

# Identity Reconstruction of the Great Zimbabwe National Monument: An Indigenous Knowledge Systems Perspective

**Temba T. Rugwiji**

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1825-0097>

University of Pretoria

[rugwiji1964@gmail.com](mailto:rugwiji1964@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Various theories have been advanced on the identity of the people who built the Great Zimbabwe National Monument (GZNM). On the one hand, some ancient Mediterranean communities (Lebanese and Phoenicians) are associated with the construction of GZNM. On the other hand, some archaeological discoveries have claimed that the unique architecture could be assigned to King Solomon and Queen of Sheba, suggesting a religious/biblical basis regarding the construction of the structures. In some instances, those in favour of local indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) argue that the Shona people of the Rozvi dynasty in Zimbabwe were the architects of the magnificent structure. Despite voluminous literature published to date, including more recent contributions, consensus has not been reached on the identity of the people who constructed GZNM. From an IKS perspective, this study attempts to reconstruct an identity formation surrounding GZNM by exploring some similarities in terms of cultural customs between the Ancient Mediterranean World (AMW) and the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The aim of such an investigation is to search for some certainty about the identity of the people who built GZNM. The research findings will complement and contribute to the existing body of knowledge about GZNM.

**Keywords:** Great Zimbabwe National Monument (GZNM); Ancient Mediterranean World (AMW); South Africa; Zimbabwe; religio-cultural knowledge; technology

## Introduction

The country which is presently known as Zimbabwe, was called Rhodesia during the colonial era (Rugwiji 2013, 5; 2008, 85). Beach (1980) affirms that: “Rhodesia was



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colonised by the British in 1890.” Zimbabwe became a sovereign and democratic state in April 1980. “GZNM,” explains Beach, “is a stone-built capital of the Rozvi Shona dynasty (from the 12th to the 15th century)” (also see “A Stone-Built Capital of the Rozvi dynasty.” [https://knowledge/15\\_century.html](https://knowledge/15_century.html)).

As Vale (1999, 391–408) maintains: “The name ‘Great Zimbabwe’ is thought to have derived from *dzimba dza mabwe* (‘great stone houses’).” Zimbabwe is located in central southern Africa. Because of the impact of its colonial history on the nation’s political, economic and sociocultural life, it is generally identified more with southern Africa than with central Africa (see for example, Bauer and Taylor 2005; Mitchell 2002; Pikirayi 1999a).

Zimbabwe as a nation comprises two main ethnic groups: the Shona and the Ndebele. Due to limitation of space and in line with the focus of the present study, this paper will concentrate on the Shona people. There are various inferences which associate GZNM with communities from the Ancient Mediterranean World (AMW), such as the Lebanese, Phoenicians, King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Extensive archaeological and anthropological research and surveys have been conducted to date at the heritage site and within the demographic parameters of GZNM. However, the identity of the people who constructed the monument cannot be determined with certainty although the Munhumutapa Empire, which comprised a migrant Shona group of the Rozvi dynasty, are linked with the massive infrastructure and architecture. This study attempts to explore the following two main contestations: 1) the identity, cultures and customs of ancient Mediterranean communities, and how they shared space and boundaries, and 2) the identity of the people who were responsible for the construction of GZNM. This paper aims to synthesise and analyse, from an indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) perspective, available evidence in conjunction with the results from the author’s own fieldwork—not entirely as an attempt to legitimise existing contributions, but to problematise the phenomena surrounding the identity of the people connected with the construction of GZNM. Although desktop research (i.e. various publications, articles, and the internet) predominantly features in this particular study, to a large extent a narrative approach deriving from qualitative research (i.e. interviews, participant observation and surveys conducted) plays an equally important role in this discourse. In the final analysis, discussion of some similarities regarding cultural practices and customs between peoples of the AMW and the Shona people of Zimbabwe will serve as a critical component towards the findings and conclusions drawn from the entire discourse. This approach has been adopted against the backdrop of close cultural and religious affinities with traditional African culture and ethnic religions (Mojola 2014, 1). In discussing cultures and customs of the AMW, this project focuses primarily on ancient Israel, which is a significant example familiar with the majority of the readership, especially Zimbabwean scholars.

## Statement of the Problem

Previous studies on GZNM and the Shona people of Zimbabwe are unarguably in abundance. However, not much research has been conducted on a comparison between the cultural practices and customs of the AMW and the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The present study attempts to investigate the cultures and customs of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and AMW communities in order to get closer to convincing conclusions about the identity of the people who built GZNM.

