



CECIL JOHN RHODES MEMORIAL GRAVESITE

Matobo National Park, Zimbabwe

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Executive Summary

In 1902 as requested in his last will and testament, British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes was buried atop a granite hill in Zimbabwe's world-famous Matobo National Park. Almost 120 years later, the site of his grave has become increasingly contested in light of his intimate involvement with colonisation and exploitation. Some groups have found the space maintenance inappropriate, calling for the grave's exhumation and removal. In contrast, others see it as merely a tourist attraction and a vital source of income for the local community. This case study reflects the often competing understandings and functions of contested space and complexities in managing a colonial past.

Introduction

The colonial transition - from the white minority rule of South Rhodesia to modern-day Zimbabwe - has long been a cause for contestation. Now, with accelerated global awareness and debate about relics of colonial commemoration, the future of the man's gravesite synonymous with colonialism in Southern Africa has been subjected to increased scrutiny. As attitudes towards the legacy of British Imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902), for which Rhodesia was named, have changed, celebratory monumentality has increasingly been frowned upon as deeply inappropriate, despite the economic benefits to local tourism. With the shutting of the gravesite as an effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, a renewed debate around Zimbabwe's tourism industry has emerged as to whether the glorification of the polarising politician is suitable today.

Background



Figure 1: "The view from Rhodes Gravesite" Image by Lars Lundqvist CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Cecil John Rhodes, a British imperialist, businessman and politician, was 'perhaps the most divisive figure in colonial Africa.'¹ Rhodes embodied the new capitalist imperialism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, making a vast fortune from the amalgamation of diamond mines through his firm De Beers. Rhodes' diamond fortunes soon led him into politics, where he became Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896. Rhodes has been heavily criticised for limiting Africans' land ownership rights and voting rights and formulating the foundations of generations of segregation. Many dubbed him the early architect of apartheid. Rhodes was an early subscriber to what would later become eugenics and phrenology, laying the groundwork not just for the

¹ Jane Flanagan, "The Grave of Cecil Rhodes Is a Popular Tourist Spot. Now a Statue To a Local Hero Is Set To Overshadow His Resting Place," *Times*, August 13, 2018.

intellectual justification of apartheid but later racist policies in Europe.² Many institutions, however, have benefited financially from him, such as the University of Cape Town. His power and status were immense. Both Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia) were named after him in the colonial era.³

The Funeral and Burial of Cecil John Rhodes

As was requested in his will, Rhodes was buried in 1902 on top of a granite peak in the Matobo National Park (near Bulawayo in Southwestern Zimbabwe), which he dubbed 'View of the World'⁴ ((Figure 1). Despite the scale of his self-claimed crusade to 'save Africa from itself,' he chose the simplest of epitaphs: 'Here lies the remains of Cecil John Rhodes' (Figure 2). The hill on which Rhodes is buried has long been considered a sacred place of spirits, known as *Malindidzimu*, by the Karanga before they were conquered by the Ndebele around 1840. Mzilikazi, the first King of the Ndebele, who had settled in Rhodesia around 1838, is buried in a cave just a short distance away. Rhodes died on the 26th March 1902, not yet 49 years old, in his little sea cottage at Muizenberg near Cape Town, South Africa.

