The Evolution of Fragility: Setting the Terms

Edited by Norman Yoffee

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Contents

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Figures

Table

Acknowledgements

Chapter 8

Fragile States in Sub-Saharan Africa

Peter Robertshaw

Although many college textbooks on world prehistory seem to regard only three episodes of the African past as relevant to the human story – the earliest hominins and tools, the advent of modern humans, and ancient Egyptian civilization, a good portion of sub-Saharan Africa was occupied at one time or another by states, albeit mostly dating to well within the last 3000 years (Fig. 8.1).[1] These states varied enormously in size, duration, monumental architecture (or lack thereof), and in hierarchical and heterarchical complexity: contrast, for example, Pharaonic Egypt (see, e.g., Morris this volume) with the Luba kingdom of central Africa (Reefe 1981). There is of course no reason that all these states should share traits simply because they happen to be located on the African continent.

The kingdoms, as they are frequently called, of sub-Saharan Africa are often considered as 'secondary' states that have little to contribute to debates about the evolution and collapse of complex societies. This is unfortunate because many of these African societies have rich archaeological, historical, linguistic, and ethnographic records that permit detailed scrutiny of their political, economic, religious, social, and cultural histories. For this reason, they are arguably ideal case studies for a conference on the evolution of fragility in states. But is it acceptable to focus on 'secondary' states? Parkinson & Galaty (2007, 114) note that, 'confusion about the meaning of the term secondary has led to a general presumption that if states were 'secondary', their formation did not need to be explained'. However, mere recognition of the fact that a state either emerged as the successor of a pre-existing state or had some connections to a primary state elsewhere is clearly insufficient as an explanation of the state's development and history. Nevertheless, comparative study of secondary state formation indicates some shared features of interest, viz.:

> Secondary states formed in two basic manners: as remnants of larger entities that broke up after an initial fluorescence or as competing polities that developed at the edge of more mature complex societies. Both processes involved competition between like-sized, similarly organized social units [peer polities], and therefore both resulted in the adoption of older organizational strategies by new, or emergent, corporate groups. (Parkinson & Galaty 2007, 125)

However, many states in sub-Saharan Africa do not fit easily into the binary classification of 'primary' (or 'pristine') and 'secondary' states and their formation also does not always align with the two explanations proposed by Parkinson & Galaty. For example, the first states in the Great Lakes (or Interlacustrine) region of Africa were to all intents and purposes primary states, but they did receive small quantities of exotic goods from much larger states that were part of the Indian Ocean world system in the first half of the second millennium AD. In the jargon of world-systems theory, this would condemn these central African states to the status of 'peripheries' whose primary purpose was supposedly to supply 'cores' with raw materials in unequal systems of exchange that fostered dependency (see Killick 2009). Such a view courts the danger of overlooking the value of studying these states as functioning entities in their own right. In similar vein, Trigger's distinction between 'city-states' and 'territorial states' is also not readily applicable to much of sub-Saharan Africa, not least because many of the states in this region lacked cities (see also Marcus & Feinman 1998, 8–10). Typologies often have heuristic value, but they must not become straitjackets that hamper rather than heed investigation.
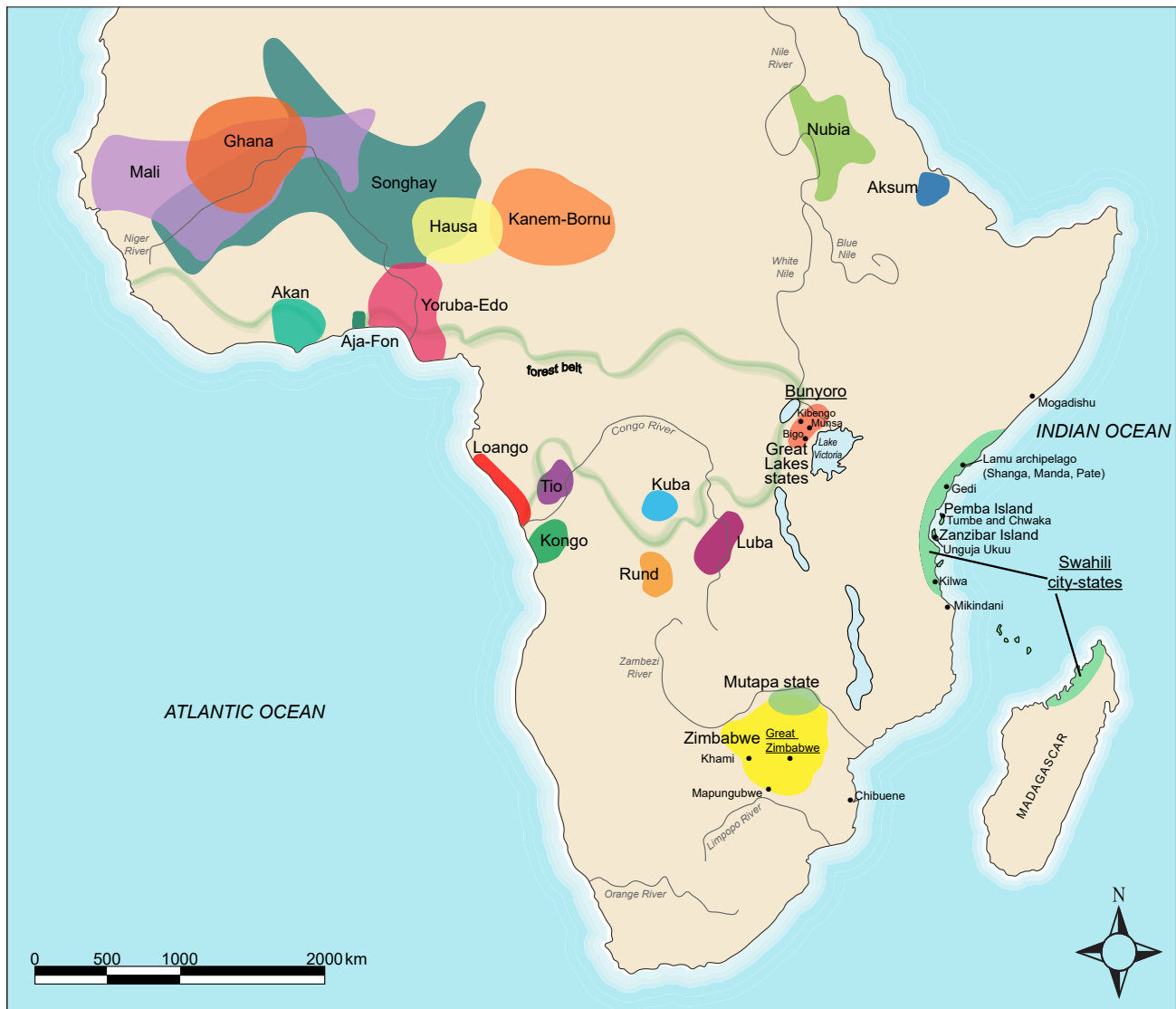
Figure 8.1. *A sampling of the precolonial states of sub-Saharan Africa, thereby giving an indication of their distribution, together with archaeological sites mentioned in the text (parts of the map redrawn from Monroe 2013).*

One might also ask whether the societies that I intend to examine here can really be described as 'states' rather than 'chiefdoms', 'intermediate-level societies' or some other term. This depends of course on one's definition of a 'state'. Connah, in his survey volume of 'African civilizations' (2016, 7), claims to follow Haas (1982, 172): 'a stratified society in which a governing body exercises control over the production or procurement of basic resources, and thus necessarily exercises coercive power over the remainder of the population', but this definition not only begs the question of how many strata but it is also not a good fit for many African states where there seems to be little or no evidence of coercive power. Baines & Yoffee

(1998, 254) also define a 'state' in political terms: 'the central, governing institution and social form in a differentiated stratified society in which rank and status are only partly determined through kinship' (see also Yoffee 2005, 17), a definition that is more forgiving in terms of my African examples. Marcus & Feinman (1998, 6) offer a list of seven traits that characterize 'archaic states' without requiring that a state must necessarily check all seven boxes, a fuzziness of definition for which Yoffee (2005, 15–16) has sympathy. Certainly, many archaic states in central and southern Africa probably do not always meet the expectation of 'a change in the settlement hierarchy from three to four levels' (Yoffee (2005, 16).

Despite the frequent absence of typical traits of states like cities, monumental architecture, and writing, early European travellers in central Africa had no qualms about using terms, such as 'kings', 'courts', and 'armies', to describe the workings of complex African societies that they encountered. They clearly believed that their European models of states were readily applicable to African contexts, a precedent that I intend to follow here in as much as I assume that I am dealing with states that may have lessons to impart about fragility and resilience.