## Methodology

This research maximally utilised a narrative approach (see Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2013; Sandelowski 1991), in which qualitative research played a central part. The author, therefore, personally acknowledges and conceptualises Anne Bell's assertion where she says: "I am one among a growing number of environmental educators and researchers with an interest in stories and narratives" (Bell 2003, 95). Qualitative research employed in this study included participant observation, interviewing, and site surveys, particularly of GZNM. With reference to the narrative approach, the human part of the author loves stories by members of communities, and admits that the present contribution is a result of the insights drawn from narratives about cultures, politics, economy, love, marriage, animal kingdom, ecosystem, and aquatic life, among others. Site visits to GZNM in Masvingo (30 June and 28 July 2017, respectively) were very helpful for this research. This paper would not have been the same without the invaluable contribution derived from the survey. The author does not claim to be a pioneer in research of this type. Although Herbert (1996, 641; 1984) and Nelson (1985, 557–559), among others, perceive that GZNM may well be the most studied historic site in sub-Saharan Africa, there are scholars who strongly argue that research about GZNM has so far still been insignificant. Desktop research also features as an important tool of the data pool. Voluminous works—most of them by experts from both archaeological and anthropological disciplines—have since been published and are in circulation. This paper is informed to a large extent by such contributions.

## Ancient Mediterranean World

Theories surrounding the communities from the AMW as the architects of GZNM have been popularised by different people in different ways. When Foxhall opines that "Technology is not politically neutral" (Foxhall 2003, 75), his assessment points to the contestations raised by various critics and theorists with regard to complexities surrounding the knowledge technology during ancient times in sub-Saharan Africa, which were demonstrated in the construction of GZNM. For example, Owen Jarus cites Portuguese explorers in the 16th century who believed that GZNM was the home of the biblical Queen of Sheba who visited King Solomon with gold and riches.<sup>1</sup> It was argued

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1 Jarus, O. 2017. "Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone." <https://www.livescience.com/58200-great-zimbabwe.html>.

that the structures could not have been built by Africans—it must have been built by either the Sabeans, Egyptians or Phoenicians who colonised the area in ancient times (see Ndoro 2001, 39).<sup>2</sup> Frederikse (1984) has noted that research at GZNM was politicised and hindered by the ruling elite in the British colony, who conveyed to the world that only a “civilised” race could have been capable of building such a sophisticated complex.<sup>3</sup> In addition, evidence pointing to the local people as architects was destroyed, and local schoolchildren were taught that the site had been founded by Phoenician colonisers.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni recently protested that: “Modern technology and other forms of modern life have corrupted cultural lives among Africans, including Euro-American epistemological fundamentalism that denies the existence of knowledge from the non-Western parts of the world” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, viii).

The theories of the presence of Lebanese communities, Phoenician colonisers and King Solomon and Queen of Sheba in sub-Saharan Africa (and GZNM) can further be problematised. Both Lebanon and Phoenicia are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible in relation to Israel. Israel was endowed with an abundance of minerals such as gold, copper, iron, silver and bronze because we read that: “A land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills” (Deut. 8:9). This notion is also depicted in 2 Chronicles 2:7 in which King Solomon requested from Hiram, King of Tyre, men skilled in gold, silver, bronze and iron to work on these minerals. Admittedly, the Phoenicians’ common practice of establishing mercantile settlements in foreign cities is consistent with the existence of a trade colony in Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah (Noonan 2011, 287). In addition, we also read in the book of Isaiah that the rebuilding of the walls was done by people from outside (Isa. 60:10). When the flourishing of Judah is mentioned in Isaiah 60:6–7 and 13, “Sheba” is also mentioned as a country alongside Midian, Ephah, Kedar, Nebajoth and Lebanon, which brought to Judah camels, dromedaries, silver, gold, incense, rams, and more. Van Beek (1974, 44) states that the wealth of Sheba included frankincense and myrrh. Fir trees and pine trees from Lebanon would “beautify the place of my sanctuary” (Isa. 60:13). In other words, the infrastructural and economic developments of Judah largely derived from the surrounding nations, including Sheba. It is also narrated that when the rebuilding of the temple was about to begin, the elders of the Judeans “gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorised by Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezr. 3:7). Both Phoenicia and Lebanon are mentioned regarding trade with ancient Israel, and not with sub-Saharan Africa.

