

***Ivhu rinotsamwa*¹: Landscape Memory and Cultural Landscapes in Zimbabwe and Tropical Africa**

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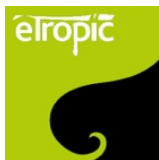
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Abstract

Perceptions of the various cultural landscapes of tropical Africa continue to be overdetermined by western philosophies. This is, of course, a legacy of colonialism and the neo-colonial global politics that dictate types of knowledge, and direct flows of knowledge. Knowledges of the communities of former colonised countries are seen as ancillary at best, and at worst, irrational. However, such 'indigenous knowledge' systems contain information that could transform how we think about cultural landscapes, cultural heritage, and the conception of 'intangible heritage'. In many non-western societies, the landscape shapes culture; rather than human culture shaping the landscape – which is the notion that continues to inform heritage. Such a human-centric experience of landscape and heritage displaces the ability to experience the sensorial landscape. This paper outlines how landscapes are perceived in tropical Africa, with an example from Zimbabwe, and how this perception can be used to enrich mainstream archaeology, anthropology, and cultural heritage studies. Landscapes have a memory of their own, which plays a part in creating the 'ruins' we research or visit. Such landscape memory determines the preservation of heritage as well as human memory. The paper thus advocates for the inclusion of 'indigenous knowledge' systems in the widening of the theoretical base of archaeology, anthropology, and heritage studies.

Keywords: Cultural landscape, landscape memory, cultural heritage, archaeology, material anthropology, tropical Africa, Zimbabwe

¹ Shona language: literally translates as 'the soil will be angry at us, but means, 'the land will get angry at us.' Land is a loaded word as it can also be used to mean cultural landscape. Land is not only nature but also includes past ancestors buried in it.



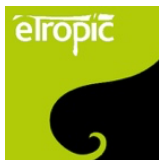
Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Knowledge

The field of archaeology has a template that limits what narratives can be told to support an archaeological theory. This template is itself a knowledge landscape. It is essentially European; yet it is used in the research and interpretation of cultural heritage around the world – including the cultural and landscape heritage of former colonised regions, most of which were located in the tropics. The European conception of landscapes focuses on human exceptionalism and domination of the land, where land is always – whether for conservation or exploitation – considered as property that can be sold or bought and used for the benefit of humans. As a result, the global concept of cultural landscape is a European invention. The shortcomings of this template are apparent in the interpretation of African cultural heritage as well as heritage of many indigenous communities from the Americas to Australia.

The European conception of landscape denotes the conquering of the land by humans and shaping it into a form that humans can survive within or enjoy. It is supremely visual (envisioning panoramic vistas), while simultaneously surveying the landscape, in both colonial and neo-colonial times, from an economic point of view. Land is a resource which can be shaped to suit the requirements of humans; although, on occasion, it is sublime – that is, beautiful enough to inspire awe. This mainstream, western imaginary dominates archaeology, anthropology, and heritage education, as well as the global UNESCO systems that define cultural landscapes and inscribe World Heritage status on places deemed significant. This academic monologue within the fields of archaeology and heritage studies, simultaneously denies the enrichment of these disciplines by other knowledge systems.

And yet, human experiences of landscape are culturally shaped. The phenomenology of landscape means that no culture's experience of a landscape is the same, while such landscape experiences define what a cultural group chooses to keep as cultural heritage. Furthermore, our experiences in these different environments shape and create our languages as well as our behaviour. For example, in many African languages the word for snow does not exist, while many names of African environmental phenomena are untranslatable into European languages. All our languages have been fed by what we see, touch and experience within the landscape (Spirn, 1998).

Even within Africa, landscapes are experienced differently according to people's cultures. The rainforest landscape is foreign to those who live in the savannas or the deserts. In 2008 I moved from Zimbabwe to Namibia to work as an archaeologist. This

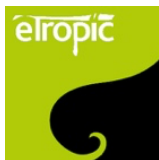


experience changed the way I understood landscapes across cultures. Namibia is dry and a large percentage of the country is desert. Crossing tens of dry riverbeds made me anxious and I found myself driving around with 20 litres of water each time I went out of the cities. Similarly, when a Namibian colleague visited Zimbabwe and I drove her from the capital city of Harare to the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe she was surprised by how many rivers were flowing. Her response was to wonder how many children drowned in these rivers! We thus have comforts and fears in environments we are familiar or unfamiliar with. These environments only become cultural landscapes when we attain some form of ontological security within them. How then do we develop nomenclature that is suitable for all environments and cultures if we have such diverse experiences? Can we really understand landscapes of the 'other'? How do we become experts in landscapes that we don't have stories or names for?

