

## **BACK TO THE OLD SCHOOL? REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN ZIMBABWE**

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#### **Introduction**

Formal heritage management came as part of a colonial package throughout the African continent, with the aim of preserving the monuments and sites that bore witness to indigenous people's developments. Before colonialism, traditional management systems were in place to maintain respect for and the survival of cultural sites. These included taboos, restrictions, myths and ceremonies, and these measures were effective in ensuring the survival of heritage places. This was mainly because traditional communities shared common values and respect for these places, which represented points of communication with the ancestral world. The impressive cultural structures we see today have survived for hundred of years, which means they owe their existence to some form of management, which is certainly traditional practices. The new system of heritage management, however, sought to protect only tangible heritage, and considered modern scientific techniques as the only relevant ways of conservation. This scenario prevailed throughout the colonial period, and the rigid policies towards conservation were even inherited by heritage institutions after independence. Coupled with aspects like the introduction of Christianity, science and technology and legislation pertaining to land ownership, the environment led to the 'suffocation' of traditional management systems in many parts of the country. An evaluation of formal heritage management shows its loopholes in effectively managing cultural heritage. This paper seeks to assess the possibility of reviving traditional management systems in Zimbabwe, as a cost-effective and complimentary measure to modern heritage protection methods.

#### **Historical considerations**

Pre-colonial communities related with cultural sites for various reasons. Groves, caves, pools and trees were considered as homes of the ancestors. Certain behaviour was supposed to be observed at these cultural points. Local chiefs appointed by the ancestral spirits closely monitored activities and behaviour at such places. This safeguarded the value and physical integrity of places like groves and pools. Myths, taboos and restrictions, for example, have led to the long survival of sacred groves scattered all over the country. Muringaniza(1998) relates an example of a myth that has led to the survival of a sacred grove in Bikita district. It is believed that an individual by the name of Nerumedzo was born with four eyes, representing a curse to the whole group. He was supposed to be killed but escaped when he was young. He was later murdered in a grove and since then, ceremonies are held annually at the site to appease his angry spirit.

Trees are not supposed to be cut down in this grove and local chiefs make sure that locals abide by the rules. Today the grove stands in contrast with the surrounding area, which is largely deforested. Besides ensuring respect for the ancestors, such traditional management systems promote responsible and controlled utilisation of resources. A sacred grove at the site of Domboshava presents an example of how taboos and restrictions worked as effective tools for managing cultural landscapes. Oral tradition has it that cutting down of trees and cultivating in the vicinity of the grove was prohibited. It was believed that if a person cut down a tree it would be in its original place the following day, and the culprit had to pay heavily. Though the grove has since been slightly altered, it still stands today. Since pre-colonial societies were closely knit, people were educated on the importance of taboos while they were still young, and because of fear of the unknown such measures were not questioned. Taboos and restrictions were not confined to groves only, but were also in place at large sites like Great Zimbabwe, Ntaba zika Mambo and Mutota Ruins.

Colonialism brought with it several factors that led to the erosion of traditional methods of protection. Legislative documents pertaining to land ownership (Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Land Tenure Act of 1959) saw people being moved to reserves, paving the way for white commercial farms. Some cultural sites became part of these commercial farms, meaning that local people had no access to them, as this was tantamount to trespassing. Nharira hills, Tsindi and Mhakwe cave are good examples of cultural sites that were affected by the colonial systems of land ownership. Having been moved hundreds of kilometres away from their places of origin, local people were divorced from their heritage both physically and spiritually. They lost contact with activities and ethics that linked them with their ancestors. The colonial government also changed the system of leadership and chiefs became nominated and appointed through its agents. Thus, spirit mediums, who were the custodians of heritage, lost their powers to control and oversee adherence to traditional management systems.

Legislation was formulated to protect archaeological sites scattered around the country, most of which also happened to be sacred. Both the Historical Monuments Act of 1937 and the National Museums and Monuments Act of 1972 recognised these sites as state properties. This meant that once a place was proclaimed a Monument, local people were not allowed to perform cultural activities on site.

