

KASOMA ROCK ART SHELTERS: A REFLECTION ON LOCAL AWARENESS AND CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper stems from an archaeological excavation of two rock art shelters, namely, Nyamang'ora and Nyankingi in Kasoma Village, Musoma Rural District in Mara Region in 2012. Apart from revealing the shelters to be home for Later Stone Age hunter-foragers, the study also noted challenges in relation to how locals perceive cultural heritage assets in their area as well as conservation obstacles, resulting from both natural causes and anthropogenic factors. Through field observations and local interviews, it became clear that the majority of people do not understand the significance of the rock paintings in their area, and many are unaware of the paintings' existence. This alarming lack of knowledge about their own cultural heritage among people living in Kasoma Village poses serious threats to the conservation and sustainability of the priceless rock paintings at Nyamang'ora and Nyankingi rock shelters. Among other mitigation measures to curb further deterioration of the sites, this study recommends the joint effort of stakeholders such as local community leaders and elders, the central government's Antiquities Department, volunteer groups, donors both local and international, collaborating in the dissemination of knowledge about the significance and conservation of rock art shelters in the area. Key to the success of multi-sector collaboration is the critical involvement of local leaders at every stage of decision making and planning of cultural heritage preservation and archaeological site conservation.

Key words: rock art, local awareness, conservation, heritage assets

Background of the problem

This paper emanates from an archaeological study that took place at two rock shelter sites namely Nyamang'ora and Nyankingi. Both rock shelters are located in the granite kopjes of Kasoma Village, Musoma Rural

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District in Mara Region (Mwitondi 2012; Mabulla 2005). This village is situated along the shore of Lake Victoria. Nyamang'ora rock shelter is found at latitude $1^{\circ} 46' 58''$ S and longitude $33^{\circ} 34' 30''$ E, about 1166 meters above sea level. Nyankingi rock shelter is found at latitude $1^{\circ} 46' 33''$ S and longitude $33^{\circ} 34' 15''$ E, about 1161 meters above sea level (Figure 1). Nyankingi rock shelter is located about two kilometers northwest of Nyamang'ora and about 500 meters from the Lake Victoria shore (Figure 1).

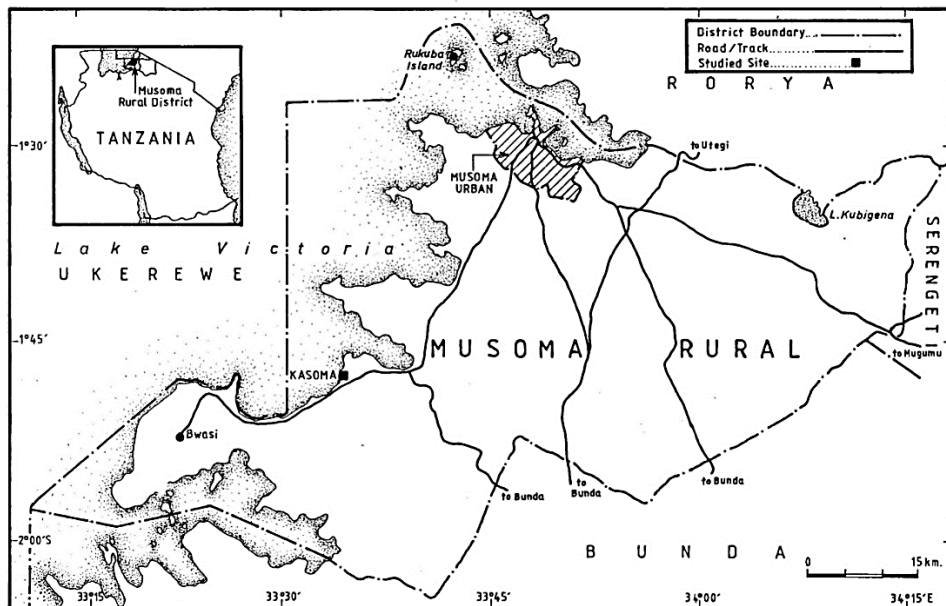


Figure 1: A map of Musoma Rural District showing Kasoma Village

In Musoma Rural District, agriculture and animal husbandry are the major occupations. The distribution of cultivation areas is determined largely by the availability of water, soil fertility, availability of alternative income generating activities such as fishing and historical factors. Thus, cultivation in the area of study is dense, especially the areas bordering Lake Victoria, extending through much of the western half of the Mara Region (National Bureau of Statistics 2003; Cook 1974).

Interest in rock art studies in Tanzania can be traced back to 1900s (Itambu 2013). Masao (2007) noted that majority of rock paintings in Tanzania are found in central part of the country (mainly in Singida and Dodoma

regions) and the contiguous Lake Eyasi Basin. These paintings were also the first to be reported, as long ago as 1908 (Masao 2005, 2007). In his (2007) study, Masao revealed that in terms of subject matter and style, it is quite clear that zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures dominate the rock art of central Tanzania and those of Lake Eyasi Basin. He also argued that these paintings, especially those of Kondoa and Singida, and to some extent those of Mbulu, belong to one tradition and perhaps are the work of one group of hunter-gatherers. Based on Anati (1983) typo-chronological classifications, central Tanzanian rock art dates between 20,000 and 50,000 years ago.

