

THE CASE OF NYANGA CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, N.E ZIMBABWE. Paul MUPIRA*, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The archaeological agricultural landscape of Nyanga is one of the most impressive and extensive examples of human environment relationships of farming communities in the second millennium AD in Zimbabwe and the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. Attempts to manage this landscape invariably involve direct intervention with the local communities' daily activities, thus making it an arena of socio-political contests. To be practical and effective approaches to landscape management should take into account the social context and cultural perceptions of the past.

The paper looks at the local communities' attitudes towards the Nyanga landscape and how such dispositions affect or are likely to affect the survival of the archaeological remains. In line with the theme of this conference special emphasis is put on the extent to which the intangible aspects of the heritage pervade the heritage debate in the area and how these have been considered or ignored when implementing protection and conservation decisions. The paper is based on previous studies in the Nyanga area over the past twelve years.

Sacred places in the landscape

The present and past identity is often closely associated with specific locations and structures in the landscape. Nyanga district is not an exception in this respect. There are many places in the landscape that the communities want to be associated with, mainly for religious and spiritual beliefs. The concept of a sense of belonging to a place enshrined in religious and spiritual beliefs affects the community's disposition towards the past. Usually local communities care for only those material elements that have direct significance to their spiritual apparatus. Some sites may be sacrosanct and unalienable, but other manifestations of the past may be demolished or neglected as having no significance. Apparently this restricted concern applies to the Nyanga local communities regarding the archaeological agricultural landscape.

The question on sacred places is normally referred either to the chief or the headmen. These are the only people who hold the prerogative to talk about areas of spiritual importance, as they constitute the traditional political leadership. The chiefs who were approached for interviews are the late Sawunyama Janhi Nyoka who lived in Nyautare and the late Sawunyama Musasikwa Gadzima Hata of Chitsanza near Sedze shopping centre. Below the chief are the sub-chiefs who control the wards and further down the rank are the village headmen.

During the studies focus was mainly on areas surrounding the Ziwa National Monuments and headmen for the following villages Mapako, Dzokoto, Matongo and Sanyangare were interviewed. However, due to a long involvement in projects in the district, it is possible for this paper to assume a broader perspective to include observations from further a field.

The perceptions on the sacredness of the terraces and associated structures differed considerably. Chief Nyoka was of the opinion that the archaeological remains associated with the agricultural landscape are respected but not consecrated. The people under his jurisdiction have their own sacred places (known locally as *madzimbahwe*) located on Nyaunguzvi hills to the west of Mt Muozi. On these hills is a place called Nyabinga, which the chief regarded as the most sacred place in the area where all traditional ceremonies are held. He referred to the Nyaunguzvi hills as the former capital (*guta*) of their ancestors after they dispersed from Mt Muozi. An archaeological investigation revealed that there are indeed some ruins in the Nyaunguzvi area. However the extent and antiquity of these sites are yet to be studied in detail.

In contrast chief Hata intimated that the terraced landscape was sacred. He said that people are not allowed to touch, remove or destroy any relics they come across in the landscape. Hata claimed that in the past when traditional regulations were still strong people would restore portions of terracing damaged as a result of everyday activities. However since the degeneration in customs and cultural practices, many places have been desecrated and small details like replacing dislodged stones are no longer considered to be important.

The people under Hata use an ancient ruin on Chitsanza hill associated with the agricultural terracing for rain-making ceremonies. However according to the chief the most sacred place for the VaNyama people is Mt Muozi. This is the place where the VaNyama established themselves when they first arrived in this territory from 'the north'.

The name Muozi is derived from a very powerful diviner and rainmaker among the VaNyama. The installation of Sawunyama chiefs used to take place here and anybody who wanted become chief had to climb the mountain and be ceremoniously accepted or rejected by the spirits. According to a legend Muozi become so popular and powerful that the paramount chief Sawunyama felt threatened. Muozi was attacked and killed by Sawunyama's army. His death brought a curse on the land and the Sawunyama chieftainship.

There were numerous droughts until Sawunyama paid some reparations to appease the avenging spirit. Since then an appeasement ceremony has to be conducted on Mt Muozi otherwise serious afflictions will befall the Vanyama people. Further, the ceremony has to be conducted by members of a messenger clan or sons-in-law who were not party to the murder of Muozi as these have 'clean hands'. If any member of the Vanyama goes up the hill he becomes sick or even dies. This is how Mt Muozi gained its sacredness.

For heritage managers the site is archaeologically important as there are numerous deposits including large whole pots and some stone structures. Recent archaeological work has shown that there was a large settlement on Mt Muozi that left varied occupation debris of later farming communities. Radiocarbon samples and bead seriation from the site suggest a date in the 16th to 17th century for the main occupation at the site.

