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# Landscape, history and power: The Zimbabwe Culture and the Nambya state, north-western Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

An archaeological identity of the Nambya state in north-western Zimbabwe is attempted by interrogating available oral accounts to determine how monumental stone structures in the region contributed to the development of the historical landscape. The research employs concepts of 'listening' to inform the archaeology connected with the state, which is also recalled in the recent histories of the Nambya people. Chronometric dating indicates that the Nambya state developed earlier than previously thought, and a review of the oral accounts indicates very close connections with Great Zimbabwe. It may have been an offshoot of the expansion of the Zimbabwe Culture on the Zimbabwe plateau during the fifteenth century, like the Mutapa state (1400-1900 AD). The clustering of monumental stone structures in north-western Zimbabwe is best informed by oral accounts, which show how royal capitals or palaces, and by extension, state power, shifted from one place to another.

## KEYWORDS

Nambya state; Zimbabwe Culture; Shangano; north-western Zimbabwe; listening

## Introduction

Archaeologists have identified the Nambya state as a manifestation of the Zimbabwe Culture in north-western Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Culture is epitomized by monumental stone architecture, which is an integral part of a building canon characterizing a civilization that developed between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, dating from the early second millennium AD. In this paper, our investigation on the Nambya state contributes to on-going research on the origins and development of socio-political complexity on the Zimbabwe plateau and adjacent regions. The Nambya state existed until the nineteenth century, when it was weakened by the Ndebele, prior to European colonisation. On-going archaeological research on the Nambya state attests to links with Great Zimbabwe. It is in the oral narratives connected with the foundations and development of the Nambya state, which this paper focuses on, to contribute towards the archaeology of the Zimbabwe Culture. We employ concepts of 'listening' (Kehoe and Schmidt 2017; Schmidt and Kehoe 2019) to better understand the archaeology connected with the most recent periods of the Zimbabwe Culture. We argue that the Nambya state developed earlier than previously thought and is closely connected to Great Zimbabwe. The paper also examines political power dynamics in north-western Zimbabwe and uses 'listening' to make sense of stone-built residences in the region. Based on oral accounts, these indicate state-level developments in the region.

## The Zimbabwe Culture

The Zimbabwe Culture is an archaeological term used to describe the development of a major civilization that flourished in southern Africa between the 12th and the 19th centuries AD. It is epitomized by monumental stone architecture, comprising free-standing dry stone walls, retaining walls and platforms, all constructed in various styles, without mortar. It is agreed that monumental stonewalls were royal residences, symbolizing the power, wealth and prestige of ruling elites. Until recently, the Zimbabwe Culture was divided into 3 phases: Mapungubwe (AD1220–1290), Great Zimbabwe (AD1250–1450) and Khami (AD1450–1650) (see e.g. Pikirayi 2001). These phases were delineated based on variations in stone architectural style, ceramic typology, and information gathered from early European travelers and oral accounts (see e.g. Beach 1980; Pikirayi 1993). However, recent research has revised this view (see e.g. Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008; Pikirayi and Chirikure 2011; Chirikure et al. 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018; Shenjere-Nyabezi et al. 2020). The archaeological evidence points towards the regional and parallel development of state systems, with some spawned by Great Zimbabwe. One sees centers of political power, the larger settlements representing state capitals. Based on this, and information from oral accounts from north-western Zimbabwe, the development of the Nambya state is reconsidered.

Monumental stone buildings in north-western Zimbabwe have been associated with the Nambya state (e.g. Hemans 1913; Ncube 2004; McGregor 2005; Makuvaza 2008; Hubbard and Haynes 2012). Despite their existence, the Nambya state does not seem to have attracted much archaeological attention and has not featured in any significant manner in archaeological discourses on the development of complex socio-political formations in the region. Even oral accounts on the Nambya state refer to only some of these. However, north-western Zimbabwe has the largest number of monumental structures of the Zimbabwe Culture within a relatively smaller area than other parts of the Zimbabwe plateau (see Figure 1). This attests to significant socio-political complexities on the Zimbabwe plateau and adjacent regions, largely unacknowledged in archaeological and historical research.

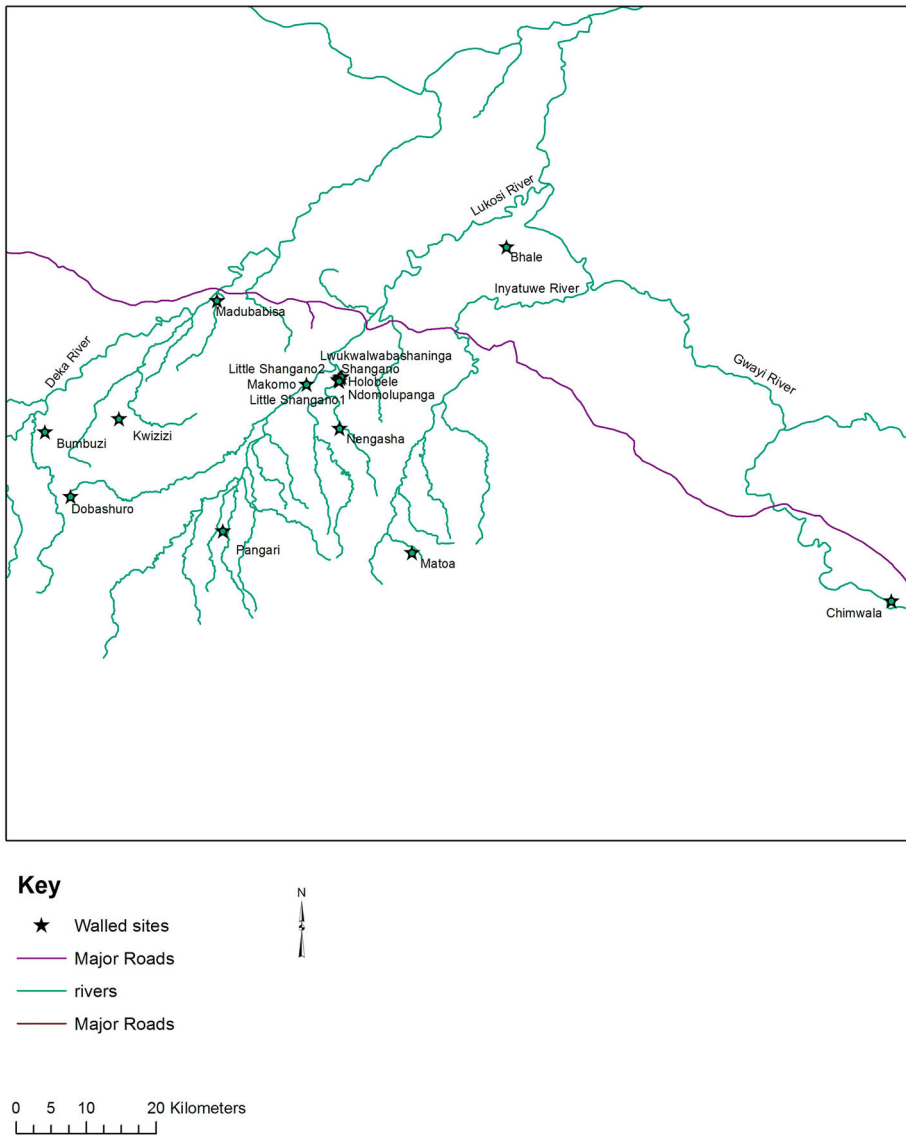
### The research area

This research was conducted in north-western Zimbabwe, the home of the Nambya, Tonga, Dombe, and Leya-speaking peoples. These live under five chiefs in the Hwange and Victoria Falls districts (Figure 2). Our work targeted the Nambya, regarded as direct descendants of the builders of monumental stone residences found in the area. The region is demarcated by the Zambezi River to the north and Botswana to the south and west.