Three African states

The study of African political formations, both state and stateless, represented the birth of political anthropology (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940; Lewellen 1983, 7). However, the colonial-era context in which much of the first archaeological explorations of the traces of early African states took place fostered the view that the development and success of these states should be credited to civilizing influences from outside the continent. This perspective in turn encouraged later researchers to focus on countering colonialist narratives with ones that emphasized the indigenous origins, bolstered sometimes by early radiocarbon dates, and achievements of African kingdoms, often at the expense of overlooking the tremendous variety of African political and social systems (Monroe 2013). Only in the last couple of decades has the emphasis shifted from universalist narratives of cultural development to the exploration of the rich diversity of pre-colonial African complex societies (S. McIntosh 1999; R. McIntosh 2005; Stahl 1999, 2005; Fleisher & Wynne-Jones 2010; Monroe 2013).

I explore three states in detail in this chapter chosen from the cornucopia of African examples of precolonial states. I chose three states with whose archaeology and history I am relatively familiar. They are certainly not a random sample, but they do differ considerably from each other, allowing exploration of variability as well as shared features. Great Zimbabwe in southern Africa is generally considered to have been a 'territorial state', while Swahili 'civilization' comprised several 'city-states' (in Trigger's (2003, 92–4) terminology; see also Charlton & Nichols 1997) distributed along the length of the East African coast (Sinclair & Hakansson 2000; LaViolette & Fleisher 2005). The kingdom of Bunyoro in the Great Lakes region of central Africa was a much smaller entity than my other two case studies, warranting the label of 'early state' rather than 'civilization' because, in Trigger's view, kinship remained the underlying principle of socio-political organization and the gap in wealth between rich and poor was less marked than in early 'civilizations' (Trigger 2003, 47). Regardless of the merits or demerits of Trigger's classifications, ancient Bunyoro, in its scale and organization, resembles many precolonial African states. Moreover, its rich corpus of oral traditions and ethnographies, combined with abundant historical information gleaned from linguistic studies, as well as some archaeological evidence, permits more in-depth analysis than is often possible for some larger ancient civilizations. Furthermore, this is the early state with which I am most familiar from my own archaeological endeavours. The choice of three states, rather than fewer or more, was based on logistical concerns.

I begin with brief culture historical notes on each of the states in my case studies to provide a context for readers unfamiliar with the past of sub-Saharan Africa.

Great Zimbabwe
Great Zimbabwe (Fig. 8.2) was the capital of a state known to academics by the same name. Great Zimbabwe, the state, was at its zenith between roughly the late thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries AD, though settlement at the capital both preceded and outlived this highwater mark. Distinguished by at least a four-level, possibly a five-level site-size hierarchy, Zimbabwe period sites are located across most of the modern southern African country of the same name, as well as in adjacent areas of Botswana, South Africa, and Mozambique (Garlake 1973; Pikirayi 2001). While most popular accounts and textbooks posit that the gold mined in the region and traded to the East African ports of the Indian Ocean world was the source of Great Zimbabwe's wealth, the importance of cattle (e.g. Garlake 1978) or both cattle and agriculture (e.g. Pikirayi 2001) to the economic basis of the state should not be underestimated. Ritual and religion, kinship connections to founding ancestors, ownership of land, as well as possession of other metals and ivory, and the materialization of power in drystone walling all contributed to the acquisition and maintenance of authority among Great Zimbabwe's leadership.

There are two competing models for the emergence of Great Zimbabwe: 1) the state was the successor to an earlier, primary state centred on Mapungubwe (e.g. Huffman 1986, 2000, 2009); 2) the state emerged as primus inter pares because of multiple causes, including competition among several peer polities, a view based in part upon new fieldwork (Chirikure et al. 2013, 2014, 2016; Van Waarden 2011; cf. Huffman 2015a, 2015b). Bound up with these competing models is disagreement about the importance of exotic (prestige) trade goods in the development and institutionalization of wealth disparities between elites and commoners (e.g. Huffman 1972, 2009; Calabrese

Figure 8.2. *The Great Enclosure and adjacent stone walling at Great Zimbabwe (image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).*

2000, 2007; cf. Chirikure 2014; Moffett & Chirikure 2016). Similar disagreements revolve around Great Zimbabwe's decline: 1) Great Zimbabwe itself was largely abandoned and succeeded by two daughter states, the Mutapa state in far northern Zimbabwe and the Torwa-Changamire (Rozvi) state with its capital at Khami (Fig. 8.3) and later at Danangombe (Fig. 8.4), about 250 km west of Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 1982, 2007); 2) there was considerable chronological overlap between Great Zimbabwe and the Mutapa and Torwa-Changamire states, with frequent changes in the location of capital sites (Chirikure et al. 2012). I explore these competing visions of culture history below, which have implications for our understanding of fragility and resilience in these states.

Swahili

The East African coast and adjacent islands from southern Somalia to central Mozambique were and still are home to the Swahili, speakers of a Bantu language, ki-Swahili, and possessors of a shared culture that Connah (2016, 222) notes was 'partly urban, mercantile, literate, and Islamic'. Swahili civilization (*sensu* Yoffee 2005, 17) developed politically into competing city-states whose individual fortunes rose and fell through time because of the complex interplay of dynamic economic and political forces at the western edge of

the Indian Ocean and the eastern edge of the African continent (Pearson 1998; Chaudhuri 1985; Beaujard 2018). Wealth derived primarily from brokering the trade between these two great regions of what has been called the Indian Ocean (e.g. LaViolette 2008, 24) or Afro-Eurasian World System (Beaujard 2018).

As has been noted many times (for an excellent summary see Horton & Middleton 2000, 2), early archaeological work that focused on stone-walled towns (e.g. Fig. 8.5) and imported goods from across the Indian Ocean combined with colonial-era historiography and colonialist mindsets to suggest that the Swahili were an urban elite who colonized the East African coast from the Middle East, primarily Arabia, bringing with them Islam and its associated cultural refinements, and who then intermingled with indigenous Africans to create a Creole society. The Swahili themselves embraced this reconstruction of their origins because not only did it jell with their own historical traditions, but it also served to enhance their status with their English and earlier Omani and Portuguese colonial overlords (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Independence in the 1960s and 1970s gradually encouraged a revision of the consensus academic view of Swahili origins to one that emphasized indigenous African roots. Excavations at the town site of Shanga on Manda Island in the Lamu archipelago of Kenya, where Mark Horton (1996) traced

Figure 8.3. *Khami – restored elite stone walling (image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).*

Figure 8.4. *Danangombe – a later Rozvi capital (image courtesy of the Archaeology Division, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).*

Figure 8.5. *Kilwa – audience court of the Husuni Kubwa palace (image courtesy of Stephanie Wynne-Jones).*

the settlement's founding to several small, probably circular houses of perishable materials surrounding a well and dated to about AD 760, tipped the scales irrevocably in favour of an African origin (see also Horton 1986; Nurse & Spear 1985). He also discovered a small, probably timber-framed building at the site, also dating to the late eighth century, that he interpreted as a mosque, indicative of the early introduction of Islam to the East African coast (Horton 1996, 2018). Subsequent research, primarily by Tanzanian archaeologists (Chami 1998; Chami & Msemwa 1997; Juma 1996), demonstrated a longer, developmental sequence for settlement on the coast that involved some maritime trade with the Roman world.

Swahili settlements along the coast in the first millennium AD were mostly villages combining agriculture, the keeping of livestock, with some fishing and involvement in maritime trade. Some settlements, notably Manda in northern Kenya, Tumbe and Unguja Ukuu on Pemba and Zanzibar Islands respectively, Kilwa in southern Tanzania, and Chibuene in Mozambique, however, were more successful and grew in size and in the number of imported goods

by the late first millennium. Around AD 1000, a suite of major changes in settlement patterns, architecture, and ceramic traditions signalled a reorientation of Swahili society into one that has been characterized as maritime, cosmopolitan, urbanized, and Islamized (Fleisher et al. 2015). This society has endured to the present, albeit one that has survived the vicissitudes of Portuguese, Omani, and British interventions from the end of the fifteenth century onwards (Pearson 1998; Horton & Middleton 2000).

Bunyoro
Bunyoro, also known sometimes as the Bunyoro-Kitara or Kitara kingdom, was one of many pre-colonial states in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. First encountered by European explorers searching for the source of the Nile, the last independent *omukama* (king) of Bunyoro, Kabarega (variously spelled, including 'Kabaleega'), fought a fierce but unsuccessful guerrilla war against the British at the end of the nineteenth century that resulted in his exile to the Seychelles and the establishment of indirect British rule. A succession of *abakama* (plural of *omukama*) occupied the

throne during the colonial period, but the institution of kingship was abolished by the independent Ugandan government in 1967. However, it was reinstated in 1993, primarily as a cultural institution.