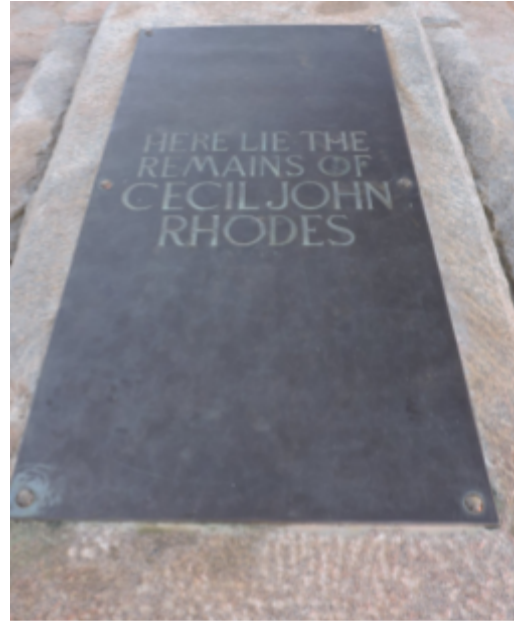


Figure 2: "Rhodes Grave" Image by SqueakyMarmot CC BY-SA 2.0

On 29th March, Reuter reported that 'about 15,000 people visited Rhodes's coffin,' and over 25,000 people attended his funeral procession in Cape Town.⁵ His coffin then embarked on a ceremonial train journey of over 1,400 miles to Bulawayo, frequently stopping for crowds of respect-givers. At his funeral, Rhodes was supposedly admired by many. For example, a local chief called Secombo said, 'The bodies of Umzeligaz, the great chief, and the great white chief now both rest in the Matoppos. Their spirits will range the mountains, and they will meet and hold a great *indaba*.'⁶ Colonel Francis Rhodes, his brother, who led the funeral procession, closed the ceremony by stating, 'I leave my brother's grave in your [Matabele] hands.'⁷ Since his initial burial in 1902, Rhodes's Grave and remains have remained untouched in the Matobo National Park, now a UNESCO world heritage site.

History of the Contestation

Calls for Exhumation and Removal of the Grave

² Cecil Rhodes, "Confession of Faith," in *Cecil Rhodes*, ed. John Flint (Boston: Little Brown, 1974)

³ Justin Parkinson, "Why Is Cecil Rhodes Such a Controversial Figure?" *BBC News Magazine*, April 1, 2015.

⁴ W. T. Stead, *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes With Elucidatory Notes* (London: Review of Reviews Office, 1902)

⁵ Colin Weyer, "The Funeral Ceremonies of The Late Right Honourable Cecil John Rhodes," *Window of Rhodesia - The Jewel of Africa*, 2011.

⁶ *Indaba* refers to a conference or meeting.

⁷ *Ibid*.

Calls for the exhumation of Rhodes date back to the 1980s when the colonial rule of Zimbabwe formally ended. Historian Phathisa Nyath has contended that when 'land owned by British settlers was seized by the new government and given to Black Zimbabweans, people began calling for Rhodes' exhumation too.⁸ In 2012, Matabeleland war veterans blamed Rhodes's remains for the rain droughts. However, Zimbabwe's National Museums and Monuments Department (NMMZ) rejected their proposal for exhumation, arguing that the remains were part of the national history and heritage and thus should not be tampered with.⁹ Godfrey Mahachi, director of NMMZ, told VOA reporter Sandra Nyaira that Zimbabwe is safeguarding Rhodes's grave because 'Rhodes is paying us back as a country, through the money generated through his grave through tourism and that is a lot.'¹⁰

Discussion of Rhodes' grave was reignited in 2015 in the context of the '# RhodesMustFall' movement in South Africa. Some of then-President Mugabe's supporters stated the intention of digging up the grave in solidarity with the protests in Cape Town. Zweli Malinga, an official of the ruling ZANU PF party, stated in Bulawayo: 'We strongly support what is happening in South Africa. We cannot stand seeing whites coming from abroad every day to honour and conduct rituals before their ancestor who is buried on our own land.'¹¹

Despite Mugabe's refusal to remove or repatriate Rhodes' remains, protests persisted across Zimbabwe and South Africa. Pritchard Zhou, CEO of the Zimbabwe Heritage Organization, has argued that the Rhodes gravesite is an affront to the history of Zimbabweans, stating that 'Rhodes wanted to defile that place... Now, our children go to look at a white man's grave.'¹² Dumiso Dabengwa, a former Home Affairs minister and now an opposition politician, further reasoned: 'People must get to know — when they hear about Cecil John Rhodes and they want to see the place where he would want to rest — and be able to make up their minds about the type of man that he was.'¹³

After 2015, the site remained relatively uncontested until the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 led to a resurgence in activists interrogating colonial pasts. A cultural pressure group known as *Sangano Munhumutapa* rose to particular prominence, organizing online petitions calling for the removal of the gravesite.¹⁴ The regional director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Butholezwe Nyathi, also expressed support, asserting that 'the most important thing, for now, is to reinterpret the narrative.'¹⁵

Economic, Heritage and Touristic Considerations

⁸ Vimbai Chinembiri, "In Zimbabwe, Debate Over Exhuming Controversial Colonialist from Sacred Site Continues," *Global Press Journal*, May 24, 2020.

