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DAVID BEACH, SHONA HISTORY AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ZIMBABWE¹

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Abstract

Professor David Norman Beach has since the early 1970s collected oral traditions of the Shona-speaking peoples of the Zimbabwe Plateau and read sixteenth century and later Portuguese documents relating to the same region and the lower Zambezi. During the course of his research he made some archaeological statements whose usefulness has been realised by both archaeologists and prehistorians devoted to the study of Zimbabwe's past. This article evaluates some of his publications, and tries to assess his contribution to the field of Zimbabwean archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

When David Beach was engaged by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the then Rhodesia in the early 1970s, he set out a programme to collect and study oral traditions with a view towards writing the history of the Shona. Such a project covering the entire Zimbabwe Plateau consequently meant dealing with the problem of the identity and origins of the Shona speakers. Chronologically this entailed covering the period before written history, which in Zimbabwe dates before AD 1500. The period in question is understood entirely from archaeology and prehistory. This commentary examines Beach's understanding of and contribution to the subject of archaeology, both during the pre-historic and historical periods. I will comment and make references to his publications, which make direct and substantial references to the subject of Zimbabwean archaeology.

I am a former student of the late Professor Beach. He taught me *World History* and *History of East Africa* at undergraduate level in 1983 and 1984, and *Prehistory of Southern Africa* in 1985 following the departure of Peter Garlake and prior to the arrival of Robert Soper — both prominent African archaeologists — in May of the same year. He also taught me *Oral*

¹ This article was originally presented at a seminar entitled: 'Beach's legacy and the way forward: A tribute to the late Professor Beach, the eminent and passionate historian of pre-colonial Central Africa' organized by The Book Café, Harare, on the 17th of June 1999. I would like to thank Professor Terence O. Ranger for encouraging me to comment on the contribution of the late Professor David Norman Beach to the archaeology and prehistory of Zimbabwe, and for his subsequent comments during the seminar. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Mrs Jill Beach who was very supportive of the idea.

Traditions in African History at post-graduate level and guided me in the interpretation of Portuguese written sources which I used to identify archaeological sites attributed to the Mutapa State (Pikirayi, 1993, see Chapter 6). It is within this background that I can confidently provide an informed review of Professor Beach's contribution to the subject of study of which I am now directly involved.

My commentary is divided into three parts. The first part deals with Professor Beach's publications before 1985. The second part examines the period from 1985 to the mid-1990s. The last part of the commentary examines his work published within the last five years.

PUBLICATIONS BEFORE 1985

Professor Beach devoted the early 1970s towards the collection of Shona oral traditions. As far as he could establish, these traditions had a time depth spanning three or four centuries and anything longer than this had to be treated with extreme caution.

By the mid-1970s, he was also reading Portuguese documents. He realised that as a historian, the act of reading documents and using oral sources required critical thinking (Beach, 1983a). He observed that "much of the field where oral tradition could be of most use remains largely unsearched by archaeologists". Nothing had been done on Ndebele archaeology or the so-called 'Refuge Period' "which indicates thousands of sites across the country, [and] still has no overall classifications on chronology in archaeological terms" (Beach, 1983a, 8). Beach thus preferred to initially comment on the archaeology dealing with the period in question and the subject he was directly involved in. His publications prior to 1980 deal with aspects of Shona settlement on the Zimbabwean Plateau and in some cases the archaeology identified with them (eg. Beach, 1970; 1972; 1978). This line of emphasis soon changed when Professor Beach was required to read more archaeology in his research on the origins of the Shona.

Indeed Beach had done considerable reading of Zimbabwean archaeology as is clearly seen in his first book on Shona history, *The Shona and Zimbabwe: 900-1850* (1980). This meant reading the archaeology relating to the period prior to 1500, a period he was somehow reluctant to delve into except on the subject matter of Great Zimbabwe (Beach, 1973). This is understandable because of the Great Zimbabwe controversy that had dominated Zimbabwean archaeology since the late 19th century. This controversy attracted considerable interest from other scholars, historians included. His article about the Mwarl cult was essentially a reaction to Peter Garlake's (1973) argument that religion contributed much to the power of the rulers based at Great Zimbabwe (Beach, 1980, 45).

In *Shona and Zimbabwe*, Beach cites 58 references on archaeology and of these, nine came from Peter Garlake and 14 from Thomas Huffman. His first chapter (Beach 1980, 1-51) is largely based on the works of these two scholars. Huffman was still in Zimbabwe by the mid-1970s, Garlake having been exiled a few years earlier. Beach's reliance on him is indicated in the acknowledgements page:

Dr T. N. Huffman, then of the Queen Victoria Museum, Salisbury, who over six years was ever ready to help an historian understand something of archaeology and, especially, to make it clear why archaeologists have come to their conclusions. His willingness to divulge information at a moment's notice played a major part in the making of this book. To Mr Paul Sinclair, then of the Zimbabwe Museum, Fort Victoria, I owe my introduction to territorial archaeology and a fascinating insight into the site territory of Zimbabwe.