The story of the Queen of Sheba appears in both the Hebrew Bible, Muslim Qur’an and the Ethiopian holy book, the Kebra Nagast (Adamu 2009, 469). The story also featured

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2 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

3 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

4 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

in the Persian and Turkish paintings, Kabbalistic treaties, and medieval Christian mystical works (Adamu 2009, 469). In both traditions, the Queen of Sheba is thought to be the daughter of a Chinese king. She was a high priestess known as Mukarrib, which means “bringer of beauty” and kin of the Moon (Koltuv 1993, 29). In the Ethiopian tradition, she is known as Makeba who bore Solomon a son, Menilek I, who founded the royal dynasty of Ethiopia. The traditions further assert that Sheba crossed the deserts of Arabia through Egypt until she came to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon (1 Kings 10; Chr. 9). When she met King Solomon, she said to him: “Your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard” (1 Kings 10:7). In return, King Solomon gave Queen of Sheba gifts and “every desire that she expressed” (1 Kings 10:13). Although Menelik I is believed to have gone to meet his father, King Solomon, the biblical text does not make mention of the encounter. One would not be oblivious of the above assertions in retrospect when reading Dada’s (2010, 161) and Adamo’s (1989, 17–25; 2001, 46–47) arguments for the presence of an African in the Hebrew Bible.

### **The influence of Global Trade and the AMW in Southern Africa**

Discussing China in terms of the identity of the Queen of Sheba is also in order. It is explored in this study that China was part of the gold trade network together with Persia and Syria during the flourishing of the Munhumutapa Empire around the 1440s.<sup>5</sup> The Ark of the Covenant, which other biblical commentators believe to have been taken first to Ethiopia, was transported to sub-Saharan Africa and is believed to be in Zimbabwe (see for example, Le Roux 2009; Von Sicard 1943). This claim is made in light of the view that when Menelik I was returning to Ethiopia from Jerusalem, Solomon gave his son some treasure including the Ark of the Covenant. In their accounts, Kribus (2016), Adamu (2009), Le Roux (2004), Koltuv (1993) and Van Beek (1974) examine in detail the traditions surrounding King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. One wonders whether Finkelstein has received a majority consensus by stating that: “David and Solomon have supplied the greatest monarchs of the world with a model of kingship” (Finkelstein 2007, 107). This article contends that Finkelstein’s opinion is likely to face some criticism, particularly by those opposed to a hermeneutical thrust which is regarded as “squeezing of the text” (e.g. Meyer 2015, 1–7).

The discovery of the biblical lampstand at GZNM is similarly illuminating. On a tour of GZNM, the author got the opportunity to visit the Great Zimbabwe Museum where various types of ancient artefacts are showcased. Among the articles in the museum are golden lampstands, typical of the biblical lampstands. The archivist of the museum, Champion Ndigunei, pointed to the “mutilated” seven golden lampstands,<sup>6</sup> which he said represent in many ways the biblical depiction of the seven golden lampstands (Rev. 1:20). In the Hebrew Bible (Exod. 25:31) Yahweh gives instructions about the golden

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5 “Shona People, their History.” <http://www.bulawayo1872.com/history/Shona.htm>.

6 Champion Ndigunei, a tour guide at GZNM, showed me the seven golden lampstands in the museum.

lampstand to be placed in the tabernacle. The lampstand was made of pure gold. It appears gold was the most valuable of all metals (Psa. 119:127; 19:10), which is depicted in terms of being “tested by fire.” This “testing” as of gold is also found in other books of the Hebrew Bible with reference to “purification,” “perfection” and or “refining” of Yahweh’s people after the “testing” (Num. 31:23; Job 23:10; Zech. 13:7–9). In the New Testament, this metaphor of “testing” as of gold is compared to the “testing” of the church (1 Pet. 1:7). Ndigunei wonders whether the presence of the seven golden lampstands at GZNM was a mere coincidence.

Ndigunei<sup>7</sup> does not entirely disregard the credibility of external influence within the cultural practices of ancient communities at GZNM, with particular reference to the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant in Zimbabwe (also see Le Roux 2009, 102–125). Ndigunei’s assertion is drawn particularly from a familiarisation with the narratives surrounding the Lemba people of Zimbabwe, whose religio-cultural belief systems resonate with Semitic customs (Le Roux 2009, 111). For Ndigunei, the Ark of the Covenant represents some strong connections between Zimbabwe and the AMW in general, and Israel in particular. Le Roux (2009, 111), who acknowledges a similar study by Von Sicard (1943), seems to suggest that oral traditions surrounding the identity of the Lemba people of Zimbabwe are remarkable and deserve attention.

