

# Desecration of Mwela Rock Art Site in Kasama District of Zambia

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**Abstract:** This paper examines desecration at Mwela rock art site in Kasama District of Zambia. The study was aggravated by extraordinary levels of desecration at Mwela rock art site. To have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, the researchers employed a qualitative approach particularly, case study and narrative designs. Data were collected through observations, semi structured interviews and focus group discussion from a sample of sixteen (16) respondents out of which five (5) were subjects of the Bemba Royal Establishment (BRE) that included four (4) Village Headmen and 1 Village Headwoman, 3 focus group discussions representing three responses from National Heritage Conservation Commission (NHCC) members, four (4) elderly men and four (4) elderly women respectively. Purposive sampling distinctively typical case study was used to purposively select 4 BRE subjects, 3 FGDs with NHCC members and the 5 elders. The respondents were purposively selected because they were deemed reliable for the study as they possessed relevant knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study revealed that Mwela rock art site has experienced desecration due to a number of factors that include the construction of the railway line, coming of NHCC at the site, demographic changes, coming of Christianity and social economic hardships. In order to minimize desecration of cultural sites, the research recommends for the incorporation of the traditional authorities and their indigenous belief system into formal cultural heritage management as propounded in cosmopolitanism type of analytical framework in heritage preservation. This study contributes towards the enhancement of cultural heritage preservation.

**Key words:** Custodianship, Desecration, Heritage, Preservation, Beliefs, Indigenous.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Royal ancestry worship has been part of the Bemba cosmology for a long time. According to Hinfelaar (1994), major changes in Bemba cosmology, date back to the arrival of the Christian missionaries at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the 17<sup>th</sup> century marked the fundamental change in Bemba cosmology when the older cult slowly gave way to a more centralized and public worship that reached the paramouncy of the Bena Ng'andu (Crocodile) dynasty of the Bemba kingdom. Werner (1971) stated that the belief in *ngulu* possessions were a new religious development in Bemba cosmology. The cult of *ngulu* spirits resulted from the invasion of land belonging to neighboring tribes. According to Werner (1971) conquering new territories was

accompanied by veneration of territorial spirits of the previous inhabitants in order to gain protection from the owners of the land. The cult of royal ancestors either integrated or supplanted the cult of the *ngulu* spirits. The *ngulu* spirits became a rival and mobile religious system that could possess people far from their own shrines (Roberts, 1973).

Correspondingly, Oger (1971) stated that the most ancient form of *ngulu* cult dates back to the veneration of nature spirits associated with natural phenomena. In addition Carey (1986) stated that typical *ngulu* shrines were remarkable natural phenomena like waterfalls, big rocks, trees and caves mostly associated with a form of snake worship. Most of these natural phenomena like caves are common in Africa with about 50 000 of rock art sites located in the Southern African region (Deacon, 2002).

Mwela rock art site of Kasama District of Zambia is part of these rock art sites and caves with shrines and nature spirits that are part of the Bemba cultural tradition. It was only after independence in 1964, that the government of the Republic of Zambia through National Heritage Conservation Commission took over the tenure of Mwela rock art site from the traditional custodianship of the Bemba Royal Establishment. Same year the Kasama rock art site was declared a National Monument (Smith, 1997).

Major changes in heritage management came with the 1990s formal heritage management archetype shift from "Monumentalist approach" that focused only on protection of tangible heritage to a holistic conservation approach (Ndolo, 2001 & Deacon, 1993). This meant that conservation became defined as a way of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural value and taking care of the environment (Burra Charter, 1999). Smith (2004) stated that the current management practices of heritage sites are viewed as the progression that is informed by the public and heritage legislation that manage local cultural heritage. Further, there is little debate that most countries in Southern Africa have recognized laws that control the way heritage sites are to be managed through the protective heritage legislations that represent western hegemonic state based legal systems for managing heritage sites (Muma, 2002, 2003). However, regardless of the heavy marginalization of traditional management systems by foreign legislations, scholars have argued that formal management systems on their own have

been unsuccessful in ensuring holistic sustainable management of heritage sites (Muma, 2003).

The above scenario is a clear depiction of what would have coerced the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) and the Ministry of foreign affairs through the Norwegian Embassy in Lusaka to begin financing a support programme for the National Heritage Conservation Commission of Zambia (NHCC) with the overall purpose of enhancing NHCC's capacity to efficiently contribute to sustainable conservation and utilisation of Zambia's heritage resources (NHCC, 2003). The main objectives of this programme are: i) creation of an effective decentralized regional management of heritage through implementation of conservation programmes; improved geographical coverage; improved management and documentation of heritage sites at regional level. ii) Increased contribution of Zambia's heritage to national development through capacity building; improved management and conservation at local and national levels. iii) Development of Zambia's heritage sites in order to increase cultural tourism and contribute towards job creation and poverty alleviation (NHCC, 2003).

