Liam Rees

Nation Building: The impact of the politicisation of Great Zimbabwe in the fabrication of national identity.

REFLECTION STATEMENT

History is an innately human project that attempts to make sense of personal and collective identity. My essay explores the politicisation of history in the fabrication of a nation's identity in response to colonialism, condemning and praising this process as a means for nation building. The process of colonialism is by its nature a denial of collective historical narratives, as such, following the decolonisation of Africa, new and nationalistic African identities began to form, with often violent and tragic consequences.

My essay utilises the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe as a case study through which I explore the impact of the politicisation of history. History's role in forming identity was chosen as an area of study as it is the most practical and potent use of the past. Mugabe-esque Zimbabwean national identity was specifically chosen as an area of study as it illustrates the consequences of the politicisation of the historical record. Within Zimbabwe, Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party manipulated the country's colonial past, utilising their own constructed public history known as 'Patriotic History'. As a result of the politicisation of the historical record, civil unrest ensued leading to a prolonged period of violence within Zimbabwe. As such, without a clear vision of a nation's identity, rooted in a rich past, historical narratives will be inevitably monopolized as seen in the rise of authoritarianism within post-independence Zimbabwe. As such, my essay reflects that history should function as a conduit by which multiple historical understandings can be expressed. Embracing the multiplicity of historical viewpoints allowing for greater societal cohesion amongst differing cultural groups leading to the process of nation building.

'Independence will bestow on us ... a new history and a new past'

– Robert Mugabe

History serves a prominent role in the fabrication of a nation's identity. To achieve social cohesion a 'shared history' is often constructed by public administrations to achieve their social and political aspirations, this is done through politicizing history. Without shared self-understanding which serves to attain 'public results',[1] ethnic and religious boundaries will supersede national needs and conflict will ensue; thus, identity must be a part of nation building. Following the rise of African decolonisation in the 1950s, new national identities had to be formed often surrounding the romanticisation of colonial resistance and other tangible histories. This often-contested process of meaning making for Zimbabwe has had profound political implications, leading to civil war and the formation of the state, the foci of these narratives is Great Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe refers to a collection of ruins in the South of Zimbabwe, broadly attributed to the Bantu people and was 'abandoned' around the 15th century. Due to this politicisation, historical narratives within Zimbabwe have not only undermined academic methodologies but other figures have and continue to be 'fixed' in positions of political marginalization in the pursuit of social cohesion through identity. To combat this, pluralistic interpretations of Zimbabwe's shared history have been developed amongst dissenting voices primarily through the University of Zimbabwe, challenging monopolized historical narratives. According to literary historian Hayden White, 'Historical Pluralism'[2] serves to 'answer collectives needs and interest of the intellectual community' through 'diversifying' our understanding of the past. The intersection between archaeology, ethnography, and importantly local 'oral' histories in response to colonialism has formed several pluralistic constructions of African history surrounding the site. The confluence of these interpretations serves to form a more democratic and increasingly nuanced understanding of history, whilst challenging dogmatic and politicised historical narratives.

1. *The history and future of nation-building? building capacity for public results* (p. 197–218) by Jocelyne Bourgon, J. (2010). *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* 76(2), doi:10.1177/0020852309365666.

