Nyatsimba Mutota - The Ancient Great Ruler, Cultural and Social Reformer in Southern Africa

Tafara Marazi

University of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Nyatsimba Mutota, the fifteenth-century founder of the Mutapa state, remains one of the most consequential yet under-celebrated political, cultural and social reformers in the precolonial history of Southern Africa. Oral traditions, early Portuguese chronicles and archaeological evidence agree that Mutota led a migration northwards from the Great Zimbabwe area into the Dande and middle Zambezi valley region, where he founded a new polity whose rulers carried the title Mwene Mutapa. Although his achievements laid the foundations for one of the largest and most influential states in the region between the 15th and 17th centuries, Mutota is seldom afforded the central place he deserves in African historical, sociological and cultural scholarship. This article is based on a qualitative secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, heritage management reports, international conventions and national policy documents, drawing particularly on the work of Mudenge, Beach, Pikirayi, Chanaiwa, Bhila and Bourdillon. Afrocentricity provides the theoretical lens. The analysis identifies five interlocking themes: Mutota's political founding of a new state and the innovation of the Mwene Mutapa office; his economic reforms and insertion of the state into long-distance Indian Ocean trade; his religious and spiritual reforms linking rulership to the mhondoro cult and the Mwari high god tradition; his social and cultural reforms concerning kinship, succession and titles; and the marginalisation of his legacy under colonial historiography and its potential revival in twenty-first-century African education and heritage policy. The article argues that recovering Mutota as a founder figure is essential to any African-centred account of state formation, governance and cultural identity in Southern Africa. It recommends community-centred heritage management, sustainable support for custodian communities and further participatory research with the descendants of the Mutapa polity.

Keywords: Nyatsimba Mutota; Mutapa state; Mwene Mutapa; Shona history; precolonial African statecraft; indigenous governance; cultural and social reform; mhondoro tradition; Afrocentricity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Nyatsimba Mutota occupies a foundational place in the political and cultural history of Southern Africa, yet he is seldom named alongside the figures who are routinely celebrated as the great rulers of the African past. In the course of the fifteenth century he is reported to have led a migration out of the plateau of the Great Zimbabwe tradition, crossing the escarpment into the Dande and middle Zambezi valley and founding a new state whose rulers would carry the title Mwene Mutapa, from which Europeans derived the name Monomotapa (Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). The polity he established survived in various forms for more than three centuries, controlled the gold, ivory and salt trades of a wide region and became the first African state in the interior of Southern Africa to enter into sustained diplomatic and commercial contact with Portugal, maintaining embassies, treaties and tributary relationships that extended as far as the royal court in Lisbon (Bhila, 1982; Pikirayi, 2001). Oral traditions preserved among Shona communities in Zimbabwe and Mozambique remember Mutota as the originator of an entire line of paramount rulers, as the reformer of the customs of chieftainship and as the author of a new political and ritual order (Abraham, 1959; Bourdillon, 1987).

Despite this significance, Mutota has not received the sustained scholarly and public attention accorded to figures such as Shaka of the Zulu, Sundiata of Mali or Mansa Musa. The literature on the Mutapa state is

extensive, but much of it treats Mutota as a shadowy founder whose personal agency is difficult to reconstruct, and attention has often shifted quickly to the dramatic encounters between his successors and Portuguese traders, missionaries and soldiers (Chanaiwa, 1972; Newitt, 1995). In the twenty-first century, the memory of Mutota is sustained unevenly: he appears in school textbooks and in occasional heritage commemorations in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, but the physical sites associated with his reign, such as the stone-walled courts at Zvongombe and the hill shrines of the Dande are poorly interpreted and under-protected (Pikirayi, 2001; Garlake, 1973). The article addresses that neglect by examining Nyatsimba Mutota as an ancient great ruler and as a cultural and social reformer whose innovations continue to shape African ways of understanding leadership, community and the sacred.

