

ZIWA NATIONAL MONUMENT: ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO THE LOCAL PEOPLE HANGS DELICATELY IN THE BALANCE

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Introduction

The Impact of change and diverse perceptions on the relationship between modern societies and the intangible heritage has probably never been so distinctive and clear as it is currently the situation at the Ziwa National Monument, in Zimbabwe's north-eastern district of Nyanga.

There have been successive episodes of change mainly in the regional and global political and socio-economic trends over the past two centuries. Coupled with the advent and spread of new religions such as Christianity, and ideas associated with 'modernisation', there have been curved significant shifts in the way people relate to sites and in particular on the traditional respect and reverence towards sites.

The traditional values, beliefs, and attitudes that once made Ziwa an important cultural and spiritual site for the locals particularly during the pre 1900s and also for some decades well into the 20th century are no longer observed. Their significance is fast fading in the mist of antiquity. The importance of Ziwa site itself to the locals is increasingly hanging in the balance. It is therefore probably useful for heritage managers to start instituting campaigns now, to promote a revival that will establish a restoration of the old tradition among the people so that coupled with a strong basis of spiritual significance, the current heritage management policies at the monument may be effective.

ZIWA NATIONAL MONUMENT

Ziwa was declared a National Monument in 1946 and is currently under consideration for World Heritage listing. It embodies the remains of a vast late Iron Age agricultural settlement that has been dated to the 17th century. A variety of stonework structures including stone terraces running along contours of hills and steep landscapes; stone passages; enclosures; pit-structures, and hill strongholds form the principal physical features of a monument that is strewn across an estimated 3300 hectares of land. Archaeological investigations have also engendered important aspects of pottery; rock art, both Iron and Stone-Age tools, and implements which do not only depict Ziwa as a once thriving community but also as a settlement that probably had successive phases of occupation by different groups of early people.

When the agro-economy was at its peak in the area crops such as millet, sorghum, rappoko etc may have been grown and these probably formed the staple diet of the community. A small breed of cattle (now extinct), sheep, goats and other small livestock were also reared and must have roamed the pastured valleys and plains of the monument estate. The estimates of possible population are still a subject of debate among scholars and researchers and the same debate, apart from a few factors suggested so far, also seeks to establish the reasons that led to the decline and abandonment of the settlement around the 18th century.

Prior to the declaration of the site as a National Monument in 1946, Ziwa had been part of the commercial farms area and was thus under private ownership. A great deal of damage or degradation of relics may have been registered during this period as the farmer used the property as a cattle ranch.

However it took NMMZ up to the late 1980s to establish serious conservation structures at the site and maintain a permanent presence to facilitate development - an activity that had not been possible due to the insecurity of the area in the 1970s political instabilities (when Zimbabwe was going through struggle for independence).

To date a Site Museum (with tourist facilities such as camping; tour guiding, walking trails, bird viewing etc) has been established to be a mouthpiece of the Ziwa heritage and of other archaeological sites in the Nyanga district. People from all walks of life and from all continents of the world visit Ziwa each year. Their statistics show that the heritage is quite popular among tourist.

The significance, functions and values of the site for the locals

Despite the abandonment of the site by its inhabitants in the 18th Century, Ziwa had continued to be of significance to the later communities that settled in its neighbourhood. Although the origins of these later inhabitants are not clear there is an undisputed belief (in oral traditions) that claims that the majority were descendants of the ancient society that lived at the site. There are some indications that before the arrival of the BSAC in the region during the late 19th century, the extent of the boundaries of traditional constituents (which were governed by indigenous rulers) overlapped into the present monument territory, so that the entire estate was covered.

Ziwa is part of the north-western Nyanga district whose traditional monarchy are the SaUnyama people (Beach D, 1995). Much of the oral traditions as per discussion with the elders in the community place the SaUnyama ancestors on the centre of all the past that relates to both Ziwa and the rest of the Nyanga Archaeological Complex (Beach, 1995). Meanwhile the Nyahukwe, SaNyangare, and the Matsapa subordinates of the SaUnyama chieftainship had their traditional boundaries converging and covering sections of the site's estate. Ziwa was thus essentially part of their territory.

Apart from this however, the site was regarded as sacred. All the villagers in the area thus attached high spiritual values to both the ruins and the ruins areas. To the SaUnyama people the monument was a revered shrine that housed the burial grounds of their ancestors, chief and their elders. The Nyahukwe and the SaNyangare people considered the site as spiritual shrine where bilateral issues were shared with the departed, and indeed, they used certain sections of the monument as rainmaking shrines. However as will be shown in the later part of the paper, this traditional relationship between the site and its local community is no longer practised among the present generations in the area.

