

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Up until fairly recently, little was known about hunter-gatherers or interaction in the Shashe-Limpopo region, in contrast to the well-known Iron Age sequence. One goal of this study was to begin to address this lack through the description of three new hunter-gatherer sites: Tshisiku Shelter, Balerno Main Shelter and Balerno Shelter 2 (Chapters 4-6). A second goal was to examine how hunter-gatherer spaces, places and identity changed with the movement of farmers into the Shashe-Limpopo region over the last 2000 years. Ethnographical and archaeological interaction case studies, and ideas concerning the construction of identities (Chapters 1-3), were used in the interpretation of the archaeological material from these three sites. Comparisons between the pre-contact and contact periods were also necessary in order to identify whether changes in the hunter-gatherer sequence were due to the presence of farmers in the region.

The fact that the Shashe-Limpopo Iron Age sequence is the most complex and well-known in southern Africa was an important factor in the selection of this region for research, as it provided a unique background against which to study changes in hunter-gatherer interaction with farmers. Mitchell (2004) notes that an acknowledgement of the differences between farmer groups, and how they structured their interaction with hunter-gatherers, has been lacking in interaction studies so far - this study takes a step towards redressing such a lack. Knowledge of the Iron Age sequence and distribution of Iron Age sites in the Shashe-Limpopo region is therefore critical for identifying when, where, how, and who, hunter-gatherers were interacting with, as several different farmer groups settled in the region over time, including Zhizo (AD 900 – AD 1100 / 1200), K2 (AD 1000 – 1220) and Mapungubwe (AD 1220 – AD 1300) period farmers.

Since the Shashe-Limpopo farmer societies were quite varied in their social, political and economic complexity, different responses to interaction with hunter-gatherers resulted. Interaction relationships were not one-sided, however, and the choice of a

specific kind of interaction (with options ranging from hostile to amicable, trade to service) was influenced by the image of the 'other' that both hunter-gatherers and farmers constructed. Interaction in the Shashe-Limpopo region was therefore not merely based on economic exchange and service, but was also guided and facilitated by an underlying social structure. The constructed identities defined the differences between hunter-gatherers and farmers, and maintained both cultural boundaries and the roles played by each group. These boundaries and constructions made the interaction between the groups more predictable for the participants, and also controlled the kinds of goods and services that were exchanged.

Availability of space (and thus proximity between hunter-gatherers and farmers) played an important role in interaction in the Shashe-Limpopo region: the less restrictions hunter-gatherers had in terms of mobility and access to resources, the more choice they had in terms of their responses to farmers and the kinds of interaction that they wished to participate in. Proximity between hunter-gatherer and farmer sites would therefore have been an important factor in how interaction relationships were constructed and maintained, and where interaction took place. With an increase in the number of farmer settlements and a decrease in the amount of available space for hunter-gatherer activity, the nature of interaction with farmers is likely to have changed, as hunter-gatherers became constrained in space, and their available choices and access to resources more limited. However, although the arrival of farmers imposed limitations on hunter-gatherer subsistence and mobility, new opportunities were created, including trade.

The original Shashe-Limpopo hunter-gatherer sequence

Hall and Smith (2000) proposed a sequence of interaction for the Shashe-Limpopo region where hunter-gatherers appear to have had declining access to farmers through time, as they became increasingly inferior in the eyes of the farmers. During the Happy Rest period (AD 350 - 600), hunter-gatherers presumably had access to all farming communities because they were less ranked than later communities, and thus farmers may have seen hunter-gatherers as almost equal. In the Leokwe Zhizo period at Little Muck Shelter (AD 900 – 1200), hunter-gatherers may have interacted closely with farmers, for example, preparing hides for them (see Chapters 3 & 7).