This was in line with the new act that repealed and replaced the Natural and Historical Monuments and Relics Act (NHMRA) and established the National Heritage Conservation Commission (NHCC) which clearly defined functions and powers of the commission. The new act now clearly stipulated the holistic function of the commission that it shall conserve the historical, natural and cultural heritage of Zambia by preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, reconstruction, adaptive use, good management, or any other means (NHCC, 2003).

The Kasama rock art site has a lot of caves that are believed to inhabit spirits of the past with healing powers and rain making skills. It is believed by the local people that the entire environment around Mwela rock art site was under the protection of spirits during the BRE tenure. The sacramental aspect ensured protection and survival of the sacred site for a long period of time (Changwe *et al*, 2021).

According to the BRE, the entire Mwela rock art site is a sacred site, however, due to human activities, the spirits have become inactive because people are ignoring their own cultural beliefs and have stopped respecting the sacred site (NHCC, 2003). The spiritual beliefs are believed to have reserved Mwela rock art site in its natural form before the coming of colonialism in southern Africa. However, today the rock art site is facing exceptional desecration and destruction (NHCC, 2003).

Hence, the underlying motivation for this study was to investigate the factors that would led to desecration of Mwela rock art site which are a threat to the survival of cultural heritage site and the puzzle of losing spiritual values and cultural identity of sacred cultural and natural site that has been part and parcel of the long cultural tradition of the Bemba cosmology for a long time.

### *Overview of Desecration in Sacred Natural Sites (SNS)*

Ramsa (2001) viewed SNS as having no permissible protection and faced with threats, broadly related to the impact of modernisation and globalization. These include agricultural expansion, demographic changes, erosion of traditional values, predominantly associated with widespread distribution of institutionalized religions brought in by colonization that have considered traditional beliefs as 'superstitious'. Further, modern land reform programmes have liquidated traditional land ownership, the expansion of the petroleum and mining industries, tourism, developments, changing social and economic aspirations of communities, immigration patterns, administrative and policy changes particularly within the last 20 years are threats to cultural heritage sites (Ramsa, 2001). This entails that traditional beliefs and practices that acted as effective controls in protecting the environment were now being overwhelmed by these changes leading to desecration of cultural landscapes.

A report provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to the Secretariat of the convention on biological diversity identified the following threats to Indigenous traditional knowledge that is critical in environmental conservation. These threats included political pressure, policy and legislative development, cultural integrity, social and economic pressures assimilation, poverty, education, marginalization of women, loss of language, territorial pressures, deforestation, forced displacement and migration, exploitation of traditional knowledge, bio prospecting, objectification development policy, agricultural and industrial development, globalization and trade liberalization (Appiah-Opoku, 2007).

In Ghana the use of flora and fauna was done with veneration and guided by the conservation necessities thus the traditional beliefs and institutions. The study concluded that the coming of Christianity had eroded the rich cultural and belief system of the African people. Furthermore, places, objects, flora and fauna that were regarded consecrated have since been destroyed with the exclusion of the belief that nature inhabits supernatural powers (Aniah *et al*, 2014).

Christianity is one of the world main religions that were imposed on Africa. The message conveyed by Christianity can be epitomized by love of fellow creators, and the worshipping of the only one living God. Nevertheless, the practice of this religion was in contradiction with that of Animism which remains one of the largest and mainly practiced in traditional African societies (Bereau, 1971). To reinforce this argument the scholar sited Prophet, Harris Wade William the organizer of the Harrist Church in West Africa particularly Ivory Coast. He was also referred to as the 'Black Elijah'. His mission from 1910 to 1929 moved tens of thousands of Africans out of traditional religion into the flow of Christianity and Modernization. The evangelistic message of Prophet Harris was clear about that: "all fetishes must be shattered. Burn them all into the fire. That the evil besieges whoever keeps them secretly in his house! ... Read the Bible, it is the word of

God.” (Bureau, 1971). This is another clear indication that the development of Christianity has contributed to the loss of the sacred value of traditional beliefs in many traditional African communities.

The relationships between the sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples with the world’s major faiths has in some cases have had a complex and paradoxical history. Many traditional sacred natural sites had been appropriated because they were considered pagan or idolatrous by newly emerging world faiths. In some instances religious buildings were forcefully superimposed upon traditional sites. While it was important to guard against ‘demonising’ the involvement of major faiths with indigenous and traditional peoples, it was important to acknowledge that the wearing a way of sacred natural sites was directly linked to the growth of the dominant faiths in many cases (WWF, 1986).

Harun *et al* (2017) in Malay cultural landscape in Malaysia highlighted the changes and threats in the safeguarding of the traditional Malay landscape focusing on the preservation of a traditional house compound. The findings revealed that the changes and threats include four underlying aspects; unsuitable and inappropriate uses, ownership problems, inadequate fund and consultation and current development trends. Furthermore, the study discovered that the landscape exists through impartial interactions between man, nature and culture together with the traditional house (Cordell, 1998). On the flipside the study established that preservation of heritage in Malaysia tends to focus more on architectural buildings rather than adopting a holistic approach that included the surrounding environment of where the building was located. It was concluded that absence of holistic approach has contributed towards the loss of the traditional Malay Landscape.