North-western Zimbabwe has unique physiography. It is covered by wind-blown Kalahari sands overlying basalt lava flows, granite and gneiss rock formations. With temperatures averaging 27 degrees Celsius and annual rainfall of +/-500 mm, it is water-scarce and drought-prone. There are a few major and perennial rivers such as the Lukosi, Inyantuwe, Matetsi, and Gwaai and numerous springs. The Lukosi River, which features prominently in the history of one of the largest sites discussed in this paper – Shangano – emanates from springs and wetlands in the adjacent Hwange National Park. The vegetation is dystrophic savannas, comprising mostly bushland, interspersed by mopane, other woodlands and grasslands (Chamaillé-Jammes, Fritz, and Madzikanda 2009; Mapaire 1994).

### Conceptual framework

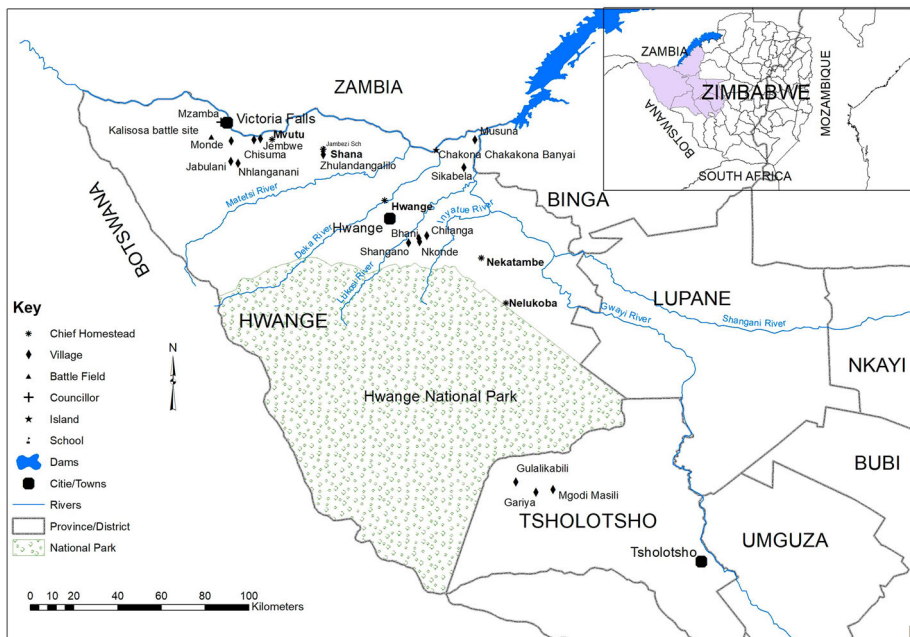
In this paper, we ask the meaning behind place names and the significance of these to local and regional histories of the Zimbabwe plateau. We also attempt to make sense of some of the dynastic titles connected to but distant from Great Zimbabwe when read in conjunction with oral traditions



**Figure 1.** Zimbabwe Culture sites in north-western Zimbabwe.

and local histories. Some of these traditions and histories mention elite residences, sometimes referred to as *dzimbabwe* ('houses of stone'; for the Mutapa state, see e.g. Pikirayi 1993, 2001). Without these accounts, and especially for more recent periods, these residences have always been difficult to interpret from a traditional Western archaeological standpoint.

The paper approaches the Nambya state in the context of archaeology of listening, the following approaches were used by Kehoe and Schmidt (2017) and Schmidt and Kehoe (2019). The practice of listening to our peers and elders who live at or close to, or are descendants of people connected to certain types of archaeological sites, brings to bear the constraints of routine archaeology. Their realities, their habitus, diverge from ours. By listening to communities native to places where we conduct archaeology, we develop concepts that emphasize participatory understanding. With the acceptance of these deeply established concepts in anthropology, archaeologists are no longer constrained by Western Enlightenment science. According to Kehoe and Schmidt (2017, 15), the practice



**Figure 2.** The research area.

of historically informed interpretations has been neglected, regarded not as a science. They argue that archaeology is historical science that requires approaches fundamentally different from the physical sciences. Such historical sciences are inductive, not deductive. Archaeologists have before them the data, the empirical evidence. They observe these data; they cannot manipulate them in laboratory experiments although they can experiment with replicating the means leading to observed data. To infer the best explanation for the data, archaeologists need wide experience of cultural and natural processes that may have produced the observed data. Here the value of listening to our peers from local and descendant communities comes to the fore: they have lived experiences and behaviour that may be analogous to those produced by archaeological data. They can demonstrate and describe wider social contexts. Such knowledge may remain obscured or significantly marginalized unless archaeologists take the time to listen and see their local peers, ‘to hang out with’ the community. Such interaction and engagement take time, which is vital in developing a local reality. From this emerges comprehension of non-human components, e.g. how ancestral spirits inhabit snakes during important rituals of renewal among the Haya people of Tanzania (Carlson 1990; Rwelamira 2003; Kamanzi 2014).

Listening is an emerging and essential practice in community archaeology (see Atalay 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Schmidt and Pikirayi 2016; Schmidt 2017). To learn about people and communities who were once deeply connected to a landscape, it is helpful to listen to communities who are still deeply connected to that landscape (Foghlú 2017, 32). Listening introduces archaeologists to informed reasoning backed by expert opinions from those who experience these landscapes and their traditions every day.

By consulting local histories and traditions, we learn what needs to be researched and how we should interrogate the archaeological evidence. According to Foghlú (2017, 32), ‘listening does not provide a blueprint of the past; rather, it highlights questions to be asked about the past’. The values that local and descendant communities place on their cultural heritage have historically been eclipsed by science-oriented approaches to the archaeological record, especially the archaeology of the most recent periods, often labelled ‘historical archaeology’. According to Nicholas (2017, 30), this has promoted a scientific agenda that short-changed descendant and indigenous

communities whose heritage it is. Understanding what local and descendant communities' value as heritage is important to making decisions about knowledge creation, what emerges from such knowledge, including relevance (Sagiya 2019).

Generally, descendant communities value most intangible aspects of heritage for their well-being, identity, spirituality and history. Indigenous peoples, in particular, neither see differences between place, the stories and knowledge that location holds, nor between objects and historical continuity they reflect or the social obligations they convey. By not considering local voices and perspectives, we tend to perpetuate Western notions and misunderstandings about heritage and what it means rather than learn new worldviews decidedly non-Western. Without engaging community members, archaeological inquiry and heritage management approaches remain incomplete, if not skewed to outsiders' interests. Care and 'management' of other people's heritage (including determination of significance) thus impose great responsibility on archaeologists.

Listening to oral histories and narratives is also about understanding mobilities around the movement of people in a given landscape. Human movements are a characteristic of African political life, which are critical in amassing political power. In this sense, movement is regarded as a political act giving followers some agency, e.g. the act of leaving and abandoning an unpopular or unsuccessful ruler. The Karanga saying '*Ushu vanhu*' ('kingship is people') implies a ruler's legitimacy is premised on followers. Retaining followers was often a complicated process of enticement, coercion and/or consensus. For contexts covered by written or oral sources, it is important to reconsider mobility in the archaeological record, especially where movements are reported to have occurred (Beaudry and Parno 2013). In Africa, most states were territorial, thus some leaders had the propensity to expand their spheres. Furthermore, it is important to understand the dynamics of exporting political power and institutions to distant regions, including colonisation, which often spawned other entities.

## Conceptualizing the Nambya cultural landscape

In this paper, narratives on Nambya origins and settlement in north-western Zimbabwe are key to understanding their cultural landscape. Understanding these narratives involved a synthesis of the traditions collected by historians and anthropologists and a presentation of the oral accounts collected from the area during fieldwork conducted in 2017. We use the term 'landscape' to underline the fact that the physical traces of the Nambya state are imbued in the natural environment, covering the greater part of the Hwange district in north-western Zimbabwe. We differ from European colonial assumptions of local and descendant communities as devoid of notions of and attachment to landscape (Ranger 1999). Instead, communities in north-western Zimbabwe, as is often the case with other African communities, have their own ideas about landscapes, make and re-make landscape and are also engaged in contestations over the landscape. This is particularly true for those living in the Hwange district who claim connections with and origins from the Nambya state. Other ethnic groups adjacent to the Hwange districts, such as the Leya and Dombe, are also involved in contestations with the Nambya over the landscape, where burials, oral histories and archaeological sites are mobilised to claims of belonging, authority and recognition by the state. In this regard, they also claim to be part of the Nambya state. As illustrated in this paper, narratives of Nambya movements into and settlement in north-western Zimbabwe are vital towards understanding the emergence and development of the cultural landscape of the region.

