrifice generally is only a symbolic part of rain-control. The foremost sacrificial animal is not a person; rather it is a black sheep. These sheep are used as symbolic substitutes for humans and at times also the king or queen. By sacrificing a sheep, symbolising humanity or royalty, rather than an actual human, “the death of a man-god assures the creation of the world or the salvation of men” (De Heusch 1985:97). Because of the symbolic power harvested, substitution is more powerful than actual human sacrifice.

The colonial image of widespread human sacrifice might conflate symbolic and real sacrifice. This is similar to the confusion of African symbolic statements about ‘eating people’ as presented in stories of the *mfecane* (the troubled period in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). These statements are metaphors about expanding territories and incorporating other groups. This is not to deny that a few real cannibalistic events might have occurred. A few isolated events, however, were generalised as cannibalism narratives. In African communities these stories were used to show “the dire consequences of the destruction of properly constituted authority” (Delius 1983:24). Accordingly, as part of internal ideological processes, African accounts are also likely to over exaggerate cannibalistic accounts. Unfortunately, these accounts also fitted colonial stereotypes and agendas, so they similarly exaggerated the extent (Wright 1995).

ACADEMIC IMAGES OF RAIN-CONTROL

These popular narratives are based on generalisations without history. In contrast the purpose of this thesis is to locate Leopard's Kopje rain-control in history. This will facilitate an understanding of the specific manifestation of rain-control in the K2 – Mapungubwe periods. In addition, it might help us to better understand the archaeology of Mapungubwe Hill.

We do not know what Mapungubwe was called when it was a royal site. The name Mapungubwe (meaning Place of the Jackal) dates from the historic period, and was given to the hill by Sotho/Tswana or Venda communities who lived in the SLCA.

These Late Farming communities did not settle on top of Mapungubwe, but rather they revered the hill. This is clear from the behaviour of Mowena, the African man who showed European settlers the secret stairway up to Mapungubwe in the 1930s, but did not ascend himself. He said his spirit would be damned forever if he climbed the hill (Meyer 1998).

Mowena, or others from the area, may have used Mapungubwe as a rain-control hill, and their avoidance was similar to Tswana avoidance of Kwanyape rain-hill (Schapera 1971) and Mount Tswenyane (Feddemma 1968) as well as the Pedi avoidance of Modimolle (Hughes 1957). The following song collected in the twentieth century by a local farmer, Mr G. Moerdijk, from an old African man from the area, strengthens this hypothesis.

For the offering of rain, clay pots are filled with sorghum
And if it does not rain? Then the last offering is a ten-year child.
When the jackals begins to call 'Ma-pun-gub-we, Ma-pun-gub-we', meaning
'Many children are dead'. It is the season of drought
Many people gather, and call upon the Rainmaker,
The clay pots are filled with sorghum
And young women carry these pots to the summit of the Hill,
Via the secret ladder
They place the pots down upon the ground,
And then the snake comes to bite them,
Some survive, some do not
Singing and dancing takes place, and a ten day old goat is killed,
Cremated, and placed in a clay pot,
Then, the young girls put more pots down on the ground,
And the vultures come to peck their eyes out,
Then there are festivities, dancing, eating and drinking,

And the witchdoctor comes to sniff out the young boy of ten years old,
He is burnt, and placed in a pot,
Once again, the young girls carry the pots up the hill.
Then it rains (Webster 2004).

There is much in this song to ponder, but for now I simply use it to underscore the possible link between Mapungubwe Hill and rain-control.

Like this song about Mapungubwe, most of what we know about rain-control in farming communities is drawn from historical accounts or ethnographic studies undertaken in the twentieth century (see Chapter V for a review). Rain-making was a popular topic in ethnological texts at the time. Frequently, these texts took rain-control out of its social and cultural contexts and focused on the single 'rain-making' ceremony at the beginning of the agricultural season, which is often associated with sacrifice (cf. Dornan 1927-29; Beemer 1935; Eiselen 1928; Schoeman 1935).

Rain-control, however, is more complex than this single ritual; rather it is the whole cycle of rituals and ceremonies performed throughout the traditional calendar. None of these ceremonies can be omitted. All have to be performed to ensure good rainfall. Making rain also is not the only concern. As important is controlling the quantity and quality of rain, as well as preventing hail and lightning. Consequently, I use the term rain-control.

The archaeology of rain-control in farming communities is poorly known. Except for Aukema's 1989 study, most archaeological research on rain-control has focused on hunter-gatherer practices (cf. Jolly 1986, 1992; Dowson 1998; Prins 1990; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004a). Aukema's short but excellent paper linked caves and shelters in the Lepalala drainage basin, which contain pots and grindstones, with the preparation and storage of rain-medicines. Caves, like hills and pools, are associated with spirits and not ancestors one can remember. Hence, these "dark, cool and mysterious places" (Aukema 1989:71) are used as points of access to the spirits, and are thus suitable for use in the specialist parts of rain-control.