Similar study was conducted by Milupi *et al* 2020 in the Barotse floodplain where they investigated the scope of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and its sustainable practices among the Lozi-speaking people of Western Zambia. The study found that TEK which includes taboos, myths and restrictions associated with the sustainable use of natural resources among the Lozi-speaking people is very common and widely used.

Another study was done in Kenya of the Kikuyu shrine at Makurwe wa Nyagathanga by Rukwaro (2016) on community participation in conservation of gazzeted cultural heritage sites. The study employed case study design with questionnaires, observations, interviews and focus group discussions as data collection instruments. The study revealed that before coming of colonialism, the shrine was venerated by the community as a place where gods abode. The demolition of the shrine came after the colonial masters imposed restrictions on using the shrine for prayers. The study concluded that even if the local communities participated in conservation of the heritage site, conversion to Christianity

had led the majority of people to forget their ancestors, gods, culture, religion, history and heritage.

Appiah-Opoku (2007) observed that over the years, traditional belief systems, practices and indigenous knowledge strategies that conserve the natural resources have been eroded or corroded by western cultural infiltration and religion. The scholar recommended a re-visitation of the traditional belief systems and cultural practices that promoted the management, preservation and conservation of natural resources for the sustainable development of the Upper East Region of Ghana and the nation at large.

Despite the significance of sacred natural sites to biodiversity conservation, and evidence of significant local level protection and management, in some cases local management systems have been widely overlooked by state agencies, conservation agencies, international conventions and legislation and wider civil society. While several activities have been conducted in recent years for protection of sacred sites by organisations like UNESCO and others, no substantial progress has been achieved on the ground. In the context of uneven power relationships, indigenous and traditional peoples have repeatedly lacked the means of promoting their rights and responsibilities as stewards of their land and resources. They were often excluded from decision making processes which affect their land, and they frequently lack information, organization and financial resources to develop and defend their interests (Oviedo, 2001). It is evident that exclusion of local management in the preservation strategies is practical and this could lead to desecration of natural sacred sites.

Malhotra *et al*, (2001) argued that in the past, protection and conservation of the sacred grove of India in Orissa were closely linked with the religious beliefs and traditional culture of the indigenous tribal communities all over the world. This cultural heritage survived through generations, but unfortunately the religious beliefs and taboos that were in the centre of sacred grove preservation were now fast eroding due to change in social setup, increased consumerism for better living and change in the belief system of the people attributable to modern system of education (Rao, 1997). Therefore, it was extremely difficult if not impossible to protect sacred groves indefinitely only on the basis of religious beliefs. Rao (1997) observed that in the subtropical forests of north east India, there was a need to revitalize the age old ethos of conservation culture of traditional societies by supplementing with scientific knowledge about the crucial role these forest patches play in conserving biodiversity and providing large number of valuable good and vital ecological services to the people living around the sacred groves.

The survey by NHCC (2003) in Kasama district of Zambia revealed that infrastructure developments had destroyed substantial parts of Mwela rock art site. During the construction of railway and new roads by the Chinese the granite rocks of Mwela were considered as excellent filling material. The survey revealed other local threats that included

fire to clear small fields for agriculture or to hunt smaller animals.

### Analytical Framework

This study was guided by the main idea behind the cosmopolitan framework in heritage management which emphasize that cultural heritage preservation requires recognition of varied value systems, minimized western influence and incorporation of traditional and formal heritage management practices (Appiah, 2006). Scholars have advanced views in favor of the above framework. Mitchell *et al.*, (2009) for instance argued that special recognition of already existing traditional system and aspirations of local communities to be considered in management practices. Miskell (2009) noted that if formal heritage management is to succeed especially in cultural heritage sites the management practices should emanate from the local setting of the community. Smith (2009) also noted that cosmopolitanism has the capacity to challenge the presumption that only experts can interpret and analyse heritage sites. It is on this basis that this study was guided by this analytical stand point in preventing desecration at Mwela rock art site.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study sought to have an in-depth investigation into desecration of Mwela rock art site of Kasama district of Zambia, a narrative case study designs was used which is one of the literal form of qualitative research approaches that seek to describe personal experiences of individuals in a particular setting and gives realistic and explicit facts into the phenomenon under study (Cresswell, 2012). Hence, this design was appropriate to capture inner experiences of the 16 respondents on the phenomenon under study.

Positivism and interpretivism also referred to as quantitative and qualitative paradigms are usually the two epistemological assumptions of the researchers's methodological approach (Bryman, 2008). In order to capture in depth descriptive information from respondents the study employed the interpretivism paradigm. This philosophical underpinning allows social scientists to take hold of the subjective meaning and understanding of the social reality in a subjective manner. This approach provided an exclusive facet of comprehending this social reality from the respondent's experiences and interpretation (Bryman, 2004).

The target population of this study comprised the subjects of the Bemba Royal Establishment (BRE) that included the village headmen. Further, elderly men and women, who are part of the surrounding community and the Members of the National Heritage Conservation Commission who are currently the custodians of the Mwela rock art site, were part of the population as well. Choice of these respondents was based on the researchers envisioned accessibility to respondents with rich data and connection to the phenomenon under study.