In the process of configuring the legitimacy of the narratives regarding the connection of the AMW and or ancient Israel with ancient societies at GZNM, other scholarly views cannot be ignored. For example, Clark and Fagan (1965, 354) affirm that by the fifth millennium BCE, Neolithic peasants<sup>8</sup> had occupied the lower Nile and were passing westwards along the Mediterranean seaboard into the Sahara, and southwards up the river to Sudan. Ndigunei<sup>9</sup> concurs with Clark and Fagan’s views, where he affirms that one cannot talk of Egypt without talking of Sudan. He adds that people from Sudan are believed to have built the pyramids in Egypt. It is further noted that during the three succeeding millennia the new economy spread throughout northern Africa; but it is not until the first few years of the present era that there is any reliable evidence of mixed farming communities in the central and southern parts of the continent south of the Sahara (Clark and Fagan 1965, 354).

Meanwhile, it is affirmed by some scholars that GZNM was the capital of a sizable kingdom or empire that included other cities, such as Thulamela, which is located in modern-day South Africa.<sup>10</sup> Chieftainship declined in 1450 when some left GZNM due to overpopulation and deforestation; the kingdom split and moved south to Khami.<sup>11</sup> Pikirayi (2005, 3) and Ndoro (2001, 151–167) both confirm that: “By the middle of the

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7 Ndigunei, a tour guide at GZNM.

8 Marlowe (2002) and Lee (1979) also express the view that Neolithic peasants were *hunter-gatherers*.

9 Ndigunei, a tour guide at GZNM.

10 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

11 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

15th century, GZNM had declined in both political and economic significance.” However, Mazarire (2009) reiterates that: “During the 1700s GZNM was re-occupied by vaDuma of the Karanga ethnic group.” Despite varying viewpoints with regards to the construction of GZNM, some scholarly research and archaeological discoveries have undeniably proved that local people built the structures. For example, archaeologist David Randall-Maclver (1905, cited in Jarus 2017) confirmed that the dwellings were “unquestionably African in every detail.”<sup>12</sup> Schoettler (1971, 1–18) agrees with Randall-Maclver’s findings because of two main observations. First, archaeological evidence is a reliable means of determining the history of the African peoples. Second, building techniques and architectural styles are less useful, although they are some aid in comparing later people.

Randall-Maclver’s affirmation was followed up about 22 years later in 1929 by Gertrude Caton-Thompson, who came to a similar conclusion. In addition, GZNM was radio-carbon-dated to approximately 600 CE, and historic findings seem to point to the fact that the ancestors of the modern-day Shona people built GZNM and hundreds of other stone walled sites in Zimbabwe.<sup>13</sup> Last but not least, Garlake (1973) also argued that the monuments had been built between the 12th and 15th centuries by ancestors of the Shona people.

## **Civilisation and Knowledge Technology**

Foxhall contends that: “Technological practices and developments—complex combinations of culturally shaped elements and practical constraints—are critical for understanding how human societies exploit natural landscapes” (Foxhall 2003, 75). There have been many civilisations in Zimbabwe, as shown by the ancient stone structures at Khami, Great Zimbabwe and Dhlo-Dhlo.<sup>14</sup> “GZNM (A.D. 1270–1550),” writes Pikirayi (2005, 3), “emerged in the southern plateau regions of Zimbabwe from an Iron Age agricultural community.” The Shona, as cattle-rearing people, were skilled in building pole-and-thatched huts; the same structures one finds at Mapungubwe, which is older than GZNM. The high level of knowledge technology exhibited through the stone walls at GZNM is unparalleled to other ancient knowledge systems of the time. As Pikirayi (2005, 3) notes: “These structures attest to the opulence of GZNM as a city as well as a centre for political power.” According to Pikirayi (2005), “In managerial terms, this entailed control of a skilful human resource base and possession of resources required to finance long-term construction projects.” Stone “bricks” were used to construct the walls at GZNM. The bricks were worked so that they sit on each other without using mortar. In 1552, a Portuguese historian named Joao de Barros described the structure as a “square fortress, of masonry within and without, built of stones of

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12 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

13 “Shona People, their History.”

14 “Shona People, their History.”

marvellous size and a nearby stone tower, both built without mortar” (see Hall and Steffoff 2006, 10).

