Shimoni Caves Contested Meaning

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In all, let Nature never be forgot; But treat the goddess like a modest fair, Nor overdress, nor leave her wholly bare; Consult the genius of the place in all; That tells the waters or to rise, or fall; Or helps th’ ambitious hill the heav’ns to scale, Or scoops in circling theatres the vale; Calls in the country, catches opening glades, Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shade; Now breaks, or now directs, th’ intending lines; Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs (Pope 1731).

Introduction

The above quote from Alexander Pope shows that as human beings, we believe that there is an inherent spirit that guides us or rather should guide us in all that we do; that the physical things that we produce or see are intertwined with this inherent spirit. Pope is also telling his friend that objects and places obtain meaning and significance through the values that are ascribed to them by the people that create and come in contact with them (Sullivan 2003, Munjeri 2000).

The spirit of place Pope is talking about, we can call ‘intangible heritage’. UNESCO (2003) describes Intangible Cultural Heritage as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, — as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith — that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’. This intangible cultural heritage is passed down from generation to generation and is constantly being modified by communities as a response to their socio-political interactions and gives communities both a sense of identity and continuity. It is this idea of intangible heritage as an identity provider that is of concern to us here and especially how this works in a contested environment.

In pre-colonial and the early colonial periods, African intangible heritage was managed by local communities using their local unwritten laws; many sacred sites were managed by traditional custodians who used a series of taboos, rituals and restrictions to take care of the sites. This was so because many African societies’ religious beliefs were based on the respect for natural spirits and ancestors, belief in the continuing involvement of ancestors in their lives, beliefs in the forces of good and evil that can be manipulated by direct communication with the ancestors and spirits through prayer and sacrifice (Mbiti 1969). Therefore places such as mountains, water springs, rocks, rivers and caves became ‘intangible sacred’ sites (Ndoro 2005; Chiwaura 2005; Fontein 2006). Though this has to a large measure changed because of the influence of Christianity, Islam or Western education, there are areas, however, where ancestor and spirit worship is still done openly regardless of religious affiliation. Shimoni village on the southern Kenya coast is one such place.

Location

Shimoni is a small village on the south coast of Kenya. The name ‘Shimoni’ is a Kiswahili word that means ‘a place of the hole’ or ‘inside the hole’. Shimoni derives its name from naturally formed caves that are found along its seashore. The caves cover over 5km and have complex tunnels that have been used at different stages in the past for different functions. For instance, during the peak of slave trade in the eighteenth century, the caves are said to have been used as a place of confinement for slaves before shipment to the slave market in Zanzibar. Currently, there are pieces of iron hooks attached to the cave walls and some people believe that these hooks were used to shackle slaves in order to stop them from running away. Concomitantly, the caves have been and are still being used as a religious shrine and, thus, some people argue that the hooks inside the cave walls were used to hang animals that were slaughtered during such rituals.

Currently Shimoni is a metropolitan town with people from all over the world. The exact date for occupation of Shimoni is, however, problematic. The initial settlement is said to have been at Kichangani, which is 1km south of the present settlement. Ruins of an old mosque mark this old site, which is now used as a burial ground for the local community. According to the elders, the site of Kichangani was abandoned after a band of Wasurs (Arabised African slaves) invaded the area and killed their spiritual leader, one Hassan Mwalago. People then moved further north and founded the ‘Kaoni’ settlement, which is present day Shimoni. It is claimed that the place was called Kaoni because of the cave – that when one is inside the cave, one is unable to see. (Kaoni may be derived from the Kiswahili word haoni which means one cannot see. Alternatively, it may be derived from another Kiswahili word, makao which means a dwelling place.)