During the Zhizo / Leokwe Zhizo period, there were large differences over relatively small distances in the amount of archaeological material occurring in hunter-gatherer sites (van Doornum 2000). At Balerno Shelter 3, artefact densities were low, even though the closest Zhizo-, K2- and Mapungubwe-period farmer sites were only about 3km away. These low densities revealed little about the nature of hunter-gatherer interaction with farmers, other than that they were present on the landscape. However, Little Muck Shelter, lying only about 1km from the farmer site of Leokwe Hill, had much higher densities of archaeological material. This pattern indicated that some hunter-gatherers were possibly moving from more marginal, ephemerally occupied shelters like Balerno Shelter 3, to shelters such as Little Muck Shelter, in order to trade with farmers (van Doornum 2000).

In the later K2 / Mapungubwe period (AD 1000 – AD 1300), when there were more complex social and political structures in place in farmer societies, Hall and Smith (2000) believe that hunter-gatherers were increasingly excluded, and that commoner farmers at the base of the farming political system began to perform more of the tasks and functions that hunter-gatherers had previously performed. The hunter-gatherer signature in the area became less distinct during this time, and eventually disappeared by the end of the Mapungubwe period.

The new, refined Shashe-Limpopo hunter-gatherer sequence

The model and interpretations described above for the Shashe-Limpopo region were preliminary, and were based on observations made at only two sites: Little Muck Shelter and Balerno Shelter 3. One of the main aims of this project was therefore to test whether the hypotheses generated from these two shelters regarding interaction were generally applicable to the region, or whether these observations represented unique situations.

The three sites selected to test Hall and Smith's (2000) model were chosen with specific characteristics in mind. Tshisiku Shelter, like Little Muck Shelter, lay in close proximity to a river and to farmer settlements, while Balerno Main Shelter and Balerno Shelter 2 were located near Balerno Shelter 3 in an area where no farmer

settlements occurred. Balerno Main Shelter also offered the possibility of a potentially deep pre-contact sequence.

It became apparent from the analysis of material from these sites (Chapters 5-7) that interaction and the hunter-gatherer sequence in the Shashe-Limpopo region were more complex than initially hypothesised, and that in fact a range of hunter-gatherer reactions and responses to the appearance and settlement of farmers in the region occurred.

6000 BC to 1220 BC: Early pre-contact LSA

Results of initial work in the Shashe-Limpopo at Balerno Shelter 3 and Little Muck Shelter suggested that LSA occupation of the region was recent (within the last 3000 years), because both shelters were mainly occupied during the last two millennia (Hall & Smith 2000; van Doornum 2000). The lack of deeper pre-contact sequences was thought to indicate an intensification of occupation due to the regional appearance of farmers, in an area previously ignored by hunter-gatherers. However, as this thesis shows, the original hypothesis was incorrect: both Tshisiku Shelter and Balerno Main Shelter have significant pre-contact deposits, and in fact, hunter-gatherer occupation was concentrated in the pre-contact period at Tshisiku Shelter.

Little is yet known about the hunter-gatherers living in the Shashe-Limpopo region during the early pre-contact period (11 120 – 1220 BC), because only two shelters (which were not occupied contemporaneously) dating to this time have been excavated. However, some general comments regarding this phase can be made. Balerno Main Shelter was initially occupied between 11 120 – 10 890 BC and 6230 – 6060 BC (a period which does not form part of this study), and then reoccupied after a lengthy hiatus between 340 – 320 BC and 210 – 100 BC. Although Balerno Main Shelter remained unoccupied during this early phase, this was the period during which occupation at Tshisiku Shelter began, in about 5660 – 5610 BC. Thus hunter-gatherers were still present in the Shashe-Limpopo region at this time, even if they were only present in small numbers, as was the case in Zimbabwe between 6500 and 4000 BC.

An increase in artefact densities and tool variability occurred at Tshisiku Shelter between 4330 – 4220 BC and 1220 BC, either due to greater numbers of hunter-gatherers occupying the shelter or due to smaller groups occupying the shelter for longer periods. This peak in activity may be related to increases in population such as those noted in other regions of southern Africa. In the Matopos region, for example, the occupation of increasing numbers of shelters has been linked to the adoption of aggregation and dispersal, and this may also have occurred in the Shashe-Limpopo.