Cross-cultural perception is not one way. It requires concerted efforts to connect with nuances of a different culture. Dominant cultures are the worst connectors, as, in most cases, they focus on themselves and see others in their own lenses. This is true even at a local and national level. Those in the minority make efforts to understand the dominant culture, usually for their survival. They grudgingly work with the attributes of the dominant culture in trying to be heard. In many cases, even when they are heard, they are misunderstood. This is Zora Neale Hurston's 'sharp white background' of academia (Hurston, 2000). One of the issues that has beset discussions at the international heritage assemblies has been the term 'intangible heritage', which was coined to address an issue brought to the fore by countries from the so called 'global south'. When issues were first raised in the early 2000s about how the World Heritage definitions of heritage and landscapes did not create a holistic view of these inherently cultural concepts, international heritage organisations quickly introduced the simplistic and binary tangible/intangible dichotomy which has since come to dominate mainstream heritage discourse. When complaints were again raised around 2010 that this dichotomy is not what indigenous communities were referring to, the terminology quickly changed to the now trending 'nature-culture links' which I will discuss below.

Knowledges and the Concept of Landscapes

In 1992 The World Heritage Convention became the first international legal instrument to recognise and protect 'cultural landscapes'. This was after efforts from countries (lumped under the rubric) of 'the global south' to recognise that the separation of culture and landscape was to ignore some of the most important aspects of cultural heritage – for landscape is cultural, it is performed, constructed, and venerated, and in return shapes people's ideas and philosophies. I retain the term 'cultural landscape'

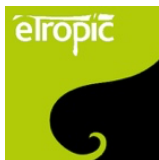


in inverted commas because the term does not exist in any African language or philosophy. In Africa the land owns the people, not the other way around. The heritage term suggests the culturalization of the landscape to suit human needs; whereas in African (and many indigenous) philosophies, the landscape is the centre and humans 'naturalise' themselves to the landscape (Saidi, 2017). That is also the concept of "country" in Indigenous Australia. The landscape can only look after you when you look after it in the way that it wants to be looked after. However, in the World Heritage definition 'cultural landscape' is still regarded as an 'object' to be manipulated by humans:

Cultural landscapes often reflect specific techniques of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relation to nature (World Heritage Council, 2021).

Although the quotation above is aware of culture and landscape, the 'cultural landscapes' definition is once again defined through western philosophies that centre human existence over nature. Landscapes are regarded as a sedimentation of the human past and remove the intimacy and stewardship that is associated with belonging to landscapes. Recent developments in heritage debates have created an enthusiastic Culture-Nature debate which does not seem to recognise that some societies do not see where the separation of the two lies. In 2013, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), after recognising the inadequacy of the definitions used by the World Heritage systems, created a group 'to explore, learn and create new methods that are centered on recognizing and supporting the interconnected biocultural character of the natural' (IUCN/ICOMOS, 2013). In other words, the group was delegated to come up with ways to define the indivisible nature of culture and the environment that nurtures it. Led by western experts (mostly archaeologists and architects) whose philosophical background does not recognise this indivisibility, the best term they could come up with is 'Culture-Nature Links.' The IUCN is comprised of organisations with academic discipline 'hard borders' which makes it difficult to bridge the gulf that remains between the 'natural' and 'cultural' sciences 'even though everyone realises that they are managing the same' heritage (Lilley, 2013).

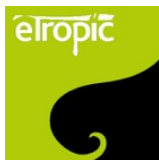
The definition of 'cultural landscape' for a person from Africa, or for an Indigenous person of Australia, the Americas, or Asia-Pacific, is completely different to the mainstream definitions used in archaeology and cultural heritage studies. The failure to see or recognise other ways of seeing the landscape is what Eduardo Kohn (2013) has called 'soul blindness'; that inability to see beyond what your culture has taught



you. Education is always cultural and unless deliberate efforts are made to learn and teach other ways of knowing, this blindness will persist and stagnate the disciplines of archaeology and cultural heritage studies. Though there is some new research in archaeology, anthropology and cultural heritage that considers new possibilities for human relations and understanding landscapes that could be used in critiquing human exceptionalism (Baltus & Baires, 2018; Basso, 1996; Chao & Enari, 2021; Kohn, 2013; Mignolo, 2009), such publication still remain few and far between. Despite critiques from both indigenous and some western scholars, mainstream archaeology and cultural heritage studies have not changed.