Wikipedia (2018) lists 24 kingdoms in the Great Lakes region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though some of these were small and often short-lived polities. The more substantial states included Buganda, Rwanda, Bunyoro, Nkore, and Burundi. Knowledge of the history of these states began with the collection of king-lists, each of which became longer with time as individual states sought to enhance their status with their colonial overlords by using British standards of worth (Henige 1974). Oral traditions of the history of Bunyoro began to be recorded early in the twentieth century (notably Fisher 1911), while the spread of literacy among the Banyoro eventually led to indigenous histories (notably Nyakatura 1973). These traditional histories divide the past into events associated with three successive dynasties, the last of which is the Bito, among whose rulers were Kabarega and the current *omukama*. Bito dynasty rulers presided over a state with three main social strata, the Bito elite, Bahuma nobles who specialized in cattle-keeping, and Bairu agricultural peasants. Capital sites were peripatetic, with each new *omukama* building a new capital supposedly laid out according to an established pattern that included several large buildings, all built of perishable materials (Roscoe 1923, 73–86). Wars of succession were common, which reinforced the importance of the kingship as the 'indispensable conditions of security and national well-being' (Beattie 1971, 111). The ancient kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara also plays a role in the history of political anthropology; the concept of the 'segmentary state' was proposed by Aidan Southall (1956) based on his ethnographic work among the Alur, Ugandan neighbours of Bunyoro. Casting around for other and perhaps better examples of this political system, Southall (1988, 81) pointed to the historical kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara as a 'very large, loose, segmentary state,' which he considered to have been 'held together by ritual suzerainty, with a centralized core' (Southall 1999, 33; see Robertshaw 2010).

Archaeological evidence for Bunyoro history has focused on two types of sites, earthworks and shrines, excavations at some of which, in concert with historical linguistic research and analysis of oral traditions, have led to attempted explanations of the development of the state and its subsequent history (e.g. Robertshaw 1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2003; Robertshaw & Taylor 2000; Schoenbrun 1998). It is, however, fair to state that the archaeology of the states of the Great Lakes remains woefully understudied.

State formation

While there is no a priori reason the same factors and processes should have been operative in state formation across Africa, Connah (2016) nevertheless attempted to identify some 'common denominators'. This exercise led him to conclude that control of highly productive land within the context of increasing population pressures was the 'crucial common factor underlying the emergence of African elites' (2016, 351; see also Johnson & Earle 1987). Added to this basic ingredient was external long-distance trade, itself an 'intensifier' of social changes that had begun with elite control of limited resources, such as copper, salt, iron, and ivory, which already circulated in 'extensive *internal* trading networks' (p.350, emphasis in original). A further important ingredient was 'religious ideology' that 'legitimized and reinforced' the social hierarchy (p.352). Connah himself bemoans this 'somewhat mechanistic' explanation for the origins of social complexity, remarking that 'surely the reality is more complex than that' (p.353).

The hypothesis of increasing population pressure and concomitant elite control of productive arable land is problematic for at least some African cases, particularly the states of the Great Lakes and perhaps also Great Zimbabwe and its antecedents. Control of internal trading networks and productive land are indeed mechanisms by which elites may seek power. However, the emergence of an elite and the formation of a state are not the same thing. Thus, Connah fails to distinguish between those factors that might lead to the establishment of a chiefdom and those that might bring a state into existence. Other than the brief mention of ideological legitimation, there is no discussion of how group fission would be prevented in the process of state formation. Moreover, exigencies of the archaeological data, particularly the paucity of regional site surveys, often preclude a firm conclusion about whether population pressure preceded or succeeded state formation. On present evidence, the latter seems likely, except perhaps in very circumscribed areas such as Nubia.

If population densities were low in the earlier stages of state formation, then early elites may still have competed for control of internal exchange networks, but would there also have been a shortage of fertile agricultural land over which competition might take place? This is a difficult question that brings into focus two competing stereotypes of African agriculture. On the one hand, Africa has often been portrayed as possessing poor, easily exhausted, and eroded soils on which rain falls erratically and often so heavily that essential nutrients are washed

away. On the other hand, Africa and particularly its tropical rainforests have been viewed as veritable Gardens of Eden where almost anything will grow. In this context, some scholars have drawn attention to the tremendous productivity of some introduced Southeast Asian crops, especially bananas. Reality probably lies between these two extremes; each part of Africa must be examined separately in terms of its agricultural potential. In the Great Lakes region of East Africa, fertile land appears to be plentiful and in Rwanda supports the highest rural population densities in modern Africa. Historical and ethnographic data reveal that many pre-colonial African chiefdoms and states had very low population densities whereas the opposite was true of acephalous societies (Shipton 1984; see also Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940). In the Great Lakes region in earlier periods it was not fertile land that was in short supply, at least in the centuries prior to state formation; it was agricultural labour (Robertshaw 1999a). Therefore, elites are likely to have pursued wealth-in-people rather than wealth-in-things (Vansina 1990, 251; Guyer 1993; Guyer & Belinga 1995; Nyerges 1992).

Control of internal exchange networks is also possible but the evidence for it is far from overwhelming, as perhaps one might have predicted based on Africa's diversity. Examples of control of such networks include the likelihood that Ile-Ife's emergence as a centre of kingship in West Africa was at least in part attributable to its near-monopoly in the production and distribution of beads (Ogundiran 2002, 434), while the monopoly of valuable local products, such as copper and salt, in the Kongo kingdom of central Africa to exchange for exotic items was critical for the acquisition and retention of power (Ekholm 1977). However, in both these cases the society in question was already enmeshed in external trade relations, including a trade in slaves, so control of internal trading networks may have been a product of the desire for external trade goods. Thus, contra Connah (2016, 350), external long-distance trade may have led to attempts at control of internal exchange networks rather than vice versa. Furthermore, Chirikure (2014, citing Mudenge 1974, 1988) has recently drawn attention to the fact that, by the time of Portuguese contact in the sixteenth century, the rulers of the Mutapa state, the successor to that of Great Zimbabwe, did not monopolize the trade with the coast that brought glass beads, cowrie shells, and cloth into the interior, though they did tax that trade, with glass beads being one acceptable form of payment. Under these circumstances, Chirikure (2014, 721) argues for the enduring importance of ancestors, cattle, and land as the bases of royal power. Thus, in summary, discussion of the control of land

and of exchange networks represents too narrow an analytical focus for understanding of state formation in tropical Africa. We are better served by looking at the individual case studies.

Great Zimbabwe

A fascinating, if sometimes acrimonious (e.g. Chirikure et al. 2016), debate has been waged recently over the explanation of state formation in what is often called southern Zambesia, a region comprising the modern state of Zimbabwe and adjacent parts of Botswana, South Africa, and Mozambique that includes Great Zimbabwe and all the sites that may have been incorporated into the Great Zimbabwe state and its antecedents. The model of state formation championed by Tom Huffman (e.g. 1986, 2000, 2009, 2010, 2015a, 2015b) argues that there was only one state at a time for much of the region's pre-European past, with a pristine state, with its capital at Mapungubwe (Fig. 8.6), eventually succeeded by that of Great Zimbabwe. The genesis of the Mapungubwe state could be traced to three major factors: (1) successful control of the accumulation and distribution of exotic trade goods, notably glass beads and probably cloth, acquired in exchange for gold and ivory, elephants being abundant in the Mapungubwe area in the centuries leading up to Mapungubwe's florescence in the thirteenth century; (2) population growth supported by extensive cultivation of fertile agricultural land in the vicinity of Mapungubwe during a period of higher rainfall; (3) rain-making and from it the emergence of sacred kingship that served to provide ideological legitimacy. In this model prestige goods are a more dependable form of wealth than cattle because cows are harder to look after than beads; thus, inequalities of wealth that may have originally been based on the size of one's cattle herd could be materialized and entrenched through the acquisition of prestige trade goods. It should, however, be noted that glass beads are found in the Shashe-Limpopo region, where Mapungubwe is located, from about the eighth century onwards, so Huffman is not arguing that glass beads alone beget states. The third component of the model, the emphasis on rain-making, derives from ethnographic data on the role of rain-making among south-eastern Bantu-speaking peoples, together with structuralist interpretations of their worldview and use of space, as reflected in settlement layouts that could, via ethnographic analogy, be read into the archaeological record of Mapungubwe and other sites. In this model there was a shift in this worldview, epitomized by the emergence of sacred kingship, when the leaders moved their homes (and graves and rain-making activities) to the hilltop at Mapungubwe

Figure 8.6. *Mapungubwe Hill (image courtesy of the Archaeology Division, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).*

away from both their cattle kraal and the houses of the commoners.

The alternative to the Huffman model is, as mentioned earlier, a more multi-pronged approach in terms of both the number of incipient complex societies in the early second millennium AD and their pathways to complexity. Those who champion this alternative do so based on both new and old archaeological data, as well as the anthropology and history of the Shona (the descendants of Great Zimbabwe's inhabitants) and upon 'our own worldview and lived experiences as Africans' (Chirikure et al. 2016, 76). In addition to resurrecting earlier views of state formation in the region, the new perspective also includes a critique of the applicability to southern Africa of the theory that control over the distribution of exotic, prestige goods was a form of economic control facilitating the emergence of differential wealth and power (Chirikure 2014; Moffett & Chirikure 2016).