Shona and Zimbabwe tries to a considerable extent to remove the bias created by archaeologists resulting from their studies of ceramics and the chronological sequences that ensued. He rightly observed that:

... too many archaeological texts in the past have given me the impression that the country was inhabited by pots rather than people (Beach, 1980, xiii).

The only problem that I see in *Shona and Zimbabwe* is the failure to interpret available radiocarbon dates, which essentially deal with time brackets rather than actual years. This is so because archaeological evidence is — and even during the most recent periods when historical evidence is abundant — essentially about communities and not individuals, establishing processes of human development rather than specific events. This limitation is seen in Beach's dating of some Later Iron Age cultures on the Zimbabwe Plateau:

The first of these groups is known as the Leopard's Kopje culture, and it settled in the south-west of the Plateau after about 940. By about 1020 it had extended itself to the Limpopo valley lowland. The second, known as the Gumanye culture, was found in the south of the Plateau in the middle courses of the Mtilikwe, Tokwe, and Lundi rivers and is so far dated at only one spot, about 1090 (Beach, 1980, 18-19).

This however, may be regarded as a minor setback given his overall appreciation of the discipline of archaeology, prehistory and the origins of the early Shona. When Beach was commissioned to contribute a chapter on the precolonial history of the Zimbabwe Plateau which subsequently appeared in *History of Central Africa* (Beach, 1983b), he had clearly mastered the debate between archaeologists and linguists on the Bantu, and particularly on the origins of the Shona. This is also demonstrated in a book that he published for the Zimbabwean market (Beach, 1984). He says this in the introduction:

Efforts have been made to bring in the findings of research published since 1981, and also to make it more relevant to the needs of Zimbabweans. In particular, it has become clear that teachers and students often find it difficult to reconcile the different views of archaeologists and historians, especially when they contradict each other or supplying insufficient evidence for their argument.

He also used the same opportunity to respond to Garlake's (1983) earlier criticism of *Shona and Zimbabwe* (1980) that "it suffers badly from a complete and uncritical reliance on a single source for all its archaeological interpretations". Garlake was referring to Beach's use of Huffman's theory of Shona origins from south of the Limpopo. Beach pointed out that given the delays in the publication of his book, and the appearance of Phillipson's *Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* (1977) when the former was at a very advanced stage, Huffman's theory was "the best explanation of the evidence that has yet appeared, however much it may be modified by later findings" (Beach, 1984, 67; 1980, 19-21).

It was also in Beach's *Zimbabwe Before 1900* (1984) that he made some of the most explicit statements about what archaeology was and what it ought to do. Commenting on the debates on the chapter on environment and prehistory, which, in my opinion, is the best example of environmental archaeology (pp. 5-19), he had this to say, '... archaeology deals with humans in the past, it is essentially a science and not part of the humanities' (Beach, 1984, 66).

In terms of approaches to the analysis of archaeological material he pointed out that:

... when it comes to such matters as disagreement between two archaeologists over pottery classifications, the historian often has problems deciding whose view — if either — to choose (Beach, 1984, 66).

It was also in the same publication that he admitted that archaeology was a fast growing discipline with the potential to alter radically the view of the African past:

New archaeological papers come thick and fast, so that as fast as a general overview is written, it is usually obsolete by the time it is published (Beach, 1984, 66).

Indeed it was becoming extremely hard to catch up with developments in the field(s) of archaeology despite the need to compile overviews for the benefit of historians. Thus the only archaeological debate he sustained consistently was that involving Great Zimbabwe (Beach, 1980; 1983a; 1984) even after shifting his interests towards demographic history during the mid- to late 1980s. His third chapter in *Zimbabwe Before 1900* where he examines precolonial states prior to 1700 (Beach, 1984, 24-29) carries

a lively debate on Great Zimbabwe involving earlier racist views, the first professionals, Peter Gariake, Thomas Huffman and himself (see also commentary on pp. 70-73). It was in this publication as well as his earlier work on oral tradition and archaeology (Beach, 1983a) that he demonstrated some faults in Huffman's (1981; 1984) interpretations of Great Zimbabwe. I will comment on this in the last section of this article. By that time he was also becoming increasingly fascinated by the use of spatial analysis in archaeology. He was to make another significant contribution to the analysis of Shona settlement on the Zimbabwe Plateau using aspects of spatial studies gleaned from Paul Sinclair (1984; 1987). I now turn to his publications after 1985 to illustrate these points.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE MID-1980S TO THE EARLY 1990S