Contemporary developments provide an important policy context. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) commits the state to the preservation of national history and heritage, while the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework 2024–2030 introduced by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2024) places heritage, indigenous knowledge and the philosophy of unhu/ubuntu at the centre of the education system. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) further legitimises the protection of the oral traditions, ritual practices and knowledge systems through which Mutota's legacy is transmitted. These frameworks create a favourable environment in which to re-examine the Mutapa founder and to reassess the place of precolonial African statecraft in national memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising precolonial African statecraft and reform

The study of precolonial African polities has moved steadily away from the colonial assumption that complex state institutions in the region were imported from outside. Mudenge (1988) demonstrates at length that the Mutapa state developed in continuity with earlier Shona political traditions. Pikirayi (2001) shows that the stone-walled centres of the Zimbabwe culture, Khami, Danangombe and the Mutapa settlements represent an unbroken sequence of indigenous state formation. Vansina (1990) argues more generally that African state-building in equatorial and Southern Africa drew on political imagination rooted in kinship, ritual and the control of trade, rather than on imported models. Within this body of thought, reformer figures such as Nyatsimba Mutota are important for they mark moments at which political and cultural institutions were reorganised to meet new challenges. The concept of reform used in the article refers both to deliberate innovation by rulers and to the gradual restructuring of social, economic and religious institutions that accompanies such innovation.

Great Zimbabwe, migration and the Mutapa origins

Several scholars have situated Mutota within the longer trajectory of the Zimbabwe culture. Huffman (1996, 2007) presents archaeological evidence for the growth and decline of Great Zimbabwe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and Pikirayi (2001) traces the political reconfiguration that followed its decline, with the emergence of new centres at Khami and in the Mutapa heartland. Garlake (1973) and Beach (1980) describe the exhaustion of resources, the shifting of trade routes and the political competition that may have motivated the northward move associated with Mutota. Oral traditions collected by Abraham (1959, 1962) and reinterpreted by Beach (1980) and Mudenge (1988) identify Mutota as a prince of the Great Zimbabwe royal lineage who led his followers in search of salt and new lands, conquered the Tavara and other peoples of the Dande and established his capital at Zvongombe. Newitt (1995) emphasises the strategic importance of the Zambezi valley for Mutota's new polity, situated as it was between the plateau and the Indian Ocean trading network.

Nyatsimba Mutota and the founding narrative

The specific figure of Mutota has been studied most systematically by Mudenge (1988), whose political history of the Mutapa state is the standard reference. Mudenge argues that Mutota was not merely a conqueror but a political architect who created a new office and a new state ideology, articulating the title Mwene Mutapa, often translated as "Lord of the Conquered Lands" or "Master Plunderer", around his person and his

lineage. Abraham (1959) and Bhila (1982) show that the founding narrative was elaborated and contested in later generations, and that different versions emphasise different aspects of Mutota's reign. Chanaiwa (1972) interprets the founding story as evidence of the political and ideological work required to establish a new centre of authority, including the subordination of previously independent lineages and the incorporation of their mediums into a state-wide ritual network. Bourdillon (1987) and Lan (1985) later show how these founding narratives continue to shape the political culture of the Shona.

Trade, economy and religion in the Mutapa era

The economic dimension of the Mutapa state has been examined by Bhila (1982), who documents the exchange of gold, ivory, copper and iron for cloth, beads and ceramics at fairs such as those at Masapa and Dambarare. Newitt (1995) and Chanaiwa (1972) analyse the complex relationships between Mutapa rulers and Swahili and Portuguese traders, showing that long-distance exchange was integral to the fiscal base of the state. Religion has been studied by Gelfand (1962), Bourdillon (1987) and Lan (1985), who document the mhondoro cult of royal ancestor spirits, and by Ranger (1999), who connects the Mwari high god tradition of the Matopos to wider regional religious currents. These works suggest that Mutota's reign is best understood as a moment at which economic, political and religious institutions were woven together into a distinctive form of statecraft.