To the archaeologist, the landscape of north-western Zimbabwe is characterised by a distinct type of archaeological site – the monumental, stone-built sites such as Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa. Based on Nambya oral accounts collected from Mr. Tholani Elias Ndlovu and chiefs Sana and Hwange in January and February 2017, these sites are associated with the origins and development of the Nambya state, and thus a reflection of movement and settlement in the region. The accounts identify these buildings as palaces of Nambya rulers, each associated with successive rulers of the state. The rulers are referred to as Whange in the Nambya language. Shangano was the capital of Whange

Chilobamago, who was succeeded by his first son, Nyanga. Nyanga moved the capital to Matowa. The capital subsequently moved to Bumbusi during the reign of Whange Shana, the second son. Shana was succeeded by Lusumbami-Chilobamago's nephew, but his capital is not specified. The three capitals – Shangano, Matowa and Bumbusi – constitute an important part of Nambya history and are regarded as sacred ancestral residences by the Nambya.

The Mutapa state in northern Zimbabwe was established by ruling elites who migrated from Great Zimbabwe (Beach 1980; Pikirayi 1993, 2001). The Nambya state appears to have been founded similarly, but not as a mirror image of the former. With both their origins histories vaguely recalled, what remains crucial are narratives of mobility synonymous with the exportation of kinship and political institutions from Great Zimbabwe. From listening to Nambya's oral narratives and histories, we established toponyms of north-western Zimbabwe's broader cultural and natural landscape. Hydronyms and oronyms help provide complex stories of human movements and interactions within the same landscape in which Nambya capitals are situated. These histories inform the dynamics of Nambya palaces, but they also provide a broader context of how state-level socio-political organisation was encrypted on the landscape. It has been demonstrated elsewhere on the Zimbabwe plateau that by listening to the landscape and its meanings, archaeologists begin to understand links between landscape, history, and power (Pikirayi 2017, 2019).

### Decolonising approaches

The archaeology of the Nambya landscape and state study was conducted using approaches in community archaeology (see Schmidt and Pikirayi 2016). The research involved engagement with local communities involved in the entire research design from the planning stage, the archaeological surveys in the Shangano site territory, site mapping, excavations and interpretation. Local communities have been particularly fundamental in our research at Shangano and sites such as Holobebe and Little Shangano 1. At Shangano, members of the local community participated in the large-scale excavations conducted there. They were also involved in the ethnoarchaeological investigations and they gave their interpretation of the site, e.g. how they read and viewed the multiple floors exposed during platform excavations. This involved on-site discussions held with 12 elders (5 female and 7 male), to listen to and learn how they interpreted the archaeological record. Those, who were not part of the excavation team, would pay occasional visits to witness excavations in progress. These included school children and teachers from the nearby Chilanga Primary School, some 4 km east of Shangano. When a preliminary report was generated, another discussion was held with community thought-leaders, including chiefs, village heads and the members of the Nambya Cultural Association. These elders raised several questions that resulted in this paper. For instance, in our draft paper, we had not included any quote from the traditional custodian appointed by the Nambya people to look after their sites. We considered that observation as valid and included the narratives of Martin Shoko, the site custodian appointed by the community to preside over the spiritual uses of Shangano and other sites attributed to the Nambya state.

The collection of oral narratives in the Hwange district was undertaken over a long period stretching from March 2016 to April 2019. During this period, we lived, interacted, and interviewed villagers, traditional leaders, and members of the Nambya Cultural Association. For interviews and Focus Group Discussions, we targeted the five chiefs and or their aides, four headmen, 18 village heads, 19 elders, a traditional custodian, and members of the Nambya Cultural Association. These are equivalent to Fontein's (2004) 'traditional connoisseurs'. Often, this stratum of experts espouses 'tradition' in validating and legitimising versions about the past to enrich our archaeological understanding. We also sought to understand their historical narratives of the Nambya state and the associated archaeological sites. While all efforts were made to include gender balance in the quest to understand Nambya origins, men dominated as sources of information about the past. This may be attributed to the women married to Nambya men being large of Tonga origin and thus not 'eligible' to speak about Nambya origins.

We recognize that in most contexts where indigenous societies have been studied, archaeology remains colonial and Western forms of thought still dominate conventional ways of understanding the past. Through listening, we allow for a deeper understanding of indigenous world views, embracing Sanger's (2021) 'ontological turn', who, using Native American philosophy, attempted to understand artifacts (Late Archaic shell rings in the coastlines of the Southeast United States). This presented a landscape perspective where such sites are then interpreted as places where Native Americans established communication with non-human forces and eventually socialized the newly formed coastline.

North-western Zimbabwe compares with other parts of the world where national historical narratives generally leave out local histories of groups perceived to be on the periphery of society. This is typical in colonised settings where dominant groups promote meta-narratives, often at the expense of local histories. Acabado and Martin (2020) demonstrate this in Philippines where people on the fringes of the most dominant groups are described and identified as remnants of the past and, in the process, exoticizing their cultures. The authors demonstrate how intense community engagement among the Ifuago provides avenues for learning and unlearning histories, empowering the marginalized in the process by encouraging the rethinking of history and subsequently taking control of their history and heritage.

Our approaches to Nambya pasts should be regarded as an exercise in the co-production of knowledge. We are encouraged to do so by Acabado and Kuan (2021), who demonstrate in the case of the Asia-Pacific region the many ways in which co-production of knowledge is reconnecting local and indigenous relations to the landscape and diversifying the philosophy of human-land relations. Engaged collaborative research with indigenous people 'enriches our knowledge of landscape, while changing the landscape of knowledge'. While such research must meet the demands of the communities involved, especially in terms of the knowledge produced, it also meets the demands of academic scholarship. Co-authoring or co-production of knowledge (see Graham and Vergunst 2019) is an emerging trend in this direction, where the process of research itself can be an empowering force by which communities stake a claim in the places they live. The next section presents ethnohistorical accounts from the Nambya as knowledge produced by the community.

## *Nambya ethnohistorical accounts*

### *Published accounts*

Ethnohistorical accounts on the origins and development of the Nambya state include published works by Kearney (1907), Hemans (1913), Henson (1973), Mathews (1976), Hayes (1977), Beach (1980) and Ncube (2004). These are summarized here and then corroborated with the oral narratives collected during our fieldwork since 2017. The latter are dominated by Godi Chinyati, an influential and prominent local Nambya historian. According to these accounts, the Nambya state developed as a splinter group from Great Zimbabwe under a ruler referred to as Mambo. Hayes (1977, 385) regards the Nambya as descendants of the Rozvi King, Mambo. The reason for the split from the Rozvi Changuamire and the subsequent long journey westwards was that one of Mambo's three sons, Dende (or Dendelende and later, Sawanga) decided to break away from his father's rule. This enraged his father, who sentenced him to death. That these rulers kept changing names as they travelled to disguise their identity as a security measure in case they would be followed. Dende escaped and, together with his followers, embarked on a journey. It is unclear when exactly Dende left Great Zimbabwe. Hayes (1977, 386) dates this to the early eighteenth century. In a paper on Nambya toponyms and anthroponyms, Nhongo (2015) dates the leaving from Great Zimbabwe to 1737. According to Ncube (2004), Sawanga (also known as Dende/Dendelende) died in 1780 at Shangano, where he had ruled since arrival. However, this narrative differs from current ethnohistorical accounts indicating that Dende settled and reigned from Bhale, where he was probably buried. Oral accounts do not say much about Bhale, though. Shangano is presented as the first capital of the Nambya state and

associated with Chilobamago, who seems to have been Sawanga's son. The Nambya probably departed Great Zimbabwe sometime during the eighteenth century, an estimate confirmed by Ncube (2004).