Between 1985 and 1994, Beach published few articles with a direct reference to Zimbabwean prehistory and archaeology. As pointed out above, he was developing an interest in demographic history and reading more Portuguese sources (see Beach, 1990a; 1990b; 1990c). He had also realised the need to publish some of the oral data he had accumulated during the 1970s and which could not be accommodated in *Shona and Zimbabwe* (see Beach, 1989; 1994a). Thus the only substantial article on archaeology published in the late 1980s highlighted the potential of the discipline in illuminating and sometimes altering our view of events of the 19th century which until then had been dwarfed by the readily available written sources, especially pertaining to the mfecane (Beach, 1988).

The publication on the Zimbabwe State (Beach, 1993) was essentially more of a commentary and an overview than a significant contribution to the field of archaeology and Zimbabwean prehistory. It was in 1994 that Beach published a book on the peoples of the Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent regions. The book is essentially based on his "Great Crescent" theory. Stemming from Sinclair's (1984; 1987) spatial studies of archaeological sites from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, Beach argued that since pre-colonial times the Shona had always preferred settling in a crescent shaped zone stretching and covering the areas of Makonde and Guruve in the north, east through Mutoko, Makoni and Manyika, south to Buhera, Bikita, Chivi, and Mberengwa, and then south-west towards the present Botswana. These settlement locations seemed to confirm the archaeological evidence for the period AD 300 to AD 1300 and reflected a long-term preference for those plateau environments. This is highlighted in the opening chapter of *The Shona and Their Neighbours* (1994b).

While the "Great Crescent" theory forms a useful model in understanding Shona settlement processes on the Plateau since prehistoric times it assumes rather dangerously that the country is well

surveyed archaeologically, which is not the case. Very little archaeological work has been carried out in the Zambezi and Limpopo lowlands, but the data that is currently available already suggests prehistoric settlement existed in the very same areas which are treated today as marginal environments. Beach therefore underplays environmental changes in determining settlement shifts between the various Plateau zones and adjacent lowlands. The model is also based on the state of colonial archaeology, which relied heavily on reports of numerous later Stone Age rock art sites in the hilly, higher altitude areas compared to the Iron Age and later settlements in the same regions. In my opinion the model — although well conceived and generally accurate on a macro-scale such as the whole of the Zimbabwe Plateau — is not clearly articulated to account for earlier, pre-Shona settlement dynamics in relation to environmental changes. Beach could be forgiven for lack of relevant environmental data which is now becoming available to historians and archaeologists but whose interpretation is set to be very controversial.

It is unfortunate perhaps that readers of *The Shona and Their Neighbours* — and this includes some historians, radical archaeologists, students and nationalists — have understood the model to mean that the Shona never preferred the richer, heavier soils associated with the highveld. The Europeans, ostensibly, found these areas generally empty. With the current debate on the land question the “Great Crescent” theory has been regarded by some as a deliberate attempt by Beach to perpetuate White/Rhodesian colonial interests. While historians would better handle this debate, his comments at the inaugural lecture failed to put the matter to rest. He has this to say for the “Great Crescent”:

Modern writers seem to forget that the Natural Regions were originally defined with white immigrants in mind, not the African people of the country. Nobody involved in the current land question will get much comfort from my research as it requires a modification of practically all accepted views (Beach 1999, p. 9, footnote 8).

The quotation is as controversial as the “Great Crescent” theory itself, but perhaps the value of *The Shona and Their Neighbours* lies in underscoring the impact of spatial studies in archaeology that many Zimbabwean scholars have failed to realise. More discussion is required to understand how Beach managed to combine demographic history and spatial analyses to come out with a theory/model of Shona settlement on the Zimbabwe Plateau since the late first millennium AD. Perhaps the inability by scholars to promptly comment on this model was overtaken by “new” approaches towards the interpretation of Great Zimbabwe pioneered by Thomas Huffman (1981; 1984; 1996). Huffman’s structuralist model generated considerable debate during the second half of the 1990s of which Beach took an active part.

THE PERIOD 1995 TO PRESENT

During the early 1990s, Professor Beach had firmly embarked on his research projects on the regional and economic histories of northern and eastern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique covering the period 1500 to 1900. His research on the traditions of the Saunyama and Manyika people in eastern Zimbabwe and the Portuguese documents referring to the same region invited a fresher look into the archaeology of the Nyanga complex. Using population data, totems and languages, local histories, evidence for the mfecane and famine, and available cattle figures, he tentatively concluded that the complex 'was primarily (but not exclusively) the work of the people of Unyama and northern Manyika' (Beach, 1996, 717). He urged archaeologists working in the area to consider more seriously local Shona history and anthropology than had been the case so far (p. 718).