New archaeological research, particularly at the site of Mapela (Chirikure et al. 2013, 2014) and in north-eastern Botswana (Van Waarden 2011), in combination with a re-examination of other sites suggests that 'Mapungubwe's hegemony amongst the ruined stone-walled sites has likely been exaggerated, suggesting that it is more likely that there were 'several semi-autonomous, autonomous or competing centres (Garlake 1978, 490)' (Moffett & Chirikure 2016, 346; see also Kim & Kusimba 2008; but see Huffman 2015a, 2015b for rebuttals of these claims and the evidence on which they are based). The source of the wealth of these emerging polities is most commonly mooted as having been cattle (e.g. Garlake 1978 for Great Zimbabwe itself), though agriculture has also been mentioned (e.g. Pikirayi 2001). Cattle certainly formed the basis of economic power in the Toutswe polity of eastern Botswana that emerged in the late first millennium AD (Denbow 1986; Denbow

et al. 2008). Gold and imported goods are considered to have been much less important.

Criticism of the prestige-goods theory is founded upon several lines of evidence. Historians of the Shona and of the Mutapa state that followed that of Great Zimbabwe have shown that the leaders of this and other polities did not monopolize imported goods nor did their capitals act as centres of redistribution of such goods (Mudenge 1974). Instead, itinerant traders bought and sold such goods wherever they could, leading polity rulers to levy taxes on the trade in the form of tribute, which could be paid in goods like glass beads but also in the form of grain. Tribute in the form of labour was probably more common and this would, of course, have been vital both to the construction of monumental dry stone-walling and perhaps to agricultural production. Ownership of exotic items was not restricted to elites (see Mudenge 1988; Bhila 1982). Rather than enhancing their status through the display of prestige goods, 'For their part, Manyika kings maintained their prestige by hospitality; they killed cattle and held beer-drinking parties…' (Bhila 1982, 14). Craft specialists and the goods they produced were also not controlled by rulers (Bhila 1982, 37–42), while gold mines were so dispersed that elite control would have been impossible (Swan 1994). However, these historical observations were made after the Portuguese had severely disrupted the trading networks connecting the interior with the eastern African coast (Newitt 2002). Thus, we must be cautious in attempting to project this historical reconstruction back in time to the florescence of Great Zimbabwe and its antecedents. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence provides some support for such an extrapolation: crafts, such as metal production, were not preferentially associated with major centres, while craft production at these centres seems to have been based in individual homesteads rather than centrally organized on a more industrial scale (Moffett & Chirikure 2016, 366). Exotic trade goods, particularly glass beads, are found in considerable quantities in commoner sites (e.g. Antonites 2014) and these beads were probably incorporated into clothing worn by both elites and commoners of all ages and sexes, as evidenced from burials, though it is certainly the case that some royal burials, notably at Mapungubwe, contained many thousands of beads (Chirikure 2014; Moffett & Chirikure 2016; cf. Huffman 2007, 2015).

In addition to the critique of the prestige-goods theory, Chirikure and colleagues (2016, 90–1) also take aim at the idea that the ritual aspect of royal authority at Great Zimbabwe was derived from the ruler's rain-making activities. Citing Mudenge's (1988) history of the later Mutapa state, they note that 'there was a clear separation of powers between chiefs who were political leaders and *mhondoro* [spirit mediums of deceased kings or chiefs] who presided over spiritual issues' (Chirikure et al. 2016, 90). These *mhondoro* did not always live at the royal capital and 'tend to be associated with the interests of particular houses/families involved in succession rivalries' (Mudenge 1988, 123), suggesting that they could act as a check on the power of the king and influence political rivalries. I return to the question of succession disputes and the role of ritual authorities later in this chapter.

The debates over the rise of states in southern Zambezia indicate that we tend to lack detailed archaeological data, particularly from regional surveys, to reach definitive answers. States may have arisen from a context of interacting peer polities (see Denbow et al. 2008 for a sense of these interactions). Within this framework, Chirikure and colleagues (2016; Moffett & Chirikure 2016) not only urge consideration of religion and ritual in this region in broader terms than rain-making, but also suggest that the basis of power and authority rested on ownership of land, itself derived from ancestral ties, ancestry more broadly, and individual entrepreneurship. All these factors were inextricably intertwined with the concept of wealth-in-people, a concept both developed and widely applied in tropical Africa, in part as an alternative to the common notion of wealth as the accumulation of material goods, and one that may explain why African kings have so little 'stuff' compared to their counterparts elsewhere. This concept has been applied previously to the Great Lakes kingdoms (see below; see also Stephens 2016 for a more nuanced discussion of 'wealth' and 'poverty' in Great Lakes Africa).

Swahili

Much energy has been expended on the question of whether these city-states were founded by foreigners (Arabs or Persians) or indigenes, a polarized and political debate in which protagonists often felt uncomfortable in occupying some more sensible middle ground (Robertshaw 1990; Horton & Chami 2018). Allied with this was a focus on excavations of the larger and presumably more glamorous stone-walled 'towns', with a concomitant neglect of village sites and regional settlement patterns that might have shed light on topics like population growth and agricultural potential. Things have changed over the last couple of decades with some valuable survey projects (e.g. Fleisher 2003, 2010; Helm 2000; Helm et al. 2012; Pawlowicz 2011, 2012; Wynne-Jones 2007) that permit some consideration of the place of towns within their regional context rather than simply thinking of them as urban outposts on the edge of the Indian Ocean, there simply to take

advantage of trading opportunities. These survey projects also served to direct attention away from discussion of the ethnic and linguistic identity of the first coastal settlers towards more processual concerns with the development of settlement hierarchies.

Although there are mostly ephemeral traces of Later Stone Age settlement by hunter-foragers in the coastal regions of East Africa, the advent of farming communities in about the late first millennium BC and early centuries AD may be said to have initiated the process of state formation. These communities combined subsistence activities with iron-working and probably engaged in widespread exchange networks, commonly perhaps in perishable goods that leave no archaeological traces, such as salt, leather, and cloth (Abungu & Mutoro 1993). Settlements were located on the coastal hinterland, with a few right on the coast that were always adjacent to protected beaches where small boats could be hauled out of the ocean (Horton & Middleton 2000, 43). They were also preferentially located on nutrient-rich soils (e.g. Pawlowicz 2012). Very rare sherds of exotic pottery and glass beads have been discovered at both the beach-adjacent and inland sites.

The locally made pottery on these early sites has clear historical ties to ceramics from the Great Lakes region and is commonly attributed to Bantu speakers (M'Mbogori 2015), a connection supported by the classification of ki-Swahili within the Bantu grouping (Nurse & Spear 1985). This early coastal pottery develops into a well-studied ceramic entity known as either 'Triangular Incised Ware' (TIW) or the 'Tana Tradition' (Chami 1994; see Chami 1998; Fleisher & Wynne-Jones 2011; and Horton & Chami 2018, 140 for discussion of nomenclature). Early Tana Tradition pottery, dated about AD 600–900, is found both at early 'stonetowns' on the coast and at farming settlements in the interior, thereby corroborating the indigenous roots of Swahili urbanism (Fleisher & Wynne-Jones 2011, 247). Distributed along the coast from northern Kenya to Mozambique, as well as on the Comoro Islands, and up to several hundred kilometres into the interior, the Tana Tradition tended to be viewed as a monolithic entity but recent analysis has demonstrated considerable variation that does not fall neatly into a geographical or chronological pattern and has been interpreted as evidence of 'a vast interaction sphere in which communities were most in contact with those nearest to them, while cognizant of a larger sphere that included them all' (Fleisher & Wynne-Jones 2011, 274). Beyond this, Fleisher & Wynne-Jones (2011) also note the presence of more vessels of bowl form at some larger coastal settlements that were involved in Indian Ocean trade, which they

suggest may be linked to 'nascent elites' and 'emerging notions of prestige' (ibid., 275).

Although there is a paucity of good archaeological data, scholars assume slow population growth during the late first millennium AD and look to growth in trade as the foundation for the development of social complexity (e.g. Kusimba 1999, 101; Horton & Middleton 2000, 27; Horton & Chami 2018). Kusimba (1999, 201–3) emphasizes interregional and international trade in iron as a catalyst for this development, but the scale of iron production at Tana Tradition sites and its importance as an African export in the Indian Ocean trade may have been exaggerated (Killick 2009). More widely embraced is the idea that towns developed along the coast, as entrepots for the Indian Ocean trade that took advantage of their favourable locations within the Indian Ocean trading system and their ability to supply the main African products that trade coveted, namely gold, ivory, slaves, and mangrove poles for construction in the Middle East (Horton & Middleton 2000, 99). Within this framework, the early adoption of Islam at the coast by perhaps only small numbers of converts, judging by the size of the early mosques at Shanga (Horton 1996, 2018), is viewed both as an entrepreneurial adaptation to partake in the religion that facilitated Indian Ocean trade and a means to avoid the risk of enslavement, since Islam forbade the enslavement of believers (Horton & Middleton 2000, 51). As the more successful of these entrepots grew, it is assumed that the countryside filled in with settlers and a settlement hierarchy was established to facilitate trade with the interior and a supply of food to the coastal towns (Kusimba 1999, 101). Along the coast itself, competition between towns for export products from the interior that would supply the transoceanic trade led to independent city-states, within a wider Swahili civilization that developed in the first half of the second millennium (e.g. Wright 1993).

