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Cultural Heritage and Culture - Inheritance in Africa: Some Insights from the Makonde of Tanzania

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Abstract:

Heritage studies have received remarkable interest among cultural heritage professionals in the world. Most of these studies are so much related to the conservation and protection of cultural heritage resources. Another area of concern has been on local communities' understanding and engagement in protection of cultural heritage resources. It is this later concern that influenced this study on cultural heritage with emphasis on 'culture - inheritance' in Africa. The problematic question that this paper attempts to unveil is the fact that cultural heritage professionals in Africa have paid little attention to the dynamics of 'culture-inheritance' among Africans across generations. There is a miss-link in the process of inheriting culture, hence resulting to a state of 'culture-exclusivity' leading to culture deterioration among the community members particularly the youth group. With focus to the Makonde of Tanzania, the study through interviews, observation, narratives and community engagement in site-survey noted the lacuna of 'heritage culture' among the local communities especially young generation. The dialectical understanding and lack of awareness on cultural heritage resources among some members of the society is part of the discussion of this paper. It is suggested in this paper that, the problem of poor conservation of cultural heritage in Africa has to a large extent a direct link to the lack of 'heritage culture' of heritage resources. It is this problem that hinders inclusive efforts for sustainable conservation of cultural heritage resources in Africa.

Keywords: Heritage, cultural heritage, conservation, community engagement, tangible, intangible

1. Introduction

The term heritage refers to the human-made, natural and historical character of the material and symbolic elements of life as well as the intrinsic productivity of social action...It is most often a set of conditions adopted by a cultural grouping to meet the basic requirement of that group (Edson, 2004). It can be presented as a socio-cultural process in which negotiated relationships are formed between legacies of the past and stewards of the present, and the product of such relationship is an ethos of conservation and subsequent preservation for future generations (Milliken, 2012). Thus "heritage", in this sense is not so much a "thing," as a process in which we relate to things (Howard, 2003; Smith, 2006). In order to engage the term "heritage" we must view it as "an applied humanity" (Howard, 2003). It is a thing which a past generation has preserved and handed on to the present and which a significant group or population wishes to hand on to the future generation (Herbert, 1995).

Heritage has been characterized in the UNESCO conventions and documentation as 'at risk' and 'in danger' and therefore, calling not only for protection and conservation but also to be inherited and sustained across generations. The idea that heritage needs to be and should be preserved is integral to how it is usually understood (Harrison 2013). This means that, as soon as an object is identified as 'heritage' it becomes surrounded by a set of assumptions and practices concerning its need for protection to ensures that it endures into the future (Macdonald 2017). Although heritage in the words of Sharon Macdonald, is imagined and produced as enduring unchanged over time, the processes by which it (heritage) is inherited from one generation to another have been changing over time. The interest upon heritage inheritance especially among youth in Africa has been decreasing across generations as equally does the authenticity of the inherited heritage. It is important to note that the idea of 'heritage' cannot be reduced to a concern with materiality; rather, heritage is more usefully understood as a discourse that frames a set of cultural practices that are concerned with utilizing the past for creating cultural meaning for the present (Smith 2006).

2. Study Area

Mtwara Region forms part of the Swahili coast which also includes the offshore islands of Comoro, Zanzibar and Pemba as well as northern parts of Madagascar (Chami, 2005; Horton, 1996). It borders Lindi Region to the north, the Indian Ocean to the east and is separated by the Ruvuma River from Mozambique in the south. To the west it borders Ruvuma Region (Figure 1). The region occupies 16, 729 sq. kms or 1.9% of Tanzania Mainland area of 945.087 sq. kms (Gabriel, 2015). The Swahili coast as defined today lies on the East African littoral plain and includes the islands of the Indian Ocean extending about 3000 km from present-day Mogadishu, Somalia to Cape Delgado, Mozambique. The coastal plain extends as far as 300 km inland in some areas of Tanzania and Mozambique, but it can be as narrow as 20 km in the

north (Orme, 1996). The diverse climate of the coast supports a variety of vegetation and wildlife, which has created zones of resource specialization that likely contributed to the success of competing trading polities (Wright, 2005).

