

Comment on "Community Involvement in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management: An Assessment from Case Studies in Southern Africa and Elsewhere" by Shadreck Chirikure and Gilbert Pwiti

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Experience shows that in archaeological and heritage management research we are often confronted by varied communities, some very cooperative and some very unruly. The definitions of “community” and “ownership” in relation to archaeological sites therefore become important. While Chirikure and Pwiti eloquently describe various forms of communities, they seem to have restricted themselves to residentially based ones. I have observed that where communities have close links with archaeological sites they tend to be very supportive, providing archaeologists with financial, accommodation, and intellectual assistance. There are, however, instances in which they have refused to allow excavations of particular sites. Where there is no link, archaeologists are usually frustrated and exploited by the community, and in some cases the sites are looted and destroyed (Nigerian examples are the Nok Valley and the Kwatokwashi area, and Domboshava may be a parallel in Zimbabwe). In such cases the future of the sites depends on the community of stakeholders rather than on a local residentially based community that has no sentimental link to or intellectual interest in them. The determination of ownership of heritage can be a very contentious issue and cannot be based on residential proximity. The claim of being owners and not stakeholders has no meaning, since we are not dealing with local and foreign (colonial) contenders.

Chirikure and Pwiti seem to support the turning of heritage resources into economic assets when they say that “community involvement is consonant with this general movement towards empowering the previously disadvantaged.” Disadvantaged in what? Empowered to do what? To mine and exploit archaeological sites? They do not explain these issues. More disturbing is the way in which they describe the relationship between NMMZ and the local community at Domboshava: “The traditional ceremonies [conducted in the tunnel] produced smoke that was *thought* [my emphasis] to be affecting the art.” Was the art not affected? There can be no justification for vandalism on the part of the local people. NMMZ has the responsibility under the laws of the country to protect its heritage, and it should not compromise because local people want to appropriate or misappropriate the national heritage in their neighbourhood. It was easier for the community leader to claim a change in community values than to protect the integrity of the collective heritage.

Chirikure and Pwiti seem to be biased towards the position of the local community at Domboshava. They also advocate views that may be dangerous and destructive on how best to protect the past. It is bizarre for them to expect NMMZ to change legislation it did not make. Archaeologists are experts in their field as viewed by NMMZ, and it is difficult to see what is colonial about its insisting on standard practice and procedure. The American example of the NAGPRA does not apply to the case of Zimbabwe because, as Chirikure and Pwiti themselves have said in discussing what is indigenous, we are dealing here with different contexts.

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My comments address not the specifics of Chirikure and Pwiti’s judicious intervention into the policy of Zimbabwean and South African archaeology but its general principle: deference to “community.” According to the logic of this principle, those possessed of technical expertise should treat the poor and disenfranchised with humility and respect. Since it took hold in the 1980s, this graceful attitude has blunted much of the “authoritarian high modernism” (Scott 1998) so characteristic of development and modernization. Chirikure and Pwiti recommend such deference to those academics who still practice a purely extractive form of fieldwork. Few will quarrel with their case-by-case judgments. Yet, as it has been extended over the past decade or so, their principle of deference to community may have reached its limit. Two broad shortcomings have weakened its appeal among scholars and activists. First, “communities” rarely correspond to neatly bounded geographical places. More often than not, “community” exists as a feeling, a hope, and an idea rather than a place. Second, this conflation of the ideal and the real leads to a certain political inattentiveness. The study of a community, as a concrete thing, shades imperceptibly into advocacy for community, as a desired state. “Community,” in other words, can become a coercive concept—one that warrants careful handling especially in Zimbabwe’s current context of violent nationalism. The standards for such care—as caveats to the deference to community—still need to be fleshed out.

To begin with its geographical flaws, the notion of “community” suggests an unwarranted spatial concreteness. Few people now live in isolated villages, if they ever did, and movement and hybridity are the order of the day. This is not to say that all people are or wish to be transnational. Still, the opposed model of static communities of place gives us less and less purchase on this increasingly fluid social world. Individuals associated with any of the Zimbabwean sites have likely worked in other parts of Zimbabwe and/or in South Africa. Many have certainly fled to South Africa now, along with close to a quarter of their countrymen. To grant them authority over local archaeological sites makes no more or less sense than enfranchising them in national and regional politics. Unfortunately, the emphasis on the former has dampened any potential for the latter. In the 1990s, “community-based” activities—in conservation and development rather than in archaeology—helped close discussion on more far-reaching political transformations (Hughes 2006). With respect to archaeology itself, the emphasis on community risks fostering parochialism and possessiveness, as if heritage were local and an object to be owned and controlled. One might choose to treat artifacts as such where survivors of genocide and cultural theft seek redress from the still-dominant per-

petrator society (as some have through the U.S. Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act). Also, as Chirikure and Pwiti suggest, people whose contemporary belief and practice involve a site surely deserve special rights to it. Other contexts—notably that of the Parthenon Marbles—offer less moral clarity. In a nod toward such pervasive messiness, Chirikure and Pwiti mention Appiah's (2006) call for "cosmopolitanism," but they do not indicate how to apply, in engaged archaeology, his notion of unbordered relatedness. The attachment to "community," in sum, exaggerates essence and difference at the expense of commonality, fluidity, and flow.