The study being wholly qualitative in nature relied on a limited number of respondents. This study therefore, comprised 16 respondents out of which 5 were subjects of the Bemba Royal Establishment that include 4 Village Headmen and 1 Village Headwoman and 3 focus group discussions representing 3 respondents from the members of the National Heritage Conservation commission who have remained taking care of the site, 4 elderly men and 4 elderly women respectively. The study employed purposive sampling to be specific, typical case study sampling since it adopted a case study design. In this case, subjects of the BRE, NHCC members, elderly men and women were purposively sampled based on group indicators that include, age and proximity of residence, tribe and lived experiences. Elders, Village headmen and woman became key informants as they were regarded as knowledge keepers about Mwela rock art site since they were part of the initial custodianship of the site. These were considered as an appropriate sample to give information about historical state of Mwela rock art site. Selection of 16 respondents was not for the purpose of wider generalization of findings but for providing in depth description of desecration at Mwela rock art site as experienced by stakeholders at the site.

Table 1. Showing the Demographic Profile of Respondents

Respondents	Number	Sex	Age Range	Role	Experience
BRE Subjects	4	Male	65+	Headmen	50 Years+
	1	Female	70+	Headwoman	60 Years+
Elders	4	Male	60+	Caretakers	30 Years+
	4	Female	60+	Caretakers	30 Years+
NHCC Members	3 FGDs	Male	28+	Conservationist	3 Years+
		Female	26+	Conservationist	3 Years+

The researchers in this study were guided by the semi-structured interview schedules to conduct face to face interviews, observation schedule and focus group discussions. The Semi –structured interview schedule was administered to 5 BRE subjects, 4 elderly men and 4 elderly women who have had the understanding and long lived experience near the rock art site community for a longer period of time as well as being part and parcel of the initial custodianship of the site under the BRE. Data were collected using semi structured interview guides so as to obtain independent expressions, attitudes, opinions, experiences and understanding of the problem under study from elders and the BRE subjects. This enabled the researcher to compare, contrast and seek clarification of responses. To ascertain reality of desecration of the rock art site, the researchers asked for permission from NHCC offices to make observations. In order to validate the finding from interviews and observations the researcher had to administer 3 focus group discussions with NHCC members in who are the current custodians and site users. The focus group discussion helped to purify the findings from interviews and observation.

It was prudent to triangulate using three different instruments of data collection as a way of ensuring dependability,

transferability and confirmability of the research findings in a qualitative study. Analysis of data in this study was done in adherence to Sjostron & Dahlgren (2002) seven steps which include; familiarisation, compilation, reduction, preliminary grouping, naming or coding categories and finally contrastive comparison of categories. Similar responses from groups were established in order to come up with similar emerging themes thus thematic analysis were done in line with the research objectives.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion is in line with the themes that emerged in the findings on the factors that have led to desecration of Mwela rock art site.

#### *Factors that have led to Desecration of Mwela Rock Art Site*

When the respondents were asked to state the factors that have led to desecration of Mwela rock art site, the following themes emerged; construction of railway line, coming of NHCC, demographic changes, coming of Christianity and social economic hardships.

#### *Construction of the Railway line*

The finding shows that the stakeholders were of the view that the construction of railway line passing through the Mwela rock art marked the beginning of desecration. They indicated that this was the earliest form of desecration as it was an industrial encroachment into the sacred home of spirits that started way back in the 1960s by the Chinese investors. Respondents stated;

*Mwela lost its religious significance due to the absence of traditional spirits. This was caused by the noisy explosives that were used to break down the rock in the sacred territory during construction of the railway line by the Chinese people. The explosives destroyed the homes of the spirits and the sacred animals, hence, the spirits and animals fled away.*

One member re-emphasized stating that,

*For me the 1960s marked the major time of destruction of the site through quarrying of granite stone during construction of railway line that passed in the sacred territory. The construction of the railway line led to indiscriminate cutting down of trees and quarrying of granite rocks in the sacred land.*

Indeed the construction of the railway line might have been the earliest and beginning point of desecration at Mwela rock art site. While appreciating this developmental agenda for the nation, this developmental project destroyed part of the sacred cultural landscape and home for spirits. The fact that Mwela rock art site supplied the best granite rock which was much needed for the construction of the railway line this act is regarded as blasphemy, breaking down the rocks not only meant destroying the home of spirits but also ritual territory. Changwe *et al* (2021) stated that Mwela is regarded as a

sacred home of spirits and a ritual place in Bemba cosmos. It's clear that the construction of the railway passing through the sacred site was sacrilegious since it encroached and destroyed the spiritual significance of the entire cultural landscape.