Mugabe revealed to the author that “the natural occurrence (i.e. volcanic eruption) played a key role in the formation of flat rock mass.”<sup>15</sup> It appears there were numerous layers of flat granite stone, as evidenced by massive stone works used to build both the royal and the great enclosures. According to Mugabe: “The slabs of flat granite rocks from which stones were sliced to make stone ‘bricks’ were separated from the main rock by veldt fires (or perhaps man-made fires).”<sup>16</sup> When one moves closer to the stone structures, one discovers that the stones are different in numerous places. Bricks used at the top on the royal enclosure appear thinner as compared to the bricks used at the great enclosure below. When the author inquired, Mugabe explained as follows:

The reason for the stone slabs found towards the bottom of the mountain to be thinner was because of the gravity of the mountain at some points. The difference in size of the thickness of the bricks was probably a result of the speed of the lava after the volcanic eruption. Slabs at the very top were thinner because gravity of the slope from the top of the mountain allowed for the increase in speed of the flowing lava which would cover a wider area before drying up.<sup>17</sup>

Mugabe further argued that: “Labour probably included women who transported the bricks where they were needed. Slavery was unknown among the Rozvi people, and therefore the question of slaves being forced to perform the menial duties, as argued elsewhere, is not supported by evidence.”<sup>18</sup>

Two main enclosures were built at GZNM: 1) the royal enclosure on the summit of the mountain; and the 2) great enclosure south-east of the mountain below. Stone works for both these structures were worked and transported from the mountain. Mugabe eulogises that: “Knowledge technology was unique among the ancestors of the Shona people. Uniqueness in technology is demonstrated by the structures at GZNM, Mapungubwe and similar places in sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Herschbach remarks that “there is a strong belief among technology educators that technology constitutes a type of formal knowledge that can be reduced to curricular elements” (Herschbach 1995, 31). However, Herschbach further acknowledges that technological knowledge is not a type of formal knowledge similar to that associated with the recognised academic disciplines. In other words, as Herschbach opines: “Knowledge is not formal; there is no one way of demonstrating knowledge” (Herschbach 1995, 31). Hence, Landies correctly explains technology as “the acquisition and application of a

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15 Mugabe, a tour guide.

16 Mugabe, a tour guide.

17 Mugabe, a tour guide.

18 Mugabe, a tour guide.

19 Mugabe, a tour guide.



corpus of knowledge concerning technique, that is, ways of doing things” (Landies 1980, 111).

Knowledge is believed to be the most effective way out of the poverty trap (Cresswell 1998, 8). Masoga (2005, 15–37) also argues that: “Indigenous Africans possess, practise and protect a total sum of knowledge and skills constitutive of their meaning, belief systems, livelihood, constructions and expression that distinguish them from other groups” (see also Dondolo 2005; Hoppers 2005; Nel 2005). Thus, Peter Bridgewater concurs that:

Non-physical remains such as place names or local traditions are also part of the cultural heritage. Particularly significant are the interactions between these and nature: the collective cultural landscape. Only the preservation of these enables us to see indigenous cultures in a historical perspective. The cultural landscape forms a historical and cultural frame for many indigenous peoples. (Bridgewater 2008, 11)

So, “essentially,” concludes Bridgewater, “all landscapes are cultural, and subject to cultural influences, and a source of cultural knowledge” (Bridgewater 2008, 11).

The great enclosure comprises the conical tower which appears on the Zimbabwean currency. Silas Chakawa revealed that: “The conical tower represents male dominance. This further explains that the Rozvi dynasty was largely patriarchal. The tower itself also represents the granary.”<sup>20</sup> Much of GZNM is unexcavated and what the different enclosures were used for is a source of debate among archaeologists.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Tawanda Muzemani pointed for my attention to the stone wall at the great enclosure, which is higher than many places for the sake of privacy.<sup>22</sup> Tawanda Muzemani concurred that: “The great enclosure was home where premarital lessons for girls were conducted particularly by the king’s senior wife. Girls who had come of age were trained in the great enclosure.”<sup>23</sup>

## **The Karanga Village**

The Karanga Village is located in the eastern side of the site. It is located on *ruvare* (a massive stretch of flat rock) on which several daga-and-pole huts were erected. The village represents a traditional African home of ancient times. As Chakawa observes: “The number of daga-and-thatched huts represents a polygamous family organisation.”<sup>24</sup> Until today, daga-and-thatched huts are common features in a traditional home, called *musha* (Du Toit 1982). Shona people are known internationally

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20 Silas Chakawa was assigned as a tour guide on my second tour of GZNM on 28 July 2017.