While Dende was still at Shangano, his brothers, Sebutulu (also known as Chawanikwa) and Dewa also left Great Zimbabwe and followed him (Hayes 1977). Dewa stayed with Dende, while Sebutulu proceeded further north, where he established a dynasty in Barotseland, in what is now south-western Zambia. This account only features in Hayes (1977) and ethnohistorical accounts presented in this paper. However, from the accounts collected during the 2017 fieldwork, it was Dende and Sebutulu, who left Great Zimbabwe, but separately. Dewa is not mentioned. Furthermore, accounts linking Chawanikwa to the conquest of Barotseland are denied by the Lozi but historically inaccurate (see Clark 1952; Mwamulowe 2017).

The Nambya recall that when Dende settled at Shangano, he built his capital using stone. However, the locational details of Shangano are unclear and sometimes conflict. Both Hayes (1977) and Ncube (2004) locate Shangano in an area called Bhale, between Gwayi, Inyantue and Lukosi rivers, which does not tally with its actual location (see Figure 1). Ncube (2004, 9) incorrectly sites it on a hilltop while it is actually located on relatively low flat ground at the foot of Ndomolupanga hills to the south. Recent archaeological surveys recorded a stone enclosure smaller than Shangano on the summit of Ndomolupanga hills. It is also recorded in historical accounts that while residing at Shangano, Dende built another capital at Bumbusi, intending to move there to pursue fertile soils and moisture (Ncube 2004). According to Ncube (2004), Shangano served as the capital of the Nambya state for more than half a century and spanned the reigns of three successive kings after the death of the founder, Dende. He further points out that Chilobamago, Dembetembe and Nyanga ruled from Shangano before the capital moved to Bumbusi during Shana's reign. According to Hayes (1977), Nyanga moved from Shangano to Bumbusi where he built his residence near a baobab tree, which still stands today. However, Matowa, the second capital of the Nambya, is hardly mentioned in historical accounts. Nyanga, who is said to have built Matowa as his capital, is mentioned in one account as having ruled from Shangano (Ncube 2004, 10), while in another, is said to have ruled from Bumbusi (Hayes 1977, 387). No other capitals are mentioned in these accounts.

The final aspect that is well documented in all the historical accounts consulted was the demise of the Nambya state. This was mainly due to succession disputes, the Ndebele raids, European encroachment, especially the exploitation of coal at Hwange. While accounts vary slightly, they all indicate that due to either or a combination of these, the Nambya state collapsed, and its people dispersed to separate areas, led by different leaders. Some crossed the Zambezi River northwards, while others migrated westwards into Botswana. Those who remained behind were relocated elsewhere to provide room for coal mining and, eventually to pave the way for the creation of the Hwange National Park (Chiweshe 2018). However, some Nambya who had fled and settled north of the Zambezi and some who had been captured by the Ndebele, later returned and revived the Nambya state, albeit, within a context dictated by the colonial government and inherited by the postcolonial government.

### *Nambya oral accounts collected during 2017, 2018*

Since the beginning of 2017, we have been listening and recording oral narratives on the rise, spread and collapse of the Nambya state. In light of this endeavour, we spent eight months between 2017 and 2018, staying among the Nambya communities, engaging chiefs, headmen, village heads, chief aides, among other elders, the equivalent of Fontein's (2004) 'traditional connoisseurs'. Based on their status, clan, age and other considerations, traditional connoisseurs in rural Zimbabwe know about the past and its forms, including ancient settlements (*matongo*). Although there are variations on the finer details from one narrator to the other, by listening to these narratives and stories, some light is shed on the Zimbabwe Culture in north-western Zimbabwe. The Nambya are presented as

having originated from 'Zimbabwe' (now Great Zimbabwe), alternatively referred to as 'Masvingo'. For example:

So, from what I was told, the Nambya came from Masvingo. While in Masvingo, they were under Chief Mambo ... (Interview with Lawrence Godi Chinyathi, 11 February 2017).

Our origins as Nambya people ... we came from Masvingo. We had a king who was called Mambo who had his sons (Interview with Chief Hwange, 07 February 2017).

What oral history says is that once upon a time, we were at Great Zimbabwe. There are many versions ... (Interview with Gabriel Ncube, 30 January 2017).

Our great grandfathers whom I can say are our ancestors [are] Sawanga, Chilobamago, Dembetembe [but] you will find some mentioning ... other names but he is just one person, i.e. Sawanga, the son of Mambo, who came from Masvingo. They came from there with Sebutulu, the one who is called Luwanikwa, here we say Chawanikwa. So, they came together from Masvingo (Interview with Chief Shana, 06 February 2017).

While at Great Zimbabwe, the ruler was Mambo. The names, number, and migration histories of Mambo's sons vary with the narrators. In some versions, Mambo had two sons, Dende (also known as Dembetembe and later Sawanga) and Subutulu (Interview with Chief Shana, 06 February 2017). It is not known how many sons Mambo had, but it is recalled in traditions that Dembetembe and Subutulu broke away from their father's kingdom, migrating north-westwards (Interview with Lawrence Godi Chinyathi, 11 February 2017). During migration, the two sons led their followers using different routes, with the larger group led by Dende. One version says that from Great Zimbabwe:

They moved north-east. Upon reaching the Zambezi River, they turned westwards, and moved along the river. As they migrated, they were other smaller tribes. They would capture them, integrating the boys into their army. When they arrived in Binga, Dende's pregnant sister gave birth to a son who was named Mhashu. They named him so because that year after the farming season there were swarms of locusts (*mhashu*). I think that's Chief Pashu. The Tonga are the ones who identified him as such. As they moved further into Binga, another of Dende's sister gave birth to a boy, who was named Shava. In Tonga they called him Sava, hence you find Chief Sava in that area. When they moved along the Lwayi (now Gwaai) River, they reached another river called Rukoshi (now Lukosi). They crossed Lukosi and arrived at a place, which they named Shangano. At Shangano is where Dende built the first ruins similar to those where they came from – Masvingo. They settled there (Interview with Chief Hwange, 07 February 2017).

In recounting the journey, Chimwala stone-walled settlement (now, Halfway House), located about 15 km north-east of the Gwaai River, is considered one of the stopovers for the group led by Dende. It was reported that they first moved towards Mapfungautsi plateau, then Nkayi, and Lupane district. In Lupane, they settled at Chimwala (Interview with Gabriel Ncube, 30 January 2017). However, other accounts point to Bhale (or Chinove) stone-built settlement as the first capital of the Nambya:

Hwange Lusumbami ... was killed by Mzilikazi. We know that Mzilikazi died in 1868, so Lusumbami must have ruled around this time. The first settlement was Chinove (Bhale), close to Kamativi area (Interview with Noah Msimanga, 30 January 2017).

However, oral accounts mentioning Bhale are rare. Shangano, on the other hand, is frequently referred to and considered the first stone-walled settlement that served as the capital of the Nambya state and for about half a century. For Shangano, the names of successive Nambya rulers are presented, and how the site became a launch pad for the construction of other capitals such as Matowa and Bumbusi. Dende and Sebutulu were re-united briefly at Shangano before the latter crossed the Zambezi. Dende would change his name to Sawanga, and his followers were identified as Nambya. When he died, he was succeeded by Chilobamago, also known as Dembetembe. In some sources, the name Dembetembe refers to another ruler from Shangano after the death of Chilobamago, while in others, this is a synonym for Dende, the founder of the Nambya state. Such contradictions or variations should, however, be expected from oral narratives:

From my understanding when they settled at Shangano, the person in charge was Chilobamango Chidende-lende. At times he was called Dembetembe and there is another name. He arrived from Binga. But it is an account that is now disjointed and I am now confused. When the elder brother settled at Shangano with other leaders who had come before him, his younger brother crossed Zambezi and settled in Barotseland. But when Dembetembe was at Shangano, he changed his title from Mambo to Hwange. Whilst at Shangano he continued surveying for better land. He found the piece of land where he constructed a palace, completing it. However, he died while still at Shangano. His younger brother Nyanga, took over, settling at Matowa. His reign was however short, dying soon afterwards. Dembetembe's first son, Shana, was then installed Hwange and moved to Bumbusi (Interview with Lawrence Godi Chinyathi, 30 January 2017).