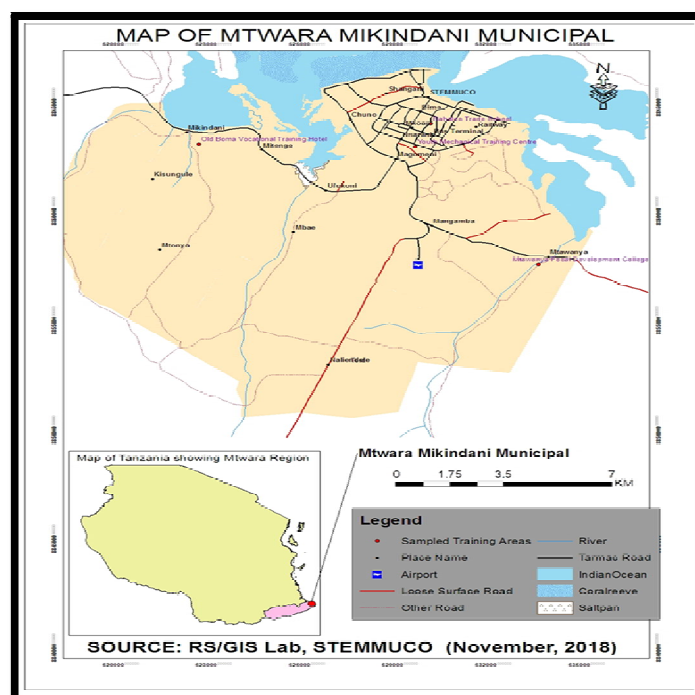


Figure 1: A Map of Mtwara – Mikindani Municipal as Extracted From the Map of Tanzania

The population and socio-cultural activities of Mtwara Region are to a great extent influenced by cross-border migration of ethnic groups from Mozambique and those from the Tanzanian side. The Makonde groups of Mozambique are mostly settled at Cabo Delgado Province in the northern part of Mozambique especially at Plano Alto de Mueda (Figure 2). The Tanzanian Makonde have their traditional homeland on a similar high plateau in Mtwara Region (Gabriel 2015). The plateau rises from the bank of the river in the north and is traditionally viewed as the core area of the Tanzanian Makonde groups (Saetersdal, 1999)

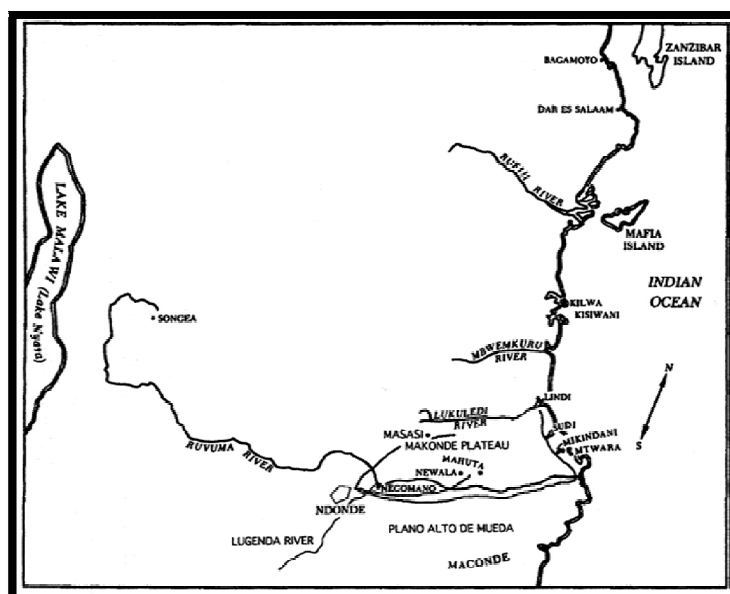


Figure 2: Map Showing Main Makonde Migration Routes Into Tanzania (Adopted From Saetersdal 1999)

Majority of the indigenous people of the Mtwara Region are of Bantu origin. The most dominant groups are the Makonde of Newala, Tandahimba, Masasi and Mtwara Rural. Other groups are the Makua of Masasi and Mtwara Rural, and the Yao who also live in Masasi (Gabriel, 2015). Mtwara Region has for a long time remained behind in terms of economic development compared to many other regions in Tanzania. Currently there are plans by the government to transform it into an industrial region especially after the discovery of gas and oil deposits in the region.