1220 BC to AD 100: Late pre-contact LSA

After the early pre-contact phase (6000 – 1220 BC), many small shelters began to be utilised in the Shashe-Limpopo region, especially in the last half of the first millennium BC (a similar situation is noted in the Matopos by Walker (1998)). Balerno Main Shelter was occupied around about 350 – 100 BC, after a substantial hiatus. In contrast, Tshisiku Shelter, already occupied in the early pre-contact period, continued to be utilised, with no break in occupation between the early pre-contact and the late pre-contact period, although the intensity of occupation / the number of people occupying the site decreased from that of the early pre-contact period.

During this phase, larger, well-used shelters such as Balerno Main Shelter may have acted as central places, while several smaller sites, such as Balerno Shelters 2 and 3, were possibly occupied on a temporary or seasonal basis. These smaller shelters may have acted as dispersal phase shelters, which would explain the ephemeral nature of the deposits occurring at these sites. The larger, more varied assemblage at Balerno Main Shelter indicates that a wider variety of activities took place there than at the smaller sites, perhaps because the shelter was an aggregation site, or because of a longer period of utilisation by a smaller group.

AD 100 to AD 900: Early contact period

The ‘contact’ period in southern Africa spans the last two millennia, during which time farmers, herders and hunter-gatherers were in contact with each other to varying degrees. Although farmers and herders had migrated into southern Africa during the

first millennium AD, no evidence of farmers or herders settling in the Shashe-Limpopo region between AD 100 and AD 900 has been found. However, this does not preclude the possibility that farmers or herders passed through the area, resulting in limited contact with hunter-gatherers. Although direct interaction may not have occurred in the region itself, contact may have taken place in regions adjacent to the Shashe-Limpopo, or indirectly through long-distance inter-hunter-gatherer exchange. This early contact period therefore marks the very beginnings of interaction, and emphasises the impact that farmers came to have on the hunter-gatherer way of life in later periods.

At Balerno Main Shelter, a strong continuity in occupation occurred between the late pre-contact and the early contact period, with material densities remaining high. In contrast, a steep increase in artefact densities occurred at several of the smaller hunter-gatherer sites in the region during this early contact phase, including Balerno Shelter 2, Balerno Shelter 3 and Little Muck Shelter. An increase in artefact densities even occurred at Tshisiku Shelter, despite the fact that this shelter had become less attractive to hunter-gatherers during the previous late pre-contact period (1220 BC – AD 100).

The increase in hunter-gatherer occupation intensity and density in the Shashe-Limpopo region between AD 100 and AD 900 may be due to the general increase in population in southern Africa at this time. However, it is also likely to be linked to EIA farmers occupying other more ‘desirable’ regions such as the Soutpansberg. The arrival of farmers in these areas would have decreased the spaces, places and resources available to hunter-gatherers, forcing or encouraging them to spend more time in other regions less favoured by farmers, such as the Shashe-Limpopo region. Hunter-gatherer activities in the Shashe-Limpopo - including ritual activity, bead-making, bone- and wood-working - increased during this phase due to the increased number of hunter-gatherers in the region, or as a response to the farmer presence in adjacent areas and the potential for trade and exchange.

The presence of farmer and herder artefacts, as well as an increase in scraper frequencies (linked to increased processing of skins) in all of the hunter-gatherer sites points to the fact that some trade between hunter-gatherers and farmers /

herders did occur. Exchanges would have taken place either through hunter-gatherer trade networks or through direct interaction with farmers and herders. Contact between hunter-gatherers and farmers / herders was likely to have been limited as hunter-gatherers would have had to travel to farmer or herder settlements in order to trade, unless herders and farmers were passing through the region – again, no evidence of farmer or herder occupation in the Shashe-Limpopo region has yet been found.

