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*Tradition, Archaeological Heritage Protection and
Communities in the Limpopo Province of South Africa* by
Innocent Pikirayi (review)

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Collaborative Anthropologies, Volume 7, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 87-91
(Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cla.2014.0000>

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by the VCC) while highlighting the dialectical relationship between these “national” definitions and the interpretations of foreign anthropologists.

The book’s epilogue, by Margaret Jolly, emphasizes that the 1985–94 research moratorium, while possibly upsetting to foreign graduate students and other scholars looking forward to fieldwork in Vanuatu, was ultimately a good thing: it resulted in the production of research guidelines that have since been used as a model of best practices by UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and others. Seven years following Afta 26 Yia, in 2013 the Vanuatu National Cultural Council approved a second moratorium, in effect until 2014, in order to rethink current guidelines and ensure that future researchers comply with national policies on collaboration. For those concerned by this act of research sovereignty, this book is a helpful reminder that collaboration and compromise have helped, not hindered, the production of anthropological knowledge about Vanuatu and its people.

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Innocent Pikirayi. *Tradition, Archaeological Heritage Protection and Communities in the Limpopo Province of South Africa*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), 2011. 128 pp. Paper, \$24.95.

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Archaeologists and African communities increasingly seek more collaborative approaches to heritage conservation. While material finds offer important historical sources and a potential foil against intellectual colonialism, archaeology as a discipline continues to struggle to articulate its relevance to multiple audiences, often including the people linked, in a historical or cultural sense, to archaeological sites. In this volume Innocent Pikirayi—a professor at the University of Pretoria and a specialist on the later archaeology of southern Africa—addresses contemporary traditions and heritage challenges on the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Throughout his

study the author employs ethnographic archaeology to engage Venda communities. He further draws from observations of the neighboring Shona, Sotho, and Tswana, all of whom occupy the border intersections of Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Pikirayi asks how, by collaborating with Venda communities, archaeologists might engage present society and make archaeology more relevant and useful to people and their cultural traditions. He urges scholars of heritage to attend to the loss of tangible heritage related to long-term pasts but also to know, value, and integrate people and their worldviews into more critical collaborations of mutual benefit to conservation. The author strives to think beyond traditional archaeology to redefine the discipline in modern South Africa and to bring heritage practices more into line with anthropology and social justice initiatives.

The archaeological sites and setting of southern Africa provide remarkable examples of heritage destruction and contests, including the complex relationships among people, practices, and politics in the post-apartheid era. The outcomes of colonialism, racial injustice, and impoverishment impact the Venda. Pikirayi's work joins the scholarship of his colleagues—Shadreck Chirikure, Joost Fontein, Lynn Meskell, Webber Ndoro, and Nick Shepherd—in seeking to empower African communities through the dual project of addressing pasts and, via responsible and collaborative practices, making better futures possible. Such an endeavor necessitates “aware” archaeologists and a “direct involvement” (63) with people that prioritizes community participation in heritage management. To this end Pikirayi raises three questions (4–5) addressed in seven chapters: (1) How does the African public in Limpopo Province access, interact with, and use sites to negotiate the past and present? (2) How do communities identify archaeological and landscape localities of significance and how do they conserve them? And (3) can the discipline of archaeology serve the Venda and related groups in the context of poverty and development. Key concepts—“tradition” and “conservation”—frame the volume and enable Pikirayi's assertion that the preservation of archaeological heritage means scientific assessments and protections but also, and perhaps more important, the “spiritual and symbolic” conservation of meaningful localities by African participants (13, 72).

The author launches the text with concise introductory chapters that provide a background about the region, its people, and the emphasized archaeology. Moreover, he introduces and defines key concepts related

to ethnographic archaeology and cultural heritage. The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape—a World Heritage Site—contains the location of the first ancient chiefdom and state known in southern Africa, with an origin in the late first millennium AD. The region’s cultural attributes include the stone-walled structures that characterize the area’s large-scale societies through the middle second millennium AD. For decades colonial officials secretly hid Mapungubwe’s gold and other artifacts and determinedly attributed to non-African builders the impressive worked-stone structures of Great Zimbabwe, some 250 miles to the north.

In chapter 4 Pikirayi presents the results of “condition assessments”: evaluations of the physical impacts to archaeological remains. He demonstrates the natural breakdown of ancient structures and the negative impacts of soil erosion and certain development projects on the cultural landscape. Improperly backfilled excavation trenches and mounds of unburied archaeological refuse implicate colonial period archaeologists in site destruction and deterioration, especially at places that possess tangible remains important to the Venda, like Bambandyanalo and Mapungubwe Hill. What do these impacts and losses mean for the Venda? And how do the Venda ensure the protection and meaningfulness of places critical to their worldviews and the spirits of their ancestors?