Heritage, memory and contested history

Pwiti and Ndoro (1999) and Ndoro (2005) argue that colonial historiography systematically distorted the history of precolonial African states, including the Mutapa. Early European writers attributed Great Zimbabwe and related ruins to Phoenicians, Arabs or biblical figures, in a move that Beach (1980) describes as a deliberate denial of African capacity for state formation. Chirikure and Pwiti (2008) and Chirikure et al. (2010) show that heritage management in Zimbabwe and the region has often continued to marginalise descendant communities. Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) argue that the devaluation of indigenous knowledge in African education has prevented successive generations from engaging meaningfully with figures such as Mutota.

Nyatsimba Mutota, the wafa Wanaka totem, identity and social unit

Oral traditions among the Korekore of the Dande and Guruve link Nyatsimba Mutota to the Soko (monkey) totem and its praise name or chidawo, Wafawanaka. Among the Shona, the mutupo or totem identifies a clan through an animal or part of an animal that its members may not eat, while the chidawo distinguishes sub-clans and anchors the praise poetry through which the history of a lineage is recited (Bourdillon, 1987). Local traditions describe the forebears of many Soko Wafawanaka houses as people who came from Guruuswa and settled in the Dande in the course of the migration associated with Mutota, and several Korekore chieftaincies and headmanships in the region still identify themselves as Soko Wafawanaka. The eastern part of the Dande is itself known locally as Mutota, and Lan (1985) shows that the mhondoro of Mutota stands among the most senior royal spirits of the valley, whose mediums play a central role in legitimating chiefs. The traditions are not uniform, however. Other versions associate the Mutapa founder with the Nzou Samanyanga clan, Mudenge (1988) notes that the founding traditions are telescoped, and Beach (1980) suggests that Mutota may in part be a symbolic figure. According to other traditions, Nyatsimba was a very powerful leader who built his kindom after conquering many tribes including the Tonga and the Tavara people. After successfully establishing his chieftaincy, Nyarsimba Mutota grew old and died. His subjects respected him and regarded him as a guardian spirit of the whole chieftaincy after his death.

When the conquered tribes heard that he was being honoured as a guardian spirit, they were thrilled; remembering all his military prowess; employing warfare tactics which they considered super. Thus the Mutota figure prominently featured as a unifying force among the people in his polity. The tribes then remarked "wafa Wanaka" meaning a person is holy after death. Through an Afrocentric lens, the Wafawanaka totem is best understood as part of Mutota's wider social and cultural reform rather than as a mere label of descent. Totemic identity regulated marriage through clan exogamy and bound dispersed households into a moral community stretching from the plateau into the valley (Bourdillon, 1987). By carrying a shared mutupo

and chidawo into newly conquered territory, Mutota's followers created a portable identity that distinguished the incoming royal houses from the Tavara and other earlier inhabitants of the Dande (Lan, 1985). Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that the totem is the emblem through which a group represents itself and its sacred unity, and Soko Wafawanaka praise poetry recited at installations and funerals performs this function by narrating origin, migration and ancestral achievement. The persistence of the totem among Korekore communities in Guruve and the wider Dande demonstrates that Mutota's legacy survives not only in ruins and records but in everyday practices of naming, greeting and praising. From an Afrocentric standpoint, recognising this living heritage restores ordinary people as the custodians of Mutota's memory (Asante, 2003; Mapara, 2009).

Gaps in the literature

Literature demonstrates that the Mutapa state as a whole has been well studied, but that the figure of Nyatsimba Mutota is rarely examined in his own right as a political, economic, religious, social and cultural reformer. Few studies combine archaeological, historical, oral and anthropological evidence within an explicitly Afrocentric frame. The article seeks to address these gaps through a secondary analysis of the existing scholarship.

Theoretical framework: Afrocentricity

The article is anchored in Afrocentricity, a theoretical paradigm associated principally with Molefi Kete Asante. Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as a mode of thought and action in which African interests, values and perspectives predominate, and in which African people are treated as subjects and agents of their own history rather than as objects on the margins of European experience. Mazama (2001) describes the Afrocentric paradigm as one that places African experience at the centre of analysis and rejects the assumption that European cultural standards constitute a universal measure of value. Central to the paradigm is the concept of location, which refers to the cultural, historical and psychological place from which a person or a phenomenon is viewed. From an Afrocentric standpoint, the problem with much historical scholarship on precolonial African rulers is that their achievements have been analysed from a dislocated position, using concepts and categories derived from European political traditions (Asante, 2003).