The finding further revealed that the railway construction did not only displace sacred animals from their natural habitats but also destroyed trees and rock surfaces that were smashed by explosives. The displacement of animals and destruction of trees is regarded as blasphemy to the Bemba cosmology. This is because the entire Mwela and its inhabitants were regarded as sacred components of the cosmological landscape. In this case all the trees, animals and rocks of the landscape were spiritual figures and belonged to the spirits of the site. Any disturbance, destruction or displacement implies disturbance or destruction to both the seen and unseen elements of the cultural landscape. Hence, construction of the railway line passing through the cultural landscape was itself a form of desecration as it is a disturbance to sacred home of spirits.

It is also clear from the respondents view, that the construction of the railway line scared away the animals that were regarded sacred in the natives belief system. The sacramental aspect attached to the animals demanded spiritual protection. Respondents stated that taboos protected the sacred territory from killing animals. This was so because killing or displacing these animals meant killing or displacing the spirits too. However the construction of the railway line overlooked this fact. Hence the displacement and killing of animals angered the spirits which has contributed to their passivity.

Similarly, Harun *et.al* (2017) stated the changes and threats to sacred natural sites that included unsuitable and inappropriate uses, ownership problems, inadequate fund and consultation and current development trends. It can be deduced that encroachment and destruction of rocks ruined the sacred homes of the spirits that in turn impacted negatively leading to passivity of the spirits. This trickled down negatively by way of weakening the myths, taboos and restrictions that sanctified and protected the rock art site. The fact that Mwela rock art site is regarded as the home of spirits led to the site being reserved for special divine encounters, hence destroying the rocks during construction of the railway line meant destruction of traditional beliefs and activities. Similarly Appiah-Opoku (2007) in report provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity pointed out threats to that include development projects and displacements among other factors.

In this regard the government of the Republic of Zambia needed to conduct a baseline survey on the negative impact of passing the railway in a sacred territory. In as much as development should take place it should not be at the expense of eroding cultural heritage sites and environmental degradation. It was also crucial for government and the Bemba Royal Establishment to have dialogued in order to

safeguard the spiritual and cultural heritage site by not allowing the construction of the rail line to pass through the cultural landscape especially that they understood the spiritual significance of the rock art to the local community even if the railway line was seen as a developmental agenda.

#### *National Heritage Conservation Commission*

Most respondents were of the view that the coming of NHCC at Mwela rock art site was another form of the ongoing desecration at Mwela rock art site. A common response from respondent's stated as follows;

*Desecration of Mwela and its spirits is because of the coming of the National Heritage Conservation Commission after independence. They grabbed ownership of the rock art site because of the rock paintings. They opened up the place for tourism at the expense of spiritual beliefs. This made the Bemba Royal Establishment who were the initial custodians of the spirits to withdraw their religious activities hence the site has remained an ordinary place.*

*Government through the Nation Heritage Conservation Commission grabbed ownership of the rock art site and imposed their own regulations without recognizing the spiritual value the site has had to the local community. Their interest was only to protect the rock paintings and attract more tourists. This made the spiritual value of the site to slowly fade.*

*When the rock art site was under the royal custodianship the people regarded the site very sacred and the spiritual activities were very active. But with the coming of National Heritage Conservation Commission having total control of the site the spirits became inactive, spiritual activities drastically declined, hence the place was no longer regarded sacred by the generations that kept on coming. It is just a folktale today youths have no regard to it as everything talked about is historical, not present and practical.*

Most views from the elders and BRE subjects expressed the realization that the NHCC came with the national wide possession of all national monuments and heritage sites by the new government of the Republic of Zambia in the 1960s. This meant that Mwela rock art site was now under NHCC management and unlike the traditional authority of the Bemba Royal Establishment. Responses from the elders and BRE subjects indicated that the government through NHCC grabbed custodianship of the entire landscape disregarding the spiritual and cultural interconnectedness that was shared between the landscape and local people's world views with regard to it being home of spirits, ritual place of communication and a sacred place protected by taboos (Changwe *et al.*, 2021). Hence seizure of this site by government through NHCC is not only regarded irreligious but disrespectful to the spirits of the cultural landscape. It is also clear from the respondent's view that seizure of the site by NHCC meant seizure of spirits, spiritual activities and its

religious significance to the local people. Hence the coming of NHCC to manage the entire landscape is another profane act at the consecrated site that has led to the continued desecration of Mwela rock art site by ordinary people.

This is in conformity with Ramsa (2001) who stated that modern land reform programmes have liquidated traditional land ownership, the expansion of the petroleum and mining industries, tourism, developments, changing social and economic aspirations of communities, immigration patterns, administrative and policy changes particularly within the last 20 years are threats to cultural heritage sites. The respondents view is that the coming of NHCC at the site had little or rather no interest in addressing the cosmological significance of the peoples cultural landscape, instead NHCCs interest was in the physical and rock paintings of the landscape for development purposes. Hence conducting tourism activities without appeasing the spirits is disrespecting the spirits of the landscape. Correspondingly, WWF-India (2001) stated that tourism, economic exploitation road construction led to loss of cultural heritage and ecological degradation of the wet land basin in south Eastern Ladakh. Ramsa (2001) stated that in the last 20 years sacred natural sites are faced with threats that emanated from tourism developments and administrative policy changes among others.

