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Shadreck Chirikure. *Great Zimbabwe: Reclaiming a 'Confiscated' Past*. Publisher: Routledge, 2020. 338 pages. ISBN: 978-0-367-40999-9.

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Professor Chirikure has offered an elegant reading of Great Zimbabwe in his new book *Great Zimbabwe: Reclaiming a 'Confiscated' Past*. He seems to have taken a tongue-in-cheek stance in the writing of this book which he half confesses to in the preface of the book. The book takes on past readings of Great Zimbabwe which have appeared in many publications over the last hundred and twenty-five years. It is a no holds barred reflection on the writing and reading of southern African archaeology and indeed world archaeology. It offers a critique of how archaeology is practiced not only in Africa but globally. It challenges notions of science and objectivity which have always been associated with the discipline and its allied fields such as Anthropology.

At the heart of Chirikure's thesis is the interpretations which archaeologists make of places such as Great Zimbabwe. He challenges past and current research in archaeology highlighting the fault lines in the discipline and its tenets. At the core of his critique is how archaeologists have imposed interpretations and labels on places such as Great Zimbabwe; this approach which resulted with the alienation of these places from their local contexts including disenfranchisement of local communities. By labelling these spaces as sites, archaeologists overlooked the significance of such places especially when they had other significance such as religious and spiritual value for communities who live in the vicinity of such places. This *tour de force* reading of Great Zimbabwe comes at just over 300 pages; and each of the eleven chapters presents a thoughtful and provocative call for the restoration of Great Zimbabwe to its proper place – back in the ecosystem where it belongs.

Chirikure's calls for a dismantling of the 'tools of the trade' which archaeologists have been using since time immemorial. Further, he critiques the coloniality of the discipline and its practice of privileging a material culture focused interpretation of the past at the expense of intangible culture such as language, belief systems and epistemologies of the communities in which the archaeological resources would be found. In respect to Great Zimbabwe, he argues that past research and writing on Great Zimbabwe alienated the site from the Shona people whose history is linked to

the place. He blames this on the manner in which even Zimbabwean archaeologists' training in the post-independence period mimicked the coloniality of the discipline. He contests that there is a need for "reversing this [which] requires an approach that goes beyond mimicry – to balance discipline fundamentals with postcolonial desires for locally understandable, relevant and usable pasts." (p14).

To do this, he "combines concepts from Shona philosophies with archaeological methods and techniques to develop a native centred interpretation." (p17). Chirikure notes that the post-independence state also failed to restore the past, in the form of archaeological heritage and monuments to local communities such as the Shona but instead perpetuated the Western or Euro-American traditions of heritage management. In this regard, he contends that it "... is surprising that is after independence, little attempt was made to rename parts of Great Zimbabwe using Shona names, be they of natural features or persons." (p.64). He boldly states his intention in this book as "simply to present a historical imagination of Great Zimbabwe and the wider territory set in both native concepts and in archaeological understanding to build an inclusive past" (pp.33-34). The extent to which this is possible is further examined below.

The call for decolonizing knowledge in African studies is not new. To his credit, Chirikure devotes a good part of the book to acknowledging this. Presented in three parts, Part I of the book presents a rich literature review which also makes a case for decolonizing knowledge in the study of Africa. He acknowledges the work of scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o who had already made a case for decolonizing African studies. Wa Thiong'o had called for writing in African languages in the 1980s.

The call for decolonizing the study of the African past has also received growing attention over the last three decades with increased vigor over the last decade with scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni pushing for decoloniality studies to recognize the impact of Western narratives on the writing of African history. Following global movements led by students in higher education for decolonization of the curriculum in South Africa, much attention has been devoted to intellectual discourses on the study of Africa across the different disciplines and the need for transformation in the academy. To this end, Chirikure's own call for a truly decolonized archaeology is timely as it draws attention to the lingering concerns in respect to archaeology and especially a site such as Great Zimbabwe.

One of the issues Chirikure draws attention to in this book is the extent to which Great Zimbabwe was pillaged by antiquarians and archaeologists. Further, the place was 'confiscated' from the local communities through its construct as an exotic and privileged monument. He painstakingly details (chapters 3 and 4) how the site was looted with a number of its precious finds ending up in private collections including

Cecil John Rhodes. It is interesting that Chirikure would have been witness to the student uprising at the University of Cape Town during the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement. Rhodes not only inserted himself onto the landscape of Great Zimbabwe but went on to ‘colonize’ the whole country during its pre-independence existence as Rhodesia.

Chirikure further highlights how narratives which claimed an exotic origin for Great Zimbabwe were clearly aimed at disenfranchising the local communities from the site and by extension the land and country. He highlights how the colonial project succeeded in alienating the local Shona population from the environs of Great Zimbabwe and the site was physically altered through construction of various colonial buildings, including a prison, which affected its significance for the local communities. Its designation, as a national monument after independence and subsequent declaration as a World Heritage site, further removed it from the local Shona communities. Chirikure draws attention to the tragedy of Great Zimbabwe’s capture and imprisonment. He notes that “...designation of Great Zimbabwe as a ruin, a relic, and as an archaeological site created a long-lasting but unfortunate impression that the site is an abandoned group of settlements and not a lived and living landscape or shrine.” (p.113).

Drawing on his previous research of Zimbabwean archaeology, Chirikure makes a strong point of connecting Great Zimbabwe’s rich material culture to the history, culture and heritage of the Shona. He uses language (Shona) as the main pillar of his thesis and links language to engineering, innovation and creativity that for long has been associated with Great Zimbabwe.