Afrocentricity resonates with a wider body of African decolonial thought. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonialism operated not only through political and economic domination but also through the colonisation of the mind, by which Africans were taught to devalue their own languages, cultures and histories. Mkabela (2005) and Chilisa (2020) have translated these insights into methodological terms, arguing that research on African indigenous culture should be grounded in African worldviews, value community knowledge and contribute to the well-being of the communities concerned. In Zimbabwe, Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) have applied similar reasoning to indigenous knowledge systems, arguing that they were deliberately marginalised by colonial education and remain undervalued in the postcolonial era.

Afrocentricity is particularly appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it provides a basis for explaining why Mutota and other precolonial African rulers have been marginalised in mainstream historical writing. From an Afrocentric perspective, their neglect is not accidental but reflects the long-standing devaluation of African political achievement, in which African states have been treated as derivative or primitive rather than as sophisticated expressions of indigenous statecraft. Second, the paradigm's emphasis on agency allows the article to foreground Mutota and the communities he led as the creators and custodians of their own political and cultural order. Third, the paradigm has a practical orientation towards cultural renewal, which aligns with the article's concern with revitalisation and with policy developments such as Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article adopted a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis involves the analysis of data that were collected by other researchers or institutions for purposes other than the

current study (Johnston, 2014). Heaton (2008) notes that the secondary analysis of qualitative material allows researchers to address new questions using existing data, to synthesise findings across studies and settings and to study phenomena that would be difficult or costly to investigate through primary fieldwork. This approach was considered appropriate for the article sought to integrate scholarship on Mutota that has developed in separate disciplinary traditions and to examine a historical figure across a wide geographical area and over a long historical period. The approach aligns with Afrocentric methodology, which encourages researchers to re-read existing knowledge from an African-centred location (Mkabela, 2005).

Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, doctoral theses, heritage management reports, published collections of oral traditions, international conventions and national policy documents. Sources were identified through searches of databases and repositories including Taylor and Francis Online, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), Sabinet, Google Scholar and the open archives of ICOMOS and ICCROM, as well as institutional repositories of Zimbabwean, Mozambican and South African universities. Search terms included combinations of 'Nyatsimba Mutota', 'Mutapa', 'Mwene Mutapa', 'Monomotapa', 'Great Zimbabwe', 'Dande', 'mhondoro', 'Mwari', 'Shona history' and 'precolonial African state'.

Data analysis

The selected documents were analysed using document analysis and thematic analysis. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents, which involves skimming, reading and interpretation in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. Thematic analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Codes were generated inductively from the documents and then interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. Five themes emerged from the process. They are presented and discussed together in the following section.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness was enhanced by drawing on multiple types of sources, which allowed for the triangulation of evidence (Bowen, 2009), and by prioritising peer-reviewed and institutional sources. The use of secondary data nonetheless has limitations. The researchers were dependent on the questions, contexts and interpretations of the original authors, and some sources, particularly early Portuguese chronicles and colonial-era historians, reflect perspectives that this article critically interrogates. In addition, the historical record for Mutota himself is thinner than for his successors, which makes reconstruction partly dependent on inference from later events and from oral tradition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nyatsimba Mutota and the political founding of the Mutapa state

The analysis shows that Mutota's most far-reaching achievement was the political founding of a new state and the invention of a durable office of paramount rule. Oral traditions and early Portuguese reports, synthesised by Abraham (1959, 1962) and later by Beach (1980) and Mudenge (1988) present Mutota as a prince of the Great Zimbabwe royal lineage who in the early fifteenth century led a northward migration across the escarpment into the Dande and middle Zambezi valley. There he conquered the Tavara, the Tonga and other local peoples and established his capital at Zvongombe, from which he and his descendants ruled over an expanding territory. The title Mwene Mutapa, crystallised around Mutota's reign, became the designation for an entire dynasty and, in distorted European form as Monomotapa, entered the diplomatic vocabulary of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Newitt, 1995; Bhila, 1982).