AD 900 to AD 1300: The Zhizo – Mapungubwe periods

The intensification of hunter-gatherer activities and shelter occupation noted in the early contact phase continues into the Zhizo / Leokwe Zhizo (AD 900 – AD 1000 / 1200) and K2 / Mapungubwe (AD 1000 – 1300) periods at some of the sites investigated in this study, but not at others. This is largely due to the increasing numbers of more socially and politically complex farmers occupying the landscape.

AD 900 – AD 1000 / 1200: The Zhizo period

Zhizo farmers may have initially been attracted to the Shashe-Limpopo region by large herds of elephant, because of the east coast trade in ivory and other goods. These farmers subsequently settled in the area due to its agricultural potential. Hunter-gatherers may have initially responded with little hostility to the Zhizo farmers, having become accustomed to trading seasonally, on a more or less equal footing with Happy Rest farmers and Bambata herders. Those hunter-gatherers who reacted negatively to the new arrivals would have had the option of leaving if they were unhappy with the presence of the farmers, or retreating to shelters some distance from farmer settlements.

Decreasing space on the landscape would have resulted in closer contact between many hunter-gatherers and farmers, and the distance between hunter-gatherer and farmer settlements would therefore have had a great impact on hunter-gatherers, as perceptions of ‘space’ and ‘place’ would have changed as well. What was once a purely hunter-gatherer landscape would have become a hunter-gatherer *and* farmer landscape, with farmers taking control of spaces, places and resources that had once been freely available to hunter-gatherers only.

Some farmers settled near hunter-gatherers, such as those hunter-gatherers occupying Tshisiku Shelter and Little Muck Shelter, for one of two reasons: 1. because hunter-gatherers, as ‘first people’, had power and control over the supernatural and nature, a resource that farmers would have found useful to tap into, and because they could provide labour and goods to farmers or, 2. because resources other than the presence of hunter-gatherers, such as water and fertile land, were attractive. That hunter-gatherers chose to continue occupying their shelters rather than move away indicates that they were getting something out of this close proximity that made it worth their while to remain where they were. Alternatively, the farmers were not enough of a threat to their way of life and their identity to make them leave.

Proximity to – or distance from – farmer settlements was thus one of the factors that allowed for the varied responses to farmers by hunter-gatherers. Close proximity forced hunter-gatherers to either move away from the area, or allowed them to become more closely involved with farmers. Distance from farmer sites allowed hunter-gatherers more choice in when and where to interact with farmers. Hunter-gatherers, being socially flexible, would have been able to manipulate their identities and find a place where they could fit into the farmer hierarchies.

Thus, during the Zhizo period (AD 900 – AD 1000 / 1200), several reactions to the presence of farmers on the landscape occur. Material densities at a number of sites (Balerno Shelters 2 and 3, and Tshisiku Shelter) decreased, while at Balerno Main Shelter, artefact densities increased gradually. Limited evidence of farmer-derived artefacts at buffer-zone hunter-gatherer sites, and even Tshisiku Shelter (situated in close proximity to farmer settlements), seems to reflect intermittent contact with farmers. However, at Little Muck Shelter, material densities increased dramatically and this evidence of closer contact (in the form of increased frequencies of scrapers and other artefacts) suggests that perhaps interaction took place at certain sites situated in close proximity to farmer settlements, or within the settlements themselves. These differences in material densities were thus largely due (but not limited) to the proximity of some sites to farmer settlements and the distance of others from farmer villages.