Certainly the coming of NHCC at Mwela rock art site is viewed as serious escalation to desecration of the cultural landscape by the local community. This is attributed to the fact that NHCC came with modern techniques of conserving the cultural landscape that completely overlooked traditional authorities, spirits and their indigenous beliefs that are embedded into the site. Modern techniques employed by NHCC have very little or no recognition of the spiritual significance of the cultural landscape. This implies that NHCCs modern conservation mechanisms for the management of the site undermine the local community preservation mechanisms and aspirations. It is the failure by the NHCC management to fully embrace indigenous beliefs and its people that might have escalated desecration of the site as their restrictions have not effectively protected and respected both the tangible and intangible elements of the site. NHCCs irreligious activities and custodianship of the site is regarded sacrilegious hence it has deactivated the spiritual and cultural elements of the sacred site. This is because of the belief that Mwela is not only the spiritual home of spirits but also ritual place of communication with the invisible world. This entails that activities taking place at this site are supposed to be sacred and not profane in nature. This in accordance with Bwasiri (2011) argument that colonial masters came with a formal western style of managing and protecting landscapes that overlooked rich evidence of indigenous people's developments in conservation. This management system was designed to protect the scientific value of cultural relics, such as rock art, artifacts and skeleton materials through heritage legislation and frameworks. The scholar viewed western style of managing and protecting landscapes to have threatened survival of cultural landscapes in southern Africa.

It was also observed that Mwela rock art site was now a tourist destination for both locals and foreigners. Further observation showed that NHCC agents freely conduct research, tour guides and enforce regulations on behalf of the commission. From the interviews it is clear that members of the local community and traditional authorities have been distanced from control and management of the site as no member of the local community was seen actively participating in the management of the site. Unfortunately, the restrictions enforced by NHCC were poorly implemented and not respected as members of the local community were seen entering the site at free will. The only notable restriction was the entry fees charges slapped on all tourists. This has made respondents' to view the coming of NHCC at the site have had reduced the extra ordinary spiritual landscape that was used for spiritual activities into an ordinary profane landscape. For instance, from the field it was observed that the site has been opened up for tourism activities, where locals and foreigners freely come to view animals, paintings and the landscape. It was also clearly indicated by BRE subjects and Elders from the interview that, *a place that required a ritual to enter was now opened up to entry fees charged by NHCC for tourism purposes.*

It was evident that respondents have blamed the ongoing desecration at the site as a result of NHCC failure to embrace and respect the traditional beliefs and local authorities in the management of the rock art site. The local people felt the site had been alienated from them by NHCC. However, to be critical, it can be argued that the coming of NHCC at the site was detrimental as viewed by most respondents. The NHCC had accelerated the opening up of the site to tourism activities that are of economic value to the nation. Had the site remained under traditional authority that is BRE, it would have remained pristine for a long time. However, under traditional custodianship the site was likely going to lag behind in terms of exposure to the current scientific, geographical and archeological research. Further, traditional custodianship was going to hinder development of tourism due to the conservative nature of restrictions that were imposed at the rock art site by the local community.

Desecration becomes more vivid as NHCC management had failed to effectively protect and recognize both the spiritual and physical aspects, cultural landscape as whole as compared to the time when the rock art site was fully under the traditional authority. This setback disrespect led to passivity of the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the local people. The passivity was initiated by the disturbance in the cosmological environment by the coming of NHCC to manage the site. In this case desecration might have emanated not only by not consulting the local community but also not recognizing and embracing the local authorities in decision making and management of the site. Doing so would have helped to preserve of both tangible and intangible elements of the landscape and it would have not only given opportunity to the local people to continue honoring their spirits but own and be part of the management of the site. This in turn would have

effectively preserved and sustained the site from desecration for a longer period of time. Similarly Oviedo (2001) states that in the context of unequal power relationships, indigenous and traditional peoples repeatedly lack the means to promote their rights and responsibilities as stewards of their land and resources. They were often excluded from decision making processes which affect their lands, and they frequently lack information, organization and financial resources to develop and defend their interests.

Focus group discussion with NHCC members and field observation revealed further that, weak management of the cultural landscape by NHCC has let the construction of a feeder road which is used for transportation of quarry to Kasama town. The local community has now found it very easy to construct houses, light fire, cut down trees and do some small scale farming within the cultural landscape. This human encroachment into the sacred site has been tolerated by the coming of NHCC and it is considered blasphemy on the cosmological environment. It could be concluded from the respondent's view that the coming of NHCC at the site had greatly contributed to the loss of spiritual values and practices by the community at the rock art site. The argument drawn from this is that NHCC strategies have little capacity to effectively preserve both the physical and spiritual aspects of the rock art site at once despite being enshrined in the NHCC Act.