2 *Historical Pluralism* (p. 480-493), by Hayden White. Critical Inquiry

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Politicised historical narratives surrounding Great Zimbabwe began as a response to colonialism's dispossession of people and understanding, these narratives in turn served proto-Zimbabwean self-understanding. Following colonial resistance in Kenya, the *'winds of change'* precipitated ideas of independence across Africa leading to a growing black consciousness and demand for self-determination.[3] To fight colonialism in Rhodesia, divided tribes, mostly divided by artificial racial boundaries, needed a united sense of self not just a common identity.[4] As such, romantic idealisations of the past began to arise, specifically ones which glorified aspirations of independence typically connecting fights for self-determination to Great Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe according to Kaarsholm became proto-Zimbabwean nationalists' key symbol for situating their roots of modern identity in a rich and autonomous historical one'.[5] Great Zimbabwe represented tangible evidence of the pre-colonial 'Golden Age'[6] and was a demonstration of ancient African achievements when racially united. The selection of an archaeological site to form the basis of national identity is imperative as it represents a tangible history which directly combats the denial of oral or other histories under colonialism. This view is supported by Art Historian Simon Schama who argues that "when local forms of memory run counter to more 'official histories... landscapes offer a place to keep alternative narratives of the past in circulation"[7]. These alternative narratives manifested themselves within the site through 'nationalist historiography' first purported by public historian Terence Ranger's books *'Revolt in Southern Rhodesia'* (1966) and *'The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia'* (1967). Ranger's work emphasises the role of armed struggle to bring about independence drawing connections to the First Chimurenga and Great Zimbabwe, the first independence 'war' between Shona and Ndebele Africans versus the British South Africa Company. Great Zimbabwe's role in Ranger' work was as a platform by which he asserted the inspirational example of black unity, a key feature in early political formation and organised resistance. This diversification of perspective from that under Rhodesia rule is what White refers to as developing a 'sense of history',[8] as multiple historical

narratives develop within the public space. This process in turn develops greater group understanding, as Shona Africans connected to historical mythology developed by Ranger and others, thus fabricating unity for once historically shunned cultures. Great Zimbabwe's centrality in earlier Zimbabwean self-understanding is evidenced in the naming of anti-colonial liberation movements after the site, this being the ZANU and ZAPU. ZANU and ZAPU throughout the 2nd Chimurenga, also known as Zimbabwean Independence War, also utilised the symbols of Great Zimbabwe within their flags and party banners, thus racially uniting their respective power bases through history. Additionally, the Soapstone birds and the Conical Tower of the site became enshrined in the Zimbabwean national iconography, appearing in the coat of arms, the national flag and on coinage[9]. Zimbabweans were supposed to emulate the enterprising spirit of their ancestors who had constructed a politically and economically successful kingdom'[10], the immortalisation of Great Zimbabwe within national symbols served not only to root the country in rich African culture and history but to also fabricate an identity based on former united black ingenuity. This is supported in Garlake's view that Great Zimbabwe emerged as a source of black cultural pride and inspiration for historical and political consciousness for all Zimbabweans[11]. As such, the initial formation of the state was heavily reliant on Great Zimbabwe, with its symbolic capital serving to galvanise support for independence. As early 'nationalist historiography' had to appeal *'en masse'* to overcome the intellectual and physical resistance of the Rhodesian Front Regime (1965-1979), because of this the site's diverse and shared nature was stressed within work, especially examining the power of black unity[12].

Despite this, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe began constructing a new racialised national identity, narrowing ideas of 'Zimbabweans' to ensure political stability post- independence. As Zimbabwean political divisions were primarily along racial lines, with ZANU being supported by Shona Africans while ZAPU a national party mainly appealing to Ndebele peoples, Mugabe began to exclude Ndebele contributions from Zimbabwe' shared history.[13] This purposeful absence in the historical record served to stress the 'ZANU-PF as the alpha and omega of

3   *Nation branding in Zimbabwe: Archaeological heritage, national cohesion, and corporate identities* (p.5), by Shadreck Chirikure, Simbarashe S. Chitima and Thomas P. Thondhlana. Journal of Social Archaeology

4   *Becoming Zimbabwe or Becoming Zimbabwean: Identity, Nationalism and State-building* (p. 55), by Alois S. Mlambo. Sage Publications

5   *The past is a battlefield in Rhodesia in Zimbabwe. The struggle of competing nationalisms over history, from Colonisation to Independence* (p. 156), by Preben Kaarsholm. Institute of Commonwealth Studies

6   *Nation branding in Zimbabwe: Archaeological heritage, national cohesion, and corporate identities* (p.5), by Shadreck Chirikure, Simbarashe S. Chitima and Thomas P. Thondhlana. Journal of Social Archaeology

7   *Landscape and Memory*, by Simon Schama. Vintage Books

8   *Historical Pluralism* (p. 480-493), by Hayden White. Critical Inquiry

9   *Nation branding in Zimbabwe: Archaeological heritage, national cohesion, and corporate identities* (p.6), by Shadreck Chirikure, Simbarashe S. Chitima and Thomas P. Thondhlana. Journal of Social Archaeology