3. Community Perceptions on Heritage

Following the objective of this study – i.e. to investigate on how cultural heritage is understood and inherited from one generation to another, some representatives from the Makonde community were interviewed to get their understanding on cultural heritage resources but also on how culture is inherited across generations. For example, in one of the group interviews, the following were some of the respondents' views on the meaning of the concept "cultural heritage resources" or "urithi tamaduni" as commonly understood in Kiswahili language.

Urithi tamaduni ni mambo mbalimbali ya kijadi au kimila yaliyofanywa na wazee wetu kama vile matambiko, Jando na Unyago, pamoja na ngoma za asili. Kulikuwa pia na miiko mbalimbali, – Mfano, mtoto akitoka Jando alikuwa haruhusiwi kuingia nyumba ya baba yake. Ilikuwa ni mwiko pia kwa watoto kwenda makaburini. Hayo yote ni mambo ambayo ni ya zamani lakini bado yanaendelea kufanyika mpaka sasa japo si kwa kiwango kama cha zamani¹

Translation: [Cultural heritage resources are those diverse traditions or customs which were performed by our ancestors such as ritual offerings, Jando and Unyago (i.e. male and female initiation ceremonies respectively) and traditional dances. There were also different taboos, for example, a boy coming from Jando initiation was prohibited to enter his father's house. It was a taboo for children to attend funeral ceremonies. While these cultural practices are attributed to the past, they are still relevant in contemporary society to a certain extent].

One elder informant associated the meaning of cultural heritage resources to witch-craft and traditional healing. He narrated a number of circumstances by which people could not make some decisions without consulting their ancestral spirits. The following are some of his explanations;

Nijuavyo mimi, mambo hayo ni pamoja na mila za zamani kama vile matambiko kabla ya kufanya jambo fulani lililohitaji ridhaa ya wahenga. Matambiko haya yaliambatana na baadhi ya masharti ikiwemo kufanya pepezi iliyoongozwa na bibi kikongwe aliyekoma kuzaa au binti ambaye bado ni bikra (kihinch) ambaye hajaanza kufanya ngono. Pepezi hili lilifanyika ili kuomba kuondokana na balaa fulani katika jamii au kuomba jambo fulani litokee. Kwa mfano, katika kijiji chetu cha Mjimwema mtu asingeweza kuhamia tu kijijini pasipo kuomba ridhaa ya wazee/wahenga wa kijiji. Ikionekana kuwa wahenga wameridhia mgeni kukaa katika kijiji alipewa kinga itakayomfanya aishi kijijini kwa amani. Translation: [To my understanding, cultural heritage resources include past traditions like ritual offerings before doing anything that needed consent of the ancestors. These ritual offerings were accompanied by some conditions include conducting pepezi which was led by an old-woman who had reached at menopause or rather a virgin lady (kihinch in vernacular) who had not yet engaged in sexual relations. The pepezi ritual was done in request to get rid of some misfortunes or to ask for a certain event to happen. For example, here at Mjimwema village a person would not just come to live here without asking for consent from the ancestors of the village. If it happened that the ancestors accepted a new comer to settle in a village, he/she was given protection to ensure that he/she lives in peace].

The local communities' responses revealed that their approach to the meaning of the concept cultural heritage resources differs from the professionals' approach whose emphasis and focus has been on tangible heritage. It was clearly noted from the interviews that local communities' understanding of cultural heritage resources was mainly skewed towards intangibles with little interest in tangible cultural heritage resources. Typically, traditional dances, initiation rites such as Jando and Unyago², traditional foods, witchcraft, traditional medicine, local beliefs and taboos, ritual practices such as pepezi and many other traditional practices characterized their understanding of cultural heritage resources. This is different from the professionals' understanding of cultural heritage resources. The professionals' views about cultural heritage favour most the tangible cultural heritage resources as compared to intangibles. It is only recently that intangible heritages are also emerging as subject in the anthropology of heritage studies.