The impact of change and diverse perceptions

It is appalling how the traditional values that once made Ziwa such an important cultural and spiritual site, particularly during the pre-colonial era and also for some decades into the 20th Century has become insignificant to the modern communities of the area. Observations and interaction have shown that very few people in Nyanga today still recognise and practise the values associated with the Ziwa site. Those that still do are mainly the elderly members of the society who have been able to resist the influence of the changing times.

The factors that have influenced this phenomenon may be attributed to the advent of western civilisation, modernisation, the spread of Christianity and modern education, colonialism, modern economics and improved communication networks. While the trend here may be similar to what was happening elsewhere in Zimbabwe and indeed throughout the region at that time, the Ziwa community had their unique reactions in the face of the influences that these factors brought.

1. The Land Tenure Exercises of the 1940s and 1980s

The details and events about the arrival of the BSAC settlers in the 1890s will not be covered here but the paper will highlight the massive movement and displacement of entire communities in the Nyanga district during the 1940s. As oral history in the area shows, these movements were enforced by the BSAC to enable the creation of commercial farmland.

Hordes of people were moved particularly from the Nyatwe area of Makoni district in eastern Rusape and resettled in the territories that surrounded the Ziwa site.

This is how the present villages of Tamunesa, Matongo, Dzokoto/Tawengwa, Mudondo, Ruziwa and other villages in the Nyatate area have come into being. Meanwhile the SaUnyama, SaNyangare and the Nyahukwe people did not only have to bear with the new people in their areas but had also to accept a reduction in the size of their own constituents and the possible restriction on access to the site. The present Ziwa site estate (which was developed into farmland too) was curved out of their territories and became private property.

It is important to note that the newcomers were virtually outsiders and did not have previous relationship with the Ziwa site. They thus obviously considered themselves to have no traditional obligation to mind about any 'supposed' sacredness of the site whatsoever. This attitude towards Ziwa became worse after another resettlement exercise in the 1980s brought hundreds of new households into the Ziwa neighbourhood. The creation of villages 1 - 5 along the southern and eastern borders of the site's estate was the result and it is not surprising that the majority of the people who live there, just like the 1940s groups, do not understand the significance of the site at all. What has made the situation more complex is that the population of the new-comers far exceeds that of the original people (the SaUnyama, SaNyangare and Nyahukwe) and there cannot be any denying that the former are over-dominating the later.

2. The spread of Christianity; Modern Education and Western Civilisation

The effectiveness of the activities of Christian Missionaries in Zimbabwe especially in the post 1900 period can probably be well reflected by its impact on the African society in the Nyanga district. Several missionary centres such as the Marist Brothers Catholic Mission, St Mary's Anglican Mission, Avila Mission, Mount Mellury's Catholic Mission and, Emmanuel/Elim Pentecostal mission were built and as elsewhere in the entire district, the Ziwa people have increasingly become Christian. Apart from the churches mentioned above there are also several unregistered 'independent' African Christian denominations of the Johane Masowe ministries operating in the community.

However it will be noted that associated with the spread of Christianity is also the spread of western civilisation and education. Apart from the schools at the missionary centres, the state and the local government have also established a number of schools in both the Ziwa area and the entire district. Some of the nearby schools include Tamunes, Mapako, Nyatate, Sedze, Nyarumvurwe, Nyamatsa and Nyatondo School. The result over the years has been the transformation of the society and the development of new perceptions and views towards life. While the Christian teaching prohibits the worship of gods other than the Almighty and considers that certain aspects of the traditional cultures especially those associated with rituals are pagan, western civilisation and education create people who scoff at traditional cultures and think it is backwardness.

Hence the traditional values and significance of the Ziwa site are no longer a matter of importance to the majority of people in the Ziwa local community.

3. Modern economic development and improved communication network

This factor has also impacted negatively on the importance of Ziwa to its local community. People nowadays frequently find themselves having to travel a lot, either settling in places far away from their original homes all in search of jobs and also in pursuit of economic gains. There have recently been immigrations to foreign countries too. Electronics (TV, radio, computer and telex) and other media have also improved contact with other societies living in other parts of the world.

In view of this background it will be noted that there are many people who have also come to settle in the Ziwa area and the Nyanga district at large, either due to job commitments or for other economic reasons and the opposite is also true. In this way various groups bring in their own cultures while those that have left the Ziwa area to go elsewhere will be exposed to other traditions and gradually they tend to adopt views that will develop new perceptions in them towards their own culture.