This situation is perpetuated by both indigenous and western scholars. Many of us who come from less influential continents must learn to live and work within knowledge systems other than our own. With a few exceptions (Mignolo, 2009; Kohn, 2013; Ndoro 2005; Sinamai, 2018b), we have continued to produce work suitable for readers taught in western knowledge systems without making attempts to explain our own knowledges, thus denying us the right to be understood from our own knowledge systems. This is compounded by western academics, many of whom have little time for knowledge systems from outside their spheres, or who variously label non-western knowledge as 'traditional knowledge systems' or 'indigenous knowledge systems'; terms that designate these systems as peripheral – to be consulted occasionally, or not at all. The few texts that do incorporate these knowledges (Baltus & Baires, 2018; Chamberlain, 2003; Fontein, 2015), rarely infiltrate the curricula. The very act of labelling these knowledge systems as 'Indigenous Knowledge' or 'Traditional Knowledge' is to contrast them with what is deemed normal.

The above situations make it difficult for concepts of African landscapes to be understood by the mainstream. In African philosophy, the landscape is not only alive, but also experienced sensorially, imagined in various forms of consciousness and lived through collective memory of those experiences. In Zimbabwe, when the word *Kumusha* (Shona language) or *emakhaya* (Ndebele language) is used, it does not just mean home, but refers to extended landscapes of home. Those landscapes are woven into stories of existence without putting the human on a pedestal. In Zimbabwe the question 'Where are you from?' is loaded and often requires your collective identity which is not merely shaped by your own lived experiences. It could be answered by the city in which you are living, the rural place where your parents and grandparents live or where one is born, and it could relate to the origin of your clan. I can answer that I am from Masvingo city, but if I want my answer to create relationships with the person who is asking the question, I will need to give him or her information through which they can create my landscape. With that information he/she can find a relationship between us and adjust his/her behaviour towards me according to the



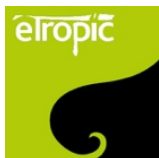
connections her family may have, or had, with my clan in that landscape. I therefore maintain a memory of the landscape of the district of Gutu, based on my praise poetry,² even though five generations of my family have not lived there.

My clan's praise poetry mentions places that I have never been to, but which are of value to me in terms of my original landscape. *Gona, Hwiru, Mashambadza*, are some of the places which I have kept in my memory even though I have never visited them. The assumption is wherever those places are, there are people who are related to me and that these landscapes somehow shaped me. Zimbabwe is a tapestry of these clan landscapes which are captured in various praise poetry. Not only do they map a migration landscape, but they also capture historical figures and their exploits, as well as lost ancestral landscapes. Thus, landscapes don't need to be actualised through material remains as suggested by Cornelius Holtorf (2006), but can be imagined and experienced through imagined identities. This is not unique to Zimbabwean clans, and can be observed in other African diaspora communities. African Americans experience Africa without ever visiting the continent and maintain connections with the continent through many other senses. Africa becomes an imagined space, an arena in which histories and identities mix. Connection to the land, once established, creates an ontological security for people living in or imagining that landscape. The rupture of this security can be devastating for societies and creates a nostalgic need for new narratives on top of the old narratives of connection (Sinamai, 2019). The colonial experiences in Africa, and their various manifestations across the tropics, are primary examples of such ruptures.

Landscape has Memory

The landscape is not only recorded by humans, it also has a memory of its own. The landscape rewards good stewardship and punishes the adverse use of land. The soil is not just natural, it is also cultural and is referred to anthropomorphologically. In Shona, *Ivhu rinotsamwa* (the soil will be angry) or *Ivhu rinoziva* (the soil knows) refers to the interaction of the soil and ancestors through burial. The soil is not just what nature has created but is also linked to the ancestors who are buried in it and are guardians of nature. Both birth and death are therefore linked to the soil (land/country). This is also a recognition that every action on the landscape has a reaction, which may be beneficial or adverse – something that the world now recognises through the issue of climate change. Climate change in Africa is taken to be the land's anger for the

² In Zimbabwe (and among some southern African groups) people (from the same language groups) are divided by clans with a totem which can be an animal (elephant [*nzou*], lion [*shumba*], eland [*mhofu*], monkey [*shoko*] etc.) or a body part (e.g., heart [*moyo*], leg [*gumbo*]). The totem is inherited from male progeny only. Each clan has a landscape of origin and has a praise poem that cites events, landscapes, important personalities, and achievements from its past.