⁹ Mail & Guardian, "Statue Struggle Rekindles Bid To Exhume Rhodes," *Mail & Guardian*, March 24, 2015.

¹⁰ VOA News, "Zimbabwe Monuments Officials Block Removal of Cecil Rhodes Gravesite," *VOA News*, February 22, 2012.

¹¹ Peta Thornycroft, "Zimbabweans Threaten To Dig Up The Grave of Cecil Rhodes," *Telegraph*, March 24, 2015.

¹² Vimbai Chinembiri, "In Zimbabwe, Debate Over Exhuming Controversial Colonialist from Sacred Site Continues," *Global Press Journal*, May 24, 2020.

¹³ Christopher Torchia, "Cecil Rhodes' Grave in Zimbabwe Has Become an Awkward Tourist Attraction," *Skift*, March 12, 2017.

¹⁴ Vimbai Chinembiri, "In Zimbabwe, Debate Over Exhuming Controversial Colonialist from Sacred Site Continues," *Global Press Journal*, May 24, 2020.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

While many have condemned the site, many have emphasised its importance to the country at large, seeing the monument not as a glorification of Rhodes but as a vital tourist attraction; a source of income for a struggling national economy. Fundamentally, debates about Rhodes' grave have, and continue to, take place in Zimbabwe's increasingly difficult social, political and economic circumstances. Journalist Christopher Torchia thus describes the Zimbabwean government as taking an 'entrepreneurial approach' to the gravesite.¹⁶ Indeed, to enter the park, a foreign adult must pay \$15 and an additional \$10 to see the burial site, whilst Zimbabweans pay \$8.¹⁷ In 2018, foreign nationals made up 17% of the 32,000 people who visited the site, an increase of 4,000 more visitors than the previous year.¹⁸ Furthermore, numerous websites advertise holidays, include a visit to Rhodes' grave.

Tourism from foreign visitors to the site has sustained and fueled the Matobo economy. Local resident Effie Moyo settled in the area within a year of Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. She was able to fund her children's education at a boarding school from the money she made selling curios to German and British tourists. Emphasising the importance of the gravesite for the local economy and community. Moyo argued, 'I do not want to hear this nonsense about exhuming Rhodes' grave... Matobo will be poor. The people who are pushing this agenda are not even from this community.'¹⁹

Beyond economic concerns, others have argued that the grave site should remain intact as a monument to colonial rule and a reminder of the past. Former Housing Minister and opposition politician Dumiso Dabengwa have argued that 'there are certain things in history which you must leave for posterity's sake.'²⁰ While leading Zimbabwean playwright Cont Mhlenga has emphasised that monuments, such as the gravesite, perform an important educational function, reasoning that when addressing colonial-era monuments, Zimbabwe 'should take every colonial symbol and put it in public [They] must be brought back to the public so that it can be scrutinised.'²¹ National Executive Director of National Monuments, Godfrey Mahachi, stressed, 'We owe it to the next generation to have access to this sad chapter in our history.'²² Striking a similar tone, lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe Eldred Masunungure was unequivocal that 'history is history – we have to accept both the good and bad chapters as all this is a part of our heritage.'²³

There is also a discussion of how these contestations fit within party politics in Zimbabwe. According to Eldred Masunungure, political science lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, the publicity associated with the gravesite may be a tactic for the next election cycle. Masunungure queries how 'removing the remains' will 'solve the socio-economic problems faced by the country?'²⁴ Despite the removal of many colonial-era statues since 1980, Rhodes' grave has remained untouched. This is

¹⁶ Christopher Torchia, "Cecil Rhodes' Grave in Zimbabwe Has Become an Awkward Tourist Attraction," *Skift*, March 12, 2017.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ News24, "Put Rhodes Statue Back Where It Belongs," *News24*, April 13, 2015.