Group interviews were held with Shangano and Chilanga elders in June 2017. Among the interviewees was Martin Shoko (now late), the Shangano traditional site custodian, village heads and elders of the Chilanga clan. This clan oversees sacred Nambya places such as Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa and is also responsible for leading traditions and practices associated with the installation of Nambya chiefs (Group Interview, 10 June 2017, Shangano, Hwange). When they asked about the first Nambya chiefs, the elders indicated the following:

Some were as far as Pandamatenga ... but if you listen to all the names in Hwange, they are of the Nambya language. All those people were ruled by Chilobamago, who took the place of Dembetembe. Sawanga was the first ruler of the Nambya.

The first paramount chief of this region was Dembetembe or Sawanga. He was buried at Chinove/Bhale, at Nyantue. When he died, Chilobamago succeeded.

Chilobamago built his palace during the reign of Dembetembe. Other people were appointed as headmen during that time.

The location of the grave of the founding figures of the Nambya state is one striking narrative associated with the major stone buildings of the Zimbabwe Culture. These graves are revered and considered sacred among the Nambya. At Shangano and Bumbusi, the exact positions of the graves of Hwange Chilobamago and Hwange Shana, respectively, are known, and this is where the Nambya conduct rain petitioning ceremonies. Responding to a question about what the elders regarded as significant at Shangano, one elder, Elias Ndlovu said

What we value here is the burial of Chief Chilobamago because that is the history that we are talking about. This is the most important thing. Even the ancient building techniques, no one knows how they did it now, where the stones came from. During rains what they would do, is why we value Chilobamago's burial place. It is said that Chilobamago was not a traditional healer or spirit medium, but was a king for a tribe known as Banyai. So, to us, we know that we inherited that authority and the powers vested therein. These include rain-making ceremonies, and when we meet today for that purpose, rains will fall. These powers are not from someone remote or unknown, but emanate from here [referring to Chilobamago] (Interview with Elias Tolani Ndlovu, 10 June 2017).

Whatever the variations, and some of the contradictions in the narratives, Nambya elders have detailed stories, knowledge, experiences and information about the Zimbabwe Culture buildings, who built them, when and in some cases why they were abandoned. They even recall the origins of some of the names of the builders of these palaces, including Chilobamago. Chilobamago may not have been his real name, but, was used about his power, which was equated to the stinging hornets, and palaces as nesting spaces for political power;

Chilobamago's power and wrath was associated with hornets, whose sting is considered harmful. As a result, no one would trespass his domain or palace. His name implied the viciousness associated with a hornet's nest (Interview with Martin Shoko, 10 June 2017).

From listening to Nambya narratives, we gathered that Matowa was settled for about 12 years. When probed on what contributed to that, elders pointed to a pandemic outbreak. The other name for Matowa is Lushago Lubi, meaning 'land of bad omen' (Interview with Price Chipaya, 05 February 2018). Traditions recall people dying in large numbers, leading to the abandonment of Matowa.

The palace shifted to Bumbusi, where under the leadership of Hwange Shana and later Lusumbami, the state reached its zenith before destruction by the Ndebele.

We also tried to understand the clustering of Zimbabwe Culture sites in the region. Among the Nambya, names prefixed with 'ne-' are dominant, e.g. Negasha, Nekobolo, Neteje, Nehwati, Nechenge. The elders indicated the *Ne-* was a title conferred by the Hwange to those possessing rare skills, talents or would have performed distinguished tasks for the state (Interview with Lawrence Godi Chinyathi, 11 February 2017). Therefore, the presence of stone-walled sites within the precincts of known palaces implies residences for such people, not necessarily royalty.

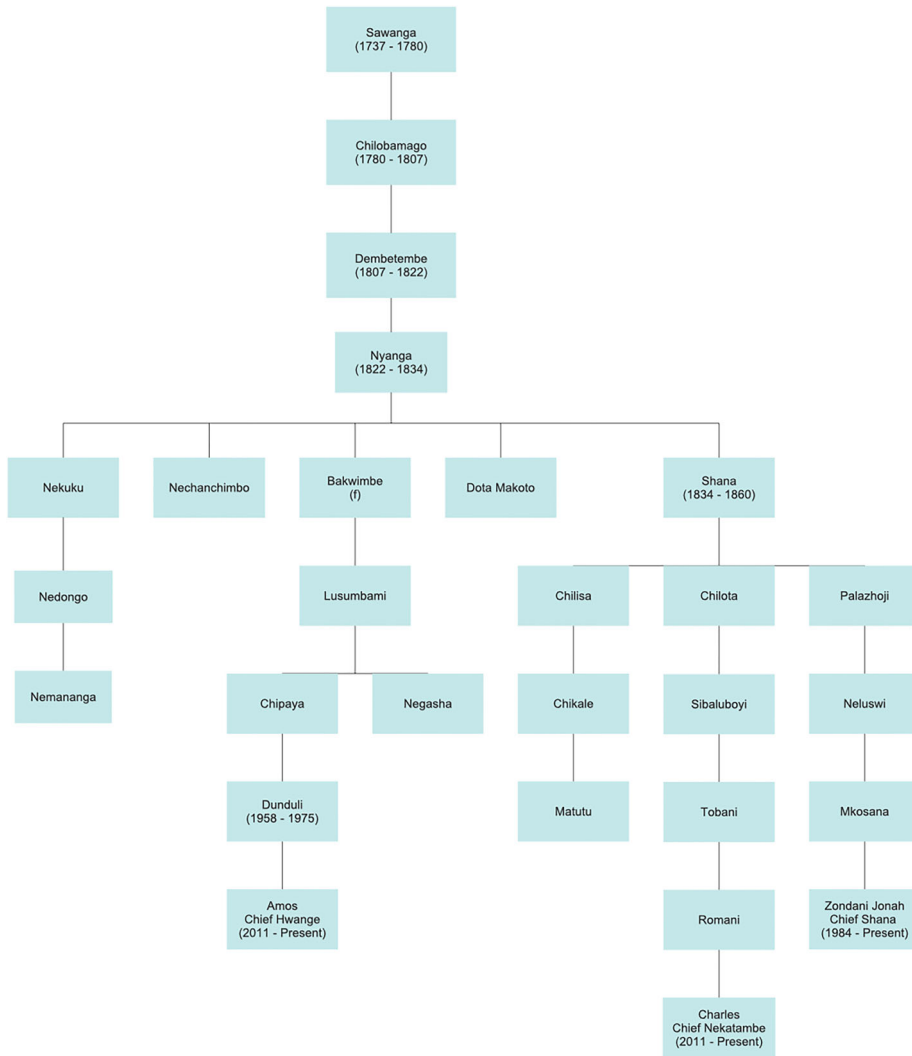
The elders presented the multi-named founder of the Nambya state system in north-western Zimbabwe as having begotten two children, Nyanga and Shana, who became successive rulers of the state. However, both did not rule Shangano (Ncube 2004, 10). Instead, after the death of Chilobamago, Nyanga, the first son, succeeded him and built his capital at Matowa where he ruled. He only ruled for a few years before he died, after which the chieftaincy of the Nambya went to Shana, the second son. During this short reign at Matowa many people died, following a pandemic (Interview with Price Chipaya, 05 February 2018). It is recalled that after Nyanga's death, Shana did not inherit Matowa as his capital, but he moved to and completed the construction of Bumbusi. It is suggested that Chilobamago initiated the construction of Bumbusi while ruling from Shangano, intending to move his palace to an area favourable for the cultivation of bulrush millet and sorghum. Unfortunately, he died before the completion of the construction work. According to local information, he was buried at Shangano.