According to the four headmen interviewed not all terraces or ruins are sacred; only those in which contemporary cultural sites have been located are of extra importance. The headman for Sanyangare claims that there are many sacred places on Ziwa national monuments although he specifically refers to only one contemporary shrine or *dzimbahwe* simply known to the locals as *rutumba* (i.e. hut). The Ruin No 1 incident mentioned below perhaps confirms his claims of 'many' sacred sites at Ziwa. The living cultural site which is entirely a contemporary creation has been in use for a long time even during the colonial period. The headman warned the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), the institution mandated to look after the heritage in Zimbabwe not to temper with the *dzimbahwe*, emphasizing that the ancestral spirits would deal with any defiance or disobedience.

The village head for Dzokoto village said that they used an ancient fort on Nyamazhi hill about 400 m north of Tawengwa for rain ceremonies. The slopes are terraced and people are not allowed to cut down trees on the hill. Some people though were not observing these rules and the blame was put on newly arrivals that have been settled by political appointees without the permission of the local leadership. The new settlers have no respect or appreciation of local sacred sites as they lack the sense of belonging to such places.

The headmen for Mapako and Matongo believed it was improper for them to reveal their cultural sites to strangers as many places were losing their local significance because of that. The activities of some churches were also criticized as they infringed on cultural sites, particularly those located on hills and mountains where churchgoers hold their prayers in total disregard of the local reverence of the places.

A respondent from the District Administrator's office thought that not every terracing in the agricultural landscape was culturally important or sacred. His disposition is based on the premise that, in indigenous African culture every society has its own sacred areas and would not appropriate any which do not belong to their own people or ancestors. Hence immigrants as 'outsiders' could not designate a place as sacred in an area which is not their own.

However, they have to observe the rules of the land in which they have settled. The only way some terraces may be regarded as sacred is because of the existence of contemporary cultural sites in the landscape. This, however, does not mean that the terraces are not important. In the case of Ziwa, he repeated a comment by some of the villagers that before the area became state land there were people living there but they did not disturb the landscape. When the whites came they made the place more important than it was before, but in the process they never explained to the local community why they were giving it such value of significance. In a concluding remark the officer said "Nyanga is an area of terraces, if the NMMZ wants to save everything then there will be no development".

It is clear therefore that the local leadership regard some terraced areas as sacred. This is because either they have selected certain ancient ruins in the cultural landscape and made them sacred and ignore others as not of any religious significance. In places the local community has developed/created their own contemporary sacred cultural sites and do not view the terraces as of any real religious or spiritual importance although they respect them. In a study in Kagore Matowanyika (1991) found out that settlement in terraced areas is forbidden by local regulation and folklore. Key informants in that area said terraces were sacred. They were however, not among the most important sacred sites in Kagore, such as burial sites, mountain ranges, hills, ritual sites and residences of the spirits, listed in that order of local importance (Matowanyika 1991). The local community in south Dzimbabwe tended to have the same reverence for hills and mountains as in Kagore and pointed out that they were the favoured locations for sacred sites. Thus even if Ziwa and Nyahokwe mountains were not specifically mentioned as sacred during the survey they may be regarded as significant living sites of special local importance.

Protecting and preserving the cultural landscape

Generally the local community does not claim to be the living descendants of the terrace builders. However they use some of the relics from the past for traditional ceremonies or rituals and agriculture. Is the agricultural landscape worth caring for and is the local community doing anything to save it?

The traditional leadership claims that they maintain all the sites they were using for cultural functions. Sacred areas were out of bounds at any other time except during ceremonies. The rest of the terraced landscape was preserved through what Lipe (1984: 2) has termed 'passive protection'. This means refraining from doing any activities that may damage or destroy sites that are not in contemporary use. Such avoidance is noted in the settlement and land-use systems and distribution. The ancient agricultural landscape has a significant influence on these. This type of management is buttressed by local regulations and folklore, still existing in some places. The locals are supposed to be aware of these regulations and newcomers are sensitised about them.

Chief Hata warned that outsiders should never try to go out to places such as Muozzi without permission and local guidance sanctioned by him as this could have disastrous repercussions. A well known case is that of a missionary from a local school who went up Mt Muozzi and tried to remove a piece of cloth from a large ceremonial pot. The cloth kept on rolling out of the pot and the missionary could not release it from his hands - he wandered around with it for some days before he found his way down the mountains and later died! Incidentally two archaeologists went up Mt Muozzi recently and on their way back one of them had a nasty fall losing his smoking! Such an incident may be taken as 'normal' by archaeologists used to rough conditions in the field. But to the locals the fact that this happened on a sacred mountain, the fall and the loss of property would certainly be interpreted as punishment for treading on a sacred site without permission.