²² Vimbai Chinembiri, "In Zimbabwe, Debate Over Exhuming Controversial Colonialist from Sacred Site Continues," *Global Press Journal*, May 24, 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peta Thornycroft, "Zimbabweans Threaten To Dig Up The Grave of Cecil Rhodes," *Telegraph*, March 24, 2015.

primarily because President Robert Mugabe maintained that the grave should remain despite regular demands for its removal.²⁵ Having come to power in 2019, President Emmerson Mnangagwa has yet to comment directly on the Rhodes case.

Decision-Making Processes

Fundamentally, the grave of Cecil John Rhodes has remained untouched. Heritage management today is administered via the NMMZ as part of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The NMMZ saved the grave from exhumation because it is integral to the country's history. It is protected by the *National Museums and Monuments Act Chapter 25:11*, which provides that the NMMZ have sole control over the site's administration.²⁶

Historically, cultural heritage was protected by uncoded laws enforced by community leadership. These laws constitute what is known as customary laws. Formal heritage laws were only enacted in 1902 to protect dry-stone ruins across Zimbabwe from pillaging and destruction.²⁷ This was followed by the 1912 Bushman and Relics Ordinance to protect rock art.²⁸ Both the 1902 and the 1912 ordinances were later repealed and replaced by the comprehensive *Natural Historical Monuments and Relics Act of 1936*.²⁹ Regardless of these amendments, the legislation remained to a vast extent, identical to the predecessor Acts, especially in sections and parts that relate to the definition and the actual protection and management of cultural heritage in the country.³⁰

Apart from removing the grave or repatriating his remains to Britain, suggestions were made that a monument to indigenous heroes might be built alongside Rhodes' grave as a counter-monument.³¹ Other solutions have been suggested, such as purchasing the toppled University of Cape Town statue and displaying it adjacent to the gravesite.³² According to Times correspondent Jane Flanagan, there has been a suggestion to raise a statue of the former freedom fighter Joshua Nkomo, who died in 1999. The idea came from Nkomo's son, Michael Sibangilizwe Nkomo, and is intended to serve 'as a reminder that his [Rhodes'] ambition for racial supremacy was eventually thwarted.'³³

It seems likely that a decision of some form will be made on the site in the near future. To improve cultural heritage management, the legislation governing cultural heritage management should be revised. This would address the problem of its entrenchment in colonial principle, which considers that cultural heritage sites should be protected rather than used. This would also address the

²⁵ Jane Flanagan, "The Grave of Cecil Rhodes Is a Popular Tourist Spot. Now a Statue To a Local Hero Is Set To Overshadow His Resting Place," *Times*, August 13, 2018.

²⁶ Svinurayi Muringaniza, "Heritage That Hurts: The Case Of The Grave Of Cecil John Rhodes In The Matopos National Park, Zimbabwe," In *The Dead And Their Possession*, eds. Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert and Paul Turnbull (London: Routledge, 2002)

²⁷ Ibid.

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²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 7965-7973.

³¹ Christopher Torchia, "Cecil Rhodes' Grave in Zimbabwe Has Become an Awkward Tourist Attraction," *Skift*, March 12, 2017.

³² News24, "Put Rhodes Statue Back Where It Belongs," *News24*, April 13, 2015.

³³ Jane Flanagan, "The Grave of Cecil Rhodes Is a Popular Tourist Spot. Now a Statue To a Local Hero Is Set To Overshadow His Resting Place," *Times*, August 13, 2018.

problem of the isolation of the local communities from managing their cultural heritage and the protection of its intangible aspects.

Summary and Conclusions

The Rhodes gravesite has long been a contested memorial, reflecting his divisive legacy. Some groups have found the space maintenance inappropriate and a painful reminder of the country's imperial past. Others see the site as a valuable source of income and would happily use it to monetise European tourism. Others have argued that it is a constructive reminder of the past and a means of never forgetting a problematic past. This case study reflects the often competing understandings and functions of contested space and complexities in managing a colonial past.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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