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Many people still do not know much about the medieval Kingdom of Mapungubwe in Limpopo, and a large section of our population has never visited the site. How is it that such an iconic heritage site has remained hidden for so long?

I have for many years been fascinated by the heritage of Mapungubwe, first as a student and as part of my work at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (Mistra), a think-tank that seeks to understand why nations succeed or fail. Mistra adopted the name Mapungubwe (meaning Hill of Jackals in TjiKalanga and Tshivenda) to focus on this very important ancient civilisation.

The founders of the institute were inspired by the knowledge that was emerging about precolonial state formation, social stratification, complex architecture, mineral processing and evidence of globalisation in Mapungubwe.

When I joined the institute in 2013, it had just embarked on a research project that sought to explore Mapungubwe beyond its rise and decline. The research illuminated the challenges of turning heritage sites into knowledge centres and the continued lack of understanding of this precolonial society.

DELIBERATE SILENCING?

The assertion in 1990 by British-South African academic and educationist Martin Hall that Mapungubwe was shrouded in technical controversy is evident in how little is known about the civilisation outside archaeological circles.

I have also found, as part of my own continued research, that this obfuscation occurs due to the use of scientific jargon, which offers a convenient way for archaeologists to avoid engaging with immediate issues facing broader South African society. That scientific jargon also places the discipline in a remote position where it can stress the need for "objectivity" and thus remain removed from contemporary conversations.

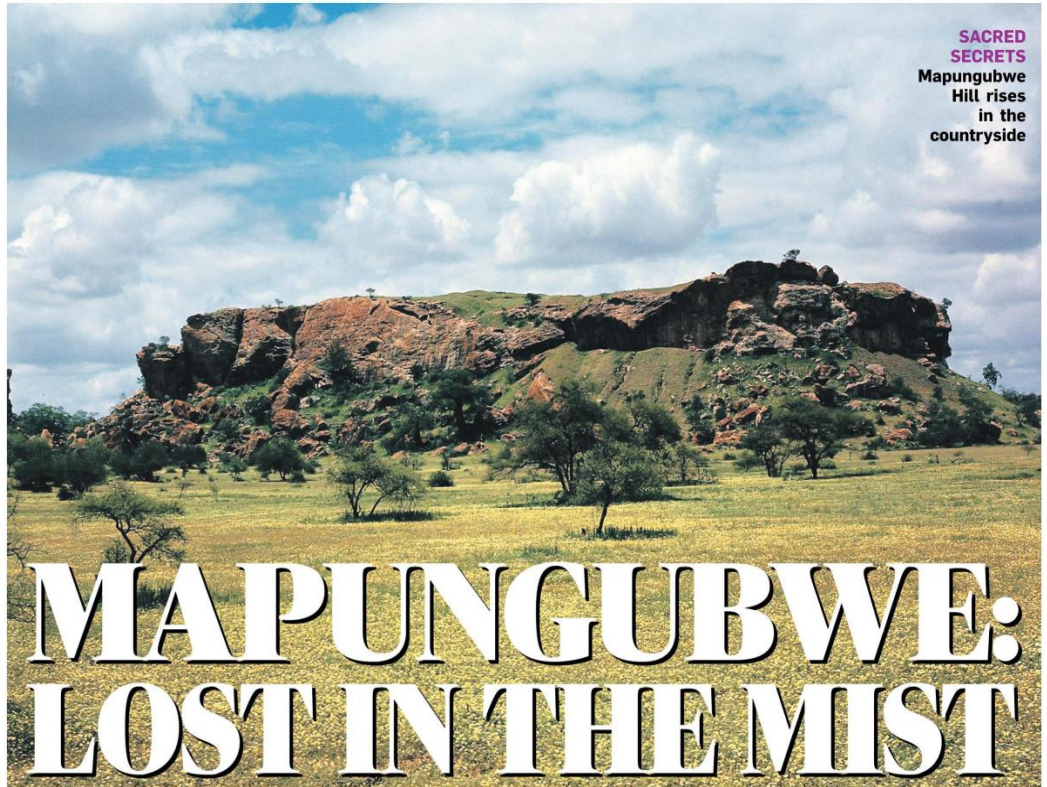
It can also be argued that the conditions under which knowledge was produced in terms of Mapungubwe were informed by the need to prove the late arrival of Bantu-speaking people in southern Africa. The archaeological research on Mapungubwe started in the early 1930s as a direct outcome of General Jan Smuts' patronage.