4. Cultural Heritage and the Threats of Modernity

Some intangible heritage resources like initiation ceremonies such as Jando and Unyago, taboos, and other ritual practices also are no longer inherited and practiced in the same way as it was in the past. As a result, the inherited heritages are not as authentic as they were in the past. In some interviews, the informants explained how the circumcision rite has lost its meaning in that it is carried out by medical doctors and not the traditional Ngariba³. A good number of traditional principles, which in the past constituted and accompanied circumcision rituals have been abandoned in favour of modern practice. It is in the same vein that the influence of globalization and modernity are blamed as a cause. In the words of one of the informants;

Zamani Jando lilifanyika kwa usiri mkubwa sana kwenye maeneo yaliyotengwa maalum kwa kazi hiyo hasa msituni. Baada ya tohara vijana waliweza kukaa huko hata miezi miwili au zaidi wakifundishwa mambo mbalimbali ya utamaduni na utu uzima. Hivyo haikuwa tu kwa ajili ya tohara bali iliambatana na mambo mengine ya kimila kama sehemu ya kuwapokea vijana kwenye kundi la watu wazima. Siku hizi Jando limepoteza maana yake halisi kwani watu hawazingatii usiri kama ilivyokuwa zamani. Jando linafanyika kwa uwazi hospitalini na kusherekewa majumbani kitu ambacho siyo sahihi. Akina mama hawakuruhusiwa kuwaona vijana wao wakati wa Jando lakini siku hizi hakuna anayejali. Wakati mwingine watoto hutahiriwa hospitalini wakiwa wadogo na wanapofikia umri wa kualukwa ndipo huchezwa ngoma⁴

Translation: [In the past Jando initiation was secretly performed in a place chosen specifically for that purpose. After circumcision the youths would remain in the camp for two months or more for training in various traditional matters and adulthood. So, it was not only for circumcision but it was accompanied by other traditional matters as part of

¹ Interview notes, group interview with elders, at Mtendachi village in Mtwara Rural district

² Jando and Unyago refer to initiation ceremonies whereby both male and female children get introduced to adulthood.

³ According to Swahili – English Dictionary the word means local circumciser

⁴ Fieldnotes, interview, at Naliendelevu village in Mtwara - Mikindani Municipality.

welcoming the youths into the adults' group. Nowadays Jando initiation has lost its original meaning as there is no secret as it was in the past. It is openly practiced in hospitals and celebrated at home. Women were prohibited from interacting with their youths during Jando initiations but nowadays no-one cares. In some cases, children are circumcised in hospital during their infancy and when they are grown up, they just undergo Jando ceremonies accompanied by other ritual practices.

In one incident while undertaking this study, there were contrasting views among local communities at the Mvita graveyard regarding their relationship with their deceased relatives. Some members of the local communities at Mvita ancient settlement were asked to consent to the idea of clearing the forest that densely covered the graveyard (Figure 3). There were those who supported the idea, but there were others who opposed it. Each of the two parties defended their position in their own rights.

Those who opposed the idea of clearing the forest were of the belief that the dead are watched over by angels. So, clearing the bushes would mean removing the shade in the graveyard, hence exposing the dead to the sunshine, something that would seem lack of respect to the deceased. This would make them angry and it would be accompanied with some calamities to the society. On the other hand, those who support clearance of the forest in the graveyard consider it a sign of respect to the ancestors. It is not only a way of showing love and intimacy to the dead but also treating them the same way we would be treated after death.

While providing the above explanation, the informant had deep feelings which were accompanied by tears as she recalled how the graveyard at Mvita was no longer cared for as it used to be in the past. From her views one could get a sense of attachment to the past by the present communities. But again, one could not see that there was a problem of culture-inheritance given a claim that the current practice was contrary to what was practiced in the past. She emphasized that the way in which we treat the dead we will be treated the same after death as no one would escape this. Mvita graveyard as a cultural heritage site is in fact deteriorating at an alarming rate, and there is undoubtedly a sign of neglect from the local community upon conserving the site. It was said that in the past, local communities had a tendency of visiting this site for ritual practices including offerings in honor of their ancestors. Communities living on or near religious and sacred sites have a strong and direct relationship with such heritage resources, whether or not the sites are legally protected (Fontein, 2006; Masele, 2012).