The decrease in shelter utilisation in the region was therefore due to several factors, which may also be linked to seasonal aggregation and dispersal patterns. For instance, when hunter-gatherer groups dispersed seasonally, the smaller groups may have interacted more closely with farmers. Some may have spent more time at shelters closer to farmers, working for and trading with them, perhaps acting as rainmakers and ritual specialists. Others may have focussed on larger shelters further away from farmer settlements, such as Balerno Main Shelter. Hunter-gatherers may have been aggregating seasonally at Balerno Main Shelter, in a continuation of social customs extending into the pre-contact period, despite the presence of farmers on the landscape. In fact, the presence of farmers may even have encouraged aggregation and the maintenance of certain customs in order for hunter-gatherers to retain their social boundaries and identity. This pattern would account for the low densities of artefacts at the smaller shelters in the region, and for the high concentration of artefacts at Balerno Main Shelter. In addition, hunter-gatherers in the farmer-free buffer zone where the Balerno shelters were located had the freedom to choose if they wished to interact with farmers or not, due to their distance from farmer settlements.

A third alternative is that hunter-gatherers were curtailed in their mobility by the farmer presence on the landscape. The Zhizo elite controlled trade with the east coast, and may have gradually forced hunter-gatherers out of their position in this trade network by relying on lower-ranked commoners to fill their space in the trade. These hunter-gatherers may have therefore spent less and less time in the region, choosing to settle elsewhere.

AD 1000 – AD 1300: The K2 / Mapungubwe period

K2 / Mapungubwe farmers were very different from Zhizo farmers in terms of their social and political make-up, and thus hunter-gatherers would have had to negotiate a different set of social structures and boundaries in order to interact with these new people. Interaction between hunter-gatherers and farmers during this period may also have been even more complex than previously thought, because of the continued presence of some (Leokwe) Zhizo farmers in the region. Hunter-gatherers may therefore have had several different relationships with farmers, depending on what was involved in this contact.

It is likely that the highly stratified farmer hierarchies present during the K2 / Mapungubwe period (AD 1000 – 1300) restricted hunter-gatherer access to farmer settlements, even more than Zhizo farmers may have previously. Lower-ranked farmers may have taken over the hunter-gatherer roles in trade, hide-working, bead-making, raw material procurement and so on. Hunter-gatherers would therefore have had to find other roles to play in interaction, and this may have included healing, rainmaking and other such roles, unless they intermarried and became part of the farmer society in that way. The fact that some sites, such as Little Muck Shelter, may have been taken over by K2 / Mapungubwe farmers during this period indicates that farmers perceived hunter-gatherers to have some form of power, even if they were generally conceived of as inferior. This appropriation of the shelter indicates that farmers were taking control of the landscape and appropriating the power of the ‘first people’.

Hunter-gatherer material at almost all of the hunter-gatherer sites in the Shashe-Limpopo region had decreased substantially by the K2 / Mapungubwe period. Although many of those hunter-gatherers who had not left the region may have become incorporated into the K2 / Mapungubwe farmer societies, they may still have retained their hunter-gatherer identity. However, it may not be possible to identify this identity in the material culture of farmer villages or hunter-gatherer shelters (for example Little Muck Shelter).

Not all hunter-gatherers were marginalised and out-competed by farmers, or forced to leave the region. Those hunter-gatherers occupying Balerno Main Shelter continued to utilise the shelter, virtually undisturbed by the farmer presence, right into the K2 / Mapungubwe period, unlike all the other shelters studied. The importance of the shelter as an aggregation site may be part of the reason for its continued use while utilisation of other shelters decreased. Hunter-gatherers thus maintained their independence during parts of the year, while at other times - dispersal phases - they may have come to work with, or rely, on farmers for certain things. The fact that hunter-gatherers may have continued to aggregate highlights the point that even in the face of change and encroaching farmer settlements and lifestyles, hunter-gatherers were still able to retain some of their own customs and

their identity, although the manner in which they interacted with farmers may have changed.

The hunter-gatherer signature in the region finally disappeared completely by AD 1300, along with the farmer presence in the region. Hunter-gathers are likely to have either left the area on their own, or moved with the farmer groups with which they had become intermingled (either through marriage, trade relationships or subjugation).