Mutota's political founding involved more than conquest. Mudenge (1988) argues that he reorganised the relationship between the paramount ruler and subordinate chiefs, requiring regular tribute, military service and ritual submission. Chanaiwa (1972) shows that Mutota and his successors appointed provincial governors, often drawn from the royal lineage, and maintained a network of royal courts linked by messengers, traders and spirit mediums. Garlake (1973) and Pikirayi (2001) note that the stone and daga courts of the Mutapa, while less monumental than Great Zimbabwe, were highly standardised and clearly reflect a centralised political ideology. Bhila (1982) adds that Mutota and his heirs developed a sophisticated system of royal messengers, known in the oral tradition as the vanyai, who carried instructions, collected tribute and conveyed intelligence between the capital and the provinces, functioning as an embryonic civil service long before the formal bureaucracies introduced during the colonial era. Beach (1980) further notes that the founding generation integrated a diverse population of Shona-speaking farmers, Tonga fishers and traders into a single political community through intermarriage, alliance and ritual incorporation, rather than through forced assimilation alone. These findings emphasise that Mutota's political achievement rested on institutional creativity as much as on military success. From an Afrocentric perspective, this theme recovers Mutota as a political architect of great ambition and skill, whose work refutes the colonial claim that precolonial Africans lacked the capacity for sustained state-building (Asante, 2003; Beach, 1980).

Economic reforms and the insertion of the state into long-distance trade

The second theme is that Mutota's reign marked a decisive economic reorientation of the Zimbabwe plateau polity towards the Zambezi valley and the Indian Ocean trading system. Bhila (1982) demonstrates that the Mutapa state derived much of its revenue from control of gold panning in its tributary areas, from ivory obtained through royal hunts and from the salt pans of the Zambezi and the Rukovakuona. The decision to move north has often been linked by scholars such as Beach (1980) and Newitt (1995) to the search for salt, which was both a dietary necessity and a valuable medium of exchange. Pikirayi (2001) notes archaeological evidence for imported ceramics, glass beads and cloth at Mutapa-era sites, pointing to intensive exchange with Swahili traders operating from the coastal city-states of Sofala, Kilwa and Mozambique Island.

Mutota's reforms created an institutional framework in which long-distance trade could be regulated, taxed and ritually legitimised. Mudenge (1988) describes the system of court fees, hongo tribute and royal monopolies on certain goods such as ivory and the finest gold. Chanaiwa (1972) and Bhila (1982) argue that this system allowed Mutapa rulers to redistribute imported goods as marks of political favour, strengthening bonds of loyalty between the paramount and subordinate chiefs. Newitt (1995) adds that the state's control of key river crossings and markets along the Zambezi gave it leverage over commercial routes. From an Afrocentric standpoint, these findings challenge the long-standing portrayal of African precolonial economies as isolated or subsistence-based. They show that Mutota presided over a complex political economy in which indigenous production, long-distance trade and political reward were tightly interwoven (Asante, 2003; Mazama, 2001).

Religious and spiritual reforms under Mutota

The third theme concerns religious and spiritual reform. The literature agrees that Mutota's reign was a moment of significant reconfiguration of the relationship between political authority and the sacred. Gelfand (1962) and Bourdillon (1987) document the mhondoro cult, in which the spirits of deceased rulers continue to speak through spirit mediums and to intervene in the affairs of the living. Lan (1985) shows that the mhondoro of Mutota and his successors became central points of reference in the religious geography of the Dande, where particular hills, pools and trees were associated with specific royal spirits. Ranger (1999) locates the Mutapa religious order within the wider regional complex that included the Mwari high god cult of the Matopos, with which it shared practices of rain-making and territorial protection.