10 Ibid.

11 *Prehistory and Ideology in Zimbabwe* (p. 1-19). By Peter Garlake. Africa: Journal of the International African Institute

12 *The past is a battlefield in Rhodesia in Zimbabwe. The struggle of competing nationalisms over history, from Colonisation to Independence* (p. 165), by Preben Kaarsholm. Institute of Commonwealth Studies

13 *The politics of recognition: Symbols, nation building, and rival nationalisms* (p. 396-418), by Gabriella Elgenius. University of Gothenburg

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Zimbabwe's past, present and future.'[14] This overt polisitcation of the past that formed following the establishment of the state has been termed 'Patriotic History', which is unique from simple 'nationalist historiography' due to its increasingly narrow and racialised interpretation of Zimbabwe's past along with its notable public elements.[15] As such, Zimbabweans collective understanding of the past was greatly contributed to by the ZANU, who, using their immense political capital, fabricated 'Patriotic History' through public speeches and displays along with changing the education system and establishing 'youth militia camps.[16] This politicisation of Zimbabwe's past served to construct a uniform and monolithic 'sense of history' within the public realm, thus political resistance supported by history, could not form. This is supported in Mugabe's belief of 'the immanence of a Zimbabwean nation expressed through centuries of Shona resistance...embodied in successive 'empires',[17] with the targeted exclusion of Ndebele people's contributions to the nation's shared past excluding them from ideas of 'Zimbabwean-ness'. This is further evidenced in the naming of the state Zimbabwe in 1980 after Great Zimbabwe, a settlement according to oral histories to have been developed by Bantu peoples, Shona Africans ancestors. As ideological ideas from the regime spread through the populous via propaganda, support for removing the regime was not only unpopular but seen as 'Un-Zimbabwean', thus Zimbabwean identity became inextricably connected to support for the regime through policitzing Great Zimbabwe to justify policies of racial exclusion and authoritarianism. This was exacerbated due to the monopolisation on the ability to create history within Zimbabwe, with key institutions such as universities and public forums being controlled by the ZANU. Dissenting historical narratives suggesting Great Zimbabwe's shared applicability and relatability to the Zimbabwean populous outside of Shona Africans would inevitably undermine support for the regime, as political opponents could draw from Zimbabwe's shared past. Thus, 'national identity' under Mugabe's rule following independence became increasingly racialized, presenting the ZANU-PF as the rightful successor to Zimbabwe's precolonial rulers, thus ensuring political power for Mugabe.

Building on this, to ensure political power, 'Shona' identity was essentialised through Great Zimbabwe, further fabricating 'Zimbabwean' identity. By 2003, Mugabe's radical promises for the country in 1980 seemed to have failed, thus, to ensure political support against the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change), a popular grassroots political party, 'Patriotic History' began to again mobilise within Zimbabwe. Following the return of one of the soapstone birds to Zimbabwe from Germany due to mounting international pressure, Mugabe began a 'multi-million' dollar campaign publicly celebrating its return.[18] Due to Great Zimbabwe's symbolic capital being a constant feature of state iconography, featuring on the Zimbabwean flag and coinage, this stressed the ZANU-PF's personal role as 'colonial liberators' as the return of the artefact was an ideological victory.[19] This accentuated the political divide characterised in the 2003 election by 'revolutionaries' v. sell-outs', with the ZANU-PF politicising the site to stress a new national identity surrounding 'patriotic Shona nationalism'.[20] This reflects a trend of 'political parties frequently reproducing national symbols and appropriating archaeological artefacts as partisan symbols', with the site solely serving Mugabe's ideology.[21] The public glorification of Great Zimbabwe throughout the election stressed the historical connection of the modern Zimbabwe state, a state ruled by the ZANU-PF, to that of an *'ancient empire'*, which further legitimized Mugabe's rule as he was seen as the epitome of 'Zimbabwean-ness'. This shift from a Zimbabwean identity based on pan-African black unity pre-1980, to early Zimbabwean identity stressing Shona African supremacy, to *'Patriotic History's'* obsession with continuing the revolution highlights a continued essentialisation of black culture for political ends.[22] Initially the politicisation of Great Zimbabwe served to 'strategically essentialise' African culture as being united and politically powerful prior to colonialism. This phenomenon is explored in literary and post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak's work that argued that sometimes 'group identity can be simplified in a way to achieve definite goals".[23] This purposeful homogenization of African culture served to combat colonialism as recognising cultural diversity inherently weakens claims of self-determination and narrowing features of a 'group' encourages cohesion. This process is what political scientist Benedict Anderson refers to as creating 'imagined community' of nationalistic unity, by which racial differences are