Recent research has predictably shown that this model assumes too much homogeneity along the 2000 miles or so of the Swahili coast. Instead, different parts of the coast may have undergone different trajectories regarding the establishment of towns and their relationship to regional settlement patterns. The Kenyan coast may have seen the development of integrated settlement and economic hierarchies connecting the coast with the hinterland (Kusimba & Kusimba 2005; Kusimba et al. 2013; Shipton et al. 2013). However, the demand for African slaves in the Middle East in the late first millennium, at least until the Zanj Revolt in Iraq in AD 868 (Horton & Middleton 2000, 75), indicates that coast-hinterland relations may have been varied and not always peaceful. Further south, on the island of Pemba, the establishment of towns was

the result of the depopulation of the countryside in the eleventh century, a process termed 'synoecism' (Fleisher 2010). The stimulus for this process may have been defence, but Fleisher (2010) argues for religion, noting an 'enormous investment in religious architecture' at the new town of Chwaka. Thus, people moved into towns to enjoy a fulfilling religious life that involved community worship at a Friday mosque, public baths, and permanent markets. This emphasis on the importance of Islam and Islamic ritual practice has also been seen more generally as crucial to the development of stonetowns (Wright 1993, 671–2). Further south again, Kilwa (Fig. 8.7) became perhaps the richest port-city in the Swahili world, but during the period of its growth, the regional settlement pattern remained basically unchanged and unintegrated (Wynne-Jones 2007). Finally, it should be noted that state formation did not characterize the entire Swahili coast: in the Mikindani region of southern Tanzania near the Mozambican border, there was no settlement hierarchy, no concentration of population along the coast itself, and very few imported goods prior to the eighteenth century (Pawlowicz 2012).

Looking ahead to the discussion of fragility within the Swahili civilization, it may be noted that AD 1000 or thereabouts marks a major disjunction in Swahili history with some larger settlements flourishing as others were abandoned. This also marks the end of the Tana ceramic tradition that tied the coast firmly to the hinterland. From a review of the evidence, Fleisher and colleagues (2015) posit that the first centuries of the second millennium AD was the period when the Swahili became 'maritime', an idea that encompasses a new Swahili worldview and the development of 'cosmopolitanism' as a defining characteristic of Swahili society (LaViolette 2008; Fleisher et al. 2015, 108).

Bunyoro

The explanation of state formation in Bunyoro involves the successful integration of three types of evidence: archaeology, historical linguistics, and oral traditions. In addition (and this may be true of all regions

Figure 8.7. *Kilwa – the Great Mosque (image courtesy of Stephanie Wynne-Jones).*

of the world), we must be sensitive to the dangers of teleology; we know much about the Nyoro state in the nineteenth century, so it is tempting to develop a just-so story to link farming settlements of the late first millennium AD to that later kingdom in a seamless, but perhaps fictitious, narrative.

To the best of my knowledge I may be the only archaeologist in recent years to have proposed narratives of state formation in Bunyoro, though this is not to deny or belittle the important contributions to the archaeology of the region made by several colleagues (e.g. Posnansky 1966, 1969; Sutton 1993; Reid 1991, 1996; Connah 1991). My narratives began with a relatively straightforward processual model (Robertshaw 1994) that was modified and expanded to discuss gender issues (Robertshaw 1999), then examined within the context of climatic and environmental changes (Robertshaw & Taylor 2000), and then somewhat shoehorned into Blanton et al.'s (1996) dual-processual model (Robertshaw 2003). Recently, in a journal article (Robertshaw 2010), book chapter (Robertshaw 2016) and a couple of conference papers, I have stepped away from processual accounts to emphasize the roles of creative power, ritual, and healing networks in the development and history of the Nyoro state. In this endeavour I have relied heavily on the work of historians, notably David Schoenbrun (1998, 2006) and Neil Kodesh (2008, 2010), as well as on colonial ethnographies (Beattie 1971; Roscoe 1923). A summary of my current view of state formation follows.

Much of Bunyoro seems to have been sparsely settled by farming communities prior to about AD 1000, with much of the region under forest cover. Pioneering farmers in this 'internal African frontier' (Kopytoff 1987) probably comprised small, lineage-based communities who, I surmise, would have been anxious to attract followers to assist in clearing forest for cultivation, to manage their small herds of livestock, particularly cattle, to provide craft specializations, such as iron-working, and for defence. Women, as farmers and as reproducers of labour, would have been needed as much as men. In Buganda, adjacent to Bunyoro, Neil Kodesh has examined the early history of clanship, roughly around the early second millennium AD, to reveal 'how the domains of public healing and politics were intimately entwined in practical ways' (Kodesh 2008, 200; see also Kodesh 2010). The basis for this in early history was the existence of shrines, located on each clan's primary estate, where ancestors were remembered and individuals sought help with their personal problems, such as infertility and poverty. Gatherings at these sites of relatively egalitarian clan members '…drew upon the idea that the public recognition of common spiritual entities generated the conditions for collective prosperity' while the 'dispersed shrines constituted ritual networks that shaped the framework within which communities sought their collective health' (Kodesh 2008, 204). Analysis of the clan histories also indicates that gatherings at shrines brought together not only people but also knowledge, assembling people with varied skills into communities who could thereby improve a community's economic and spiritual well-being (ibid., p.208). Thus, these shrines, tied to ancestral spirits, served as centres where local leaders could assemble the wealth-in-people that marks many successful African polities (Guyer & Belinga 1995). These community networks of public health and healing could also have served as defensive networks in the face of raiding, most likely aimed at the capture of cattle and women (Robertshaw 1999a). However, these shrines and the spirits they served were territorially based for they were situated on the lands of the ancestors, and the leaders of these communities drew their authority from claiming their primacy on the land and, therefore, a direct link to the ancestral spirits. Thus, opportunities for the expansion of political power, founded upon these communities, was very limited since it was tied to specific clan lands (Schoenbrun 2006, 1424, 1426). This account, based on work in Buganda, applies almost equally well to Bunyoro. As Schoenbrun (2006, 1430) remarked, 'the era of ancient state-building had opened with public healing central to its unfolding.'

A new era was ushered in when territorial spirits were transformed into portable spirits capable of caring for the health of people over much larger regions by embracing spirit-possession. Of course, the process of state formation was far from straightforward; while spirits and their mediums were themselves powerful, they had to cope with changing climatic and economic contexts. The portability of these spirits, linked by kinship and known as Cwezi, and their decoupling from a territorial identity allowed successful leaders, who combined ritual, political, economic, and perhaps military skills, to construct larger, multi-clan polities. Several of the Cwezi spirits, despite the portability of their cults, are linked with shrines, identified in oral traditions, at each of which there was a resident spirit-medium. Excavations at two of these shrine sites have revealed occupation dating back to about AD 1300, though traces of earlier occupation suggest that their thirteenth- to fourteenth-century inhabitants selected sites with deeper roots, perhaps identified with territorial ancestral ghosts (Robertshaw 1994). It is tempting then, albeit speculative, to correlate these thirteenth- to fourteenth-century occupations as the centres of two of these nascent polities. This coincides broadly also with a period of somewhat drier climate.

The later construction of earthworks at some locations in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries (Robertshaw 2001, 2002) probably indicates competition between these polities.

Whether these Cwezi polities can be labelled 'states' is moot, though an earlier generation of historians interpreted the Cwezi oral traditions as evidence of a vast, short-lived, and 'loosely organized empire' (Nyakatura 1947; Oliver 1953; quote from Ogot 1984, 503–4). Nevertheless, the sixteenth century witnessed the collapse of the Cwezi polities and the immigration of a new dynasty of rulers who established a new kingdom (Bunyoro) which they ruled until the arrival of the British near the close of the nineteenth century (Schoenbrun 2013).

Healing networks, portable spirits, ancestral ghosts, etc. represent an unusual array of factors responsible for state formation, at least when viewed by archaeologists. Taken together they serve to emphasize the importance of creative power in state formation rather than the instrumental power with which most archaeologists of a Western bent feel far more comfortable (Robertshaw 2010). Earlier archaeologists in search of an explanation for state formation in this region tended to latch onto the accumulation of wealth in cattle and control of prime grazing lands (e.g. Posnansky 1966; Sutton 1993), as well as control over regional trading networks, particularly in salt (Connah 1987, 225–6), ideas that were materialist and grounded in ethnography, but not well supported by the evidence (Robertshaw 2003, 152–3). These earlier explanations also ignored agency and ideology and overlooked variation in polity scale and complexity. While marrying the narrative of creative power to the archaeological evidence from Bunyoro may be difficult, despite the existence of shrine sites and later earthworks, at least it offers a novel perspective. In applying the dual-processual model to this evidence, I argued that the harnessing of creative power early in the process of state formation was one of several exclusionary (network) strategies employed by emergent elites, the others being control over the production and distribution of iron and ivory, and participation in a prestige-goods network (Robertshaw 2003, 160). However, in retrospect, evidence for elite control over iron and ivory is slim, while the prestige goods, glass beads in this case, are not only rare but found in the burials of children and adolescents as well as those of adults. Even if we set aside the recent critique of the applicability of the prestige-goods model to Africa (Moffett & Chirikure 2016), we still need to understand the cultural context of these goods in Bunyoro. If the case for exclusionary power strategies is weak in Bunyoro, the succeeding corporate power strategies seem better supported by the archaeological evidence of earthworks, involving large labour inputs supported by elite control of surplus agricultural production (Robertshaw 2003, 161).