Shana ruled from Bumbusi until his death. He begot four children – a daughter (VaKwimbe) and three sons (Chilisa, Palazhunje and Chilota). Oral accounts say he was buried within the walls abutting the giant baobab tree. After Shana's death, two more chiefs, Lusumbami and Chilisa, ruled from Bumbusi. The accounts indicate that Lusumbami usurped the chieftaincy from Mpalazhuji, who, according to the Nambya, was the rightful heir to the throne. Lusumbami had his mother, VaKwimbe's blessings when he ascended to power, an act that did not go down well with the Nambya traditional leadership that recognises succession along patrilineal lines. VaKwimbe's brothers were unhappy (see Hayes 1977; McGregor 2005). The accounts say Lusumbami was cruel and thus unpopular. He made a ruling that all baby boys were to be killed at birth in a bid to reduce would-be-contenders to the throne. It is against his unpopularity that Chilisa, Shana's second son hatched a plan and arranged for Lusumbami's death at the hands of the Ndebele – a story that is captured in all available historical records and also narrated with remarkable consistency by the Nambya during our surveys.

### *Genealogy*

A remarkable dimension of Nambya oral traditions is the precision in which they recount the genealogy of the state's political leadership, prior to Ndebele and European disruption (see Figure 3). This chronicles the story from the founders of the state to the present five chiefdoms subsumed by the Nambya. However, it should be noted that there are three chiefs in Hwange district, Whange, Shana and Nekatambe, who have direct ancestral connections with the Nambya state. The other two, Nelukoba/Dingani and Mvuthu are associated with colonial developments, and thus, their connections with the Nambya genealogy are tenuous. While Nelukoba has some traceable link with the Nambya state, the Mvuthu chieftaincy, which largely comprises Ndebele-speaking people, was created by Europeans and imposed on the Nambya to accommodate the Ndebele who were forcibly relocated to the Hwange District.

Of interest here is how certain Nambya state rulers are assigned stone-built capitals, while some are not and how some rulers, such as Chilobamago, are more remembered than others. In the context of our application and use of the archaeology of listening, this presents an interesting dimension in relation to aspects of remembering, recollection and re-telling. We consider this in the idea and sense of place and definition of places and their recognition across the Nambya landscape in the history of the development of complex socio-political formations. In the histories of the



**Figure 3.** Nambya genealogy reconstructed from oral accounts and historical sources (modified from Elliot 1965; Hayes 1977).

origins and development of political systems in many parts of Africa, including the Zimbabwean and Karanga pasts, places of origin and those that matter in peoples' histories are marked and remembered in many instances because they confer a strong sense of history, identity and legitimacy. Such places are thus etched in the memories of descendants because they are associated with the greatest and most prominent personalities that made a people's history. In our listening of Nambya narratives, we realised that while places, such as Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa, feature prominently in the state's history and are linked to specific rulers, the remainder of the rulers are named and their reigns periodized but not identified with specific places. At the same time, we observed that the north-western Zimbabwe landscape abounds with prestige stone buildings that identify with centres of power in the state's history, yet there is apparent silence over them. In the same vein, some rulers are more remembered than others. This begs for comment. This evident silence over some rulers and their capitals may be explained either in terms of their reigns having been associated with either best forgotten, or may have been characterized by low key events or never feature prominently in succession politics. Continued listening of the Nambya may prove rewarding for this

line of inquiry, as it is emerging that the stone-built site of Bhale may be associated with Dende, the first ruler of the state before power shifted to Shangano. This information only emerged after persistently probing recent ethnohistorical accounts. This also demonstrates that listening is about probing and interrogating versions of the past informed by local narratives. It is a well-known dogma that history is always written by winners and possibly, oral versions of the past that become the dominant narratives may in themselves have been 'written' by the most dominant.

### *The archaeology of north-western Zimbabwe*

We conducted archaeological investigations in north-western Zimbabwe to engage with the oral narratives and ethnohistorical accounts. Archaeological research was viewed as an approach in co-production of knowledge with local communities, whose knowledge was considered vital in understanding the development of the Nambya cultural landscape. Systematic surveys were undertaken in the study area, focusing on the major sites of Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa. Field walking was conducted around these settlements. Through community engagement, use was also made of local knowledge, leading to the documentation of new sites and interpretation of some excavated contexts. The knowledge of wildlife rangers also proved invaluable, especially for sites located in the Hwange National Park.

#### *Site surveys*

From the archaeological surveys, 14 additional Zimbabwe Culture-type stone buildings were recorded, bringing the total number of sites to 21. All these sites are within a 50 km radius of Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa. They ranged in size and layout from the small single arc-shaped enclosures (Table 1) to much larger sites. The latter, e.g. Shangano, is surrounded by smaller enclosures. The newly documented sites neither feature in the written documents nor the oral accounts on the history and origins of the Nambya people (Ndlovu, pers comm).

Shangano is a Zimbabwe Culture stone-walled site located in the south-east of the coal mining town of Hwange, on the edge of the north-eastern boundary of the Hwange National Park. The site lies at 71° 44' 35.7792" and 25° 44' 49.286", some 780 m above sea level, on a plain, overlooked by the Ndomolupanga hills to the south. Shangano is easily accessible from all directions despite four mountain ranges that enclose the site. The Mvuma hills lie about 4 km to the north, trending east-west and parallel to the Ndomolupanga and Holobebe hills to the south. The Kachivanungu hills lie to the north-west, while the Ndomolupanga-Holobebe hills lie only 400 meters south of the site. Shangano is flanked by two major rivers, Lukosi, which is 3.5 km to the west, and Inyantuwe, some 25 km to the east. Kambizi River, which is 400 m to the east, must have been the closest perennial water source. Some 400 metres to the west are two small arc-shaped enclosures known as Little Shangano 1 and Little Shangano 2. Two more small enclosures, Lukwalwabashananga 1 and 2, are located about 700 meters to the north-west of the main Shangano site. Yet another three smaller stone-walled sites are located to the south on the summit of Ndomolupanga hills, half a kilometre from Shangano. Some 1.5 km further east is another smaller site lying on a promontory of Holebebe hills. Together with the main site, these sites form a cluster.

Shangano can be divided into many distinct areas where the two semi-detached stone enclosures, aligned north-south and an extensive midden located to the south, are most distinct. The southern enclosure is oval with a large opening to the south-east and three entrances (north, north-west and south-west). It encloses at least two platforms (Platforms A and B), one of which was excavated during the July/August 2017 field season. Platforms A and B are linked by a radial wall where Platform A appears to be linked to the eastern wall of the enclosure. Directly south-east of Platform B is a short section of walling, largely collapsed, which oral traditions point to as the grave of the founder of the Nambya state, Whange Chilobamago. The rest of the enclosure is open with no clear signs of house platforms. In comparison, the northern enclosure forms a

**Table 1.** Zimbabwe Culture sites in north-western Zimbabwe (after Shenjere-Nyabezi et al. 2020, 9).

Site Name	Location and GPS Reference	Approximate Size	Building Material	Construction Style
Bhale	Chinove communal area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0480108; 7979555	60 m × 70 m	Sandstone	P, PQ, R
Dobashuro	Hwange National Park GPS Reference: 0417805 7943794	A horse-shoe shaped wall that is 20 m long	Sandstone	PQ
Matowa	Hwange National Park GPS Reference: 0466595 7935823	70 m × 80 m	Granite	PR?
Bumbusi	Hwange National Park GPS Reference: 0414199 7960931	1 ha	Sandstone	PQ, Q, R
Halfway House	Chimwala communal area, Lupane District GPS Reference: 0535093 7928967	60 m × 40 m	Sandstone	P, PQ, R
Holobebe	Chilanga communal area, Hwange District GPS Reference: 0456332 7960931	30 m × 40 m	Sandstone	P, R
Makomo	Hwange National Park GPS Reference: 0451538 7959888	20 m × 10 m	Sandstone	P, PQ
Madumabisa	Madumabisa Resettlement Area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0438774 7971854	70 m × 50 m	Sandstone	P, PQ, Q, R
Ndomolupanga	Shangano Communal Area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0456210 7960334	40 m × 30 m	Sandstone	P, Q, R
Negasha	Negasha Safari Area, Hwange National Park GPS Reference: 0456265 7953558	90 m × 80 m	Granite	P, PQ, Q, R
Little Shangano 1	Shangano communal area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0455942 7960578	40 m × 50 m	Sandstone	P, PQ, Q, R
Little Shangano 2	Shangano communal area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0455910 7960601	30 m × 50 m	Sandstone	P, PQ, R
Lukwalwabashinganga	Shangano Communal Area, Hwange district GPS Reference: 0455948 7961062	30 m × 20 m	Sandstone	P

complete enclosure with two entrances, one to the south-east and the other to the north-west. Immediately outside the two main enclosures six other house platforms form an arc to the north from an open area between the enclosures (Figure 4).