The rock paintings in Kasoma Village have been attributed to the Hunter-Forager Red Geometric tradition (Plates 1, 2 and 3). This is characterized by a thick-line painting of simple geometric designs. Typical designs include the “uterus-like” design, “oval” designs, circles, concentric circles, circles with externally radiating lines, circles surrounded by ordered lines of dots, semi-circles, dots, divided circles, ladders, lines, sets of parallel lines and “H-like” designs (Mabulla 2005). Through excavation of these two rock shelters (Nyamang’ora and Nyankingi), the results show that Kasoma Village was occupied by Later Stone Age (LSA) people who lived in the area around 8,000 to 5,000 BP (Mwitondi 2012). This LSA culture is subdivided into Aceramic and Ceramic LSA. Lithic artifacts, pottery, and other symbol-revealing features such as red ochre and dirty white pigments, have been used to infer the LSA culture at Kasoma Village (Mwitondi 2012).

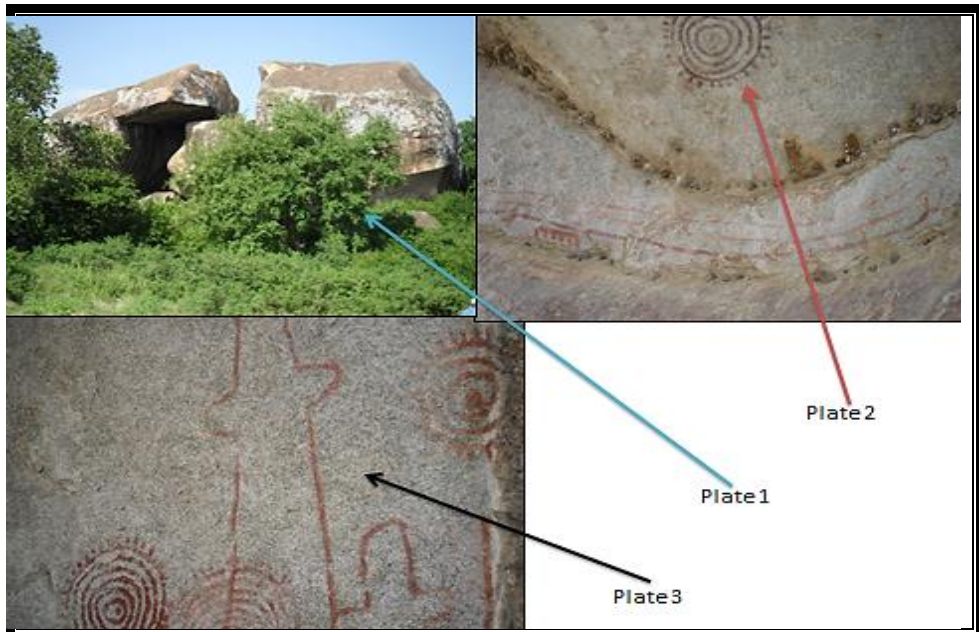


Plate 1: Nyamang'ora rock outcrop. **Plates 2 and 3:** Hunter-Forager Red Geometric traditional designs at Nyamang'ora rock shelter

Despite the presence of significant and priceless archaeological and historical remains at Kasoma Village, observations made during the 2012 study have revealed knowledge gaps in awareness, significance and conservation constraints of heritage assets among Kasoma villagers. Through field observations and interviews, it emerged clearly that most villagers had little information pertaining to the importance of conservation and management of heritage assets in the area. To a large extent, this knowledge gap is due to research imbalances in the country (Mabulla1996, 2000, 2005; Masao 2005). In response to this lacuna, the idea arose to conscientize the public through teaching them the significance of these assets and the importance of heritage conservation.

Methods

This study employed both primary and secondary data sources. In addition, this researcher conducted direct observation visits to assess the state of conservation in the area. Primary data were collected through ethnographic inquiries with locals. An ethnographic inquiry allows the researcher to study the lifestyles and belief systems of modern societies in

reconstructing their past life-ways (Itambu 2013). A set of ethnographic questions probing locals' awareness of the presence, the significance, and the conservation of rock art were administered to selected respondents based on age groupings. To acquire diverse and well-represented data, school children, youth, and elders were chosen deliberately. The following section addresses the research findings.