The period since 1995 is however dominated by two publications on Great Zimbabwe (Beach, 1997; 1998) in reaction to Huffman's earlier work, but particularly the book *Snakes and Crocodiles: Power and Symbolism in Ancient Zimbabwe* (1996). This book is a cognitive study of the Zimbabwe culture buildings, interpreting the various units of space on the site using oral traditions, written sources and archaeological data.

In his 1997 article published in *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* Beach had clearly lost patience with Huffman's approaches to the study and interpretation of Great Zimbabwe and its sister sites. He pointed out what archaeologists had to do to avoid a clash between models applied in their discipline and other sources, in this case, history. Huffman's grasp of essential historical methodology was regarded as inadequate, while his collection and use of oral tradition did not possess the level of competence required. This critique was published when Beach had already written another detailed article, "Cognitive archaeology and imaginary history at Great Zimbabwe", which appeared in *Current Anthropology* in February 1998. This article critiques Huffman's interpretation of Great Zimbabwe since 1977 (see also Beach, 1983a). Beach (1998) set out to conduct a rigorous study in the use of oral tradition and written documents in the interpretation of archaeological evidence. He attempted to offer an alternative model in explaining the growth of Great Zimbabwe — *historical process* — using the knowledge of Shona society to good effect.

I was asked by the editors of the same journal to comment on Beach's article (see pp. 64-65) and together with seven other scholars, were generally agreed that Beach's critique of Huffman and his own alternative model were necessary in the interpretation of Great Zimbabwe. I was perhaps less lenient or polite with Beach than any other commentator

because of what I regarded as controversial details relating to the distribution and builders of the Zimbabwe culture buildings in the opening statements of his article. I even pointed out that his treatment of oral tradition was turning out to be hypercritical to the point of rendering them useless, obscuring the essential historical facts in the process. What I also considered as unsatisfactory was the argument that since Great Zimbabwe was a major political centre, oral traditions and written sources could be used to interpret its development in terms of political process. This alternative model to Huffman's supposedly fit the available archaeological data but failed to explain the meaning of the architecture of Great Zimbabwe. Both Beach and Huffman appeared to have problems in the perception of cultural continuity (see pp. 60-61), and therefore the whole interpretation and debate about Great Zimbabwe is essentially based on how the different scholars including these two approached the issues. Both Beach and Huffman were not fluent in the Shona language and therefore had to omit certain aspects of Shona cosmology, which their sources could not accurately or properly convey to them, for example, the many rituals surrounding the Shona courts. I suggested the need to focus research efforts on the study of cultural landscapes to understand many hidden aspects of the Shona past. This however, remains largely unfulfilled by recent research but is worthwhile considering for the archaeology of the 21st century.

THE FUTURE

Professor Beach passed away prematurely on the 15th February 1999. Many of us are clearly at loss over what to do next. It is critical if not imperative to continue from where he left but this is not a simple task. Beach had an elaborate research programme designed to see him through his proposed retirement towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century. He had clearly scheduled his research plans and amassed large quantities of data. The areas covered include northern and eastern Zimbabwe as well as the central parts of Mozambique. If the Department of History is to sustain the teaching and research in the histories of Zimbabwe and adjacent regions, competence has to be developed in the fields of research left by Professor Beach. The potential danger cannot be underestimated for one only has to read Beach's comments in the appendix of his inaugural lecture, where he listed all his 63 publications:

Numbers of publications, in any case, take no account of the actual amount and complexity of the research that led to them. I supply this list because, for reasons outside my control, I have become almost the only remaining academic historian of four centuries of pre-colonial Zimbabwean history. Not only is this an unhealthy situation in itself but

it seems to have led to a situation where few academics in the fields that surround mine are fully aware of what I have been doing (Beach, 1999, 30).

When Beach said this last year, I felt very uncomfortable because as an administrator and fellow colleague, I knew exactly what he meant, but I could not do anything then. What we need to do as a Department is groom our postgraduates in the field of pre-colonial Zimbabwe. This requires institutional and national understanding of what it means to teach such a field of history at university, and what we expect our graduates to achieve when they go out to teach in schools and colleges.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although Beach was not an archaeologist — and he never pretended to be one — he made a significant contribution towards the understanding of archaeology especially of the last two millennia. His historical approaches, meticulous concern with detail and critical analyses of historical sources clearly signified the value of multi-disciplinary approaches in the study of the past. Archaeology is one such discipline and Beach used it accordingly. Thus archaeology to him was a long-term history rather than a science, fitting within the broader context of historical studies.

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