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10th Congress of the Pan-African Association

Submitted by Eugenia Herbert, Mount Holyoke College

The first meeting of the Pan-African Association for Prehistory and Related Studies in twelve years, the last having been held in Jos, Nigeria in 1983, was held in Harare Zimbabwe from June 19 to 23, 1995. The Congress took place at the University of Zimbabwe and was organized largely by members of the History Department, ably headed by Prof. Gilbert Pwiti as Organizing Secretary. Almost 300 scholars attended, most presenting papers. All were impressed by the smoothness of the operation and how well virtually all the details were planned -- especially since the organizers had to contend with a gathering of local officials that preempted some of the meeting spaces and vied for resources.

After opening ceremonies, attended among others by the Foreign Minister-cum-historian Stan Mudenge, there was a plenary session devoted to Great Zimbabwe. For the rest of the four and a half days, four sessions ran concurrently except for a mid-week break in order to visit the Domboshawa cave paintings. Sessions were divided among eighteen different themes:

- Hominid Evolution
- Palaeoenvironmental Studies
- Rock Art
- Early Food Production
- Information Technology
- Ethnoarchaeology
- Cultural Resource Management
- Early Iron Working Communities
- Late Iron Working Communities
- Development of Complexity
- Historical Archaeology
- Interpretation of Culture Change
- Early Hominid Land Use
- Terminology in African Prehistory
- Zimbabwean Archaeology

Zimbabwe Publishing House, in concert with the British Museum Press, was able to time the publication of Peter Garlake's *The Hunter's Vision: The Prehistoric Art of Zimbabwe* to coincide with the Congress.

Obviously the distinctions implied by the themes of the sessions were tenuous and arbitrary, but they may have been intended to highlight methodological debates, especially those within archaeology, as well as to impose some order on the proceedings. (I should note at the outset that I confined myself to sessions dealing with post-Stone Age Africa.)

Aside from the interesting range of the research itself, some of the most stimulating issues concerned the meaning of sites to indigenous peoples themselves and the use of later ethnographic evidence to interpret archaeological sites. For example, the earthworks at Bigo in

Uganda had no significance for the local people when they were first studied by European archaeologists but have now come to be important ritual centers. Similarly, cave painting sites such as Domboshava are currently embroiled in a tug of war between Historical Monuments officials and tourists on the one hand, and local populations that see them as centers for rain making ceremonies on the other.

Tom Huffman's argument that contemporary, or at least recent, Venda culture may be used to explicate the spatial arrangements, political relationships, and other aspects of Great Zimbabwe continue to spark a great deal of controversy. Some archaeologists deny that Great Zimbabwe and its neighbors exhibited as much uniformity as Huffman's model claims, while others are suspicious of the degree of continuity Huffman finds in Venda. His book should be out at the end of 1995, detailing his arguments and supporting evidence more than has been possible in articles and in the brief presentation to the Congress.

At the same time Merrick Posnansky's presentation of 25 years of archaeological work at Hani in northern Ghana brilliantly demonstrated the value of such long-term research. Here, long acquaintance with the village and its people not only permitted judicious use of oral tradition in reconstructing the past but also made the researchers aware of how much their own presence has affected ways of organizing space over time, not least in the widespread adoption of hedges by individual compounds.

There were a number of presentations about metalworking, some unfortunately scheduled at the same time. Nic David's work on Sukur now allows him and his colleagues to propose unusually precise estimates for iron production and charcoal consumption over the past century and a half, and to detail the symbiosis of montagnard metallurgists, farmers of the plain, and traders. David has, incidentally, just completed a film on African iron working entitled *Black Hephaistos*. It was made in collaboration with David Killick and shows what can be determined by laboratory analysis -- a valuable adjunct to archaeology and the history of African technology. The film is available from the University of Calgary.

This was a superb opportunity for scholars to engage each other, and especially enjoyable to continue the discussions after the Congress proper during the excursions. Only francophones might complain about the overwhelmingly anglophone character of the meetings -- it must have been hard to deal with not simply the fact that the overwhelming majority of communications were in English, but that the English came in so many accents! And, as a speaker at one reception remarked, one can hope that future congresses will see a more even match of African and Euro-American participants.