

Dawson Munjeri

The reunification of the Stone Bird of Great Zimbabwe at an exhibition of the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, Belgium and its return from Germany to Zimbabwe

'On behalf of the Government and people of Zimbabwe I feel privileged and honoured to receive the lower half of one of the soapstone birds from the Great Zimbabwe era which we heartily welcome back home after years of exile'. Thus said the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe on 14 May 2003, amid pomp and ceremony and in the presence of Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, the Diplomatic Corps, traditional chiefs etc.

The significance and meaning of the Bird to the people of Zimbabwe is implicit in the words of the President of the Council of Chiefs, Chief Jonathan Mangwende who on that occasion said (in vernacular) 'They (the Germans) were not aware of the power of the avenging spirits (*ngozi*). They could not forever live with (the bird) because of the avenging spirits'. So the ancestral spirits of which the bird was a physical manifestation had liberated themselves and returned to their country of origin. 'The spirit of the deceased inhabitants of Great Zimbabwe were not going to rest until the birds were recovered' (Matenga 1998: 56-57)*; their return was 'restoration of the national identity', said the Head of State. The reunification of the bird was therefore an essential *rite de passage*.

But for the curators of: National Museums and Monuments (NMMZ); the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA); Dr. Bill Dewey curator of the exhibition 'Legacy of Stone: Zimbabwe Past and Present'; the curators of Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin;

But for the following institutions: RMCA, NMMZ and Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation;

But for the traditional and spiritual leadership;

But for the Ambassadors of Germany and Belgium to Zimbabwe;

But for the various Ministers of State *inter alia* Foreign Affairs, Interior, Arts and Culture of Belgium, Germany and Zimbabwe;

But for Heads of State and Government of the three countries;

But for all these ACTORS the reunification would have been well-nigh impossible. The case is an illustration of the dynamics of the interplay of a plethora of ACTORS in a very delicate balance which makes them interlopers, interlocutors and intercessors depending on the INTERESTS and ISSUES and the variables of the two.

On 1 February 2000, as the Executive Director of NMMZ it was left to me to realize the import of this. The return of the bottom half was conditional on getting the pound of flesh without letting a drop of blood!! The Bird was coming: 'On Permanent loan to National Museums of Zimbabwe'. During the handover, the German Ambassador said, as much, thanks to the 'understanding and generosity of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation LEGAL OWNERS OF THE FRAGMENT'.

The solace is that on receiving the Bird, President Mugabe underlined 'Never again shall the bird be severed in two and never again shall any part of the bird find its way to foreign territory'.

Echoing these sentiments, the German Ambassador said:
'May the two parts of this bird never be separated again'.
'Return' or 'Restitution' which will atone the spirits?

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- Matenga, E (1998) *The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Symbols of a Nation*. Harare Africa Publishing Group.

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President Robert Gabriel MUGABE receiving the bottom half of the Bird from Dr. Peter Schmidt, the German Ambassador to Zimbabwe.

Courtesy: The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.



The soapstone bird used as the National Icon.
Courtesy: Edward Matenga



Depiction of different characteristics and meanings.
Courtesy: Edward Matenga



Aesthetic qualities demonstrating artistic skills.

Courtesy: Edward Matenga



Depicting mermaid water spirits : *njuzu*

Courtesy : Edward Matenga



Courtesy : Edward Matenga