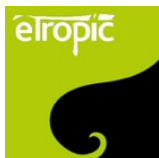


ecological catastrophes caused by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of the landscape (Harris, 2019) and it is humans and animals that will be wiped out. The vocabulary used in climate change studies often reflects a dying earth ('we only have one earth') but changes to the planet will not destroy earth, but rather, cause human extinction. This contrasts sharply with the western concept of climate change where people are said to be 'destroying the world.' Thus, in African philosophy, the landscape is not only perceived, but it also manifests itself positively or adversely depending on how it is treated. This brings out the universal responsibilities that people exercise for the land and its nurturing qualities.

Across many regions of Africa, at birth your umbilical cord is buried close to where you are born, and that burying seals the relationship that the soil will have with the individual. This is the case for Shona groups in Zimbabwe where the land is a participant to human life from the day one is born (Sinamai, 2018a). In Ghana, a tree that will forever be associated with the individual, is planted where the umbilical cord is buried and later it is the individual's responsibility to ensure that the tree does not die. It is also a covenant to protect the environment that nurtures you. Thus, the burying of the umbilical cord is symbolic of planting your roots in the ground and also marks the first communications of the individual with the ancestors who may be buried in the same soil (Sinamai, 2020b). This connection is taken to be impossible to break as the soil can call you back even when you migrate to another region or country. Indeed, studies in isotope geochemistry have shown that each individual has a signature of the region where they were born and nurtured. Yet, even though this scientific narrative is accepted, the Shona narrative of connection to land is ridiculed by mainstream knowledge.

The African understanding of landscape is not located within the human perspective (Kohn, 2013); rather, humans are located within the landscape. You are virtually *mwana wevhu* (a child of the soil). Your life is also guided by the soil. A landscape is thus not an innate object that humans can shape to accommodate their needs. The landscape in many African cultures is a potent space in which soil and ancestors monitor the behaviour of the living in terms of respecting 'land'. Without that respect, the landscape can enact revenge by simply not producing, or by changing and making it difficult for people to survive. The landscape is therefore an active player in how it is shaped by humans and the connection to the landscape is not only tangible but also transcendental.

The western notion of the landscape as an object does not capture the concept of the African landscape. Thus, to manage heritage landscapes in Africa, one must understand local philosophies of land; the first principle being that the landscapes are



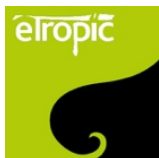
not created, they create. They are not an assemblage of things shaped by humans, but a symbolic union of 'country' and humans. As a result, a sacred landscape cannot be demarcated and managed outside the concept of home described above. In other words, the landscape demarcates what humans can do and where they can go, not the other way around.

There is constant evidence that the landscape has a memory of what it was like before human settlement. The cities that we build are quickly taken over by nature the moment we move out. During the current pandemic many animals moved back into city centres or followed routes they last followed hundreds of years ago (Bender, 2021). Everything that we construct must fight against the landscape. The landscape's memory actively erodes evidence of human memory, which is why our former cities are called 'ruins'. Any interruption in these efforts brings nature (the landscape) back to gnaw at heritage. Buildings are overwhelmed as the landscape remembers what it was before the buildings were constructed. Memory is therefore not only an internalised human action but also depends on the memory of the landscape itself. Its power lies in how it can overwhelm human achievement and how it can entrench itself in the human psyche generations after migration.

Figure 1. *The Great Enclosure at the Great Zimbabwe World Heritage Site.*



Photographed by A. Sinamai (2017).