Cases abound in the Nyanga area where divine punishment has been meted on those who trespass on local sacred places. During one of my field surveys in the Nyahava area a white colleague of mine lost a very precious pen which he had just received as a present from his wife. As we set to 'survey' / look for the pen a local guide whispered to me: "I have told you before, this is a sacred place, see what is happening now". Another well-known incident of disastrous infringement of local regulations involved the wife of a local white farmer during the colonial period. It is said that she touched some artefacts at Ruin No. 1 on Ziwa national monuments and her clothing caught a mysterious fire. Mt Nyangani in the Nyanga National Park is famous for the mysterious disappearance of people. The scientific explanation is that it is because of the quicksands on the mountain. But the local communities believe that it is the work of the spirits. In Kagore to the east of central Sawunyama territory Matowanyika (1991) reports that Kagore School was located in an area close to a sacred place and it has persistently been damaged by the secretary bird.

Such events are not limited to Nyanga alone either, as the writer has encountered such beliefs in Zimunya Communal Lands south of Mutare. This year in sub-chief Munyoro's area a lone troublesome lion was attacking and killing people's livestock. It so happened that when the trouble animal started roaming frequently at night, the archaeological team from the University of Zimbabwe, which the author is part of had been to the area conducting research in places like Manjowe and Himalaya Hills. When the team went back in August the sub-chief said people suspected that this could be a result of our activities in the domiciles of the ancestral spirits and their hosts. Among the Shona people in Zimbabwe hosts of the ancestral spirits can also be lions (*mhondoro*). The lion was finally poisoned by the locals in September and died. It remains to be seen whether the killing of the lion puts to rest the villagers' suspicions that the lion was supernatural and whether this was a sign that something had gone wrong in the community.

While many people said they had nothing to do with the terraces and would not disturb them, there appears to be a general increase in interference, maybe motivated more by necessity than by intentional malice.

Infringement includes the alteration of some ancient field systems to create larger modern fields; dismantling of terraces and the use of the stones to build house foundations, cattle pens and graves; and destruction of pits to extricate cattle that would have fallen into the structures. Extreme cases of destruction occur during the construction of public infrastructure such as dams, bridges and roads by the local authorities.

Comparing the above findings to a study by Matowanyika (1991) in Kagore there is a general similarity in the rating of the protection worthiness of terraces. When people in Kagore were asked which sites should be protected in the area at least 23% mentioned terraces. However the protection worthiness of terraces was rated below burial sites (53%), *mugore* trees (48%), mountain areas (33%) and fruit sites (28%) (Matowanyika 1991: 243).

The picture that emerges then is that passive protection is not consistent throughout the district. Also local regulations have somewhat failed to stop the gradual and sporadic damage and destruction of the archaeological structures.

Protection agency and the local community

The local leadership generally thought that the protection and conservation objectives of the heritage institution are sound. The elders, however, stressed that there was need to meet and discuss these so that they could pass on the information to the people. The programme to preserve and rehabilitate the heritage was particularly welcome at a time when many traditional morals and values are no longer taken seriously by the new generation and when local regulations are breaking down. Whatever conditions were laid down by the community should be followed to avoid conflict and tampering with culturally important sites. The general belief is that traditional laws or regulations and the heritage laws should be complementary and implemented *pari passu* to ensure a harmonious relationship.

Naturally there is an inclination towards resisting any protection programmes that are implemented without following proper channels. There are some areas that the leadership feels cannot be protected by the NMMZ because they are of living cultural importance. This includes areas like Nyaunguzvi, Ziwa and Mt Muozzi where shrines are located. There are certain categories of people who are not allowed to go to such places as this may result in defilement. Such restrictions will be infringed if the sites became the public property. The cause of the heritage institutions can only be furthered if they consult with traditional leaders. Pursuant to this, the local leadership would consider whether the management plans are compatible with local regulations. If so, procedures that the heritage managers have to follow when dealing with these sites will be laid out. The leaders may be willing to have some of their sites legally protected but there are others that cannot.

There exist some disquiet between the NMMZ and the headmen for Sanyangare and Matongo whose villages share 'borders' with Ziwa national monuments. The national monuments boundaries now only exist on the map as the fence was removed during the war.

The headmen for the two villages requested that boundaries between the commons and the national monuments area be clearly defined. This aspect needed a lot of cooperation with the surrounding community to ensure success of projects.

The headman for Sanyangare is, however, very uncomfortable with the idea of erecting a fence around the Ziwa monuments as this would interfere with the village shrine. The village community will resist all attempts to fence their side of the boundary on religious and cultural grounds. The headman contented that fencing the area would be tantamount to 'caging' the ancestral spirits. This would alienate the community from their spiritual guardians. The restricted access may also result in the community not being able to hold their ceremonies at the *rutumba* shrine. This will expose the society to other alien harmful spirits. Further he claimed that the terraces and the land they occupy belong to the people and the NMMZ cannot therefore solely set the conditions of access to the Ziwa area. If the NMMZ wanted to erect a fence they should so but rather thinking of 'our' shrine than 'their' site museum. If the NMMZ defied the community they (community) will invoke the ancestral spirits to solve the dispute, as it is them who know the true boundaries.