Over and above these sites, archaeological surveys suggest there may be as many as 50 stone-walled palaces in north-western Zimbabwe, all on an area once under the influence of the Nambya state (Figure 1). Of these, only the major sites of Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa feature in the oral narratives pertaining to the origins and development of the Nambya state. While acknowledging the centrality of these structures to Nambya political power, what is also intriguing is the silence of most of the buildings. We have proffered some suggestions above in connection with oral narratives. However, from an archaeological perspective, this may also imply very limited reigns hardly recalled or simply royal rewards to non-elites for their roles in sustaining Nambya political power. In this way, archaeology goes beyond listening by interrogating the oral accounts where they are silent. Recourse may be made on scholarly works by Beach (1980) regarding in-depth studies of Shona political systems, focusing on succession and centres of power. Political power was always revolving conceptually and territorially, and there were no permanent state capitals (see also Pikirayi 1993, for the Mutapa state; Chirikure et al. 2016, 2018). In Shona political systems, new rulers inherited power and other materialities, but not necessarily the physical capitals. On assuming power, they either ruled from their residences or moved from there to set up a new *muzinda* (palace residence) elsewhere.

The Nambya state itself is a testimony to this, as oral traditions demonstrate that Shangano, Bumbusi and Matowa were constructed by or for different successive rulers. In this sense, it now

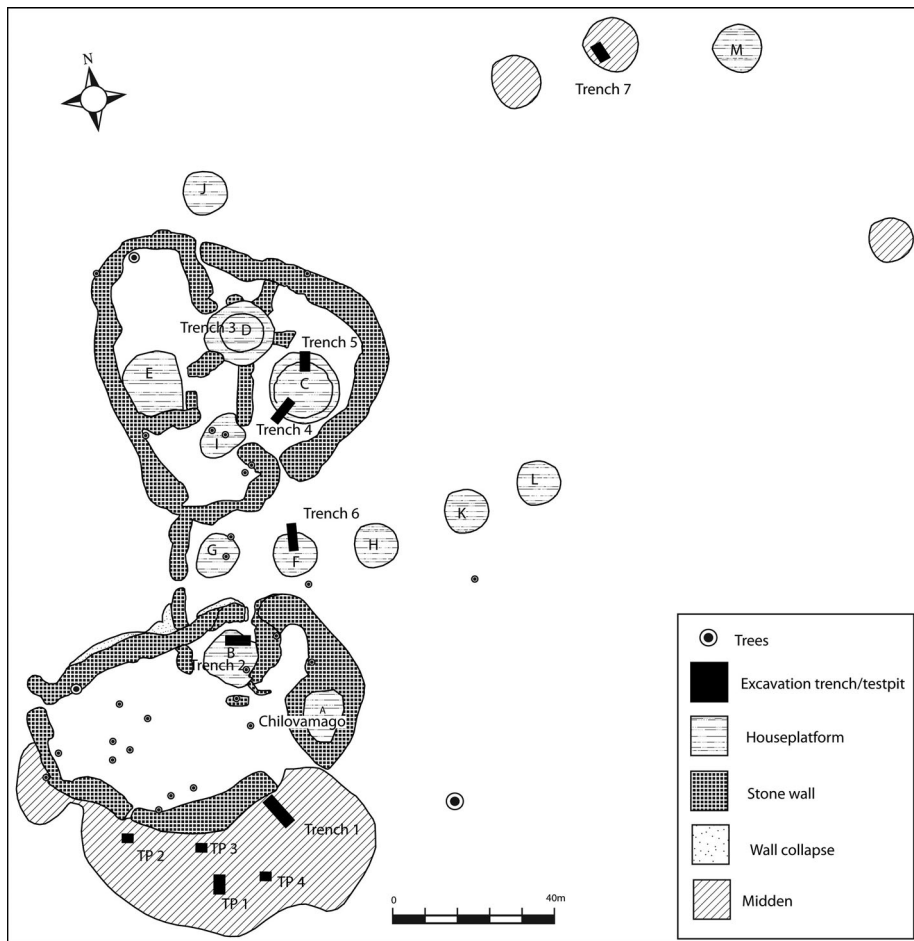


Figure 4. Shangano site plan.

becomes possible to explain the presence of the many stone capitals in north-western Zimbabwe. Although not as large or as elaborate as Shangano and Bumbusi, large sites, such as Half Way House/Chimwala, Negashe and Bhale, are likely to have been Nambya capitals at different points in its history, and the oral narratives remotely allude to them. The observed differences in state capital sizes and elaborateness may be explained in terms of the political power, economic prosperity and perhaps the length of a specific reign. The wealthier and longer the reign, the more elaborate the capital. In this sense, wealthier and more powerful rulers could engage in costly signalling through the construction of prestige stone buildings on a higher plane than their less prosperous kinsmen (Shenjere-Nyabezi and Pwiti 2021). History has shown us that political systems endure for centuries, enjoy periods of economic and political prosperity and decline under different regimes. The Nambya state is not an exception. We offer this as a framework to explain the presence of the Zimbabwe Culture sites in north-western Zimbabwe. According to available genealogies, these represented palaces of successive rulers of the Nambya. Oral traditions need further probing to relate the different state rulers to some specific, if not all sites. From the interviews conducted in connection with the stone-built site of Bhale some 30 km north of Shangano, Dende is regarded as the founder and first ruler of the Nambya state. The capital subsequently moved to Shangano.

### Excavations

Excavations at Shangano yielded various materials, including faunal remains, such as cattle, sheep and goats and wild species such as elephants (Majoli 2018). Conventional archaeological interpretations would point to the pottery recovered from the site showing some affinities with Great Zimbabwe Period 4, though lacking the lavishly decorated polychrome typical of Khami period sites (Zhou 2018). The same applies to the bead assemblage, which included glass, ostrich-egg and achatina shell, ivory, copper and gold. Archaeologists would classify the glass beads generally within the Khami bead series (Koleini et al. 2017, 2019; Nyambiya 2018; Shenjere-Nyabezi et al. 2020). Excavated houses show an architectural design consisting of circular thick-walled mud houses on raised platforms, which share many similarities with major Zimbabwe Culture stone-built sites in central, southern and western Zimbabwe, such as Great Zimbabwe, Khami, Naletale and Danangombe (Figure 5; See also Chikalipo 2019; Shenjere-Nyabezi 2016). What we found most interesting are the local community's understanding of raised platforms (see Figure 5) and successive house floors. The constant renewal of such house floors is viewed as an exercise that also speaks to architectural continuity over time. While there is some chronological validity in this assertion, as attested by the radiocarbon chronology (see Table 2), more testing needs to be done, e.g. using luminescence dating.