I use an example from Great Zimbabwe to show how a landscape has memory. Great Zimbabwe, a cultural property that is about 720 hectares, is inscribed as a World Heritage Site. This ancient city, occupied between 1000-1450AD, was the capital of the Great Zimbabwe empire before it split into two states. Its monumental dry-stone architecture includes walls 6m wide and 12m high, as seen in some buildings of the Hill Complex, Great Enclosure and Valley Enclosures, and which were the main attribute used in the nomination and inscription of the site on the World Heritage list (see Figure 1). According to narratives of colonial archaeology (which are still current and incorporated into neo-colonial discourses), the site of Great Zimbabwe was established within physically and chronologically defined boundaries. Such conceptual boundaries cannot be breached as they are 'proven' by 'scientific research'. However, for the local communities there are no boundaries that can lock Great Zimbabwe into an 'estate' or a (*past*) period of time. Furthermore, this landscape is also both nature and culture (undivided), thus, although in ruins and unoccupied, it is still living within the wider landscape (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Architecture incorporating nature at the Hill Complex.



Photograph by A. Sinamai (2017)

One of the areas of landscape memory cited by communities living near Great Zimbabwe is a named spring (*Chisikana*). The Chisikana spring was a sacred feature of Great Zimbabwe before colonialism. This spring fed into a stream that flowed from Great Zimbabwe, to join other streams that ran into the Mutirikwi River – which was

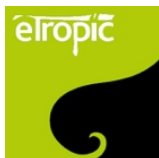


itself dammed in the 1960s to provide water for sugar cane farmers further south (Fontein, 2015). Originally, the waters from the spring were only used for brewing beer for sacred ceremonies.

When Great Zimbabwe was appropriated by the Southern Rhodesian government in the 1890s as part of Britain's violent colonisation of the territory between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, the meaning of the site changed – shifting from a sacred place to a tourist resort with trails and hotels. Most recreation spaces were designated 'white' and local people lost access to one of their most important sacred sites. As part of colonisation, the African landscape was turned into a familiar and comfortable space by incorporating features conforming to European conceptions of landscape. This included a golf course that was added to the landscape of Great Zimbabwe. The stream from the Chisikana sacred spring flowed through a flat area to the west of the heritage/tourist site and created a swamp where the golf course was to be built. To reduce the water levels in this area it was proposed that the Chisikana spring be blocked and dried. The organisation that managed the landscape at Great Zimbabwe (in a dual role of both conservation and tourism), cemented up the spring and planted exotic and thirsty eucalyptus trees (native to Australia) at the source of the spring to make sure it would never flow again. The eradication of the spring affected the ontological security of the local communities as they could not carry out their ceremonies in the right way.

The colonial experience therefore saw the stripping of cultural connections that local communities had with the landscape. Furthermore, the colonial government waged a cultural war against the local population by creating propaganda to deny that Great Zimbabwe was built by Africans. The British ruled Rhodesia until 1965 when the European settlers declared a 'unilateral declaration of independence' from the British government and established the de facto and unrecognised state of the Republic of Rhodesia. This led to one of the most violent liberation wars involving a settler community against the native population who were demanding true independence from settler colonialism. Great Zimbabwe became the African's rallying symbol in this struggle. Independence came in 1980, and the new African state of Zimbabwe, named after the site, was taken to be a progeny of the past empire.

With independence, the communities living near Great Zimbabwe lobbied National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe, the organisation charged with managing the site, to re-open the sacred spring. They suggested that the exotic vegetation and cement had 'locked' the landscape memory and only their removal would see the revival of the spring. After the uprooting of the cement and the eucalyptus trees a



ceremony was carried out at the source of the spring. A few days later it started flowing again (Sinamai, 2019).

Most connections to landscape are retained in stories such as this one. These are narratives that capture the elements of the landscape, and through their rituals of remembrance and passing on, mark the ongoing relationship with the land. In Indigenous Australia, similar notions of storied landscapes are well documented. As one Aboriginal elder said while trying to explain *tjukurrpa* ('the dreaming': a psychic state in which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, country and other beings) and why a 'white fella' could not belong to land which he/she had no deep narratives for: "If this is your land where are your stories?" (Chamberlain, 2003, p.14). Narratives thus capture not only landscapes and environmental information, but also the emotive and affective connections people have with land. Information about the landscape is filed and indexed as stories and passed on to future generations (Goddard, 2021). There is an untranslatability of the landscape when different cultural frameworks are used to interpret it, which is why people can get disoriented in unfamiliar places. Trying to understand African landscapes (or other indigenous concepts of landscape) through mainstream western philosophies has abbreviated African landscapes. Archaeology, as a scientific practice, should therefore also be accompanied by narrative inquiry to convey the elements that it cannot capture through mainstream research methodologies. Senses and emotive reactions like fear and awe are also part of the heritage experience.

