PLACE, TRADITION AND MEMORY: TANGIBLE ASPECTS OF THE INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF ZIMBABWE: A case study of the Matobo Hills

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THE CHANGING PERCEPTION

The perception, and definition, of cultural landscapes, changes through time, and the rate of change has accelerated enormously during the last 30 – 40 years. Inherent in man's perception of himself[1], is a sense of relationship with the land he lives in, the land he occupies, the land of which he is a citizen. Our common human ancestor, the first 'homo sapiens' evolved in Africa some 170 000 years ago, and his descendants were confined to the continent of Africa for at least half the time from then until now[1]. The extent to which our contemporary perception of our cultural dependency on the land, derives in part from our primordial African ancestors is a debatable point, but we can recognize certain concepts that are common to all cultures, all peoples, around the world.

Firstly, the concept that all land is 'holy', to be respected, honored and responsibly cared for: the Creation story in Genesis, the first book of the Jewish and Christian Bible[3,] is but one of many similar religious interpretations of man's relationship with Nature. Secondly, the concept that certain individuals or groups of people are, by divine right or common consent, 'custodians' of the land, with authority to determine how the land is used. And thirdly, the concept, much more recently recognized, that man's growing mastery over the natural environment, tentatively asserted during the past five thousand years, and confidently demonstrated over the last two hundred years, threatens not only man's traditional sense of custodianship of the land but the very survival of the natural environment, and man's future in it.

These three concepts – of the 'holiness' of the land, of man's custodianship of the land, and of man's power to destroy the natural environment – underlie the various stages in the development of society's understanding of them, and of society's responsibilities of custodianship. The stages include: the identification of the national heritage, the growing institutionalization of heritage protection, conservation and management, nationally and more recently internationally[4;] the widening definition of culture and of cultural heritage and

authenticity; and the increasing recognition of the value of the intangible aspects of cultural heritage, and the need to protect these. The Charter of Venice (1964), which led to the founding of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS); the World Heritage Convention (1972) which led to the definition of World Heritage properties, and the institutionalization of ICOMOS, ICOM (the International Council on Museums), ICCROM (the International Conservation Centre in Rome), and the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO in Paris in the process of World Heritage designation; and the revision of the World Heritage Convention in 1994, are markers along the road of the international community's assumption of growing responsibilities for heritage protection.

The revision of the World Heritage Convention in 1994 led to the widening of the criteria for designation of World Heritage properties, to the gradual disappearance of the notion of artistic masterpieces, to the emergence of a concept of culture closer to the definition given by anthropologists, and the progressive reconciliation between cultural and natural heritage, and to the recognition of the need to strengthen African participation in the process of identification of potential World Heritage properties, [4]

Zimbabwe has been particularly active in the process of World Heritage property designation and of increasing African representation on the list of properties since well before 1994, and has played an exemplary role, nationally, regionally and internationally, in that process. Recognition of that role by ICOMOS led to the holding of the 14th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS (the first time the Assembly had met in Africa) at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, in October 2003, [5]

Few African countries are as well as endowed as Zimbabwe is with both natural and cultural sites of international significance, and this is recognized in the number of World Heritage properties already inscribed on the World Heritage list:
Mana Pools (natural property, inscribed in 1984)
Great Zimbabwe (cultural property inscribed in 1986)
Khami Ruins (cultural property, inscribed in 1986)
Victoria Falls (natural property, inscribed in 1989)
Matobo Hills (cultural landscape, inscribed in 2003)

THE MATOBO HILLS AND ITS TANGIBLE ASPECTS

The Matobo Hills occupy an area of about 3000 km^2 in the Southwest of Zimbabwe, on the southern escarpment of the High veldt plateau which occupies the greater part of the territory between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers. Bulawayo, second city of Zimbabwe and former capital of the Matabele Kingdom, lies about 30 km to the North of the Hills. An area of great scenic beauty, it has for centuries been one of the major cultural heartlands of Southern Africa. In retrospect, one might ask why the Matobo Hills had not been nominated and considered for designation earlier. One of the reasons was the failure of the World Heritage Committee to determine the criteria for designating 'cultural landscapes'.

Great Zimbabwe is undoubtedly the country's most important, most substantial, and most culturally significant historic monument. It gave its name to the country when Britain's former colony, Rhodesia, gained its independence in 1980. Prior to Independence the great complex of ruined stone buildings – the largest complex of pre–colonial stone buildings in sub–Saharan Africa – had been called simply Zimbabwe. The name derives from the Karanga words for 'house of stone', but came to signify 'ruler's house' or 'house

to be venerated or respected', and is used to describe the hundreds of pre-colonial stone buildings that survive throughout the country, and in parts of South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana.[6] The name is first recorded historically, as 'Symbaoe', on an early 16th Century Portuguese map of Southern Africa; remarkably early, considering that Vasco da Gama, the first European navigator to round the Cape of Good Hope, had done so only a few years earlier, in 1498, [7].