The interwoven relationship between ritual, ideology and politics in the rise of a more complex political system in the SLCA raises a number of questions, such

as how ritual sites are chosen; how meaning is given to a site and how sites change from ritual to residential use; the manipulation of K2 ritual (including rain-control) and ritual spaces; and how the Mapungubwe elite appropriated rain-control. Additionally, no research has focused on the archaeology of rain-control sites in the area.

This research does not take part in isolation, but forms part of a larger research program at the University of the Witwatersrand. I will use insights from this research. In particular I draw on Bronwen van Doornum's (2000, 2005) studies of hunter-gatherer farmer relationships, John Calabrese's (2000a, 2000b, 2005) findings on the relationship between K2 and Leokwe, Jeanette Smith's (2005) insights into SLCA climate change as well as farming and animal husbandry practices, and the new contributions on SLCA settlement distribution from surveys by the Origins of Mapungubwe project led by Tom Huffman (Huffman *et al.* 2003, 2004).

CHAPTER OUTLINE

To explore this continuity and change I integrate a theoretical understanding of rain-control as part of materialised ideology with the data from archaeological excavations, and I locate rain-control in the SLCA in the social, political and economic context in which it was shaped.

The first part (Chapters II, III, IV and V) outlines the occupation sequence and establishes the conceptual framework.

Chapter II outlines the settlement history of the area and the core beliefs and organisation of the main communities. This chapter sets the stage for Chapter III, where I engage the concepts of nature, environment and landscape. These and their social roles are important in creating an understanding of the SLCA ritual landscape. I will show that the indigenous knowledge and histories of the communities resulted in different beliefs about rain-control. Through ritual contact these core beliefs merged to form a unique spatial and temporal expression of rain-control.

Ritual interaction between different communities is not unique to the SLCA. Consequently, I explore hunter-gatherer - farmer encounters in the Eastern Cape to access examples of diverse interaction outcomes. This discussion is strongly influenced by Kopytoff's *African Frontier* (Kopytoff 1989).

In Chapter IV I explore ritual and its relationship with ideology, the materialisation of ideology and how ideology could have been materialised in local ritual. Lastly, I locate these concepts on the landscape. From here I explore political states, state formation and sacred leadership in Africa. The manifestation of sacred leaders at Mapungubwe and its ideological successors, Great Zimbabwe, Monomotapa and Khami, have been a key point of contention (cf. Huffman 1986, 1996, 2000; Beach *et. al.* 1997; Pikirayi 2001). Irrespective of this discourse, the system of sacred leadership clearly forms part of ideology.

I synthesise relevant ethnographies in Chapter V. The first part of this chapter summarises the available ethnographic accounts. These are structured in order to highlight places and material culture used in rain-control. Because this thesis proposes that K2 rain-control was the result of the combined imaginings of both farmer and hunter-gather communities, I also briefly discuss key elements of hunter-gatherer rain-control. In the second part of Chapter V, I extract themes from these ethnographic accounts to explore in the K2-Mapungubwe archaeological sequence.

The second section (Chapters VI to X) discusses the research area and documents the excavations.

Leopard's Kopje people made social choices about rain-control practices and items to use against a changing environmental background. The environmental conditions did not pre-determine the choices, but helped delineate the boundaries of choice. In Chapter VI I trace the outlines of this backdrop and present some aspects of the SLCA environmental history and contemporary plant occurrence and distributions. Afterwards, I explain how sites were identified for excavation and outline my research methodology.

In Chapters VII to IX, I report in detail on my excavations at JC hill, M3S and EH hill. In the next chapter, Chapter X, I highlight pertinent elements of the archaeology of Rhodes Drift, which M. Murimbika and I excavated together. Murimbika will include a detailed discussion of the Rhodes Drift excavations in his thesis.

The last section (Chapters XI to XII) combines a synthesis of the previous two sections with a theoretically informed interpretation of SLCA rain-control, and its role in SLCA ideology.

In Chapter XI I bring together the data from the excavation chapters. The analysis presented in Chapter XII focuses on site location, material culture and features found on all excavated sites, which are interpreted using insights gained from the landscape studies and ethnography. This detailed discourse ends with a more speculative discussion on idiosyncratic finds.

Towards the end, I draw the thesis together, presenting a narrative that focuses on choices in SLCA rain-control. This chapter includes discussions of the changing relationship between hunter-gathers and farmers; changes in rain-control material culture and the role of rain-control in ideological processes in the SLCA between AD 1000 and AD 1300. I also show, by examining changes in rain-control material culture, how SLCA perceptions of rain-control, nature and environment changed through time. Lastly, in Chapter XIII, I highlight the accomplishments of this thesis and areas that warrant further investigation.