It is at the beginning of chapter 3 that collaboration enters Pikirayi’s narrative and gains its pragmatic footing. The author maintains a self-conscious desire to move beyond purely scientific practice and material interpretations to engage, observe, participate in, and witness community conversations, rituals, and ceremonies at the sites. In chapters 3 through 5 Pikirayi summarizes the results of oral interviews and observations of Venda clans and their cultural practices. He documents the meanings and vulnerabilities of communities and the spirits of Venda ancestors who are attached to cultural features on the regional landscape. Based on his project, Pikirayi is adamant that defining “cultural heritage” is “self-defeating” (87). Rather “we [archaeologists] should focus on understanding how heritage works in any given cultural and historical context” (85). Heritage “performances”—cultural expressions and practices tied to localities, an idea borrowed from Joost Fontein and his work at Great Zimbabwe—effectively manages “people’s efforts to adapt to the contestations and competitive demands of the modern world” (87). There is an undeniable spiritual importance in Venda places. Repetitive rituals, such as ceremonies tied to rain making, cleansing, and girls’ puberty initiations, help to protect sites from

desecration just as these same places comprise a materialization of Venda spirits and experiences necessary to orient rituals properly (89–90).

Pikirayi's use of ethnographic methods to generate a space for dialogue with Venda communities reveals that "[present] contestations about the past are legitimized through ritual and ceremony" (40). This interpretation and its implications are significant, for example, as they relate to the Venda and their mourning of the "loss of tradition" following archaeologists' exhumation of human remains at sites. Contemporary Venda practices, Pikirayi argues, help link scholars to the "cognitive world" of heritage contests and community disenchantments forged in both the colonial and postcolonial eras. The author accepts that there is no direct genealogical linkage between present Venda clans and the remains of stone-walled archaeological sites (a conclusion accepted among most anthropologists). But to him, this is less important than how the Venda community conserves, deploys, and remakes the meanings they link to archaeological sites as cultural spaces (30–40). The volume discusses and implies that through such unique places, communities wrestle with their present social conditions and generate futures that come to terms with Venda experiences and contexts. Thus, in Pikirayi's estimation, a collaborative social archaeology is a pathway to civic engagement in southern Africa.

In the past, archaeologists excavated human remains at sites on the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, and museums housed and displayed the remains. To demonstrate the importance of knowing Venda worldviews and how this kind of collaboration impacts effective conservation, Pikirayi argues that "death" archaeology among the Venda should be about ancestors and traditions (91), and not treatments of human remains and burials as solely material features. The author discusses at some length Venda and regional worldviews that connect the living and the dead (94–98) and how, for the Venda, these two comprise and empower each another. As one outcome of the collaborative archaeology Pikirayi advocates, he describes ceremonies surrounding the reburial of human remains originally excavated by archaeologists at Bambandyanalo (K2), Hamilton, Mapungubwe Hill, and Schroda. The University of Pretoria, Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, South African Heritage Resources Agency, government authorities, and representatives of Venda clans reburied the remains in November 2007 (58–60). Guided by stipulations in the South African Heritage Resources

Act, these ceremonies and other associated practices demonstrate the meaningfulness of cultural traditions in managing archaeological sites in a manner that attends to Venda beliefs and Venda needs. Pikirayi writes that the preservation and retention of the tangible and intangible is “conditioned by and through social interaction” (85).

Tradition is convincing as a set of arguments on behalf of a different kind of collaboration with communities, for the purpose of heritage conservation. The volume has strengths and shortcomings. One of the assets of Pikirayi’s narrative is its black-and-white photos, especially those that capture ceremonies and the reburial of excavated human remains (e.g., 55–60). Purely descriptive in places, the text also offers critical reflections that will alert instructors and archaeology students to the importance of ethnography and social concerns in archaeological practice and heritage conservation. But for a text that strives to move beyond “traditional” archaeology, the volume might have been organized without numerous subsection titles that often unnecessarily parse the narrative into a form that mimics a report. In addition, some of data might have been presented more succinctly with graphics to minimize repetition (e.g., 64–68) and provide space for elaborating the subtleties of cases and extrapolating the present implications for Venda clans, heritage collaborations, and world archaeology. There also is no index. But these are minor points and perhaps decisions made by the publisher.

Tradition contains insights and examples that motivate a deeper understanding of the role that a more engaged and collaborative archaeology can play in proactive responses to people and archaeological heritage. The informed public, upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars of archaeology, heritage, and Africa will find it useful. Pikirayi’s ethnographic archaeology and Venda cultural traditions valorize collaborative strategies of benefit to communities, external stakeholders, and scholars that reinforce a new path for heritage conservation in southern Africa. Valuing the Venda, and all people, prioritizes them and their needs on cultural landscapes and helps to conserve places and practices.

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