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THE POWER OF MEMORIAL CULTURE: the case of Shimoni historical slave cave in Kenya

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Introduction:

Shimoni is a fishing village situated about seventy five (75) kilometers from Mombasa town, along the south coast region of Kenya, close to Kenya - Tanzania border. Within Shimoni village are caves that were formed as a result of natural forces and are estimated to extend up to seven kilometers inland from the Indian Ocean shoreline. Shimoni is derived from the Swahili language word 'shimo' which means a hole or a place of the hole. Oral traditions say that the place was used by the inhabitants of the area to hide from neighbouring communities who would occasionally make raids for cattle. During such raids, the people hid in the cave leading to the use of Swahili word "haoni" (can't see) due to the darkness, and eventually the name Shimoni. The cave is believed to have been used by Arab slave traders in the nineteenth century as a slave pen for their human cargo before the Dhows arrived to ship them to the slave market in Zanzibar, Pemba in Tanzania and Oman. Its location and proximity with both Pemba and Zanzibar in Tanzania made it a suitable for holding slaves by the traders before they were shipped to the Zanzibar market. Both Pemba and Zanzibar had slave auction markets and plantations that exploited slave labour for the production of crops such as cloves for export. The Shimoni cave is a multilayered heritage landscape due to its use over the years as a hiding place by the community from danger posed by Cattle raiders, a slave pen, a shrine, village garbage dumping ground and a gazetted monument by the government of Kenya. Currently, the cave is used by the community as a tourist site presented as place of slave trade memory open to paying visitations.

The town is cosmopolitan and is inhabited by various groups that include the local (indigenous) communities mainly the Digo (original settlers) and Shirazi (a mix of Arabs and Africans). Other inhabitants include people from other parts Kenya and the rest of the world in general. Due to the diverse cultural backgrounds of its inhabitants, Shimoni makes a good case study in terms of heritage landscape presentation as a **place of memory**. Some of the areas this paper will try to tackle include **the kind of memory being presented (whether individual or collective memory)**, the factors that influence choice of the heritage layer being presented and how the presentation or narratives is done by creating identities. The paper further looks at the **critical question of ownership**, in other words; **whose heritage is it?** The role of the Museum, in this case the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) through Fort Jesus Museum is also explored. NMK's role is looked at in the context of it being the custodian of Kenya's

heritage resources, and its partnership with the people of Shimoni in facilitating **sustainable utilization of the same resources for community benefit.**

Legal Status:

Shimoni is a conservation area gazetted by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in the year 2001. Its current gazettelement is under the Parliamentary heritage Act of 2006 of the government of Kenya. This Act of parliament gives the NMK, a body that is entrusted with the custodianship of all heritage resources in Kenya the legal authority to control any development undertakings in the region to safeguard the heritage values. This is to check negative impacts caused by *ad hoc* development undertakings that might erode both tangible and intangible values of the heritage resources.

Shimoni Heritage Resources:

Heritage resources found in Shimoni area include the Slave cave now opened for tourists as a place of memory under the Shimoni Slave Cave Management Committee. The committee manages the heritage site on behalf of the community with technical assistance from the NMK. Other places of significance include; the colonial buildings that were erected by the British under the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) in the later part of the nineteenth century. This was during their quest to try to stop slave trade in the region among other interests. These resources signify colonial history in the area and include former administrative and residential buildings, prison house, a pier and flag mast area and a cemetery. Also found within the Shimoni Conservation area are the ingenious forest located on top of the cave, that is rich in both flora and fauna, and Kichangani area that was the first settlement of the indigenous people of Shimoni before they moved to the current location.

Shimoni Slave Cave as a place of Memory:

As stated above, Shimoni conservation area has **a number of identified heritage resources due to their historical, social, political and spiritual values amongst other significances.** The cave forms part of this heritage landscape due to its **multilayered values that include slave history, a shrine (spiritual), geological values (its formation and rock structure), bat life (home to about four species of bats) and the indigenous forest cover with bird, plants and animal life.** However, it is worth noting that it is only the cave that has been selected by the community and its slave heritage re/constructed to give value and identity to Shimoni as a place of memory. The narrative has been very silent on the other heritage resources and visitors are more aware of the cave and its history than the rest of the monuments that are of equal importance. This **selective memory** to some extent has minimized the potential of the area as a cultural heritage tourist destination. The selective choice leads to the critical question mentioned at the beginning; **whose heritage is it?** Does it belong to those whose kinsmen were sold or those who sold others? Or does it belong to the visitor who determines how the presentation is done and shapes the narrative in order to have a certain desired experience?

Whose heritage is it?

To answer the above questions it is good to understand that although Shimoni is a cosmopolitan town, there are two distinct communities recognized as the first settlers of the region. Indigenous groups in the region are the Shirazis who are believed to have sold and the Digos who were sold as slaves. Both groups have **conflicting facts about the use of the cave** as a slave pen and slave trade in general. Those who are believed to have collaborated with the Arabs to sell their kinsmen **deny the existence of slave trade** and the use of the cave as a holding warehouse, while those whose kinsmen were sold say that it was a reality. However, both groups through the Shimoni Slave Cave Committee collectively present the cave as a place of memory of slave trade, and are all beneficiaries of initiated community benefits realized from the money accrued from the gate collections. This fact not only makes Shimoni slave cave a place of individual and collective memories, **but a place where heritage is adopted or discarded, identities are created and recreated either for economic, social and political gains.** On **the question of ownership**, it is possible to say that **the visitors in a way becomes the owner** of the heritage since they determine how the experience is presented, what is adopted for remembrance and how it is remembered.

The Museums Role (NMK)

The NMK through Fort Jesus Museum Mombasa on their part is working with Shimoni communities to safeguard the integrity of the heritage landscape by expanding the historical layers to be presented in the narrative. This done by enhancing the experience by expanding places of memory through the restoration of the colonial buildings and having adequate information panels on the ground to give values to other places of significance in the region. One of the colonial buildings is being prepared to serve as an information centre, where a museum is being put up to give a presentation of the regions heritage including that of slavery to complement the cave's activities. The NMK is looking at Shimoni as one multilayered heritage landscape with interlinking values that needs to be developed to complement each other by proper presentation. Some of the activities being undertaken to improve the presentation include putting up information signage, restoration and stabilization of the existing structures, cleaning and landscaping the entire area and marketing the entire landscape as one entity. All these activities are guided by a management plan that was prepared specifically for the area, and is geared towards the economic, social, and political well being of the Shimoni community.

Conclusion

Places of memory such as Shimoni slave cave and the surrounding heritage landscape offer a very good chance for museums to work closely with the communities to uplift their livelihood. The partnership between the NMK and the slave cave management committee in management of the heritage resource has impacted positively in the lives of the community through the use of money accrued from entry charges to improve services and facilities in the area. Some of the areas that have benefited include

education, sanitation and medical. The tangible benefits have translated into more awareness of heritage values by the communities and better protection of the heritage sites by them because they can see their relevance and potential as development tools. It is good to note that places of memory such as Shimoni offer a good platform for spiritual reflections, as well as social, economic and political advancements through awareness and identity creations. Shimoni as a place of memory provides a forum for knowledge generation through debates between different communities and the National Museums of Kenya and hope for many many individuals and families.

Reference:

1. Kiriama O. H, (2005) Archaeological Investigation of Shimoni Slave Caves, in Slave Routes and Oral Traditions in Southeastern Africa, (Ed) Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers, and Allen Isaacman.