In 2003, Nick Shepherd, a professor of archaeology and heritage studies at Aarhus University in Denmark and extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria, asserted that Smuts was also instrumental in founding the Bureau of Archaeology and later the Archaeological Survey.

I have argued elsewhere that, in the post-apartheid era, Mapungubwe became a focal point for a new form of myth-building of a romantic past, but with a neoliberal bias.

In my current work, I seek to demonstrate that the events in Mapungubwe are an intensification of broader post-apartheid South Africa characterised by dispossession, contested claims, nationalism, Pan-Africanism and ethnicity. I do this by providing an assessment of archives in the contestation over the land where Mapungubwe is located.

Mapungubwe has long fascinated both politicians and the South African research community. As a result, there is an abundance of records and other material



SACRED SECRETS
Mapungubwe Hill rises in the countryside

Disputes about land and economic potential continue – but the site has kept its secrets, writes **Xolelwa Kashe-Katiya**

culture from (and about) the kingdom.

The continued entanglement of Mapungubwe with political patronage in the present was evident in former president Thabo Mbeki's 2004 lobby for the repatriation of the human remains that were excavated there, shortly after it had been declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco.

The Mapungubwe committee of the University of Pretoria advises senior management at the institution and the state on all issues pertaining to the site.

The repatriation of human remains became a bone of contention, as some stakeholders felt that those early excavations had desecrated an ancient burial site.

This dispute soon led to highly contested ownership issues. Various groups claimed to be the bona fide descendants of the people of Mapungubwe, while academics argued for the need for continued scientific research.

As a result, all affected groups were advised to lay claim to the human remains as a collective. The Lemba Cultural Association, Leshiba Royal Family, Machete Royal Family, San Council and Tshivhula Royal Council all duly made submissions to claim the ancient human remains. This, in turn, would make for

a strong case in laying claim to the land.

The conflict about land ownership of Mapungubwe continues today, contested privately and by the state. Although some land-owners are disputing the validity of the claims, the Land Claims Commission had to be involved in acquiring properties on behalf of the communities through the willing buyer, willing seller concept. Various mining projects have also continued to threaten the integrity of the site.

De Beers established the Venetia Diamond Mine and bought farms in the area of Mapungubwe. Added to this were other mining activities, such as Coal Africa, which was even raised with the Unesco World Heritage Committee in St Petersburg in July 2012.

Currently, the site is once again the subject of a controversial development initiative by the Limpopo provincial government, the Musina Special Economic Zone.

This has been made possible by an investment of more than R150 billion from China and is located within a 100km radius of the Mapungubwe heritage site area. The zone is envisaged to include a coal plant, steel and iron plants, agroprocessing and general manufacturing.

It is interesting that, while there is a sense of emptiness and absence in Mapungubwe, the area has become a hive of economic activity, mostly due to mining giants working in close cooperation with the state.

However, the road leading to the site from Musina is in a dismal state, with dangerous potholes that increase in size with each visit.

The interpretation centre at the site is an eerie space with hardly any artefacts, aside from a few ceramics and a replica of the golden rhino. Although the building has won awards for its unique design, it is currently in a state of disrepair.

In terms of the fauna and flora, the elephants (the main tourist attraction) are roaming freely and destroying much of the vegetation, including baobab trees and other important indigenous species.

Iconic Mapungubwe Hill, where the human remains were reburied in 2008, towers over the haunted landscape, adding yet another dimension of evasion and silencing. This is evident in the reburial process, which may have served to quieten the contestation by the claimant communities.

Ironically, they also use dormant identities and outdated "scientific" theories in the hopes of immediate economic gain.

For local communities, earlier victimhood or dispossession has become currency, while deliberately forgetting about the remains of the Mapungubwe dead and their funerary objects on exhibition hundreds of kilometres away, at the University of Pretoria's new Javett Art Centre.

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