Fragile African states

Norm Yoffee (2015) and James Scott (2017) have recently drawn attention to the vulnerability and fragility of ancient states, the theme of this volume and the workshop from which it stemmed, drawing their examples predominantly from Asia. Looking south of the Sahara most states seem to have barely survived for longer than a couple of centuries, during which turbulent times were common, particularly during interregna. Looking at two of our examples, Zimbabwe and Bunyoro, we can discern what may have been almost constant tension between the need for manpower (see also Scott 2017, 203) and womanpower (for reproduction) and the inherent risks (disease, 'ecocide', 'politicide') that came with population aggregation, making these states ripe for 'disassembly' (Scott 2017, Chapter 6). Tension also probably existed between state-making strategies for population growth that, on the one hand, emphasized such things as healing networks, wealth-in-people, and voluntary aggregation, and those, on the other hand, that resorted to raiding and slavery. It is tempting, but perhaps fallacious, to assume that the latter, heavy-handed methods were a later development when polity population size had reached some critical threshold.

Great Zimbabwe
Continuing the previous paragraph's emphasis on population size and its effects, estimates of the population of what is sometimes referred to as the city of Great Zimbabwe have varied. While Garlake (1973) estimated the population as between 1000 and 2500, Huffman (1986, 323), using different assumptions and more site survey data, suggested that at its peak Great Zimbabwe may have been a city of at least 18,000 people, most of whom lived outside the elite, stone-walled areas. In the media and textbooks, this figure is commonly rounded up to 20,000. However, a new study, using multiple lines of evidence including newer fieldwork at the site, concludes that at its peak (Period IV: AD 1200–1700), Great Zimbabwe may have been home to as few as 228 or as many as 2009 people (Chirikure et al. 2017a), numbers that certainly give pause to the notion that this was a city. The history of stone-walling at Great Zimbabwe spans almost a thousand years so the new, lower population estimates make the settlement's sustainability more comprehensible.

A small population at Great Zimbabwe may also be relevant to discussion over the settlement's history in terms of the dating and functions of different parts of the site. Huffman developed a cognitive model of Great Zimbabwe at its peak that used ethnography, history, and the available archaeological evidence to argue that the core, stone-walled areas of the settlement were laid out according to structuralist principles that reflected and reinforced the worldviews of its inhabitants. Different parts of the site were assigned different functions: for example, the king's residential area (Fig. 8.8), the court, the residences of royal wives, the treasury, and, most controversially, the hypothesis that the Great Enclosure served as an initiation school for girls (Huffman 1996). While cognizant of Great Zimbabwe's long history, this model treated the site synchronically. As readers will have realized by now, that which Huffman has built is ripe for reinterpretation by Chirikure and colleagues, though it should be said that they were not the first to criticize the structuralist interpretation of Great Zimbabwe (see Beach 1998 and commentators thereon). In place of the synchronic model, Chirikure & Pikirayi (2008; Pikirayi & Chirikure 2011; cf. Huffman 2010) argued that different areas of the site, notably the hill (or 'acropolis' as it used to be known) and the Great Enclosure were the locations of the residences of successive kings. They also argued, reliant heavily on excavations in one part of the site (Collett et al. 1992), that Great Zimbabwe was not almost completely abandoned in the mid-fifteenth century, when Khami became the capital of the later Rozvi state and the Mutapa state was founded to the north, but that it continued to be a major centre.

If Great Zimbabwe itself held far fewer people than previously surmised, what about the state of which it was the capital? We are not only a long way from having any reliable estimates of the state's population, but we also may question previous assumptions of the

Figure 8.8. *Great Zimbabwe – the Great Enclosure viewed from a royal residential area on the hilltop formerly known as the 'Acropolis'. The red deposits in the foreground derive from a series of elite structures excavated by the Public Works Department in 1915 to release the pressure from 'African' houses on what was at that time regarded as the 'Phoenician' stone walls (image courtesy of the Archaeology Division, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).*

state's geographical extent. While Great Zimbabwe is the largest archaeological site in the modern country that shares its name and stood perhaps at the apex of a four- or five-level site-size hierarchy, there are more than 150 other elite stone-walled centres in the region (Chirikure et al. 2012). Also, in the sixteenth century, following the decline of the Great Zimbabwe state and Portuguese contact, there were ten 'major Shona kingdoms' (Mudenge 1988, Map 3), as well as numerous smaller polities. From an archaeological perspective, AMS dating often indicates the contemporaneity of many of these sites, but the historical reality, as revealed by contemporary Portuguese accounts, oral traditions, and Shona ethnography, was probably much more complicated. Each new ruler of a polity established a new capital, different from that of his predecessor. This was often his existing residence, so a settlement could have a long history during which it may have served as a capital on one or more occasions. Royal succession was also complicated; Mudenge (1988, 81) terms it 'collateral adelphic succession', but this masks a reality in which warfare usually determined the outcome. At least 16 of 28 successions in the Mutapa state between 1692 and 1902 involved military force (Mudenge 1988, 79; see also Bhila 1982, 20, who recounts that all eight Rozvi rulers, spanning a period of less than a century, were killed in internal political upheavals), with the average length of reign being about 14 years (Chirikure et al. 2012, 365). It may also be borne in mind that, as mentioned earlier, the settlements of royal spirit mediums (*mhondoro*) represented additional, alternative centres of power (Mudenge 1988, 123; Chirikure et al. 2016, 90; Chirikure et al. 2017b, 4). Thus, from about 1450 onwards, with the establishment of the successor states to Great Zimbabwe, there were numerous peer polities, characterized by shifting capital sites, as well as shifting cattle camps (Lane 2004, 809, cited by Chirikure et al. 2012, 365) since the royal herds were usually too large to be kept at the capital (Mudenge 1988, 162).

Questions remain, however, about whether the post-1450 pattern of numerous polities with shifting centres can be imposed on earlier times. In particular, the early sixteenth-century disruptions caused by the arrival of the Portuguese along the coast, including their sack of Kilwa in 1505 (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 80–104), and their botched efforts to seize all facets of the gold trade may have destabilized the political and economic order, undercutting possible elite control of gold mining and the prestige-goods trade that it financed. Nevertheless, Chirikure et al. (2012, 365–6) cite evidence from much later periods in other parts of southern Africa to bolster their general case for short-lived peripatetic capitals. While, the very small size of many of the 150 plus stone-walled

centres (Killick, pers. comm.) also casts a shadow over their identification as possible capitals, the new, much smaller estimate of Great Zimbabwe's population provides a scalar context that would seem to allow for such small capitals.

Competition, as well as diplomacy and alliances, between numerous peer polities in the centuries following the demise of Great Zimbabwe's state raises questions about the availability of military forces and the economic foundations of these polities. Historical sources indicate that states did not possess standing armies but mobilized the peasantry in the event of emergency or a decision to take the offensive. A Mutapa ruler could mobilize 3000–5000 warriors within 24 hours, though peasants were probably very reluctant to leave their agricultural labours during the rainy season. Any campaign also had to be short-lived because of the difficulty of keeping the troops fed (Mudenge 1988, 137, 141). Booty in the form of livestock and women was a strong incentive for military service (ibid., 142).

In addition to succession disputes and external threats, rulers were also concerned with the economic foundations of their polities. Agriculture and pastoralism were the mainstays of the economy. Striking here is the importance of corvée labour for agriculture, with peasants spending 7 out of every 30 days cultivating the fields of their kings, provincial governors, chiefs or sub-chiefs (Mudenge 1988, 19, 164). Tribute, particularly from those living far from the capital, was also paid in cattle, grain, gold, iron hoes, slaves, and ivory (ibid, 19). The capital was economically supported by its hinterlands, in part perhaps because capitals were not necessarily sited with agriculture as the first consideration but rather with a view to the control of grazing lands, goldfields or trade routes (ibid., 26-7). Mudenge (1988, 78) even suggests that the supply of drinking water constrained the population size of the capital. Thus, maintenance of the food and water supply for the capital, as well as conscripting labour for agriculture and defence, including the building of the monumental stone walling, must have been an ongoing challenge for the king and his ministers.

