

## **THE DILEMMA OF PRESERVING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN ZIMBABWE** **Seke KATSAMUDANGA\*, Zimbabwe**

### **Introduction**

This paper intends to look at the dilemmas of preserving intangible heritage in the face of changing cultural perceptions in Zimbabwe. It is quite unfortunate that major historical developments have been antithetical to the preservation of traditional cultural values in Africa. The kind of education and the historical legacy left by colonial dogma is still affecting the preservation of intangible itineraries. The struggle in the management of intangible heritage in Zimbabwe is also a mirror of the struggles between generations. It is also a struggle between the idealism of the past and present, and the materialism of the present.

In recent months we have been seeing documentaries of traditional rituals and practices on the national television of Zimbabwe. The powers that were accorded to traditional leaders by the government have accidentally led to calls for a revival of traditional practices, ethics and values. The renaissance of these virtues is in a way a mirror of ICOMOS' efforts to have the issue of intangible heritage be taken seriously. Within the African context, much of the cultural heritage is significant because of its intrinsic values. The meaning and importance imbued in monuments and sites lay not only in their physical appearance but also in the reason behind their construction or existence. Traditional functions, like ritual ceremonies, provide the context in which the meaning of objects is communicated to the wider public. The revival of traditional practices therefore provides a platform in which the richness of the intangible heritage of Zimbabwe can be maintained.

Achieving these goals, however, is likely to be hindered by fundamental problems that range from the nature of intangible heritage itself to the historical development of the country's social processes. The dynamics of cultures cannot be ignored. Processes like globalisation have changed the way communities perceive their environments and affected the interpretation of the past. Each generation defines its own heritage values and trying to make the past live with the present should be a matter determined by social processes in the concerned communities. Since intangible heritage is about abstract concepts, and since it derives its importance from particular communities, families or individuals, its management therefore is likely to create problems for institutions that are guardians of the cultural heritage, namely, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ).

Intangible values are regulated and transmitted through taboos on age, sex and even gender restrictions. These restrictions are inculcated into society as secrets and myths by elder members of society and spirit mediums. Traditional leaders and their spirits represent lawmakers. The setup is so complete that there might be no room for the modern heritage manager. How then will modern heritage managers come in? These aspects of intangible heritage and problems created by other social forces, like population changes, new economic strategies etc., are what I discuss in the dilemmas inherent to the management of this heritage.

I argue that the preservation of intangible heritage in monuments and sites is best left to traditional leadership and the communities utilising these values. They are the ones who know what is important to them from the vast cultural past bequeathed to them by their ancestors. The professional heritage manager should only come in to provide an enabling environment for the continued use and preservation of this heritage. I also argue that as long as ICOMOS is about monuments and sites, the physical remnants of the past will continue dominating the discourse and practice of preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. Intangible values are best protected not only at monuments and sites, but also within the social processes that generated them. Only local communities attached to these places can see authentically beyond these material relics, and can reach the emotional and spiritual satisfaction of utilising monuments and sites. It should be borne in mind that intangible values are the wider frame within which societies function (Munjeri 1995). These values function in a broader sphere far much larger than the monument and site level. Targeting the preservation of values at monuments and sites without consideration of the cosmology around them might quarantine these values, thereby rendering them irrelevant to the communities that have to enjoy them. What this means is that the preservation of intangible values at monuments represents a tiny portion of the work that has to be done.

### **Intangible Heritage – definitions and concepts**

A work group on Religion and Spiritual Heritage during the 1995 First Global Strategy meeting on African Cultural Heritage and the World Heritage Convention included aspects like trance, rituals, ceremonies, rights of passage and taboos as part of the intangible elements of cultural heritage (Munjeri et al 1995, p.106). Intangible heritage may also include oral traditions and expressions, including language, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices about nature and the universe, craftsmanship and even folklore (UNESCO 2001).

This heritage can occur anywhere, on natural features like mountains or kopjes, geological formations (pools and caves, etc), in forests or on man-made structures. It includes such issues as ideas or beliefs, skills in practices and activities, as in constructions, dances, songs, emotions, and even sacred sounds that can not be played anywhere else except in the correct context. This heritage is important and can only be appreciated by people who are able to read the icons of its imprint on the landscape. Since it is knowledge that is groomed within people, it therefore differentiates one community, lineage or individual from another. It shapes the way community members relate to each other, how they relate to the physical environment, the universe and the spiritual world. Politics, subsistence strategies and other day-to-day social activities function within this network of ideas, beliefs, rules and norms of society.