In what ways does the Matobo Hills area satisfy the criteria for World Heritage designation as a 'cultural landscape'? The Matobo Hills stands out clearly as one of the landmark natural and cultural landscapes in Zimbabwe and the southern Africa sub-region. For a global village that has suddenly woken up to the decadence of the environment and resolved to recognize the values and significance of the natural and cultural landscapes, the recent designation of the Matobo Hills as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, can only be acclaimed. The Site encompasses the Rhodes Matobo National Park, Lake Matobo, Recreational Park, parts of Rhodes Matobo Estate, several communal areas and some commercial farms of the Matobo Rural District Council.

The first thing that strikes the imagination of visitors to the Matobo Hills is the combination of imposing granite relief, distinct system of diverse landforms and the awe-inspiring rock formations. The most characteristic landforms are the whalebacks, inselbergs, dwala and castellated hills (kopjes). According to the Matobo Hills World Heritage Site Management Plan: 2004-2009 dossiers (March 2004), it is rare to find so profuse an expression of granite landforms in so limited an area. Geological and geomorphologic researches explain the origin of these landforms. Following millions of years of weathering and erosion of the parent granite inselbergs and whalebacks such as the Pomongwe and the Malindidzimu (World's View, containing John Cecil Rhodes' grave amongst others), small scale relief of dwalas and kopjes form a "sea of hills", which dominate the landscape. In essence, the unique beauty of the Matobo Hills owes much to the differences in spatial scale of the rock forms and landscape patterns. If there is anything like "architecture (built environment) without architects", then the Matobo Hills is clearly a living example.

The study of the ecology of the Matobo Hills exposed a feasible intricate mix of the living and non-living components of the ecosystem. Despite the characteristic dry climate of the Zambezian savannah in which the site lies, there exists a diversity of vegetation types ranging from dry woodlands to semi-forest in the gullies structured by the underlying granite rocks. Whereas drought-resistant flowering plants dominate the vegetation of the rock domes, tree species such as Heteriopyxix dehniae, Pterocarpus ropudifolia and shrubs such as Strycnos matopensis, are typical of the dense woodland of the base of the rocky slopes, where run-off waters collect. The diverse faunal species of the site include amphibians, reptiles, fish, mammals and birds. These make the Matobo Hills popular for its game drive.

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTANGIBLES

Above are described the tangible aspects of the Matobo Hills, which is equally rich in historical sites of great cultural significance. Ruins of ancient stone buildings, termed 'zimbabwes', are found in the Matopo Hills also, though not in great numbers, and provide evidence of human occupation of the area in the later pre-colonial period. Evidence of much earlier human occupation is provided by the prehistoric rock paintings, in caves and on the sheltered surfaces of overhanging rocks, throughout the Site, and which provides, for the art–historian, irrefutable justification for the inscription of the Matobo Hills on the World Heritage list. Over 3000 rock painting sites have been identified throughout the

Site, and make the Hills the most densely endowed area of prehistoric rock art in the world with two major periods of intensive painting activity, between the 8th to the 6th millennium BC and between 200 BC and 500 CE,[8]. The San, present day descendants of the nomadic bushmen who painted the Matobean rocks during their periodic wanderings through and occupation of the Matobo Hills, and who survive in very small numbers in remote parts of Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, have assisted scholars in the interpretation of the paintings, [9].

For contemporary African Zimbabweans, the prehistoric rock art of their country appears to have comparatively little appeal: barely half a dozen rock art sites in the Hills are made accessible to visitors, at Bambata, Pomongwe, Nswatugi, the 'White Rhino' shelter, Inanke and Siloswani, and most of these are rarely visited.

Fig. 1 Inside Bambata Cave with prehistoric Rock Art paintings

Zimbabweans today attach more significance to the traditional rain-making shrines in the Hills, which are still visited in great numbers, as they were throughout the colonial period (1890 – 1980) and for several centuries before, [10]. There is no way of telling when the shrines were first established among the Matobean rocks, and when pilgrims first visited them from distant regions: but it is not surprising that rain making shrines were established here, and were widely visited, for the springs and streams of the Matobo Hills flow throughout the year, and the natural environment is green and fertile, in stark contrast with the arid savannah landscape of the Matabeleland provinces of southern Zimbabwe.