With such a high demand for labour and tribute, vigilance was needed to avert or suppress revolts and defection, i.e. voting with one's feet. Loyalty could be bought with booty and gifts of glass beads and cloth (Mudenge 1988, 142, 186). Loyalty, however, was not simply an economic transaction; shared language, identity, and religious beliefs served to integrate each polity, though kinship may have been particularly important. Royal polygamy – kings commonly had hundreds of wives – 'was primarily designed to foster loyalty' (Mudenge 1988, 110), though the flip side of this was the problem of numerous contenders for the

throne. A ruler also chose his own council of advisors, though with some offices prescribed as the prerogative of particular families (ibid., 85). If nothing else, a successful ruler had to be an entrepreneurial politician.

If Great Zimbabwe was the capital of a large state, that state was at its zenith for less than two centuries. The successor states were smaller; the Mutapa state contracted significantly in each century of its existence (Mudenge 1988, 76). Individually the states of southern Zambesia, from the late first millennium to well after Portuguese contact at the end of the fifteenth century, were, it seems, often small and fragile, albeit with exceptions like that of Great Zimbabwe. Collectively the statecraft that pitted those peer polities against each other lasted for about a millennium, a notable case of resilience.

Swahili

The Swahili civilization of the early to mid-second millennium AD was characterized by 'maritimity' (Fleisher et al. 2015), strong cultural, cosmological, and economic ties to the Indian Ocean, and 'cosmopolitanism' (LaViolette 2008), two overarching traits that both defined the Swahili and differentiated them from their inland African neighbours. Both traits were materialized in the 'stonetowns' (Fig. 8.9) that developed where natural harbours enticed traders to come ashore.[2] Here were built port facilities, mosques, and the stone-houses of the *waungwana* ('patricians'), which served as a visual guarantee of the creditworthiness of their owners and as accommodations for visiting international traders.[3] Forms of dress and the display of exotic goods, such as Chinese porcelain in houses and on pillar tombs, reinforced this cosmopolitan Swahili worldview. Rice, as well as coconuts, both Asian imports, began to be grown at the coast and rice became the staple grain of the elite, served in imported vessels during feasts (Walshaw 2005; Fleisher 2010).

When we turn our attention to the resilience and fragility of the Swahili city-states, we can look first at

Figure 8.9. *Gedi on the Kenyan coast (image courtesy of Michal Golos).*

151

competition between the city-states and second at the internal politics of the stonetowns. Relatively little is known about the military capabilities of the city-states, but they appear to have been generally weak, with the inhabitants of the stonetowns reliant upon their hinterland counterparts for defensive support (Horton & Middleton 2000, 177). Instead, my reading of secondary sources suggests that Swahili city-states engaged, like good Americans, in competitive, free-market capitalism. City-states competed, on the whole peacefully it would appear, to host foreign traders and for access to the routes, markets, and goods of the African interior (Wright 1993). Thus, 'entrepreneurial activity was encouraged and, in fact, became the cornerstone of political authority' (Kusimba 1999, 134). A Swahili proverb expresses this a little differently: '*Biashara ni vita*' – 'Trade is war' (Horton & Middleton 2000, 106). The resilience of the trading system was probably sustained by the fact that much of the commerce was rooted in individual partnerships and patron-client relationships, so that if one merchant failed, another succeeded. Fragility lay, as elsewhere in world systems, in the perturbations of foreign and inland markets that Swahili merchants could not control. It was perturbations in such things as the prices of gold and ivory and the availability and cost of imports, themselves often tied to political upheavals thousands of miles away, that might signal a change in the economic fortunes of individual city-states.

Within city-states resilience and fragility were bound up with governance and relations with adjacent commoner towns and villages that supplied subsistence and other necessities to the stonetowns of the patrician traders (Fleisher 2018). There was no single political system shared by all the city-states prior to European contact, but all seem to have been characterized by a complex interplay of internal ranking and binary systems of social and political order. Our knowledge of these systems is constrained by the available evidence – a mixture of ethnography, Portuguese documents, the accounts of occasional Muslim travellers such as Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century, and Swahili chronicles that were often as much propaganda as history. As parsed by Horton & Middleton (2000), it seems that many but not all towns had kings and occasional queens, who 'rarely if ever reigned over more than a single town' (ibid., 157) and whose political power and authority tended to be weak (see also Prestholdt 2018, 519). Their functions seem to have been primarily ritual and spiritual, as well as ceremonial. They were 'essentially African kings' (ibid.), not Islamic sultans. This African quality of kingship, in Horton & Middleton's view, with its emphasis on ritual and ancestor veneration served as a bridge in

relations between the stonetowns and neighbouring hinterland groups that were more important where the stonetowns were located on the mainland, rather than islands, and thus prone to attacks.

However, it would be a mistake to focus too narrowly on the notion of 'African kings' because some rulers were indeed Islamic sultans, as in the case of the rulers of the towns of Mogadishu and Kilwa visited by the great world traveller, Ibn Battuta, in 1331, who noted their piety and generosity (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 27–32). Many of these rulers traced their lineages back to a merchant ancestor (Pearson 1998, 43). Moreover, beneath or instead of kings in the political hierarchy of each city-state was a council of elders, commonly comprised of the heads of the patrician lineages (Prestholdt 2018, 519). Patricians, who were an exclusive minority in the city-states, were the cosmopolitan traders whose economic power was masked by their moral superiority, itself founded upon their urbanity, adherence to Islamic tenets, perceived Arabian origins, knowledge, and purity of behaviour (Horton & Middleton 2000). In some city-states there were numerous public offices held by patricians, elevation to which required the wealth to sponsor large public feasts (ibid., 168). Beneath the patricians were a host of commoners, from specialist craftsmen down to slaves. This strongly hierarchical system was balanced by binary oppositions that, in Horton & Middleton's (2000, 130) estimation promoted unity by drawing attention to the equality of those in either half of the binary system and often by the regular rotation of power between the halves. Towns were divided into spatially and socially separated moieties who fought each other in ritualized contests, nowadays often soccer matches, on formal occasions. The moieties were often crosscut by other heterarchical divisions; for example, in Lamu town in northern Kenya, the patricians were divided into two 'demes', members of each of which lived in both moieties. Demes took turns to choose a town leader to serve a four-year term (ibid., 159).

The success of these Swahili hierarchical and heterarchical modes of organization can perhaps be measured by the longevity of the city-states, some lasting half a millennium or more, during which time they were characterized by complex histories. Ruling dynasties were sometimes replaced either violently or when they died out and patrician families might fall on hard times, but states endured. If they fell into irredeemable decline, with the eventual abandonment of the stonetown, the currents of international trade may have been the ultimate cause, though warfare between city-states in a region in the context of declining trade may have been a proximate cause, as might

local environmental changes (Lane & Breen 2018). In the case of Shanga, conquest by the rival city-state of Pate during an economic boom has been mooted as one of two possible causes for Shanga's abandonment, the other being failure of the supply of freshwater (Horton 1996, 427–8).

Bunyoro

Earlier in this paper I argued that healing networks and creative power were key ingredients in the rise of the Bunyoro kingdom because they provided the means for leaders to attract followers, both men and women, whose labour and reproductive capabilities were needed to carve out and sustain polities in wet tropical Africa. The need for labour was constant throughout the history of the kingdom, though as Bunyoro and neighbouring kingdoms like Buganda grew in size and in their degree of centralization, warfare and raiding, mostly for cattle and women, often took the place of attempts to attract followers by more peaceful means. Kabarega, the king who fought the British at the end of the nineteenth century, earlier established a standing army with companies stationed throughout the kingdom, often under the leadership of foreign mercenaries, that engaged in plunder and expanded the kingdom through conquest (Steinhart 1977, 21–2). However, the nineteenth-century kingdom probably differed significantly from that of earlier times because of newfound wealth in the king's hands derived from his control of the large-scale export of slaves and ivory, external markets for which were booming during this period (Robertshaw 2016).

Earlier and perhaps less gifted *abakama* (kings) than Kabaraga had to negotiate a more delicate game with their subjects. Some of our knowledge of this is derived from oral traditions and historical linguistics but it is primarily based on extrapolation from ethnography and thus needs to be treated cautiously. It seems that the Bito dynasty, of which Kabarega was the most illustrious member, arrived as a group of intruders into Bunyoro in the sixteenth century following the country's devastation by drought-induced famine. However, this was not simply a conquest because it also involved a negotiation with pre-existing centres of creative power and a new commitment to a separation of powers between spirit-mediums and royal authority (Schoenbrun 2013). The presence of substantial earthworks at some sites indicates that there may also have been warfare, though an oral tradition recounting the slaying of a ruler of one of these earthworks by his disgruntled peasantry suggests internal strife rather than conquest, perhaps in the period preceding the arrival of the Bito (Robertshaw 2001, 2002).