Figure 1 Location of Shimoni.
Shimoni heritage landscape

The historical landscape of Shimoni currently consists of the ruined mosque at Kichangani; the ruins of the first prison house and first administrative building built in 1888 by the British colonial government in the then British East Africa Protectorate that covered the Kenya coast; a cemetery where a British soldier Captain Fredrick Lawrence who was killed when leading an anti-slavery expedition at Gasi just outside Shimoni was buried and, the Shimoni cave or as it is known, the Shimoni Slave Cave where it is claimed slaves were kept en route to the Zanzibar slave market. In this paper we will however, look at the cave only as it is its usage, that is at the centre of contestation amongst the Shimoni people.

Inhabitants

The original inhabitants of Shimoni were the Bantu speaking Digo who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD, were joined by Arabs (Vumba) who came from Vanga, which lies south of Shimoni on the Kenya/Tanzania border. The Arabs first occupied the Island of Wasini opposite before crossing over and conquering the Shimoni mainland. According to Digo elders, the inter-marriage that ensured between the Arabs and Digos gave rise to the Wa-kivundi who are currently said to be the majority inhabitants of Shimoni. The other inhabitants of Shimoni include the Shirazi, who are said to have come from Persia, and remnants of the Segeju.

This population mix in Shimoni has led to the contestation of the memory of the usage and meanings of the Shimoni cave. The different groups and particularly the Digo and the Arab descendants have different ‘memories’ and hence stories on the past functions of the cave. There are now different versions about the past of this cave that are circulating simultaneously. It seems that these versions are meant to ‘arouse and arrange memories in order to suit particular psychic needs’ (Hamilton 1994:23 quoting Kammen 1991)

Some ‘Evidence’

As already said above, the Shimoni cave has several tunnels and chambers. The tunnels connect the various chambers and are believed to lead to the ocean. Inside one chamber of the cave are iron hooks fastened to the cave wall. To the Digos these hooks were used by Arab slave traders to shackle slaves while waiting for transhipment or when hiding the internal slaves from the British soldiers. To the Arabs on the other hand, there were no slaves hidden in the cave as there was no slavery in the area and the hooks were used to hang sacrificial animals. Archaeological excavations inside the cave have unearthed some metal rings and shackles, similar to those which were used by slave traders to shackle slaves. It is now believed that this is incontrovertible evidence to support the argument that slavery may have been practised in the cave.

Religion

As said above, one of the chambers in the cave is used as a shrine by some local people and this has become another area of contestation between those who use the cave as a shrine and those who don’t. The Shimoni area is predominantly Muslim, but the shrine in the cave is used by people both within Shimoni and without and by Muslim and non-Muslims as well.

To the religious people, both Muslims and Christians, the use of the cave as a shrine is satanic and should be stopped. To those however, who come to worship at the cave, who incidentally are both Muslims and Christians, and who say they are blessed by the shrine disagree and claim that they are worshipping a god who blesses them. The guardian spirit of cave they say is mwanangoto. It is interesting to note that while this guardian spirit, mwanangoto, is Digo, the shrine ‘priest’ claims Shirazi identity. Is he using two identities as it were to legitimate his own identity?

Despite this contestation, the Shimoni communities have agreed to open the cave for tourism purposes and are using the name ‘Slave Caves’. Why is this so? Is it a commodification of heritage or is it the ‘unremembering’ of memories?

Identity

The contestation on the function and use of the cave shows that the Shimoni heritage is not a coherent identity. The meanings, identity and interpretation of this heritage are an ongoing discourse in a variety of contexts and with ambivalences and disagreements (Smith 2006; Smith and Waterton 2009). At one level, there is the issue of the construction of identity; the priest who uses the cave, Ali Zahran, whose father is Digo, claims that he is Shirazi because one of his maternal grandparents was Shirazi and this is despite the fact that the Digo are patrilineal. Interestingly, his elder brother Juma Zahran, on the other hand, claims that he is Digo and, while Juma (the Digo) disagrees with the notion that the cave was used as a slave dungeon, Ali (the Shirazi) on the other hand agrees with the claims of the cave being used as a dungeon. This is the scenario repeated often in the area that some Digo and Shirazi will claim usage of cave as slave pens, while other Digos and Arab will deny it. The reasons for
The concept, spirit of the place, is reflected in the rules and regulations that are to be observed when coming not only to the cave but also when within its vicinity. For instance, it is because of reverence to the place that no local can cut any tree in the vicinity of the cave – the forest, as already alluded to above, is the garden of the spirit – and because of that the area around the cave is the only one in the southern Kenya coast, that is remaining with the tropical rainforest that originally covered most of coastal Kenya and Tanzania. The physical presence of mwanganango inside the cave is also shown by tying red, black and white pieces of cloth as well as putting bottles of the finest Arabian perfumes and sea water in the shrine. These are believed to make the spirit happy.