AD 1600 to AD 1900: The recent past

The Shashe-Limpopo region remained unoccupied by hunter-gatherers until the recent past, although some groups were spotted in various areas around the Limpopo Province in the nineteenth century. Although hunter-gatherers no longer occupied shelters in the Shashe-Limpopo region, some were utilised by LIA farmers for several purposes including ancestral rituals, and as refuge grain stores.

Future research

As many questions – if not more - have been raised by this research than have been answered. It is impossible to make an in-depth examination of hunter-gatherer / farmer interaction in a region based on the five sites that, so far, have been excavated. In order to answer all the questions that have been raised, the excavation of many more sites, including open-air hunter-gatherer sites and farmer settlements, is required. Obtaining secure dates from the new excavations to pin down the sequence is also vital. This scale of research exceeds the boundaries of this thesis. In the light of this, I would like to suggest several directions that future research might take, and some issues that should be taken into consideration.

As yet, only two sites with a significant pre-contact occupation have been excavated, and the very early occupation at Balerno Main Shelter remains unstudied. Other shelters with equally deep sequences need to be identified and investigated to test whether hunter-gatherer occupation of the region during this time is as limited as it is in the Matopos and other regions of southern Africa. An investigation of the establishment of aggregation and dispersal mechanisms in the region is another

direction that future research might take, focussing on the identification of clear aggregation sites.

Studies of environmental issues affecting seasonal mobility, aggregation and dispersal are lacking. Comments on the role of the environment in hunter-gatherer settlement choice, and the possible links between social changes and the environment, are difficult to make due to the current lack of evidence. Shelters with good preservation may yield plant remains that may assist in studies of seasonal movements in the region, as well as allowing for comments to be made regarding the diet of Shashe-Limpopo hunter-gatherers. Further studies of faunal material in the region are necessary in order to identify the presence of domestic stock. This will lead to investigations into the presence of herders in the region, and where they made their camps, if they did indeed settle in the area. More in-depth research into hunter-gatherer / farmer and hunter-gatherer / herder interactions in the region will also be possible through this kind of study. Identifications of faunal material to species level will assist in studies of the past environment and its possible impact on hunter-gatherers and hunter-gatherer / farmer interactions.

The location of geological sources of raw material for stone tools found at the various sites need to be identified. Investigating the connections between the rock art of the region and the hunter-gatherers who made the art is yet another direction that future researchers could take.

An investigation of the existence of hunter-gatherer exchange networks would be of interest, especially in the early contact period when herders and farmers had not yet settled in the Shashe-Limpopo region. The exact nature of the part that hunter-gatherers played in the east coast trade network during the Zhizo, K2 and Mapungubwe periods, and the extent of those roles, needs to be established.

A study of gender in interaction, looking at who was interacting with whom, and where this interaction took place would add another dimension to understanding the mechanisms underlying interaction. Examples of questions to consider include whether male hunter-gatherers were only interacting with male farmers; who were female hunter-gatherer interacting with; and were hunter-gatherers allowed in all

sections of a village such as traditionally ‘male’ areas like kraals, or were they relegated to liminal spaces, such as the outer domestic, ‘female’ areas behind huts?

Locating the areas that hunter-gatherers who left the Shashe-Limpopo region settled in, will perhaps assist in resolving where the hunter-gatherers who disappeared from region through time (up until AD 1300) went to. It is therefore important that hunter-gatherer sites across the border in both Zimbabwe and Botswana, as well as sites in South Africa, are located and studied.

Studies of Zhizo, K2 and Mapungubwe farmer sites also need to be made in order to determine whether hunter-gatherers were living and working in these settlements, what tasks they were performing, and what roles they played, if they were indeed present at these sites. The disappearance of hunter-gatherers during the K2 / Mapungubwe period may thus be linked to their relocation to farmer villages. Further studies on the loss or retention of autonomy and a hunter-gatherer identity could be linked to this research focus.

I look forward to being a part of this future research, and to reading the work of other researchers who take up the challenge of investigating the complex past of this fascinating region.