All cultural sites became the responsibility of the Historical Monuments commission and the National Museums and Monuments (NMMZ) as stipulated in both the Historical Monuments Act of 1937 and the National Museums and Monuments Act of 1972, respectively (Muringaniza 1998). Heritage organisations unfortunately did not recognise the aspirations of local people and how their traditional practices and heritage sites linked them with the ancestral world. Thus, protective legislation denied local people the right to express themselves and communicate with their ancestors at cultural sites, thereby suppressing the implementation of traditional protection systems. This stemmed from the fact that local people were not consulted in the formulation of these legal mandates, and those responsible for them had little knowledge of what really constitutes an African landscape.

Christianity was one of the influences introduced by colonialism. Traditional cultural activities, including ceremonies, rituals and taboos, were denounced by the new Christian churches and considered as a belief in evil. As some local people turned to Christianity, they denounced some of the cultural practices respected by their folks. The divisions in belief systems led to a dilution of traditional management systems.

#### **Post Independence Dilemma**

After having attained independence, the general feeling among local people was that they could freely revive and perform traditional ceremonies. Independence did not only mean political freedom, but also freedom to communicate with their ancestors at all heritage places they considered important. Pwiti (1996) gives an example of how a spirit medium lost her struggle to settle at Great Zimbabwe for the convenience of conducting traditional ceremonies. She felt that as a respected figure in the society she could oversee traditional rituals at the site. This, however, clashed with the ethics of formal heritage management as her presence and activities were considered a threat to the fabric of the site.

Local communities in Northern Zimbabwe also indicated their intention to revive traditional ceremonies and restrictions at sites like Mutota. Customarily, access to the site was only through traditional leaders. Some of the restrictions included on-site firewood collection and tree felling, and abstinence from sex before visiting the site (Moyo, pers. comm). Unfortunately, NMMZ inherited rigid colonial policies that do not recognise the importance of traditional ways of protecting heritage. As a form of protection, the organisation would fence off all the proclaimed sites in the area. This in itself meant denying the public access to a heritage they considered rightfully theirs. This has led to strained relationships between heritage managers and the local people, who removed structures put in place to protect the site (fences). At the site of Domboshava, rainmaking ceremonies and rituals were held since pre-colonial times. Of importance to these ceremonies is the geological tunnel, through which smoke emanated to indicate acceptance of their offerings by the ancestors (Mvenge and Pwiti 1996).

Local people felt they were being denied the right to communicate with their ancestors after the National Museums had initially sealed off the tunnel and later banned performances. This led to the burning down of a curio shop and the later obliteration of rock art at the cave, which happen to be the contested heritage between local people and the organisation. There are many cases demonstrating the strained relationship between locals and heritage managers in sites around the country. Failure on the part of contemporary management systems to recognise the relationship between heritage places, local people and their ancestors is a loophole that renders its effectiveness in managing cultural heritage questionable.

Not only have traditional management systems been negatively affected by rigid management policies in the post independence era, but they have also faced challenges like globalisation, science and technology and introduction of western cultures. Many cultural aspects have been looked down upon, most of them being questioned. While pre-colonial communities had mechanisms to ensure that myths and taboos were not questioned and challenged, present-day science and technology encourages experiments and scientific explanations for the world around us. This has led to a severe erosion of existing traditional local systems (Edroma 2001). Recently, the government embarked on a land resettlement programme. This was a rampant process where people occupied areas they thought would be agriculturally productive, including those around sacred heritage places. This presents a challenge for heritage managers, since people from different parts of the country with different backgrounds are now interacting with cultural sites. Agricultural production and the desire to own a piece of land being the main motives behind occupation, coupled with an inadequate education on the need to conserve the sites, heritage places are definitely at a risk, and at the same time traditional conservation methods are being eroded.