Once settled in Bunyoro, Bito rulers had not only to defend the realm against neighbouring polities but also were required to satisfy their own needs for labour and tribute without entirely alienating a pastoral nobility and an agricultural peasantry who could choose to vote with their feet (Roscoe 1923, 9) or join forces with one of Bunyoro's enemies or a renegade prince of the kingdom. Kings then maintained their balancing act in numerous ways, as is evident, for example, at the coronation ceremonies where the king was both admonished by his subjects to rule justly but also handed artefacts symbolizing coercion, as when he struck a smith's hammer on an anvil to demonstrate that he was both the head of all the blacksmiths and himself like a hammer (Beattie 1971, 112; KW 1937, 296). The king was not divine, but he maintained a state of ritual purity, involving both pastoral and agricultural rites, because his personage symbolized the state (Roscoe 1923).

The king assembled loyal followers at the capital by appointing numerous office holders, many of whose offices belonged in some sense to individual clans (Beattie 1971, 124–5). Moreover, the king was the source of all political authority in the kingdom which he delegated to provincial chiefs and other officials (ibid., 147). Included in this delegation of political authority was ritual potency (ibid., 117–8). The king also regularly toured the country, both collecting tribute and providing feasts. During these tours, he also frequently availed himself of the opportunity to acquire 'wives'. Although he never officially married, a king had innumerable wives; Kabarega is reputed to have fathered 140 children (ibid., 143). Thus, the king bound his subjects to himself in various ways. However, there were a few areas within his kingdom that the king rarely, if ever, visited. These were religious centres affiliated to the ancient Cwezi cults and they seem to have served as tolerated nodes of resistance to state power, outlets perhaps for the safe exercise of disaffection that the state could monitor with relative ease (Robertshaw 2010).

Loyalty to the king came with a price: the payment of tribute – food, beer, ivory, iron, animals, and labour. Royal tax collectors also took the king's due at every market. Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that the term for 'government' in Bunyoro incorporates the idea of 'oppressive weight'. Yet, the desire of the populace to exert its autonomy by fleeing the state and its demands was offset by the fact that the state provided security, not only militarily but also in terms of economic security, notably famine relief (Doyle 2006, 31–2). Indeed, the famed historian, Jan Vansina (1990, 232), has argued that this tension between the populace's desire for autonomy and their need for

state-sponsored security lies at the heart of all politics in equatorial Africa (see also Doyle 2006, 15). The populace was reminded of the value of this security with each interregnum because bloody succession wars were the norm.

Success in maintenance of the loyalty of the king's subjects, while also extracting tribute and their help in defending the realm, may have presented another challenge: how to feed those who congregated at the capital. Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) was the staple grain and its importance is reflected in rituals when the king was required to drink millet-beer rather than milk (Roscoe 1923, 107–12); there were also royal daily ceremonies involving cattle and milking. Famines were frequent in Bunyoro (Robertshaw et al. 2004) despite perhaps relatively low population densities. Moreover, grain stores were often looted or destroyed during wars. Nevertheless, one of the expectations imposed on the king by his subjects was the provision of famine relief, so the acquisition of adequate food supplies must have been a continual goal. Each king constructed a new capital on his accession, sited on a flat hilltop with adequate supplies of water for both people and cattle. He could also move his capital during his reign on the advice of a 'medicine-man'. Most of the royal cattle herds were dispersed in prime grazing areas often several days distant from the capital. The king also frequently travelled around his kingdom collecting tribute in various forms, including grain (Roscoe 1923). All these observations suggest that every opportunity was taken to mitigate demands upon the capital's food supply.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored three precolonial African states, chosen because I was somewhat familiar with their archaeology and history. They were not chosen as representative of particular types of states nor do they encompass, by any means, the range of variation present among African states. At the outset I did not regard them as either particularly fragile or stable complex societies. Now, almost at the end of the chapter, we may consider their similarities and differences as they relate to the larger project of this volume. First, however, some remarks on the historical context of these three states as it pertains to the quality of the information presented above. In every case, I have made extensive use of historical and ethnographic evidence which I and others have projected further back into the past to allow integration with archaeological data. This is potentially problematic because in each case the historical and ethnographic evidence was collected after European contact disrupted any

status quo that may have been in existence. Thus, for example, in Bunyoro the oral traditions that have been central to the reconstruction of the kingdom's history were recorded and interpreted by historians after the forces of the last independent ruler, Kabarega, were defeated by the British when the kingdom was coming to terms with both its new colonial overlords and its diminished status vis-à-vis the neighbouring kingdom of Buganda. Similarly, we need to be cautious about assuming that the apparent lack of elite control of prestige goods in the Mutapa and later states of Zambesia can be extrapolated to earlier times, given that the disruptions to international trade caused by Portuguese interventions at the turn of the sixteenth century may have undermined earlier trading patterns and regulations.

Both similarities and differences exist between Great Zimbabwe, the Swahili and Bunyoro states. From the perspective of state formation, it is easy to point to the fact that the prosperity of both Great Zimbabwe and the Swahili city-states was intimately connected to the Indian Ocean world system, whereas Bunyoro developed in relative isolation from this trading system. Bunyoro's state arose from complex negotiations interweaving economic, demographic, religious, and environmental factors. Nevertheless, similarities existed between Great Zimbabwe and its successor states on the one hand and Bunyoro on the other. Crucial to their success was not so much access to prime agricultural land, but their ability to accumulate wealth-in-people, a project for which creative power was more frequently exercised than instrumental power. Once established, these states engaged in raiding and warfare to acquire both people and cattle. The people acquired by force may have started life in their new societies as slaves, but there were paths to integration (see Robertshaw & Duncan 2008). Kings took numerous wives and established political and ritual offices at their courts that provided different families and clans with a stake in the states' success. However, religion also offered checks, albeit mild, on state power in the form of the independent spirit-mediums (*mhondoro*) of Zimbabwe and the Cwezi cult centres of Bunyoro. Wars of succession were frequent, and the most successful leaders were clearly highly entrepreneurial, navigating threats from numerous competing peer-polities while maintaining order at home. Individual polities were often small and fragile but the larger system in which they operated was resilient.

At first glance, the Swahili city-states seem very different from the states of the Great Lakes and southern Zambezia. Indeed, literacy, adherence to a world religion, and the overarching economic importance of

Indian Ocean trade do clearly demarcate the Swahili city-states from the inland polities of Great Zimbabwe and pre-colonial Bunyoro. Nevertheless, we can also point to similarities, such as the complex and often fragile nature of political power, the importance of ancestors in legitimizing status, and the dependency on hinterland connections to avert the risk of 'disassembly' (Scott 2017, Chapter 6).

Each of my case studies also has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the concept of fragility explored in the introductory chapter and to demonstrate its explanatory potential. To give but one example from each region, the importance and long duration of healing networks, aligned to the harnessing of creative power, indicates that the people of Bunyoro and the Great Lakes region were themselves acutely aware of the fragilities of the social, political, economic, epidemiological, and environmental systems in which they were enmeshed. 'Fragility' is thus not simply an etic approach to understanding the past, but a concept that was at the core of the worldviews of the ancient people we study. In the case of Great Zimbabwe, the focus on fragility helps to orient our perception away from the grand narrative of monumentality and endurance materialized in the walls of the Great Enclosure and towards the messy and fascinating details of how all the actors involved in the construction of those walls tried to negotiate their varied competing and occasionally consensual ambitions. One lesson perhaps from the Swahili case is that fragility is present at various geographic and social scales, ranging from the competition between patrician households for trading partners, to the politics of town governance, to regional military insecurities, and to the vicissitudes of international trade. These three examples illuminate some of the varied yet complementary facets of 'fragility': as an emic cultural concept, as an analytical approach to exploring the past, and as a phenomenon to be investigated at various scales.

Two of the three examples of African states explored in this chapter were at their zenith for perhaps only two or three centuries, whereas some individual Swahili city-states persisted longer, though their fortunes were often at the mercy of near-global economic forces beyond their control. Fragility and vulnerability appear to have been the norm for all three states, with elites and perhaps commoners too working assiduously to prolong the states' life-expectancy. Their tactics were varied, but frequently involved attempts at manipulating creative power and accumulating wealth-in-people, in addition to efforts geared toward both economic and military security. However, while the fates of individual dynasties and city-states waxed and waned, measured most readily perhaps on a timescale of decades, the statecraft that characterized the larger system to which these dynasties and city-states belonged proved much more resilient.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1   The winds of change, itself a phrase with historical resonance for Africa, have finally reached college prehistory textbooks: see Olszewski (2015) for a chapter devoted to states in south-eastern Africa, while the newest edition of Scarre (2018) has a terracotta head from Nok, Nigeria, as the illustration on the front cover.

2   The common notion, expressed here, that stonetowns were oriented toward the sea has been challenged; Gedi (Figure 9) on the Kenyan coast, for example, was a major town six km from the sea and three km from the nearest creek that would give boats access to the ocean (Wilson 1982; Pearson 1998, 75–6).

3   The identification of *waungwana* as the inhabitants of the elite dwellings of the early to mid-second millennium ad stonetowns is an imposition of later ethnographies on earlier periods that perhaps fails to consider fully the relevant identity politics that shaped the creation of this and other Swahili identities (Wynne-Jones 2018).