This distortion incurs a political as well as an intellectual cost. To turn to the second concern regarding "community," the concept frequently crosses the threshold from a unit of analysis to an activist agenda. Rather than detecting a unity among people, scholars all too often try to manufacture one—without always signaling this applied turn. With relative forthrightness, Chirikure and Pwiti recommend "inculcat[ing] a sense of pride . . . in those indigenous peoples." Such efforts frequently fail. Shortly after Zimbabwe's independence, Parliament invited the late David Beach, dean of precolonial Zimbabwean history, to testify on African society before conquest. He gave the MPs much to glory in but, to their chagrin, also mentioned forms of clientage akin to slavery (cf. Beach 1980). Honest scholarship just as often wounds as it heals cultural pride. National pride is even more fraught. Chirikure and Pwiti urge the managers of archaeological sites to promote identity and nation building among a country's citizens, but can archaeologists do so while also "inculcating cultural pride" with respect to smaller and crosscutting social units? Perhaps they can, but then they must also avoid the type of "patriotic history" and "primordiality" to which Zimbabwe—20 years after Beach's lecture—has fallen prey (Ranger 2004; Muzondidya 2007). Since 2000, the ruling party has reshaped nationalism around a narrative of Shona virtue and exclusivity, invoking the past when convenient. Here is "community-based archaeology" at its worst. Chirikure and Pwiti—to substantiate their approach—would do well to find a more systematic way of sorting this chaff from the wheat in the principle of deference to community.

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Chirikure and Pwiti's aim is to examine community involvement in archaeology, highlight some of the problems that have arisen, and propose possible solutions. They base this discussion primarily on their 20 years' experience in southern Africa. In this regard, they provide a perspective that is not usually heard (the 2002 *World Archaeology* issue dedicated to this topic had one contribution from Egypt but none from

elsewhere on the African continent). Unfortunately, they do not make the most of their opportunity. They begin by debating the different communities of interest, but their definition of "community archaeology" varies, sometimes including archaeologists and sometimes not. In this case it would have been appropriate to use Marshall's (2002) definition throughout.

The main part of their text is a description of southern African case studies, principally the sites of Domboshava, Great Zimbabwe, Thulamela, and Old Bulawayo. They subdivide these studies into three subsections that do not work particularly well because of the degree of overlap and the repetition in the following discussion. Their attempt to contrast successful examples with those that expose various failings is not aided by the fact that the successes (the Living Landscape Project and the KwaZulu-Natal area) are so briefly mentioned as to be meaningless without prior knowledge. The article would have been far stronger if they had explored four case studies in much greater detail and then reviewed the issues arising from them.

The weakest part of the article is the comparison with international examples. The authors refer to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in an unproblematic way that is in contrast to the recent heated debates in the World Archaeological Congress web-based discussion forum and elsewhere with regard to proposed federal rule changes. They include modern goddess and druid cults as part of the communities of interest in the heritage sites of Avebury, Stonehenge, and Çatalhöyük. With regard to Çatalhöyük they recognize that some local communities are uncomfortable with the use of the site by goddess-cult followers. However, despite acknowledging their lack of detailed information, they present the inclusive archaeology at Çatalhöyük as the best example of an interdisciplinary team approach.

On the positive side, Chirikure and Pwiti do raise interesting issues about community involvement in archaeology, including the differences between cultural resource management and research archaeological programmes, the purpose of community involvement, and the relationship between archaeologists and the community.

The projects described by Chirikure and Pwiti all seem to fall under the broad heading of cultural resource management archaeology. Some are located at existing structures or monuments, such as the rock art site at Domboshava, the stone-walled citadels of Great Zimbabwe and Thulamela, and the reconstructed buildings in the Royal Enclosure at Old Bulawayo. The community involvement in these sites is focused on interpretation and management for the purposes of cultural tourism. The Living Landscape Project is based on traditional knowledge and is an educational facility. Although many of these places were originally investigated as part of research archaeology, this no longer seems to be the case. It would be interesting if new academic southern African archaeological projects could work alongside communities keen to know more about their past.