This region of Southern Africa was very sparsely populated in the pre-colonial period, and the fertile Matobo easily accommodated the small immigrant parties of Africans of neighbouring ethnic communities who peaceably settled there, among the already established Karanga. But the invading Amandebele, migrating into the vast territory between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers to escape the pressures of advancing Afrikaner settlement in northern South Africa, in the 1830's, followed in turn by European missionaries, adventurers, gold prospectors and settlers in the later years of the century, disturbed the peaceful equilibrium of the Matobo Hills, and introduced several more layers of human intervention and memory. These layers have each left their own cultural legacy, and marked the Site with their distinctive and unique character, and created a cultural landscape of undeniably World Heritage status.

The Matobo Hills is home to religious shrines of the Mwari cult, which play tangible roles in the lives of the Shona/Kalanga peoples,[3] The highest of them is the Njelele shrine, which

site is a rock outcrop in the west of Matobo National Park. (Others are Dula, Wirirani, Zhilo and Manyanga). The varied aspects of the hill as one moves around it is captured by the original Kalanga name " Dombo letshipoteleka", meaning the rock that turns. Confirmation of the tradition that the Njelele Rock talked is reflected in the title of the book by Ranger – "Voices from the Rocks".

THE PEOPLE'S SACRED MALINDIDZIMU

The Ndebele Kings, Mzilikazi and Lobengula, established their royal Kraals on the northern fringe of the Hills, to impose their sovereignty over such a sacred area, as did Rhodes after them. No spirit broods more palpably over the hills than that of Cecil John Rhodes, who, inspired by his visit to Mzilikazi's grave in a lofty cave on the edge of the hills, and the great indaba he convened on the site of Lobengula's royal Kraal at Old Bulawayo, to bring peace between the Amandebele and the European settler community and an end to the first Chimurenga, or 'uprising' of the African population of his infant colony, resolved that the Matobo Hills should be his final resting place. And so it was, atop the gently rising whaleback ridge, crowned by a ring of giant boulders, with its extensive view westwards over successive ranges of whaleback ridges which he called his 'view of the world'

The site, he knew, was not only a (comparatively) easily accessible one for anyone who might wish to visit his grave, but also sanctified in African tradition, as Malindidzimu, the "Dwelling Place of the Benign Spirits". It was there that he chose to be buried: and so he was, in a long and solemn ceremony, on 9 April 1902. In his will, he left very precise instructions about the management of the vast estate he had acquired there, and which he had bequeathed to the country that bore his name. He clearly envisaged the site becoming a place of pilgrimage, a kind of Valhalla, or High Hill of Tara, and so it became, under the colonial administration. An inscribed stone beside the path to the summit of the hill that came to be known as World's View, reads: 'This ground is consecrated and set apart for ever to be the resting place of those who have deserved well of their country'; Rhodes' grave is marked by a modest slab inscribed merely with his name. But within a few years, a handsome memorial in the Greek style, designed by Sir Herbert Baker with four bronze panels by the sculptor John Tweed, R A , had been erected near by, housing the mortal remains of Allan Wilson, and the patrol of 33 men he led, who had been killed during the first Chimurenga.

Fig. 2. Rhodes Grave on the World's View

And so another layer of memory was laid over the Matobo Hills, and protected by the traditions of honoring bravery and sites of battle, which the Rhodesian government inherited from the British. By 1950, of the 69 registered and protected national monuments in the colony, 10 were such sites, [12]. There is more to the Matobo Hills than

the tangible heritage. Most writers claim that Cecil John Rhodes choice of the Malindidzimu as his burial site was because of its strategic location and the outstanding beauty of the surrounding as seen from the granite inselberg. Yet, there are many who believe that Rhodes had a good insight into the intangible attributes of the sacred site, which recommended the Hills highly as a burial site for Ndebele Kings. Today, hundreds come from all over the southern Africa region on annual pilgrimages to pray.

But theirs was not the final tradition to be handed down: the oracular rain-making shrines in the Matobo Hills, of which that at Njelele had become the most important, were increasingly visited and consulted by Africans fighting for independence during the second Chimurenga of the 1970's, often at great risk to themselves; and these visits have become an integral part of Zimbabwe's Independence story, [14]. Traditions and memories, customary rites and religious ceremonies are all part of the intangible heritage of Zimbabwe. But their tangible aspects, and the tangible evidence that authenticates them must be protected, if they are to survive.