The above findings on the causes of desecration at Mwela rock art site are in accordance with previous studies conducted in other countries by other scholars. For instance, Ramsa (2001) stated that sacred natural sites in Switzerland are faced with threats of modernization and globalization that include tourism, ownership, development, agriculture expansion, demographic changes, and erosion of traditional values and institutionalized religions that came with colonization. This view was similar to the report by Harum *et al* (2017) on the cultural landscape in Malaysia where it was revealed that the cause of desecration was due to unsuitable and inappropriate use, ownership problems, inadequate fund and development trend. Byers *et al* (2001) gave a similar view in line with previous studies and the current studies that desecration and loss of the forests have been much higher in the areas where traditional leaders have been disempowered within the post-independence political system. In line with the above scholars Bwasiri (2011), Ndoro & Pwiti (2005) stated that in Zimbabwe colonial masters came with formal western style of managing and protecting landscapes that were adopted by most African countries.

The general response from the respondents still point to the fact that Mwela rock art site had lost respect and spiritual values due to the coming of the NHCC at the site. Historically, the rock art site was protected and considered sacred as it abode spirits which indirectly sanctified and protected the entire rock art site.

### Demographic Changes

Interviews with elders revealed that after independence different people of different tribes and cultures began coming into Kasama town. Respondents from the focus group discussions stated that way back before the coming of independence, Kasama had a very small population that was not plural in nature. However after independence the town experienced urban sprawl with people of different cultures coming into Kasama to settle permanently. Common response from the elders and BRE subjects;

*Desecration of Mwela rock art site is because of the youths coming in from other tribes who have no regard and respect for our traditional beliefs. The youths have come with foreign and modern ways of lives that do not have any regard for our spiritual traditions. They believe spirits don't exist and have no importance whatsoever hence they freely go to the site and do anything they feel like. This has made the spiritual activities to slowly lose popularity and become inactive.*

From the above response it can be concluded that increase in population due to influx of different people from different destinations of the country especially after independence has contributed to the loss of indigenous beliefs at Mwela rock art site. It's clear that population increase has indeed led to mixing of cultures which has diluted the sanctity of indigenous beliefs at the site. This mixing of different tribes, races, beliefs and cultures eventually undermined and desecrated the indigenous beliefs and practices at Mwela rock art site as immigrants have no regard for the spirits and the spiritual significance of the cultural landscape in line with the Bemba cosmology. This is similar to Ramsa (2001) who indicated that demographic changes and immigration patterns were among the threats faced with sacred natural sites in Switzerland.

From the respondents view, it was established that most youths have little or no understanding about the historical, cultural and cosmological significance of the site. However it was noted that mixing of cultures might have had a lesser influence on the disappearance of indigenous beliefs at Mwela rock art site. This is supported by the argument that was brought forward by one elder who stated that even if we were of different tribes in our land our cultural practices have remained the same. For instance, one Headman from the focus group discussion stated; *Ukusemfya pa Ng'wena is our cultural practice that has not changed despite different tribes and peoples settling permanently in our land. We respect and enjoy our traditional ceremony and nothing has changed up to date.* Nevertheless, elders and the BRE subjects clearly indicated that youth and foreign cultures undermine the site because of the passivity of spiritual activities that used to take place in the past. Desecration of the site by youth's of different cultures comes as they deliberately perform profane activities in the sacred territory due to the absence of spiritual traditions that preserved and enforced restrictions and taboos for the sanctity of the cosmological environment.

### Social Economic Hardship

Information from the three FGDs and interviews showed that social economic hardships have led to the continued desecration of Mwela rock art site. Common response emanating from a focus group discussion;

*High poverty levels and unemployment in our district coerced youths to engage in self employment of breaking granite stones. This is due to high demand for quarry stones in construction industry. Lack of basic needs forced people to risk and ignore traditional beliefs. They have exploited granite rock at Mwela disregarding its spiritual and cultural value.*

It is obvious that respondents attribute the ongoing desecration of Mwela rock art site to the social economic problems being faced by the local community. Respondents were able to track the beginning of social economic problems way back from the 1990 Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) that were being implemented in Zambia in which most people lost employment. It is not debatable that unemployment led hardships hence most youths engaged self employment for survival. The breaking down of these granite rocks at this time seems have had high demand in Kasama town due to the urban sprawl which led to the rapid growth of the construction industry. Despite Mwela rock art site being sacred spiritual landscape the site was inevitably deemed suitable location for quarrying activities. The deliberate act of breaking stones in the sacred environment is sacrilege to the spiritual beliefs at the site. Breaking down the stones meant breaking down the sacred homes of spirits. The granite stones are regarded sacred since they form part of the spiritual home for spirits within the cosmological landscape. This is similar to the argument that was brought forward by Ramsa (2001) that changing social and economic aspirations of communities are a threat to sacred natural sites. Field observation by the researchers also showed that the site was facing encroachment from members of the local community who are using the site for settlement and farming. This is another sacred religious act taking place around the site due to social economic hardships. This desecration entails that the sacred site which was set aside as an extra ordinary divine home and ritual place is now of ordinary usage like subsistence farming and human settlement. Regrettably the site that was of spiritual significance to the local community was now of economic significance to the youths. This was supported by similar argument made by Bharucha (1999) who states that while communities' control and protect sacred natural sites however rural peoples are increasingly vulnerable to politics and economic pressure that have led to desecration of SNS.