Some Sanyangare villagers challenged the idea that the NMMZ controls the Ziwa area by virtue of holding the title deeds of the property. The title deeds were of no consequence as the fundamental question is: Who was there before the state institution took over?

Implications for management

The leadership's sensitivity to the past tended to show a dichotomous attitude that sees the past as a good and the present bad. The past was good in that the traditional institutions had successful controls and regulations that safeguarded cultural creations; the society upheld high morals and values and there were more natural resources. The present is condemned for its lack of sensitivity to the past, which has to some extent led to the failure of traditional institutions.

The local communities do not accept that everything in the landscape is important or sacred. There is restricted concern towards the elements of the landscape, with contemporary cultural sites being valued more because of the meaning they have to the present communities. In these communities their cultural sites are private, individual to the group and secret. Their wariness of possible protection by the NMMZ shows they do not regard their cultural sites as public property.

Nevertheless general local reverence of the past has to a large extent guarded the landscape for a very long period. The fact that there is no overt wide-spread destruction of terraces shows that the communities have some sort of respect for the archaeological remains, although they do not claim any cultural identity with the builders. Therefore, it can be argued that an appreciation of the past by the people of Nyanga is largely due to some form of community culture and local regulation.

The culture generally stresses the need to respect abandoned homesteads or constructions - *matongo*, whether you know or do not know the builders. With a few exceptions, the absence of peculiarly destructive attitudes reinforces this community culture theory. But how can this respect be turned into active management of the tangible aspects?

In a place like Nyanga where there is a resident rural population in the landscape, more informal negotiations should be the preferred method for accomplishing protection goals than relying too much on formal legislation. Informal negotiations may be achieved through the strong persuasive role of key individuals and the NMMZ as the ultimate authority on heritage matters. Key individuals could be locals who share the same concern for the landscape or environment and have respect for the intangible heritage. In such a case prosecution or resort to the police action may play a less active role. The heritage laws and traditional laws may operate simultaneously. This is consistent with the thinking of the local leadership in Nyanga as the studies have shown currently.

In many African countries including Zimbabwe strong traditions and customs relate to natural resource use, involving for example sacred sites or respect for environmentally important features like waterholes, caves, mountains hills or forests (Mckinnon et al 1986). These strong traditions and spiritual beliefs can be extended to the man-made features in the environment. Local systems of resource management are grounded in a series of rules of the thumb, taboos and beliefs, which assist the conservation and protection of the human-made landscape. Archaeology in Nyanga has largely benefited from these strong traditions as Matowanyika (1991) has found out for Kagore; where terraced mountains and hills are among the important sacred places and where traditional regulations forbid cultivation in the terraces. Punishments under such systems are incorporated for rule breakers. Despite recent threats to traditional rules there is still greater respect for these than any other modern and poorly understood statutory laws.

A more effective approach for Nyanga therefore would be to highlight to the communities the local benefits of protecting and preserving the archaeological landscape. The archaeological landscape in Nyanga should be approached in such a way that archaeology gains socio-political relevance to the contemporary local community. This should entail reinforcing existing local beliefs and the intangible aspects about parts of the landscape. Some areas like the Muozzi and Nyabinga cultural sites can survive with virtually no legal protection because of local spiritual beliefs. In such cases the role of the manager should be that of an observing evaluating participant of the local community beliefs and values in order to establish how these assist in the conservation of the landscape. The manager should also explain the common goal in traditional mechanisms of management and scientific protection and preservation. This process may correct misconceptions about academic inquiry and engage rural people in remedying the problems of restricted concern towards some certain elements of the landscape.

Conclusion

Strong traditions still influence the treatment of that part of the landscape that is regarded by the local community as culturally, spiritually or religiously significant. Most people among the local community and institutions are not aware of the archaeological value of the landscape around them although elements of it have been given cultural or religious significance. As Munjeri says elsewhere, it goes to show that the tangible can only stand on one foot but the intangible stands on two feet.

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ABSTRACT

A present or past identity is often closely associated with specific locations and structures in the landscape. The concept of a sense of belonging to a place enshrined in religious and spiritual beliefs affects a community's disposition towards the past. Usually local communities care for only those material elements that have direct significance to their spiritual apparatus. As Cleere (1989: 8) points out some sites may be sacrosanct and unalienable, but other manifestations of the past may be demolished or neglected as having no significance. Following this argument, the paper looks at the Nyanga community's perception of the past, and explores the nature of this restricted concern. In order to solicit attitudes regarding spiritual beliefs the locals were asked whether they held the terraces as sacred. The diverse perceptions that emerged have important implications on the management of the cultural landscape.

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