When considered in this light, it becomes apparent that intangible values form the backbone of communities. It follows therefore that the discourse on the preservation of this heritage is beyond monuments and sites. Monuments and sites are not isolated elements of society, but are elements that play an active role in the social praxis. As a result, the management and preservation of such heritage is only successful and effectively achievable when people who can see, read, understand and utilise these values do so. These are the people interacting with this heritage as defined by its values.

Management theory and methodology calls for a clear definition of what has to be looked after. The current perception on monuments is a narrow one that sees these places as things that can be located with XY co-ordinates. It is not surprising why there has been an inclination towards the management of physical elements of monuments. As long as we continue to talk of monuments and sites in this narrow sense we will continue to see the physical remnants of culture first before seeing the wealth in intrinsic values. In that case, and unless monuments are broadened to incorporate whole landscapes and villages, it would be quite proper to take care of the physical embodiments of these intrinsic values.

### **Intangible Heritage and the colonial legacy**

From 1890, when this country was colonised, the colonial system tried by all means possible to tread down upon the identity of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. The intolerance of colonialists to African virtues resulted in an end, in some communities, to traditional practices and values. The displacement of much of the Zimbabwean population due to colonial land policies, like the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Land Tenure Act of 1969, disrupted some of these practices (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999). Most displaced people went to settle in the Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs), where they were "aliens" who could not easily fit into the new socio-cultural set-ups. Shrines in the European areas were left unattended as colonial property rights could not allow entry into areas now under private ownership.

In the TTLs (now rural areas), colonial education saw traditional African practices and beliefs as a hindrance to political and economic progress in the colony. African beliefs, especially in spirit mediums, played a role in the resistance to colonial policies that culminated in wars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 1970s. The settlers of southern Rhodesia had to subjugate this belief with the assistance of Christianity and western education. Since much of the colonial education was offered through missionary schools, Africans in these schools gradually lost their traditions and assumed new value systems. Although not all people could completely discard their beliefs, being a believer in the African value systems had a social stigma even today. With independence there was hope and zeal to restore lost cultural values (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999) through cultural revival programmes like traditional dance and drama groups. There was hope for re-entry into former cultural territories but the new government did not suddenly change the land ownership system. The government policy of reconciliation and the willing-buyer-willing-seller on land allowed continued private ownership of land in commercial farms. In areas acquired by the government, resettlement mixed people with different backgrounds. Western education continued and missionary schools continued to be evangelical tools for Christianity. The three-tier organisation of society into urban, farm and rural areas inherited from colonialism created social orders that inhibited successful revival of these values. Exposure to new ideas, like the belief in science and its tenets of concrete evidence that can be proven, all facilitated by mobility between these areas, meant that the significance of spiritual beliefs in many societies could be queried.

Formal management of monuments in Zimbabwe came with the colonial regime. It is interesting to note that legislation on the protection of cultural heritage had a political root geared towards sustenance of racial policies in the then Southern Rhodesia (Murambiwa 1991). The Great Zimbabwe controversy initiated the movement towards heritage management, and the mystery of the stone-built sites led to their proclamation as national monuments in the hope that they would reinforce the idea of a vanished, but superior and foreign, civilisation. Most national monuments of Zimbabwe proclaimed in the colonial period were either these archaeological sites or colonial memorials that had to do with the process of colonisation. The reasons for the proclamation of archaeological sites were mainly scientific (Ndoro 2001) and the fear that they were under threat from modern civilisation (Murambiwa 1991). Non-scientific values either did not exist or were merely an appendage and subsidiary to the primary criterion for proclamation. The 1901 ordinance, which became law in 1902 as the Ancient Monuments Protection Ordinance, was merely meant for stopping irresponsible archaeological damage (Murambiwa 1991). Even the 1936 Monuments and Relics Act did not change the colonial approach towards intangible values, for these represented a hidden history that the colonialists did not want revealed (Murambiwa 2001).

A 1968 letter by N. J. Boast acknowledged that the stone-walled sites of Mutota, Chiwawa and Matanda, and Chiwawa ruins in northern Zimbabwe had spiritual significance, but as these “places are used as *churches* it is considered inappropriate in the present circumstances to declare them national monuments and thereby inhibit or restrict their use by the tribesmen”. However, in 1969 they were declared national monuments on the basis of archaeological importance, not spiritual significance. By virtue of that proclamation it became an offence to use the sites. This legislation, and even the new one of 1972, gave ownership and management of proclaimed sites to the government through the Historical Commission for Management. With independence the same arrangement continued maybe to maintain cultural uniformity (Mataga 2003) and unity of the various ethnic groups in the country.