Thus, after many millennia of foraging nomadic stone-age communities followed by centuries of sedentary agricultural communities as well as the oppressed immigrant Amandebele (Nguni) group from Zululand, the resultant people of the Hills remained undeterred in values attached to their sacred shrines and reverence to the dictates of their traditional practices and beliefs. On their part, the white settlers lived to give credence to the living tradition and become collaborators instead of detractors. According to Ranger, both the indigenes and settlers value their special relationship to a unique environment. Thus it is the apparent intangible heritage which led to a long history of interaction between the people and the nature around them, consequent upon which the sustainable management of the tangible heritage and the preservation of the integrity of the traditional practices appear realistic.

The above assertions are credible on the following predicates:
In most African communities, the ancestral spirits are believed to be living in the forests and special trees, caves and ruined homes and water bodies. Such landscape elements are therefore normally treated with reverence to ensure limited human access into them lest the spirits be offended and driven away 'homeless'. In this regard, it is taboo to cut down trees found in a sacred place without the sanction of the local chief priest. The Amarula and Muhachi trees are of special mention here.
It is equally taboo to hunt or poach animals within or running into a sacred forest because they belong to Mwari and the ancestral spirits. Amongst traditional communities such as the Ndebele, where totemic is practiced, it is taboo for clan members to kill animals, which serve as the revered symbol of their families. These are only but a few of the tradition-driven practices which encourage wildlife protection and environmental conservation in general. Consequently, the intangibles and the tangibles of the Matobo cultural landscape can be said to be in a state of mutually complementary co-existence.

The specific traditional uses of the Matobo Hills also enhance the sustenance of the unique heritage and the promotion of a culture, which is living and dynamic. For example, the use of the Hills as a place of worship dates back several millennia and in contemporary times, is able to attract annual pilgrimages from various parts of the sub-region. It has over the years equally gained recognition as a tourist destination, attracting tourists from all over the global village.

Like many other cultural landscapes in Zimbabwe, the Matobo Hills is a sanctuary for diverse and unique plant species traditionally extracted for medicinal purposes by the local herbalists. This practice has since developed into extensive pharmaceutical research for the cure of such diseases as cancer and HIV/AIDS.

The local name of Malindidzimu is used to refer to the Hills as a burial place, hence it is seen as the abode of ancestral spirits and sacred. The Hills thus provide secret places (ninga) for the burial of Ndebele Kings, eg. Mzilikazi. As we alluded earlier in this paper, Cecil John Rhodes choice of Malindidzimu as a suitable place for his remains was not a coincidence. It should be emphasized however that, Ndebele burial grounds are normally not open to the public hence the tomb of King Mzilikazi must not be open to all as is Rhodes' tomb. This age-old practice explains why the Matobo people have a special attachment to the site and are not easily detracted from it, even with the stringent force of government legislations of the 1920's. Today, family and clan rituals continue unabated as the local people visit their burial sites periodically to appease the spirits and pray for the sick and in times of disasters.

SUMMARY

It is commendable that the Matobo Management Committee has in place a Management Plan for the period 2004-2009. The dossier outlines the current state of conservation practices as well as the key management issues of Conservation, Research, Tourism, Community Participation, Funding, etc. It highlights the current lack of synergy in the management efforts of the various stakeholders. For instance, the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZIPWA), the National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), and the Umzingwane Rural District Council (URDC), are the statutory stakeholders operating in the Matobo Hills. Unfortunately, each has its own independent management plans for areas under them. This was confirmed during our consultations with the stakeholders for a recent research we undertook on the site. This practice poses a fundamental question of the stakeholders' understanding of the principle of inter-relatedness of ecosystems. Without doubt, the coordinated effort of the stakeholders (statutory or otherwise) is sine qua non for consensus building towards achieving a common goal using an integrated management framework.

From all indications, the prospects for a sustainable management of the tangible heritage and the environmental conservation of the Hills landscape are more than ever bright. As was stated earlier in this paper, the Matobo Hills was inscribed in the list of UNESCO designated World Heritage Sites in June, 2003. This was as a result of the universal recognition of the natural, tangible qualities of the site as well as the intangible living culture developed out of it. With the honeymoon over in the celebration of the inscription, the question of the management and the environmental conservation paradigm for the site has since become a burning issue. Specifically, there is the urgent need to have a consensus on the appropriate environmental conservation model for the protection of indigenous flora and fauna and the unique ecological features of the landscape.

As can be seen from this paper, the intangible heritages of the Matobo Hills reside, as it were, in the tangible aspects. Both of them are seemingly inseparable. They have, in time and space, become embodiments or integral parts of the same landscape, as perceptions of them by different cultures were varied. It is therefore logical that environmental conservation paradigms must be filtered through the prism of the management models designed to protect the intangible heritage of the cultural landscape.

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[1] (in this paper we use the word 'man' as a generic term to include the whole of humanity, male and female)