Cultural Landscapes or Landscaped Culture?

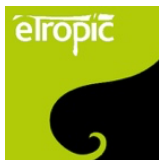
In African, as well as Australian and other indigenous contexts, humans learn the landscape; not vice versa. Landscape is learned and deliberately passed on to the next generation through language, stories, performance, work, and immersion. The supremacy of the human being in designing a landscape falls away and for a landscape to be 'cultural' there must be an equilibrium, an 'agreement' between the 'soil' (representing the natural environment), the living people, and the ancestors. Landscape is also central in the formation of our languages, but humans have, through scientific rationalism, forgotten the connection between the two. When we go somewhere (a measure of distance) or up/down (height), we are using words that specifically came from our immersion in the landscape (Spirn, 1998). Stories are usually spun around what was/is important to the community and are often a record of the environment. The landscape guides us to the stories we will tell within certain spaces. Stories shape the relationship that people have with landscape as they are a record of the environment that can be used to survive in it. These stories are not inferior to the science narrative that archaeologists tell. Archaeology recovers less



than 5% of artefacts and buildings, and archaeologists use that small sample to build a bigger picture of the past. But that narrative is more powerful because of the cultural frameworks that support it which are also tied up with legacies of colonialism (Sinamai, 2018a). In formal heritage management, where one-sentence definitions are preferred, narratives are considered confusing. Cultural places are nationalised and internationalised as identity tools and tourist places without their local narratives. The result is the dismembering of the cultural framework that the landscape narratives are intimately connected with.

Western rationalism makes the landscape an object onto which the all-conquering humans etch their memories as well as their futures. But the landscape does not respect human pasts or futures, and it can recreate itself to a time when humans were not present by taking over whatever people have left behind. Many of the heritage places that are top destinations today were at one time overwhelmed by vegetation or soil as nature recreated itself. There are many examples of these sites across the tropics: Angkor Wat, Cambodia; Borobudur, Indonesia; Machu Picchu, Peru; Tikal, Guatemala; Moai statues in Rapa Nui (so buried in volcanic soil that only the heads are visible); and Senegambian stone circles in western Africa. To local communities at Great Zimbabwe the landscape is not an empty slate; it is a participant in everything we do or build. Within this knowledge system everything is connected, and nothing except the landscape itself is superior. Just as the landscape can overwhelm and change, so too can the landscape be hurt, but it also has a memory of its own which humans can use to help heal it as the following example from the USA shows.

A hundred years ago, grey wolves (*Canis lupus*) were driven to extinction in Yosemite National Park, resulting in the collapse of the park's ecosystem. The eradication of the wolves resulted in the flourishing of the Yellowstone elk. Though the elk were still predated upon by grizzly bears, cougars, and coyotes, their major predator, the grey wolf, had been removed (Smith et al., 2019). The elk numbers increased significantly resulting in these animals affecting the carrying capacity of the park. With no threats, the elk did not move around to graze and instead browsed on young willow, aspen and cottonwood plants which grew along riverbeds. Without the predatory nature of the wolves, which had kept the elks moving between low and high ground, the elk destroyed this crucial vegetation along rivers. The result was that the beavers could not build their dams, which, in turn, affected the hydrology of the rivers and streams in the park. The re-introduction of grey wolves to the park in 1995, has seen elk breaking into smaller groups, moving into woodlands when wolves are near and grazing less along the valleys. The beavers have started building dams again, which has positively affected the hydrology of the rivers and streams. This is what is referred to as trophic cascade. Trophic cascade is defined as a predator's impact "trickling down one more



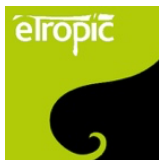
feeding level to affect the density and/or behaviour of the prey's prey" (Silliman & Angelini, 2012).

If I was to tell this story of landscape healing to Shona elders in Zimbabwe, they might insinuate the anger of the 'soil'. Keeping the 'soil' happy requires a thorough understanding of the landscape and the respect of each being, human or non-human, using that environment. This kind of recovery where the reintroduction of a single species affected the survival of all other species and plants, as well as water elements, would be seen as landscape memory. Indeed, some ecologists now believe that the best way to encourage vegetation to grow is not to plant trees, but to let nature fix itself; let it use its own memory (Cassella, 2020).