Also not to be left out is the influence of the military camps in the district. Nyanga town (about 20 km from the Ziwa site) itself is in fact a garrison community, and soldiers who work there are naturally from diverse cultural origins and thus make an impact on the ways of life of the indigenous people. These soldiers are also often seconded on regional and international peace-keeping missions (e.g. Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Kosovo and the DRC) from where they bring in foreign influences. There is also a military training base located right on the precincts of the Ziwa site to the south, and hundreds of trainees from all over the country spend several months amongst the Ziwa community, thus bringing in new influences as well.

4. National Museums and Tourism Development at the site

The establishment of a permanent presence at the site by National Museums since 1990 and the setting up of conservation structures which seek to minimise the encroachment and impact of the local people on the monument was useful for the preservation of the site but on the other hand it was misunderstood by the locals themselves. For them the development meant that their links with the site had been severed.

This view is worsened when hordes of tourists who are mainly of European descent are seen visiting the site each year. For the local rural folks, who still have memories of the colonial civic life, in which racial laws restricted entry into 'white zones' for Africans, the Ziwa site has thus become another 'white reserve'. This is of course not true.

Tourism is for everybody and the enjoyment gained through interaction with heritage sites is free to all but indications show that, for the rural people who are otherwise hardly able to save money to meet the costs required, tourism itself has become a reserve for the elites.

This idea is quite popular with most people in the local community and as such the number of locals seen visiting the site is very small. Added to this is the conservation 'by-laws' set in place by NMMZ and the result is also seen as a stifling in the interaction between the community and the site for spiritual/ritual purposes.

Assessment and Interpretation

To show that the factors related above have really had a remarkable impact on the Ziwa community and the entire district, it is probably necessary to take a microscopic observation on certain aspects of the people's ways of life today.

Traditional values and spiritual heritage are usually matters mainly related to certain cultural and religious beliefs of a society. In a normal situation the behaviour, character and ways of life of individuals living in that society should reflect a testimony of and manifest their ethnic origins in relation to these beliefs. This is however not the case in the Ziwa community today.

Very few people still have the skills required for performing rainmaking and other rituals and the dilemma is that those who still have them cannot pass them to the younger generations as the youths are either not interested or they are too embarrassed to be seen indulging in matters considered backward by their peers and in some cases, matters considered pagan by members of their churches. This dilemma is also to be seen in the manner in which people conduct their marriages, how they dress, their diets, their language, the way they interact with elders etc. A story is often related about a true incident in which the incumbent chief SaUnyama travelled 97 km from his home in Ziwa area to Mutare as a standing passenger on a bus over-crowded with mainly young people!

Conclusion

By way of conclusion one may say that the significance of Ziwa's intangible heritage to the local community has had major shifts over the years and now hangs delicately in the balance. These shifts are mainly associated with the influence and impact of change and diverse perceptions and it is probably imperative to have calls to start instituting campaigns now, to promote a revival that will establish a restoration of the old tradition among the Ziwa local people so as to enhance the current heritage management policies at the monument. NMMZ probably needs to work harder to make the community understand that its position does not restrict access of villagers to the site but essentially favours and encourages the preservation of the spiritual values and perhaps it would need to document and record live traditional ceremonies, rituals and other spiritual functions to ensure that the knowledge and skills are preserved.

The development of community based conservation strategies at the monument is also seen by many as a tool that will provide a platform for greater association between NMMZ and the community. It is hoped that a campaign to foster a revival of the old tradition may be possible.

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ABSTRACT

The discussion in this paper explains why the present generations of communities surrounding Ziwa National Monument (a 17th century agricultural settlement in north-eastern Zimbabwe) have very little reverence and respect towards the traditional sacredness of the site. The paper shows that for a long time during the pre-colonial period and for some decades well into the 1900s, Ziwa was an important spiritual and cultural centre and the local people attached high traditional values and looked to it for their identity and ethnic origin. The crux of the discussion points to successive episodes of change mainly in the regional and global political and socio-economic trends over the past two centuries as the main reason for the present phenomenon of community attitude towards the site. Coupled with this the development and growth of diverse perceptions especially those associated with the spread of Christianity and other ideas orchestrated by Westernisation and Globalisation may be blamed for the contemporary status quo. National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (hereafter NMMZ) site conservation policy is also cited among the factors that contribute to the lack of preservation of the site's intangible values. It is in the light of this background therefore that efforts should be made to promote a restoration of the old traditional values among the local people so as to enhance effective conservation practices at the monument.

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