According to Villalon (2008), the spirit of place is an indefinable, intangible, non-physical quality that is difficult to define but easy to perceive; it is a personal reaction which gives a place its identity and sets it apart from others. Spirit of place is therefore, the intangible qualities that make the place unique. For Shimoni one can say that the ‘spirit of place’ is firmly in the realm of the everyday world of the residents and the visitors that come there daily; it is the same spirit that anchors a booming tourism industry that now earns Shimoni a major part of its income. It is the spirit of the place, the wonder of horrors of slave trade that make people go quiet when they view the hooks on the walls of the cave, whether the hooks were used to tie slaves or not. It is that feeling of ‘it’ being there within the walls that Roger Whittaker captures in his song Shimoni when he sings:

There is a hole in the side of Africa; where the walls will speak if you would listen; the walls that tell a tale so sad; Listen as a million slaves tell you how they walked so far, to be sold in Zanzibar.

In the cave therefore, the intangible ‘spirit’ and tangible ‘place’ are so closely intertwined that one cannot exist without the other, the landscape taking its form not only from nature but also from the silent walls of the cave that have got tales to ‘tell’ and also from the manner in which the inhabitants of Shimoni have shaped their natural environment by not cutting the forest outside the cave, in order to keep the cave and the surroundings of the cave (the abode of mwanganango the guardian spirit), green and serene (Villalon 2008). This agrees with the UNESCO definition of intangible heritage as the ‘practices and expressions’; the people of Shimoni through the practice of not desecrating the forest and its surroundings, in reverence to mwanganango, have helped in creating and maintaining their cultural landscape.
Can it be then that because of the presence of this ‘spirit of place’, mwranangoto, whom most people in Shimoni go to the cave to consult, that people do not want to accept that the cave, the abode of mwranangoto was used for the heinous act of keeping human beings as slaves? Or can it be that because nearly all the people of Shimoni are Muslims and nearly all the slave traders were Muslims, they do not want to implicate their brethren in this vice?

Shimoni is a good example of how intangible heritage is not only the practices that societies have, it is not an abstract that is a community or people's memories, it is not a construct, rather it is an 'edifice' that is used to give life to communities. The physical attributes of the cave and the forest above and surrounding the cave are the tangible manifestations of the power of nature. The spirit mwranangoto, the intangible aspect of the heritage, is the guardian spirit of the cave and therefore protects the tangible, the forest, the cave and the people. Mwranangoto demands reverence, thus even non-adherents respect and revere the spirit; for instance no one can kill animals or cut trees in the forest surrounding the cave or do untoward things inside the cave; they will suffer reprisals from mwranangoto.

This spirit of place, of the intangible giving meaning to tangible, is what I think Alexander Pope was saying when he told his friend that he should consult the genius loci and is what Roger Whittaker, the Kenyan born British singer encapsulates in his Shimoni song quoted above.

In other words, what Alexander Pope, the Shimoni cave and Whittaker are telling us is that the tangible and the intangible are intertwined. Each makes the other despite the meaning and interpretations we, as a people, may give them. For instance, Ali a tangible, a person, uses the intangible, spirit of mwranangoto, to claim his identity in a contested landscape. Intangible cultural heritage, therefore, provides a structure through which tangible heritage gains shape and value (Munjeri 2004:18).

References