#### **Where do we go from here?**

While the situation on traditional management systems in Zimbabwe may be gloomy, not all hope is lost. There are parts of the country where traditional conservation methods are still in place, and local people positively interact with heritage places. In the Zimunya communal lands, local people strongly guard their heritage. For sites like Madzimbahwe, access is limited to only those approved by traditional leaders. Rituals and rainmaking ceremonies related to taboos are constantly held at the site. These management practices have stood the test of time and we cannot afford to ignore such success stories that result from co-operation at grassroots levels. It is time heritage managers learnt from such cases, and realised that science and technology and traditional efforts should be complimentary to each other in managing heritage places. In areas where traditional management systems are still intact, heritage managers should find ways of working with community leaders in order to have an effective management system. Recently, the government has tried to restore to the chiefs the powers they were stripped of during the colonial era.

Where people have been resettled or where traditional systems have been eroded, chiefs should be instrumental in trying to revive these old ways of heritage management. There is need to involve local communities at all stages of planning the management of heritage places. All conservation procedures implemented by heritage managers should be sensitive to the needs of the community. Co-management has proved to be the recipe for the success story in reviving traditional management techniques in the Mijikenda forests of Kenya (Githitho 2001). With similar efforts and commitment, old ways of looking after heritage places can be revived. At the institutional level, NMMZ has to adjust its policies and clearly state the importance of traditional practices.

Working with local communities in reviving old ways of looking after heritage has several advantages. NMMZ solely depends on government for funding, and the economic environment imposes constraints on its operations. Considering the number of cultural sites dotted around the country, it is impossible to adequately cater for each and every site. In this case, traditional management systems are definitely an alternative in managing heritage places. Offering local communities a chance to actively participate in site management instills in them a sense of belonging. Once they become interested stakeholders, and are allowed to utilise the sites, they can safely guard heritage places on behalf of the organisation.

### Conclusion

It is unfortunate that a number of factors have led to the suppression and, in some cases, erosion of traditional management systems. While colonial systems have impacted negatively on these systems, policies implemented by present-day heritage institutions are also to blame for further denying local communities association with heritage places. It is time local people are given the opportunity to contribute to the management of their heritage, and implement old ways of management where possible. Traditional conservation methods can be revived and maintained with the involvement of the community. This does not mean relinquishing all decision-making responsibility to the local people, but having joint management, where traditional and modern day techniques are 'fused'. There is hope for successfully reviving traditional practices in managing heritage places, as long as all stake holders are consulted at all stages.

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### ABSTRACT

Formal heritage systems came as part of a colonial package throughout the African continent, with the aim of preserving monuments and sites that bore witness to human civilisation and development. Before colonialism, different systems were in place to ensure respect and survival of cultural sites. These included taboos, myths and restrictions. The impressive structures we see today have survived for hundreds of years, meaning they owe their existence to some form of management, which is certainly traditional practices. However, the new system of heritage management sought to protect only tangible heritage, and considered modern, scientific techniques important in conservation. This scenario prevailed throughout the colonial period, and was even inherited by heritage institutions after independence. In Zimbabwe, National Museums inherited the colonial system, and did not incorporate traditional ways of heritage protection, despite the fact that in some areas local leadership was willing to participate and revive old ways of managing heritage. In communal areas, several factors led to the erosion of traditional management systems. Legislative pieces pertaining to land ownership saw people moving to reserves, creating way for commercial farms. Proclamation of sites as a way of ensuring their protection meant they automatically became state land. Thus, people became divorced from their heritage, as accessing it would have meant trespassing into private or state land. This meant that traditional leaders, also the guardians of heritage, could not enforce traditional systems of heritage protection. Missionaries also widened the gap between local people and traditional management systems as they condemned respect for ancestors, who were considered the owners of heritage. Many people became Christianised and questioned traditional ceremonies and belief systems. Recently, the government embarked on land redistribution, which had been spontaneous and uncontrolled, and it is not clear whether the new settlers will be able to respect the heritage they find in different areas. In light of these factors this paper seeks to assess how possible and practical it is to call for, and try to revive, traditional systems in managing Zimbabwean cultural heritage.

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