Landscape Acoustics

Every landscape has natural geographical as well as anthropological sounds that are unique to it. Sacred places have acoustic boundaries (both physical and immaterial) that must be respected. There are sounds associated with urban and rural landscapes and the introduction of unfamiliar sounds into a landscape may introduce noise. Anderson, Mulligan, Goodman & Regen, (1983) concluded that any positive or negative assessment of a place can be determined by sounds that are heard from it. Acoustic characteristics of a place are just as important as the place itself – we assign certain sounds with familiar landscapes and any change may upset the equilibrium between place, sound, living beings, and the landscape itself. The landscape is not only composed of evidence of human memory; it is also composed of human and non-human sounds (animal or bird sounds) as well as other natural sounds like the wind. Emotional meanings of spaces and places are experienced with all our senses, rather than just the visual, and the management of heritage should therefore consider the immaterial nodes that we use to connect to the landscape. Unfortunately, archaeology – with its focus on recovering material culture – was not designed to capture sounds or smells that connect people to a place and thus it cannot capture emotional meaning in objects or landscapes. In Africa where emotional connections are important in relating to landscape, the management of immaterial attributes of the heritage place become even more important.

In trying to understand the relationship between humans and sound, western researchers have identified three acoustical characteristics: biophony, geophony and anthrophony (Krause, 1987). Biophony is composed of sounds that are made by all animals; geophony is the sound generated by the natural features of the landscape, like the wind, rain, thunder or fire; and anthrophony is composed of human-made sounds from people's activities or music. This can also include imagined sounds that

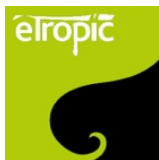


represent a sacred presence. However, for many non-western societies, these sounds may be difficult to separate into categories of bio, geo, or anthro. Thunder may be an encrypted cultural message; among the Shona of Zimbabwe, a roaring lion may be an ancestral 'lion spirit' trying to communicate to the living. Thus, sound is not simply an 'aesthetic property' of the landscape (Pistrick & Isnart, 2013, p. 513), but is also a culturally determined sensual experience of the landscape that enhances a sense of awe. These soundscape characteristics are thus entwined within a perception of the cultural landscape which is much more holistic. When these acoustic characteristics are disturbed, communities may feel a loss of sense of place.

In interviews carried out at Great Zimbabwe in 2016, elders from the local communities around the ancient city chose to focus on the soundscape (Sinamai, 2018b). There are several narratives that mention sounds that came mostly out of the sacred parts of the site. The elders spoke of hearing human voices, animal sounds, as well as sounds of nature as phenomenon that elicited awe. They narrated that 'voices' could be heard calling from the eastern enclosure of the Hill Complex, believed to be the spiritual and religious centre of the complex. These voices were also accompanied by whistling and sounds from animals like cattle. One voice shouting *Huya nehwedza iwe* ('Bring me a milking container') was quoted verbatim by all participants interviewed at Great Zimbabwe. Participants also mentioned the roaring of lions, which, they say, can still be heard from a cave to the east of the Hill Complex; and the cry of sacred birds like the Fish and the Bateleur Eagles, which they associated with departed ancestral spirits. Older participants above the age of 90 reported hearing drums and *mbira* music being played on the Hill Complex before the site became a popular tourist destination. These sounds have since disappeared and this seems to affect the ontological security of the local community who see problems like climate or accidents as essentially a result of the upset of the equilibrium with the landscape. Though the sounds within a landscape can be described individually they are also a shared anthrophonic attribute that not only inspires awe but also makes people feel secure (Sinamai, 2020a). The loss of those sounds is also a loss of the intimate connection with landscape.

Ivhu rinotswamwa: Correcting Knowledge Wrongs

African landscape as we have seen, involves the intimate relation of land with humans. This philosophy is vastly different to dominant western thought. Thus, there is an obvious need to dismantle the interpretive and research template of archaeology and heritage studies in Africa as part of the decolonisation process. This process requires an analysis of the global social and political relations that determine the flow of knowledge and engagement in collaborative consultation and research designs. It

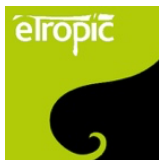


necessitates the recognition and reconsideration of the suppression of other knowledges. It also requires a reclamation of movable and immovable cultural property, not just physically, but in a way that allows for their interpretation to be centred within the cultural framework in which they were created (Bruchac, 2014).