21 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

22 Tawanda Muzemani was a heritage security at GZNM. A brief conversation with Muzemani was fruitful. 28 July 2017.

23 Muzemani, heritage security.

24 Chakawa, a tour guide.

for two art forms: 1) stone sculpture; and 2) *mbira*<sup>25</sup> music. Traditional activities are performed at Karanga Village which include: sculpting, weaving, *kuumba hari* (making clay pots), and cultural singing using traditional musical instruments such *ngoma*, *hosho* and *magagada* (Rugwiji 2017). Traditional music signifies the legacy of African value systems embedded in African cultures and religious traditions (Rugwiji 2017). The author had the privilege of joining the singing and the dancing while putting on the traditional outfit.

Among sculptural materials at Karanga Village is also a *hungwe* (Zimbabwe bird), which features on both the country's currency and the national flag. Kriel (1971, cited in Huffman 1985, 68), remarked that: "Traditionally, birds are messengers." According to Huffman (1985, 68): "Eagles, being the largest and most powerful birds, are appropriate messengers for the most important people." Huffman further opines that: "Eagles also bring messages from ancestor spirits" (1985, 68). Van der Merwe (1957, cited in Huffman 1985, 68) admits that: "Since eagles travel between heaven and earth, they can also be messengers of God, who is 'One Above' (*Wokumusoro*), or 'Great One of Sky' (*Nyadenga*)."

## **Culture Similarities between the AMW and the Shona People**

### **Burial Customs in Ancient Israel**

The exodus tradition narrates that when the Israelites left Egypt, they carried the bones of a patriarch, Joseph, which they placed in one Ark, and the living God was in another Ark (see Exod. 13:19; Le Roux 2009, 114; Parfitt 2008, 108). The Israelites would regard it as a misrepresentation of their religio-cultural practices to bury the body of Joseph in "foreign" soil in Egypt. In the Hebrew Bible, the patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses sustain the history of ancient Israel (cf. Perry 2009, 28–35; Zucker 2015, 49–53). The cave of Machpelah was a common burial place, which was bought by Abraham (Gen. 49). Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah are buried at the cave (Gen. 23:17–19; 48:7; 50:13; see also Alter 1996, 288). Posselt (2017) writes that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation declares Hebron (where the patriarchs and matriarchs were buried) a Palestinian national Heritage site.<sup>26</sup> However, Joseph's bones were buried at Shechem on a piece of ground which was bought by Jacob (Josh. 24:32), and Moses was buried north of Mount Gaash (Josh. 24:30). Nehemiah (2:3, 5) appeared before King Cyrus with his face (Nehemiah's face) sad because his "fathers' graves" were not protected as the walls lay in ruins in Israel (Rugwiji 2013, 139).

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25 For *mbira*, see "Shona People, their History."

26 Posselt, I. 2017. "UN Body Declares Tomb of Abraham a Palestinian Site."  
<http://www.bridgesforpeace.com/2017/07/un-body-declares-tomb-abraham-palestinian-site/>.

## Burial Customs among the Shona

Most traditions concerning the past in Africa are oral, whereas in ancient Israel traditions concerning the patriarchs and the important place attached to them by Israelite descendants, are documented. According to the Zezuru dialect of Shona, *Zimba-hwe* (i.e. “dzimba dza mabwe”<sup>27</sup>) is sometimes referred to as “venerated houses” and therefore carries the connotation of “houses” or “graves” for chiefs (Garlake 1973, 13). Ndoro’s (2001) supposition of GZNM serving as a “national shrine” in some way contradicts Garlake’s assessment in suggesting that GZNM could have been a burial place for chiefs. It can be speculated that GZNM served both purposes: as a shrine and a cemetery. In both cases, however, GZNM was (and is still) sacred.