Charcoal samples from different contexts were submitted to the Curt-Engelhorn-Zentrum Archäometrie gGmbH laboratory in Mannheim, Germany, for radiocarbon dating (Table 2). The results show Shangano was occupied between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries AD (Table 2). This places the Nambya state within a period that overlaps with Great Zimbabwe and Khami and Zimbabwe-type sites of Naletale and Danangombe, associated with the Torwa-Changamire state (Beach 1994; Machiridza 2012; see Table 2). The dating evidence from Shangano thus indicates that the Nambya state existed during the times of Great Zimbabwe and Khami states, which are associated with the floruit of the Zimbabwe Culture. It did not post-date these states as previously assumed. This calls for reconsideration of the origins of the Nambya state, given this antiquity going beyond the period remembered by oral traditions. The dating of sites connected with the



**Figure 5.** Thick-walled mud houses on raised platforms.

**Table 2.** Radiocarbon dates from Shangano.

Sample label	<sup>14</sup> C Alter [yr BP]	±	Max. (% probability) values [calBP]	Min.	Cal 1-sigma	C [%]	Material
Sample 7 Sh NE PFD G52	118	21	146 (53.5%)	56	cal AD 1690–1925	458	charcoal
Sample 4 Sh SE Pfb Tr 2	129	21	150 (46.7%)	58	cal AD 1683–1935	579	charcoal
Sample 5 Sh SE TP1	227	21	308 (48.9%)	275	cal AD 1651–1795	573	charcoal
Sample 11 Sh NE PFD G63	261	21	318 (74.2%)	283	cal AD 1640–1662	561	charcoal
Sample 6 Sh NE PFD G7	319	21	459 (75.5%)	348	cal AD 1521–1636	486	charcoal
Sample 8 Sh NE PFD G40	326	21	461 (75.8%)	347	cal AD 1515–1634	479	charcoal
Sample 9 Sh NE PFD G51	326	21	461 (75.8%)	347	cal AD 1516–1634	545	Charcoal
Sample 1 Sh SE Tr 1	343	21	411 (59.2%)	315	cal AD 1491–1630	539	Charcoal
Sample 15 Sh NE PFD G74	350	21	407 (53.3%)	316	cal AD 1485–1625	543	Charcoal
Sample 12 Sh NE PFD G63	354	21	396 (49.2%)	317	cal AD 1476–1623	567	Charcoal
Sample 10 Sh NE PFD G51	374	21	502 (65.7%)	428	cal AD 1456–1615	559	Charcoal
Sample 14 Sh NE PFD G74	382	20	505 (73.9%)	428	cal AD 1453–1613	568	Charcoal
Sample 3 Sh SE Tr1	448	21	527 (95.4%)	488	cal AD 1435–1449	541	Charcoal
Sample 13 Sh NE PFD G74	541	28	561 (66.3%)	515	cal AD 1330–1425	76	Charcoal
Sample 2 Sh SE Tr1	584	21	644 (67.1%)	587	cal AD 1319–1403	595	Charcoal

Nambya state and oral historical accounts would point to either a parallel cultural development in north-western Zimbabwe or the spawning of a state system from Great Zimbabwe. In this regard, we should not ignore oral accounts on the origins of groups or political elites. Like the Mutapa state (Pikirayi 1993, 2001), the Nambya state has a relationship with Great Zimbabwe, but perhaps not in the direct sense as narrated in Nambya oral histories presented here and especially in the light of the new dating evidence. What is evident here is the expansion of a major culture into a new region, accompanied by the establishment and development of political power.

Until our research in north-western Zimbabwe, it was assumed that the Nambya state was spawned during the mid-seventeenth century from the Torwa-Changamire state originally based at Khami (see e.g. Beach 1980; Pikirayi 2001). We acknowledge that Khami is one of the second largest settlements connected with the Zimbabwe Culture in western Zimbabwe, which may be as old as Great Zimbabwe. Based on our fieldwork, we observed close architectural affinities between Khami and some sites attributed to the Nambya state. Furthermore, some Nambya oral traditions claim a migration route from Great Zimbabwe, through Khami. However, it is important to recall that these narratives are at variance with the radiocarbon dating now available for Shangano. Makuva (2008) analysed the architecture and pottery from Khami and compared these Bumbuzi, one of the major sites of the Nambya state. He concluded that Bumbuzi was a Khami phase site based on architectural and material culture similarities. This is the only available evidence pointing towards a direct relationship between north-western Zimbabwe and Khami. Traditions collected during our fieldwork do not support this view.

## Conclusion

Archaeological research undertaken in north-western Zimbabwe on the origins and development of the Nambya state thus far raises some questions against oral traditions. Radiocarbon dates from Shangano point to much greater antiquity of the Nambya state. Based on available oral traditions and local histories, Nambya traditions point to connections with Great Zimbabwe and from the Torwa-Changamire. The latter possibly reflects later events associated with the demise of Khami, as from the middle of the seventeenth century.

Some of the monumental stone structures found in north-western Zimbabwe are remembered in Nambya oral narratives, where they are presented as royal residences. The narratives point to the link between political power and certain palaces. According to these narratives, palaces were 'mobile', with political power moving along with them. The ethnohistorical and oral accounts point to the

'peopling' of the landscape through migration and movements from other places, which results in the clustering of monumental stone residences in the region. As such, they help understand how clustering of settlement takes place over time. With regard to the Nambya state, we learn with the help of oral accounts that while palaces belonged to specific rulers, they were not permanent seats of power. Some Nambya choose to relocate, but did not abandon their palaces, ensuring continuity in terms of royal attachment and connection to such places.

Our collaborations and coproduction of knowledge with Nambya elders further reveal that, traditions passed on and recounted in the present are as much a historical document for the present as they are a socio-political tool. Such traditions must be read in a specific historical context. The Nambya have realized how empowering archaeological research is, especially in laying 'scientific' claim to their deep history. The radiocarbon dating evidence itself is now appreciated by the Nambya, who see the new data as an important and additional platform to reinforce their claims to indigeneity and legitimacy on north-western Zimbabwe's socio-political and economic landscape.

Upon examining architectural style and material culture items such as ceramics, a direct relationship with Great Zimbabwe seems cursory (Shenjere-Nyabezi et al. 2020; Zhou 2018). This compels a re-interpretation of the archaeological evidence using non-traditional approaches and in this case, understanding the establishment of cultural and political relationships in recent history. Oral accounts are vital in understanding how monumental structures such as those associated with the Nambya transformed the cultural landscape of north-western Zimbabwe. Given the antiquity of the Nambya state, questions arise as to why oral accounts make references to Great Zimbabwe or 'Masvingo', and what influences came from there. Also intriguing with regards to the antiquity and development of the Nambya state is silence regarding connections with the Torwa-Changamire state. Further work is required here to understand the dynamics of state formation and mobility patterns on the Zimbabwe plateau and adjacent regions.

Oral accounts of the Nambya provide opportunities for archaeologists to think about and interpret evidence based on real-life stories. Such stories offer frameworks to reconstructing, reading and understanding landscapes of the past as an active part of the present. The contemporary Nambya political landscape is multi-layered and has been shaped by many historical processes continuously produced and reproduced narratives that are as much a part of the past as of the present. We suggest that the apparent discrepancy within the archaeological evidence, especially dating, should be read in context. It may be a case in point where more recent and more vividly remembered pasts are more useful than distant ones, and the narratives we have been listening to have been projected as such. In any case, they are not altogether in conflict with archaeology. Our findings, in the interim, are that deep engagement with local communities is not just an exercise in decolonizing archaeological approaches, but rather an enriching experience in co-production of knowledge. We see this as the most viable future for archaeological practice in Africa.

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## Interviews

- Interview with Lawrence Godi Chinyathi. 30 January and 11 February 2017, Hwange town.
- Interview with Noah Msimanga. 30 January and 11 February 2017, Hwange town.
- Interview with Gabriel Ncube. 30 January and 11 February 2017, Hwange town.
- Interview with Chief Shana. 06 February 2017, Jembezi, Hwange.
- Interview with Chief Hwange. 07 February 2017, Shashatunda, Hwange.
- Interview with Elias Tolani Ndlovu. 10 June 2017, Shangano site, Hwange.
- Interview with Martin Shoko. 10 June 2017, Shangano site, Hwange.
- Interview with Price Chipaya. 05 February 2018, Mwemba, Hwange.