Thus, due to colonialism and colonial legislation, much of Zimbabwean intangible heritage was lost. Land policies and legislation on monuments drove people from their traditional shrines or prohibited the continued use of those sites by local communities. One hundred years of interrupted practices at important shrines and new challenges from science and Christian evangelism created stiff challenges to the recognition and identification of the intangible heritage to preserve. Indifference or negative attitudes of local communities towards their heritage (tangible or intangible) today must be understood in the context of the dislocation created by colonialism. The current land reform still will entrench this indifference as people are moving further away from their roots in search of better lands. Important sites in these resettlement areas continue to be isolated from their traditional owners, as they have been in the past.

### The dynamics of culture

Intangible heritage derives its essence from the social processes of the communities on which they have an influence. The preservation of this heritage therefore requires the preservation of these social processes that created them in order to ensure the survival of their significance. But then social processes undergo dynamic and evolutionary changes. Even the sense of identity in communities is not static (Pearson and Sullivan 1995). Other social factors and historical developments, like the past and present land reforms in Zimbabwe, intrusive cultures from colonialism, migrations and tourism, and globalization, incorporate new value systems into our understanding of spiritual, social and physical environments.

Some sectors of modern societies see the management of intangible heritage potentially as the management of myths and legends. The terms myth and legend are value-laden and imply that there is limited truth in the subject. Yet, successful management requires understanding and believing in these myths and legends. Different cultural beliefs, scholarly backgrounds and perceptions guide heritage managers on how to relate to heritage. Western education taught us science, and our perception of the world around us has become essentially materialist. Modern societies view the importance of heritage in terms of how much it is economically worth and how aesthetic and entertaining it could be.

Very few still revere or even know their norms, values and traditions. Issues of survival and economic problems in a capitalist society are influencing the change in social beliefs, rules and codes of behaviour. The young generation has adopted new value systems being disseminated by powerful media like radio, television, magazines and the internet, among others. The intangible values that we wish preserved at monuments no longer have relevance to the young.

It is important to note that sometimes the exploitation of nature through intangible beliefs is incongruent to other social dynamics. This problem is apparent when we look at sacred forests and population expansion. They are continuously dwindling because some are located in areas with good soils for agriculture while the population is expanding. There is no conformity between population dynamics and the social practices in this case. One such *ndambakurimwa* forest in Zimunya, Manicaland, now survives in the hills only. In Muchima, Mudzi, there used to be one such sacred forest (*Jese raNyandoro*) where farming was prohibited. The good soils in the forest and population growth in the surrounding village created pressure on the survival of this forest, and today only a very small portion of the original forest exists. The traditional custodians of this forest had to accept that people needed land, so they appeased their spirits to allow the forest to be used for crop cultivation (personal observation).

Another demonstration of how Zimbabwean society has become materialist is the reaction that came with the restitution of a part of the Zimbabwe bird that was in Germany. Some individuals from the Zimbabwean community took to the press claiming that that bird brought no food to their plates so the whole occasion was a non-event. Some people even tried to put monetary value to the bird but came up with no proper answer because such objects are significant in terms of their intangible worth. If one doesn't know this significance then appreciation of the object is difficult. One does not need to be taught to appreciate one's heritage. Lack of appreciation is a sign of changing values in societies and also a testimony of different opinions between generations.

Another example, which illustrates the changing values in communities, is drawn from northern Zimbabwe again. In 1985 the curator of archaeology of the northern region, Targat C, expressed concern at problems anticipated from the construction of a cotton depot at Mahuwe growth point. A proposed road for the Mahuwe cotton depot passed through the western part of Chiwawa monuments. A report on the monument said the local community agreed to the construction of the depot because it was likely to bring enormous benefits to the area, even though they still had strong ties with the monument. In addition to that, M C H Gandiwa, who was to construct the depot, seemed to underrate the value of the monument by saying “While we *sympathise* with your reasons for not permitting us to build our multipurpose depot...” as he reacted to the prohibition to construct the depot.

In Chief Nohwedza's area (Mt. Darwin) another stone enclosure was destroyed as some members of the community dug beneath the walls in search of rumoured gold (personal observation).

In a contrasting case, the community of Zimunya has managed to preserve and continue to use their rainmaking shrines. In January 2003 during an archaeological expedition in Manicaland, the then-acting chief Zimunya "successfully" performed some rituals to stop mysterious appearances of mermaids that were occurring at a dam in the Vumba commercial farms (Chief Musabayana. Pers. comm.). There are several other examples of practices that are still going on in the rural areas demonstrating different degrees of change in societies.