Among the Shona people, a person with a different *mutupo* (totem) cannot initiate burial of the deceased.<sup>28</sup> For the Shona people, *mudzimu* (the spirit of the dead person) does not stay alienated from those still living. The flesh dies, but *mudzimu* never (Matsuhira 2013, 169). The veneration of the spirit of the dead is common among Africans. For example, victory in the liberation struggle for Zimbabwe’s independence, which resulted in democratic elections in 1980, was attributed to spirit mediums such as Nehanda, Kaguvi and Chaminuka (Rugwiji 2013, 191). The spirit mediums are believed to have guided the freedom fighters to endure the war against Ian Smith’s Rhodesian Front (RF). Charumbira (2002, 131; 2008, 103–131), among other scholars, infers that Nehanda once said *mapfupa angu achamuka* (Shona for “my bones shall rise”). Hence, among the Shona people, *kuviga* (bury) carries a deeper meaning than that of “keeping” for future use. Sources consulted for this research portrayed the view that certain individuals, identified as spirit mediums, would converge at GZNM in veneration of *Musikavanhu* (God as “creator of humans”) who would in return provide votive motivation to the freedom fighters during the nationalist liberation struggle.

## Worship Centres in the AMW

There are numerous places in the AMW in general and in Israel, in particular as depicted in the biblical text, which attest to the emphasis on high places as worship centres. A few examples will suffice. It is stated that much of Mesopotamia is flat land, and therefore people would build “artificial mountains” called *Ziggurats*.<sup>29</sup> The description of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9 depicts a *ziggurat*. Scholars also affirm that the term “*bamah*” in the Hebrew Bible depicts a high place particularly identified for ceremonial practices (see De Vaux 1961, 284; Grintz 1977, 111–113; Macalister 1912, 381–406; Yadin 1976, 10). In ancient Israel, the location of a shrine was as critical as the occasional pilgrimage to the shrine for worship or other ceremonial rituals. Yahweh

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27 Also referred to as “great houses of stone.” See Vale (1999, 391–408).

28 “Shona People, their History.”

29 A *ziggurat* (“to build on a raised area”) is a temple tower of the ancient Mesopotamian valley and Iran, having the form of a terraced pyramid of successively receding stories. See “Ziggurat.” <https://pjahumanities6.wikispaces.com/file/view/Ziggurats.pdf>.

was believed to be present in the temple. The temple was strategically built on a high place such as a mountain. Priests played a key function in mediation between Israel and Yahweh. Cultural practices from Mesopotamia (Leick 2003, xvii) could have been exported to Israel through interaction among communities occupying this region (cf. Rugwiji 2017, 2). It is, therefore, evident that Israel as part of the larger ANE world, would exchange civilisation, trade, culture, craft and skill.

### **GZNM as a Religio-Cultural Centre**

Ndoro (2001, 103) presupposes that GZNM is revered as a national shrine; a place of worship symbolising the national and cultural identity of Zimbabwe. Ancestor worship is famous among the Shona people of Zimbabwe (Matsuhira 2013, 165). It is not documented whether the royal enclosure at GZNM played a role in religio-cultural practices among the Shona people. Mawere, Sagiya and Mubaya (2012, 22) observe GZNM as a heritage site, and the shrine is still revered for its religious significance. For instance, *Mwari* (God) of the shrines at the Matopo Hills cannot be consulted by ordinary folk having ordinary questions. The ancestors and local spirits are consulted by speaking through local mediums and omens (Zuesse 1975, 164). Nonetheless, the Lemba people, as affirmed by both Murdock (1959) and Gayre (1972), “buried their dead in an extended rather than a crouched position in the same style as in certain Zimbabwean graves which contained gold jewellery.”

### **Conclusion**

Despite the arguments against, the denialism and protectionism for political reasons on the part of the ruling elite during the colonial era, it was shown that research conducted afterwards yet again confirmed earlier findings that ancestors of the Shona (local African) people had built the GZNM. Given the findings which other scholars have advanced with regards to research on GZNM, one would agree with Ndigunei’s assertion that: “Research about GZNM is far from being exhaustible.”<sup>30</sup> The same idea has also been advanced previously that: “Despite the importance of GZNM much of it is unexcavated.”<sup>31</sup> It has been noted that very little archaeological research has been carried out (e.g. Pikirayi 1999a, 140; 1999b, 185). The above observations complement the conclusion by a team of scientists which remarked that: “If we combine areas dug by antiquarians with those by professional archaeologists, it becomes clear that the excavated area at GZNM is less than two per cent.”<sup>32</sup> This article concludes that further research is required in order to address the following two critical issues: 1) the location of the burial site for kings (and chiefs) at GZNM; and 2) the impact on (and or benefits to) local communities when GZNM was declared a national heritage site.

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30 Ndigunei, a tour guide.

31 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

32 Jarus, “Great Zimbabwe: African City of Stone.”

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