Mutota's innovation lay in binding the office of Mwene Mutapa to a particular ritual order. Mudenge (1988) argues that the paramount was required to observe strict ritual prohibitions concerning fire, sexual conduct and the treatment of certain animals. His legitimacy depended on the recognition of senior mediums. Bhila (1982) and Chanaiwa (1972) note that the royal ancestors were invoked in state affairs ranging from succession disputes to the opening of trade with foreigners. Beach (1980) observes that Mutota's reforms both absorbed and transformed the religious traditions of the peoples he conquered, incorporating local tutelary spirits into a

broader framework centred on the royal line. From an Afrocentric perspective, this theme shows that political legitimacy in Mutota's state was grounded in an indigenous theology of ancestral presence, not in imported models. It further suggests that any contemporary attempt to recover African political traditions must engage seriously with the religious institutions through which those traditions were transmitted (Asante, 2003; Mkabela, 2005).

Social and cultural reforms: kinship, titles and governance

The fourth theme concerns Mutota's reforms of kinship, succession and the symbolic apparatus of governance. Mudenge (1988) and Abraham (1962) describe how Mutota established new rules for succession within the royal lineage, favouring collateral succession among brothers and cousins rather than strict father-to-son transmission. This system was designed to broaden the base of royal legitimacy, to prevent the concentration of power in a single branch of the family and to provide for stable transitions. Beach (1980) notes that these arrangements, while not always peaceful in practice, provided a flexible framework that enabled the Mutapa dynasty to endure through many generations. Bourdillon (1987) adds that similar principles continue to shape Shona chieftaincy succession today.

Mutota instituted a hierarchy of titles and offices that organised social life around the person of the paramount. Chanaiwa (1972) describes positions such as the nehanda, the ambuya or senior female relative of the ruler, and the various mambo or subordinate chiefs who governed districts of the state. Bhila (1982) notes that the court maintained an elaborate etiquette regulating audience with the paramount, the use of praise poetry and the handling of sacred objects such as royal drums and spears. These innovations constituted a cultural order in which political authority was performed through ceremony, language and material symbols. Lan (1985) and Ranger (1999) argue that the symbolic repertoire crystallised under Mutota continued to shape the cultural life of Shona communities long after the political decline of the Mutapa state. From an Afrocentric perspective, these findings demonstrate that Mutota was a cultural as well as a political reformer, whose work shaped the grammar of leadership in Southern Africa (Asante, 2003; Samkange & Samkange, 1980).

Marginalisation of Mutota's legacy and opportunities for revival

The fifth theme concerns the marginalisation of Mutota's legacy in colonial and postcolonial historiography and the opportunities for its revival in the twenty-first century. Early European writers, including Portuguese chroniclers, interpreted the Mutapa state largely through the lens of their own commercial and religious interests, emphasising Mutota's successors' dealings with Portuguese agents while downplaying the indigenous roots of the polity (Newitt, 1995; Beach, 1980). Later colonial historiography, as Pwiti and Ndoro (1999) and Ndoro (2005) show, either ignored precolonial African state-builders or attributed their achievements to non-African origins. Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) demonstrate that formal education under settler and postcolonial regimes privileged European historical figures and gave only cursory attention to rulers such as Mutota.

There are, however, meaningful opportunities for revival. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework 2024–2030 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024) provide legal and policy foundations for the integration of Mutapa history into school and university curricula. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) offers a framework for safeguarding the oral traditions, ritual practices and knowledge systems through which Mutota's legacy is transmitted. Chirikure and Pwiti (2008) and Chirikure et al. (2010) point to models of community-based heritage management that could be applied to Mutapa-era sites in the Dande, the Zambezi valley and the Mazowe basin. From an Afrocentric perspective, the revival of Mutota's memory is not an act of nostalgia but an act of cultural self-recovery, through which African communities reclaim the right to narrate their own past (Asante, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Sociological underpinnings

Sociologically, the findings show that Mutota's reign and the Mutapa state are pointers to sustained exercise in institution-building, in the sense in which classical and contemporary sociology use that term. Durkheim

(1912/1995) argued that social order rests on shared beliefs and collective representations, and the religious and ceremonial apparatus crystallised under Mutota, with its royal mhondoro, praise poetry and court rituals are understood to be the moral framework through which a diverse population came to recognise itself as one polity (Lan, 1985; Bourdillon, 1987). Weber's (1978) typology of authority is also instructive: Mutota combined charismatic authority derived from his status as founder with the traditional authority of royal lineage and a growing apparatus of rational-legal administration through governors, tributes and codified succession rules (Mudenge, 1988; Chanaiwa, 1972). Elias (1982) might view the elaboration of Mutapa court etiquette as a civilising process in which interpersonal relations were increasingly regulated by stylised norms.