### The Coming of Christianity

The findings from the respondents indicated that the coming of Christianity in Bemba land diminished and destabilized some traditional beliefs at the rock art site. Mostly the new converts no longer respected the local beliefs of the cultural



landscape. Similar responses from interviews were stated as follows;

*With the coming of Christianity spiritual activities are no longer active because they are not respected and honored. They have left because of human behaviour. The new converts regard the spiritual activities at the site as witchcraft and evil.*

*Christianity has made people to disrespect spirits. Most Christians view the site and its beliefs as demonic and evil. Spirits are passive, because local people do not respect their own traditions and culture, only us the few elders, understand the value of communicating with the spirits, most Christians have no regard for them.*

In addition, field observation revealed that the site that was once reserved for rituals and as a sacred home of spirits was now open for Christian congregational prayers. Mostly the Pentecostal oriented churches with permission from NHCC freely conduct congregational prayers within the cultural landscape. To be critical it can be concluded holding Christian prayer meetings within the landscape is deliberate way of undermining and challenging the indigenous beliefs and spirits at the site. The site still instigates some spiritual attachment hence Christian congregation conduct these prayers as a way of placating and discouraging the indigenous beliefs of Mwela rock art site. Regrettably, members of Christian congregations had been painting or writing Christian slogans on top of the old rock paintings for instance Christian writing like we are like sheep that has *gone astray, Isaiah, Holy Spirit* among others (NHCC, 2003). This disturbance in the cultural landscape might be linked to the disappearance and passivity of spiritual activities at the site. This is because according to NHCC (2003) historically the site possessed spiritual powers, it was used also for modern rituals and ceremonies, aimed at, e.g. fighting a drought or protection against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Similar conclusion was made by WWF (1986) that most traditional natural sites have been destroyed because they were considered pagan by newly emerging world faiths. Chasing and deactivating some spirits by Christians has proved futile as it was observed that within the cultural landscape there was a spirit at *Changa Mwibwe* that is still very active but inaccessible by ordinary members of the community. Despite these congregation prayers, the spirit has remained intact since time immemorial.

From responses it is clear that the desecration of Mwela rock art site might not be associated directly by the coming of Christianity in Bemba land but by Christian's congregations encroaching into the sacred landscape for prayers. It was also noted by most respondents that even if Christianity managed to convert the locals it failed to fully halt out indigenous beliefs and practices especially concerning Mwela rock art site. Other respondents were of the view that despite Christianity coming into Bemba land, indigenous beliefs still

remain strong in the area even if people converted. For instance one member stated;

*Coming of Christianity was not a factor as most of us became Christians a long time ago but we still recognize and respect the traditional spirits. It is the coming of National Heritage Conservation Commission management that allowed Christians to have congregational prayers. When the site was under BRE these things were never allowed even if Christians were present.*

Bureau (1971) & Aniah *et al* (2014) stated that flora and fauna use in most African traditional societies was guided by traditional beliefs and institutions, but the coming and development of Christianity eroded the rich and cultural belief system in Africa which led to destruction and removal of sacred fauna and flora. This view tied well with WWF (1986) position that many traditional sacred sites have been destroyed by world major faiths that deemed them idolatry and demonic. A similar conclusion was reached by Rukwaro (2016) who states that the coming of colonialism led to restrictions and destructions of shrines where gods abode and conversion to Christianity led to majority of people to forget their ancestors. In line with these ideas, Apiah-Opoku (2007) states that western cultural infiltration and religion corroded traditional belief system and indigenous knowledge systems. However, the current findings disagree to some extent with the above scholars. This is because at Mwela rock art site the coming of Christianity and colonialism failed to fully erase the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the indigenous people. A few who converted to Christianity still embraced traditional beliefs side by side with Christian beliefs. With Mwela rock art site, it is not true that the coming and development of Christianity and colonialism made local people forget about their spiritual beliefs as most of the elders interviewed were able to remember the spiritual history of the site and still respect traditional the spirits despite the distant relation they have had with the local community. Moreover, the spirit at Changa Mwibwe within the cultural landscape is still active and the place is revered even in the face of Christianity.

The above findings and discussions are grounded in the cosmopolitan framework which stresses the survival of cultural and sacred elements of heritages sites depends heavily on the cooperation of the local community which purely relies on sustainability of their environmental beliefs and custodianship of the heritage sites. The framework recognizes the continuation and recognition of varying value systems that include formal heritage management, traditional heritage management systems, cross cultural understanding and recognition of interconnectedness in preservation of landscapes.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Desecration of Mwela rock art site would be attributed to the loss of spiritual and cultural significance of the entire landscape. This desecration occurs as a result of passivity of the spirits and spiritual activities at the site. Deactivation and

passivity of these spiritual activities is deliberate consequences linked to the the disturbances of the seen and unseen elements of the sacred landscape that came with the construction of the railway line sacred territory, the coming of NHCC, demographic changes, the coming of Christianity and social economic hardships.

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