This process of decolonization is not easy as it must be done within the context of cultural frameworks already dismantled by colonisation. The degradation of landscape memory by colonial policies is part of an '*epistemicide*' which saw the severing of indigenous knowledge from management and policy formulation (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2021). Colonisation not only involved the appropriation of things (land, for example) it also required the native population to unlearn their culture and adopt/adapt to the new one. Now we need to unlearn the body of knowledge that was created through colonial processes; knowledge that does not have the same understanding of indigenous cultural landscapes. This colonisation of memory is insidious and continues, it is the reason why at times some artefacts returned from the west have little impact on the populations receiving them. The artefacts are coming back to indigenous populations who have lost the cultural framework in which that object was important. Although emotionally invested in the lost heritage, people cannot connect to the objects to the same extent as their ancestors who used them in an unruptured cultural framework.

This decolonisation requires an engagement by indigenous archaeologists with undisciplined archaeology, anthropology and heritage studies. Communicating academic information from 'the Global south' should not be to make 'the Global north' understand; it should be to create debate laterally among postcolonial nations, among tropical nations, and to make western academia uncomfortable within the knowledge templates that have been created in the west and used globally for hundreds of years. It requires archaeologists and anthropologists to also remove the "colonial garments" they have been wearing and go beyond the elitism of academia, especially the ways in which it is practiced in former colonised countries.

African archaeology for example, is currently framed and practiced through what I would call "pith helmet" archaeology, which represents the domination and the arrogance of colonialism, as well as the authority of mainstream knowledge systems. For many African societies, colonial anthropologists and archaeologists (as part of a group called 'explorers') donned in pith helmets, were blundering fools who often made mistakes because they never asked people with local knowledge. Though the pith helmet has disappeared from African archaeology, the underlying philosophy has hardly changed. A kind of archaeological colonialism still exists in which mainstream theories, methodologies, and manpower are imported to interpret African

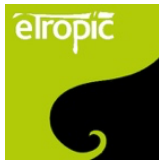


archaeological sites, but without the contribution of African knowledge systems and philosophies (Haber, 2012). Many experts in the fields that encompass cultural and heritage studies are becoming uncomfortable with narratives based solely on western definitions of material culture and feel unheard and ignored within the ‘white noise’ of academia (Fielder & Senchyne, 2019; Mignolo, 2009).

The ontologies of western philosophy which centre the human subject and ignore other agents, cannot be used to interpret places that were constructed within societies that believe humans and non-human beings and objects exist in a reciprocal world (Baires, 2018). It is surprising that an ancient city like Great Zimbabwe for example, can be discussed in archaeology and cultural heritage without a single mention of wild animals. In African narratives told about Great Zimbabwe there are animals that feature prominently, for example lions are still being ‘seen’ within the monument. The presence of lions may not be physical, but their acoustic presence mark animal proximity which entails both the availability of food and the breach of safety.

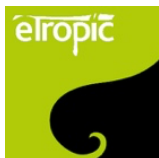
This example of archaeology and African ontologies, clearly shows that there is never a single way of knowing. Rather, there are many ways of being and knowing which arise from the different environments that we occupy. This means that we need to understand these knowledges and local cultural systems before we try to understand their pasts. Understanding other knowledges offers archaeology an opening into other worlds and a move away from ‘the power of norms’ (Baires, 2018: ix) which deny the examination of the multiple narratives that exist at archaeological sites – especially those outside western Europe and in former colonised countries. To move out of these knowledge straightjackets requires understanding that knowledge is not always packaged in ways that we all understand (Sinamai, 2020b). Relatedly, ‘other’ ways of knowing are not a special category of knowledge to be labelled and separated.

Knowledge diversity is not only part of decolonisation but can also be a re-invention of the disciplines that seem stuck in subjective experiences of the west. It will give heritage disciplines – including archaeology and material anthropology – an opportunity to demote human beings to equal players in a world where other beings, elements, and things, have ties to the land as well (Baires, 2018). In a world where humans have outsourced intimate relations with nature to others (farming or hunting, for example), the daily human connections with landscape have been reduced and our understanding of landscape is limited as we lose our ability to immerse in the landscape. This is where indigenous perceptions of the landscape are important for harnessing other ways of understanding landscape beyond scientific rationalism, as well as in widening the theoretical base of the ‘landscape discipline’ of archaeology.

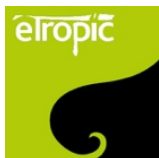


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