14   *Patriotic history and public intellectuals, Critical of power* (p. 379). By Blessing-Miles Tendi. Journal of Southern African Studies

15   Ibid

16   *Nationalist historiography, patriotic history, and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe* (p. 221). By Terence Ranger. Journal of Southern African Studies

17   *Constructions of Zimbabwe* (p. 509). By Terence Ranger. Journal of Southern African Studies

18   *Nationalist historiography, patriotic history, and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe* (p. 226). By Terence Ranger. Journal of Southern African Studies

19   *Contested Monuments: The Politics of Archaeology in Southern Africa within Colonial Situations: Essays in the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge* (p, 135-169). By Henrika Kuklick. University of Nebraska Press

20   *Nationalist historiography, patriotic history, and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe* (p. 232). By Terence Ranger. Journal of Southern African Studies

21   *Political Symbols and National Identity in Timor-Leste* (p. 8-31). By Catherine Arthur. Cham: Palgrave Macmillian

22   *Nationalist historiography, patriotic history, and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe* (p. 215). By Terence Ranger. Journal of Southern African Studies

23   *Spivakian concepts of essentialism and imperialism in Gabriel Garcia's "The autumn of the patriarch* (p.91-114)''. By Mohammad Motamedi. Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

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downplayed to facilitate a nation's unity.'[24] Significantly, 'strategic essentialism' was primarily perpetrated by Zimbabwean political parties, as Rhodesian identity was already 'racially monolithic', thus to unite divided African peoples against colonialism, politicised history was utilised. Despite this, the essentialisation of African culture continued after the removal of colonial power, serving to further narrow ideas of 'Zimbabwe-ness', eventually to a point of Shona nationalism, thereby facilitating the political rule of Mugabe and the ZANU-PF.

In conjunction with the politicisation of the site for political ends, to fight colonial the misappropriation of Great Zimbabwe, archaeologists, actively attempted to professionalise the site, through establishing an official and uniform historical narrative. The museum at Great Zimbabwe was, at the time of its heritage listing in 1986, incredibly 'professionalised',[25] with the museum illustrating the African origins of the site as early as 1932.[26] However, as anthropologist and archaeologist Barbara Bender argues 'those attempting to conserve and preserve a site inevitably 'freeze' the landscape as a palimpsest of past activity, creating a 'normative' landscape with only one way of telling and experiencing it.[27] This appropriation of the land occurred at the Great Zimbabwe Museum where even by the 2006, strictly only hired those with archaeological training, and as the only black archaeologist had died during the liberation war, there was an all-white staff.[28] Additionally, the increasing 'professionalisation' of the site did not have input from local peoples,[29] this is problematic according to public historian Joost Fontein who claimed that the multiplicity of local historical discourses about the site and the surrounding landscapes had been 'silenced' by the authority of the museum.[30] The dominance of archaeological discourses on the site had led to a focusing on static categories and simplistic understandings of cause, effect, and change,[31] thereby 'crowding out' and distancing local interpretations of history from the historical record.[32] Thus, culturally informing histories for local peoples

were restricted due to the dominance of logocentric narratives produced by the museum. Additionally, due to historiography within Zimbabwe being monopolised by the ZANU and the official museum guidebook up until 1986 still utilising the same directive under Rhodesian control of not explicitly stating the sites origin,[33] the site 'coloured' the interpretations of Zimbabwean nationalists. This is highlighted in Great Zimbabwe's political capital serving an instrumental role in the initial formation of Zimbabwe and the maintenance of the ZANU-PF'S power.