Although African tradition has always had measures to deal with problems associated with the management of intangible heritage, this has not stopped gradual cultural changes. Even the revival of important traditions might be viewed with scepticism and suspicion. Through personal experience I noticed there was suspicion when one man in Mudzi set up a cultural village to show and preserve the dying traditions in his area. The owner of the village known as the Last Destination said the majority of people he interviewed were ignorant about their traditions (The Sunday Mail 05/11/1999).

These changes, which also occur in intangible values, render their preservation problematic. Professional heritage protection theoretically seems to be against free development of social changes as needed by society. It tries to preserve values according to particular standards that are delimited in time. The best preservation method under such conditions would be to document, archive (Mataga 2003) and stop further activities that may change the recorded values. Traditionally, however, these values seem to require no professional heritage managers to survive. In areas that were not affected by land ownership rights these values have existed without the modern heritage manager. The management of intangible heritage is therefore best left to the people directly involved with that heritage. The role of the heritage manager in managing intangible value is sometimes regarded as intrusive and suspect. Communities still practising their traditions make the necessary adjustments to accommodate the situations prevailing within their sphere of influence. They choose what is relevant and reject the moribund. In any case, heritage is for the consumption of present-day society otherwise the intervention of the professional heritage manager might be interpreted as an attempt to freeze cultural developments.

#### **Legislative problems**

Appreciation of cultural values in Zimbabwe is sometimes constrained by the legislation guiding the protection of cultural heritage. The problem with Zimbabwean legislation (CAP 25/11), which defines the activities of NMMZ, is that it does not recognise explicitly the importance of intangible heritage. The ratification of this Act in 1972 did not help much in the protection of intangible heritage.

That legislation defined an ancient monument as a building, ruin or structure, or remaining portion of a building, ruin or structure, or a statue, grave, cave, rock shelter, shell mound or other site of a similar kind known or believed to have been erected before 1890 (CAP 25/11). Monuments were proclaimed on the basis of their historic, archaeological, palaeontological or scientific worth and colonial policy makers determined these values. Today, as it was in the past, this heritage is property of NMMZ, which keeps it in trust for the people of Zimbabwe (CAP 25/11), yet it wrestled it away from the same people.

Preserving intangible values at monuments and sites calls for a clear definition of the values to be preserved. From the given elements of intangible values, it is clear that these values are part and parcel of the cosmos of a community. Preserving them at monuments and sites requires the regeneration of the context in which they were practised or used. Yet, an analysis of Zimbabwean legislation shows that it is the professional heritage manager who defines the value of monuments. This Act limits access to the monument and one then wonders for which people does the board keep the heritage in trust. The management of intangible heritage in Zimbabwe requires the legislation to redefine the criterion under which monuments should be proclaimed. This would entail a re-evaluation of the existing national monuments register on the basis of intangible values. As long as we continue to talk of monuments and sites (in the narrow sense of the terms) without current use of these places by the surrounding communities, the intangible values will only be preserved as recorded knowledge, or as myths and legends in oral traditions, archives and museums. We can create monuments on the basis of their spiritual, ritual and other intangible values but if we do not have active and genuine users of this heritage then we remain where we are today, preserving the intangible values through the physical manifestations of this heritage.

#### **Recommendations**

There is no definite solution to the problems in the preservation of intangible values. Recommendations from several heritage managers and academics have been calling for co-management or community participation (Muringaniza 1998; Ndoro 2001; Mataga 2003; Taruvinga 1995). However, the degree to which communities should be involved was usually not specified. Preserving intangible values in monuments and sites in Zimbabwe, and maybe anywhere else, requires the preservation of the social processes that created them. This is more than the recommended community participation. Intangible values govern the behaviour of societies. They are generated from these communities and provide feedback channels into the social, political and economic realms of society. Traditionally, ideas and beliefs determine how the physical environment can be exploited and create the identity of societies. Enabling a free play of these social dynamics ensures the survival of the relevant intangible values of societies. The case of the Matopos landscape is a successful example of how this can be achieved (Taruvinga pers comm.). Professional heritage managers should provide the enabling environment and should accept the dynamism of cultures.

Redrafting the legal instruments and leaving communities to decide what they want included on the national monuments list can achieve this. Only when drastic changes to the social systems occur, and only if these do not enjoy popular support, might the intervention of heritage managers become necessary.