Mutota's conquest of the Tavara and Tonga involved subordination and displacement, and the tributary system transferred resources from peasant producers to a political and ritual elite (Bhila, 1982; Beach, 1980). Bourdieu (1977) describes symbolic violence as the imposition of dominant cultural standards as legitimate, and the Mutapa court's monopoly on certain forms of praise poetry, titulature and imported goods can be understood in these terms. At the same time, the system contained channels of social mobility: skilled hunters, warriors, blacksmiths and traders could rise through service to the court (Chanaiwa, 1972). Scott (1990) reminds us that subordinated groups develop hidden transcripts of resistance, and oral traditions from the periphery of the Mutapa state preserve memories of rebellion and negotiation that complicate any idealised picture (Mudenge, 1988). The sociological underpinning thus shows that Mutota's reforms created a new social order.

Anthropological underpinnings

Anthropologically, the findings indicate that Mutota's achievements are best understood as the creation and transmission of a shared cultural system, in the sense in which Geertz (1973) describes culture as webs of significance spun by people themselves. The mhondoro cult, the system of chiefly titles and the elaborate protocols of the Mutapa court together formed a dense web of meaning that linked ancestors, rulers, subjects, animals and the land (Lan, 1985; Bourdillon, 1987; Ranger, 1999). Turner (1967) showed that ritual symbols are multivocal, and the drums, spears, royal fires and sacred animals of the Mutapa state read as dominant symbols linking distinct domains of experience, from warfare to agriculture to healing. Vansina (1990) argues that political innovation in African history frequently took the form of symbolic recombination, by which existing cultural elements were reorganised to express new relationships of power; and Mutota's reforms exemplify this process.

Early colonial ethnography frequently portrayed African communities as primitive and politically fragmented, a portrayal that served to justify settler intervention and that obscured the historical depth of indigenous statecraft (Beach, 1980; Pwiti & Ndoro, 1999). Later anthropological work has questioned these representations by showing that the Mutapa state operated across linguistic and ethnic boundaries and that its political culture was dynamic and contested (Lan, 1985; Bourdillon, 1987). Fabian (1983) has criticised the anthropological tendency to place African societies in a timeless ethnographic present, a tendency that has particularly affected the study of precolonial rulers. Chilisa (2020) and Mkabela (2005) call for research grounded in indigenous worldviews and accountable to the communities concerned. The anthropological underpinnings of this article thus combines an interpretive appreciation of Mutota's cultural achievements with a critical awareness of how anthropological knowledge has been produced, used and contested in Southern Africa.

Implications for African cultural values

The findings and the sociological and anthropological underpinnings carry important implications for African cultural values. Mutota's reign embodied values that lie at the heart of unhu/ubuntu, the philosophy which holds that a person is a person through other persons and which emphasises respect, responsibility, communal solidarity and reverence for ancestors (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). The reciprocal relationship between the Mwene Mutapa and his subjects, in which the ruler was expected to protect the land, mediate with ancestors and distribute wealth, reflected the ethical demand that leadership be exercised for the common good. The elaborate ritual care accorded to royal ancestors in the mhondoro cult expressed the value of respect for those who had gone before and the conviction that the living are accountable to them (Lan, 1985; Gelfand, 1962).

The institution of female offices, such as that of the ambuya or senior royal woman, acknowledged in part the intergenerational and gendered dimensions of communal authority (Chanaiwa, 1972). When these values are forgotten or trivialised, the moral grammar of African leadership is weakened.