Part II of the book focuses on the material heritage of the site including its history of metal work and mining, engineering through complex architecture, crafts and artistic expressions including ceramics, soapstone crafts and beadwork. He locates the production of material goods firmly in the realm of everyday life in Shona cultures. “It cannot be denied that Great Zimbabwe’s investment and entanglement with science, technology, and innovation from as local point of view was immense. Innovation took place every day.” (p.192).

He further debunks the idea that exotic goods imported from outside of the area and indeed the continent played a more significant role and value in the lives of local people. Instead, he argues that exotic goods such as imported beads or Chinese porcelain “... were sometimes mundane items in their area of origin, and so too in the receiving region. When distance is added to the cultural meanings and sensibilities of the receivers, exotics become many things including ordinary. (p.219).

In the final part of the book (Part III), Chirikure takes the bold step of making a case for the restoration of Great Zimbabwe back to its “roots”. He declares his positionality as a Shona speaking archaeologist who grounds himself in his own local

culture, ideologies and epistemologies and identity of being Shona. He maintains that “It is essential to think and act like a villager, like a native, and like an archaeologist dedicated to produce versions of the past rooted in local ways of knowing. (pp.276 - 277). Perhaps this is where one gets slightly unsettled by this reading of Great Zimbabwe.

Throughout the book, Chirikure argues that the decolonizing of Great Zimbabwe through its restoration back to a Shona world is an exercise which is necessary for many heritage places across Africa and the global south. Who is a native? Is it someone born into a given language and culture group? What of language experts who are from outside the language and culture groups? There are many experts who do not share language and culture by birth but have acquired such expertise after many years of meticulous research. Similarly, there are many people who are genuinely alienated from their own language and cultural heritage. Can they claim to be more indigenous?

By “going native”, Chirikure has firmly taken a stance which privileges him as an “insider” with deeper knowledge. However, the reconversion of Great Zimbabwe to a Shona worldview needs to be a carefully considered exercise for several reasons. The author does acknowledge these limitations in the book which somewhat mitigates the point being made here. The Shona language family is an amalgamation of diverse cultural and ethnic mixes of people through time and space. Among other things, it is steeped in its own systems of exclusions and silencing which would not always have accommodated difference. So, while the bigger picture throughout the book has been to highlight the binaries of the colonial “other” from the local “natives” (read Shona), it is important to consider how within the Shona worldview “others” could potentially be excluded.

The rubric of “native” has not been sufficiently unpacked in the book to explore among other things, the gendered dimensions of language and identity. One recalls the work of writers like Tsitsi Dangaremba who draw attention to the subject of patriarchy and violent masculinities embedded in the same world view. To this end, a gendered reading of everyday life at Great Zimbabwe could be the next step in the decolonizing of the site. Further, the vast landscape which was the territory of Great Zimbabwe was also inhabited by other groups who perhaps did not enjoy similar liberties as the Shona. This has been highlighted in research on, among others the San of southern Africa. The San people continue to be marginalized in a region where they are acknowledged as the “first people”.

The analysis presented by Chirikure is somewhat silent on how the Shona worldview interacted and intersected with other language families and peoples who would also have been native to the area and whose worldviews and ways of life may not have been the same as that of the Shona. To an extent these others are

hegemonized into the Shona worldview and could easily be silenced by new narratives as much as the Shona narratives were silenced by earlier research and writing.

The statement by the author that “What is required is empathy from some archaeologists, to be able to feel for those communities whose past has long been taken away from them by both the colony and postcolony. (p.297) becomes a double-edged sword as a similar concern can legitimately be raised by an archaeologist from the San language family about Great Zimbabwe or any other landscape where their own cultures and “footprints” in history have been obliterated. The intricate layering of histories in the Great Zimbabwe landscape necessitates care in the reading and re-reading of material culture and ascribing it to a very specific language group. The concepts of “native” and “local community” could have benefitted from further reflection by the author.

A final observation that can be made in reading this interesting account of Great Zimbabwe’s history is how we go forward in the management of Great Zimbabwe as a World Heritage Site. One hopes that by placing the site firmly in the “heart and soul of the Shona worldview” Chirikure has considered the challenge of creating inclusive and democratized futures in respect to shared heritage. The current economic and other challenges in Zimbabwe, including the haunted past which bears scars of violence meted along ethnic lines creates some discomforts when imagining futures for Great Zimbabwe. One hopes that these new narratives do not serve to exclude other communities who are not Shona and who reside in the environs of Great Zimbabwe along with related sites. It is likely the author has already considered these questions including giving deeper thought to what a Great Zimbabwe, which truly respects diversity and alternative identities, will look like.

Above all, the author is commended for the bold and courageous approach towards the reinterpretation of Great Zimbabwe; an understanding that addressed questions hiding in plain sight during the making of the archaeologies of Great Zimbabwe by expatriate and Zimbabwean archaeologists. Chirikure challenges African policy makers at another level as we navigate a technology-infused present and futures which seem to increasingly defer to technology and all things associated with the Forth Industrial Revolution (4iR).

So, the question is: Can African languages reclaim their rightful position as the source and inspiration for innovation and technology-driven development? This question needs careful reflection as digital divides and other challenges continue to increase the chasms between Africa and the world. I am sure that Professor Chirikure has pondered these questions; and given his intellectual curiosity and avid scholarship, I am certain that he will be addressing them in the not-too-distant future.

This book is a valuable addition to studies of Zimbabwe's archaeology and should be a recommended reading for university students across different disciplines. It has a comprehensive bibliography and comes with excellent illustrations and a detailed glossary of Shona concepts that are used in the book. The equally detailed index helps the reader to navigate the book with ease. I hope this book will stimulate more discussions of the archaeology and historical sites such as Great Zimbabwe; and I hope this contribution will help to restore their dignity as places which continue to carry deep meaning and significance for many beyond the boundaries of the national borders where they are located.

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