This, in former chief Archaeologist at the museum Peter Garlake's opinion has led to the 'Great Zimbabwe being promoted by Zimbabweans as a mirror image of the Rhodesian' own distortions,[34] with the same process of dispossessing local understandings of the site occurring under colonial rule. In attempting to depoliticise the site through appealing to historicism, the museum at Great Zimbabwe has formed a lynchpin of Zimbabwean identity whilst simultaneously denying local peoples of their history. Within Zimbabwe this is poignant due to traditional religion having a close association with the land and the spirit world, with Great Zimbabwe serving an important role in local tribes such as the Nemanwa, Charumbira and Mugabe, interpretation of Shona spirits and Mwari (God).[35] To combat this, Ranger encourages 'not making an authorised version of [Great Zimbabwean] history but making differing interpretations available for discussion to ensure it remains a source of inspiration for individual and collective creativity'.[36] Despite this, Ranger's perspectives have undoubtedly been characterised as 'nationalist historiography', serving to facilitate proto- Zimbabwean nationalism early formation. However, due to the complexity of the historical record at Zimbabwe, in attempting to tell one story, it inherently silences another, thus an interdisciplinary approach allows for multiple perspectives. This view is supported by Hayden who argues that the aggregate of historical narratives will inevitably inform a 'sense of history' for different people.[37] Thus, as result of the 'professionalisation' of the site, like that under Rhodesian rule, a racially unifying and culturally informing national identity has failed to form due to continued management of Great Zimbabwe 'distancing' itself from local cultural understanding.

24 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. By Benedict Anderson. London: Verso

25 *Silence, Destruction and Closure at Great Zimbabwe: Local Narratives of Desecration and Alienation* (p. 771-794). By Joost Fontein. Journal of Southern African Studies

26 *Prehistory and Ideology in Zimbabwe* (p. 12). By Peter Garlake. Africa: Journal of the International African Institute

27 *Stonehenge: Making Space* (p. 26). By Barbara Bender. Oxford Press

28 *Silence, Destruction and Closure at Great Zimbabwe: Local Narratives of Desecration and Alienation* (p. 772). By Joost Fontein. Journal of Southern African Studies

29 Ibid

30 Ibid

31 *Reclaiming Great Zimbabwe: Progressive or regressive decoloniality?* (p. 400-414). By Joost Fontein. Journal of Southern African Studies

32 *Silence, Destruction and Closure at Great Zimbabwe: Local Narratives of Desecration and Alienation* (p. 773). By Joost Fontein. Journal of Southern African Studies

33 *Prehistory and Ideology in Zimbabwe* (p. 1-19). By Peter Garlake. Africa: Journal of the International African Institute

34 Ibid.

35 *The Shona Peoples*. By M.F.C Bourdillon. The Zambesian Past

36 *Rendre Present le Passe au Zimbabwe* (p. 76). By Terence Ranger. Politique Africaine

37 *Historical Pluralism* (p. 481), by Hayden White. Critical Inquiry

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To conclude, nation building is inextricably linked to the process of forming a national identity through history, as shared 'self-understanding' produces cohesion. Historical pluralism's role within this discussion is not only illustrated through the dangers of the politicisation of history in creating essentialised national identities which entrench political power but also of the dangers of the targeted de-politicisation of history and its capacity to 'professionalise' history to a point of 'crowding out' genuinely culturally informing histories. Furthermore, the intersection between oral, archaeological, and ethnographic disciplines has not only deepened historical understanding and critique but also has informed the identity of both colonial and post-colonial nations. Inevitably, *we wish to use history only insofar as it serves living*,[38] as such historians are called to celebrate the multiplicity of views which inform personal understanding through pluralism or risk 'establishing truth', inevitably empowering certain narratives and therefore people over others. Utilising this framework, further assessments can be drawn about the use of 'historical pluralism' and of history more generally in the fabrication of national identity elsewhere.

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38   *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (p. 1). By Friedrich Nietzche. Cambridge University press

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