Where monuments are no longer in symbiosis with surrounding communities, as with most of the listed ones for Zimbabwe, then management of the physical remains preserves the intangible memories attached to those sites. Even if the basis of proclamation is revised to incorporate intangible values, the context in which they operated cannot be restored. Where there is demonstrable evidence, and where there are no new powerful secondary values, the re-use of some monuments may work to preserve these values, as is the case with the shrine at Nharira hills.

Efforts to revive African virtues have included the setting up of culture houses and culture villages, cultural drama, etc. (Pwiti & Ndoro 1999). These, however, have become sources of information, knowledge and entertainment only. There is no transference and transmission of this knowledge into practice. The activities shown belong to the past and only come to the present as dramatisation. Revival of traditional practices at monuments and sites has usually generated conflicts of custodianship, hindering the success of such efforts (Mataga 2003).

There appears to be change, however, that is coming with the recognition made by the government in terms of traditional leadership. There is a revival of the need to show cultural identities. Several chiefs have been appearing on national television yearning for a return to traditional values, like rainmaking ceremonies. The granting of more powers to traditional leaders appears to be the key to the revival and recognition of intangible values. These powers challenge the relevance of national institutions of heritage. I argue that, traditionally, the professional heritage manager is irrelevant. Where monuments are in active use the heritage manager is an intruder. The overall protection of sacred sites is facilitated through spirit mediums, which might also keep out the heritage managers through a system of taboos and other social controls. The success of indigenous management structures is demonstrated by the continued existence of sacred shrines and activities in many rural areas without direct involvement of NMMZ. In this light, NMMZ becomes a liability to the nation, for it would have been excluded in the management system. But there might be other values to protect at the same monuments and sites, such as archaeological, historical, aesthetic and scientific, whose management has traditionally been against the re-use of sites.

NMMZ has been trying to avoid the conflicts that it has had with local communities (Taruvinga 1995; Mvenge and Pwiti 1996) and to make itself relevant to society by recognising intangible heritage. Some scholars have argued that powerful traditional leadership might be a threat to heritage survival. They might also be a threat to national development; hence, they have been brought under government control.

In the district of Goromonzi a dispute over burials has been hampering the development of Kunzvi Dam. Heritage (tangible or not) is threatened by the means for economic development, like dams, roads, mines, etc. Traditional leaders may accept or reject these developments if given independent powers. To what extent of authenticity then can intangible values at monuments and sites be preserved? Is it possible to use and get spiritual satisfaction at monuments if there are limitations to what can be done at the sites, let alone an external observer in the person of the heritage manager? What sense of identity is restored when certain activities are limited? We have to realise that traditional leaders were in the past lawmakers who were only assisted by their spirit mediums. Is it possible then to make the spirits abide by government directives?

### Conclusion

It appears the best approach in preserving intangible heritage would be theoretically to allow local communities carry on with their activities at these sites. This, however, should be done within a legal framework that allows ethical practices and observation of human rights issues. The role of NMMZ would be consultative and advisory, especially when stiff challenges from new value systems acquired through contact with other cultures and institutions of society threaten the survival of these monuments. Communities could be made aware of other values at their monuments, should there be any. The recognition of traditional leadership will ensure the revival and preservation of intangible values at monuments and sites. If heritage managers select monuments on the basis of these values then maybe there are already too many monuments to be declared, most having been preserved by traditional systems.

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### **ABSTRACT**

The incompleteness of cultural heritage without the inclusion of intangible heritage can not be over-emphasised. The norms (behaviours, rules etc) and values (ideas and/or belief systems) a society ascribes to its cultural heritage determine its importance. Preserving intangible heritage is crucial for communities still practising their traditions, but might be an elusive undertaking as only the intangible heritage connected to visible physical remains can be identified.

The Zimbabwean government recently gave more powers to chiefs, and consequently we have been seeing a series of documentaries on traditional practices on the national television station. Each chiefdom wants to show its identity, and most call for being accorded rights to practise traditional ceremonies even at sites that are now national monuments. This is quite proper and is in line with the concept of African renaissance. From a heritage management point of view, however, the problem comes when nomination for monument status has to be considered. Which shrine or place should be nominated and what is the significance of that for the nation? What cultural perception does the nominator have over the invisible significance?

This paper intends to look at the dilemmas of preserving intangible heritage in the face of changing cultural perceptions in Zimbabwe. It is quite unfortunate that major historical developments have been antithetical to the preservation of traditional cultural values in Africa. The kind of education and the historical legacy left by colonial dogma is still affecting the preservation of intangible itineraries. The struggle in the management of intangible heritage in Zimbabwe is also a mirror of the struggles between the old and the young. It is also a struggle between the idealism of the past and the materialism of the present.