Figure 3: The Graveyard at Mvita Ancient Settlement Site Amid Forest Cover

It was also a concern to some of the informants that the abandonment of customs and traditions has had an enormous impact to the communities. They attribute some social problems currently facing the communities to 'a cultural curse' resulting from not adhering to cultural and traditional principles as it was in the past. As a result of this, a lot of social instability leading to the loss of a sense of humanity in society has been evident. This has also led to inhumane actions like killing of criminals by fire, poison, assassination and many other harsh practices like kidnappings by the so called "watu wasiojulikana"⁵ as it is popularly known recently in Tanzania. This had not been the practice in the past as cultural norms guiding communities' way of life would not allow it. So, the informants' opinions showed clearly that the rate of community access and adherence to both tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources have been decreasing over time for various reasons as mentioned above.

While the informants regard cultural heritage as a valid resource, they admit that the value of cultural heritage resources has been decreasing over time. This has to a large extent been caused by the dawn of globalization and Euro-centrism which has affected African cultures and ways of life. The most affected, in this case, are the youths who are fond of Western culture and life-styles. For instance, it was insisted with great concern by some informants that Western culture is a threat to African cultural heritage resources. For example, in the past, it was the cultural norm for elders to

⁵The Kiswahili saying that literary means "the unknown people"

instill traditional knowledge to the youths through oral narratives and story-telling sessions conducted in the evening by the fireside. This was the mechanism for transferring cultural and traditional knowledge from one generation to another. Unfortunately, this is no longer a practice to many communities. One elder informant had the following concern about the impact of globalization:

Kwa hakika tamaduni zetu zinadidimia kwa sababu ya utandawazi! Leo hii kijana mdogo kama yule (ananyosha kidole kwa kijana aliye karibu) hayuko tayari kutenga muda kidogo kusikiliza hadithi za zamani kama ilivyokuwa nyakati zetu. Mbaya zaidi, vijana hawa watakuona mshamba na uliyepitwa na wakati kama ukiwaambia kuhusu mambo ya zamani. Kwao maisha ni usasa na siyo kuangalia nyuma mambo ya zamani. Nani leo hii miongoni mwa vijana atakaa na wazee kwenye moto jioni kusikiliza masimulizi ya hadithi za zamani? Hayupo! Badala yake wengi wao wanakimbilia kwenye video na starehe zingine. Lakini wanapaswa kukumbuka kuwa kudharau mambo ya kimila ni kujitenga na misingi ya utamaduni wetu.⁶ Translation: [For sure, our traditions are diminishing because of globalization! Today, a little boy like that one (he points to a little boy in the vicinity) is not prepared to spare a little time to listen to oral narratives as it was during our time. Worse still, these youths would see you as someone primitive and less informed if you keep telling them about the past. To them life is all about modernity and not backward looking into the remote past. Who today among the youths will sit with elders by the hearth in the evening and listen to stories of the past? None! I can assure you no-one is prepared to. Instead, most of them would rush to watch video and look for other forms of entertainment. But they should remember that ignoring traditional matters means alienating oneself from our cultural roots].

5. Conclusion

Tanzania is the custodian of an imperative array of globally significant cultural heritage resources, some dating as far back as the Pliocene era, about four million years ago (Karoma 1996). There are about 500 historical sites and monuments of various sizes and of different value. Such sites are too many to be managed by a group of only few scientists supported by few technical experts. That is without mentioning the diversities of uncountable number of intangible cultural heritages that are also at risk of disappearing if measures are not taken. So, if we are to be successful in conservation and continuity of cultural heritage resources, the issue of culture – inheritance across generations should be observed. Better strategies should be sought by professionals and experts in heritage field to ensure very close supervision and conservation of these non-renewable resources. This should be done with collaboration and engagement of the general public for sustainable development of cultural heritage resources.

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⁶Group interview, interview with elders, at Ziwani village in the Mtwara Rural district