A second implication concerns identity, dignity and the transmission of values between generations. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that a people who are taught to despise their own history lose the confidence to define themselves. The colonial treatment of Mutota and the Mutapa as peripheral or merely romantic contributed to precisely such a loss of cultural self-esteem. Reclaiming Mutota as an ancient great ruler and reformer restores the dignity of African political traditions. It affirms the Afrocentric principle that Africans must view their own history from their own location (Asante, 2003). It demands honesty about the past, since the Mutapa state, like all great polities, combined achievements with inequalities, and its revival as a source of pride must include recognition of those it marginalised. The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024) offers an opportunity to transmit this nuanced appreciation to young people, provided that custodian communities, spirit mediums and traditional historians are recognised as teachers alongside formal scholars. Families, churches, schools and the media all have a role in presenting Mutota and his legacy as a living source of ethical reflection rather than as a distant relic.

Relevance of the legacy in drawing a framework of Africa's innovation and industrialisation agenda moving forward

The significance of Mutota's reign extends beyond cultural memory to the practical challenges of Africa's contemporary innovation and industrialisation agenda. The Mutapa state demonstrated that indigenous African polities were capable of coordinating complex production, trade and administration across vast territories, long before the imposition of colonial economic systems (Bhila, 1982; Mudenge, 1988). The regulated gold industry of the Mutapa, the long-distance ivory and salt networks and the organisation of royal fairs reflect principles of value addition, quality control and institutional trust that are directly relevant to the African Continental Free Trade Area and to national industrialisation strategies in the region. Mutota's model of statecraft, in which political authority was closely linked to the mobilisation of productive resources, suggests that African industrialisation need not be understood as a purely imported project but can draw on indigenous institutional heritage. Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) argue similarly that indigenous knowledge is a resource for sustainable development. The technological traditions associated with Mutapa-era ironworking, goldsmithing and textile use offer a historical foundation on which African science, technology, engineering and mathematics education can build. From an Afrocentric standpoint, framing the innovation and industrialisation agenda in continuity with figures such as Mutota repositions African communities as the agents rather than the recipients of economic transformation (Asante, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Synthesis

Taken together, the five themes show that Nyatsimba Mutota was a political founder, an economic organiser, a religious reformer and a cultural architect whose work shaped the trajectory of Southern Africa for centuries. His reforms were not isolated acts but formed an interconnected system that integrated conquest, trade, ritual authority, kinship and symbolic representation into a coherent order of rule. His marginalisation in dominant historiography reflects the coloniality of knowledge that this article interrogates, while the opportunities identified point towards a renewal grounded in community agency, education and the sustainable stewardship of heritage sites. Interpreted through Afrocentricity, the recovery of Mutota's legacy becomes an act of cultural and political self-recognition, a moment in which African societies reclaim the historical imagination that long centuries of colonial narration sought to displace.

CONCLUSION

The article set out to examine Nyatsimba Mutota as an ancient great ruler and cultural and social reformer in Southern Africa, drawing on secondary data with particular reference to Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The analysis has shown that Mutota was the political founder of the Mutapa state and the architect of a durable office of paramount rule; that his reign reoriented the economic life of the plateau polity towards the Zambezi valley and the Indian Ocean trading network; that he instituted a religious order in which political authority

was bound to the mhondoro cult and the Mwari tradition; that he reformed kinship, succession and the symbolic apparatus of governance; and that his legacy has been partially marginalised by colonial and postcolonial historiography but offers substantial opportunities for revival in contemporary education and heritage policy.

The article makes two principal contributions. First, it brings together political, economic, religious, social and cultural dimensions of Mutota's reign within a single analytic frame, demonstrating that his work was a comprehensive reform rather than a narrow military achievement. Second, by applying Afrocentricity, it argues that the recovery of Mutota's memory is not a nostalgic exercise but a necessary step in the decolonisation of African historical consciousness. Since the article relies on secondary data, future research should include primary fieldwork with custodian communities, spirit mediums and local historians in the Dande, the Zambezi valley and the Mazowe basin to examine how they themselves understand and wish to safeguard Mutota's legacy.

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