Results regarding local awareness of the significance of the rock art shelters

The significance of cultural resources is measured according to their historical, socio-cultural, aesthetic, economic and scientific values (The Burra Charter 2013, Francis-Lindsay 2009, Mturi 1996). Inferring from received knowledge about the significance of cultural heritage assets at Kasoma Village, it was noted that not all members of this community knew of the existence of shelters with rock art in their area. At the present time, the shelters – Nyamang'ora in particular – are sequestered by local elders who use them for ritual and worshipping purposes, as indicated by a couple of broken pots, animal bones and burnt material that were clearly visible at Nyamang'ora rock shelter when this researcher conducted an archaeological excavation (Mwitondi 2012). With the exception of local elders who still use the shelter, the rest of society either knows of the existence of the shelter with paintings but not the significance embedded within them, or they know only of the existence of rock shelters as merely natural rock formations. This awareness gap was attested by the village government chairperson who knew little about the paintings at Nyamang'ora and Nyankingi rock shelters at the time of being interviewed. With great surprise, many villagers wondered themselves how this researcher got to know about the paintings in the first place while the majority of them did not. It was generally presumed the researcher must have associated with deceitful people who regularly search for precious gems and minerals in the area, taking advantage of local ignorance. In consequence this researcher encountered considerable difficulties in conducting archaeological excavations. At one point he was evicted from private land at Nyankingi while excavation was going on.

Despite adhering to all the necessary protocols, submitting required documentation to the village office in advance and receiving permission from the land owners, at one point their son accosted the researcher with accusations of mineral-poaching. The false allegation was later corrected, and after a series of appeals to and negotiations with the village office, invested parties were discouraged from undue delays through interference with the excavation work.

Local myths surround the rock shelters themselves, reflecting varied misperceptions of the value that foreigners associate with cultural heritage assets. All respondents shared a similar suspicion that German colonial administrators and soldiers hid their fortunes of precious gems in secret locations throughout the region's shelters and caves, in consequence of their defeat during the aftermath of World War I. This rumour prevails without challenge to this day, so that anyone attempting to excavate or investigate for any reason in those areas is associated with mineral poaching. The majority viewed this researcher with disapproval as just another treasure hunter.

Poor communication between village office staff, local community leaders and other residents resulted in further altercations between this researcher and village elders who regard the Nyamang'ora rock shelter as their shrine and sacred space. Notwithstanding observance of all the protocols, including the proper presentation of documents from the Antiquities Department and regional and district governments warranting research permission to Kasoma Village officials, some village elders were never notified. Even when they were told the village office had already sanctioned the excavation, they remained adamantly resistant to research conducted in the area. Such failures in communication and the consequent misunderstandings that arise are an appropriate focus for future research into community participation in decision making and information sharing among local stakeholders.

In principle, locals were right to query why "foreigners to that land" were granted permission to access their shrines. The legitimacy of such a concern reflects how far there is to go in understanding the value of cultural heritage resources for a wide range of user groups (McKercher and

Du Cros 2002, Ndoro 2001). In this context, what one researcher considers to be a cultural resource, a local community leader may protect as having the sanctity of exclusive value for an exclusive group, requiring strict and prohibitive protection from outsiders, as is the case in the Nyamang'ora shelters. Locals need to understand that the value of a cultural resource arguably goes beyond local boundaries. With this in mind, conflicts could have been eased if Nyamang'ora locals were apprised of the significance of their cultural heritage resources in the wider world. Correlatively, researchers need to respect the sentiments and history of a resource and its significance exclusive to a local community where it is regarded as sacred property (The Burra Charter 2013, McKercher and Du Cros 2002, Ndoro 2001).

Conservation challenges

In its generality, the term 'conservation' relates to an act of taking care of a cultural or a natural resource so as to retain its significance. A cultural resource's significance is determined in the first instance by how it is valued by a segment of the general public or the whole of a specific society (The Burra Charter 2013). In this light, there is a lot of work still to be done to sustain the significance of cultural resources found in Kasoma Village. Worldwide, most rock art sites are threatened by both natural and anthropogenic – that is, human-induced – impacts. In most known instances, images are not regularly preserved or renewed through re-painting or re-marking by locals (Hall 1999). At Kasoma Village, this researcher noted several conservation challenges facing rock art in the area (Plates 4, 5, 6). Though continuous usage of the shelters for ritual purposes has been regarded as a natural way to conserve the assets (Jopela 2010b), still such activities have drawbacks if they are not properly conducted. For instance over-usage of the shelters by locals for ritual purposes may contribute to its deterioration (Jopela 2010b, Bwasiri 2011a, Kessy 2011).

Among ritual protocols that threaten tangible heritage is the burning of materials at the sites with poor ventilation, resulting in smoke that may lead to fading and loss of the artistic fabric of the paintings over the long term (Jopela 2010b, Bwasiri 2011a, Kessy 2011). Further, farming activities, including chopping down trees around both shelters, have

resulted in permanent stripping away of foliage that used to protect the shelters from ultraviolet radiation in the direct sunlight. With increasing population in the area (National Bureau of Statistics 2003), growing demand for arable land for other economic activities such as charcoal processing and timber harvesting, render the Kasoma shelters and the paintings they contain increasingly vulnerable to irreparable deterioration. The anti-social problem of graffiti and recreational vandalism also pose threats to the paintings (Bwasiri 2011a, Kessy 2011). Some locals revisit shelters and leave random marks on the shelter walls; some of these overlap with earlier paintings as observed in the Nyankingi shelter (Mwitondi 2012).

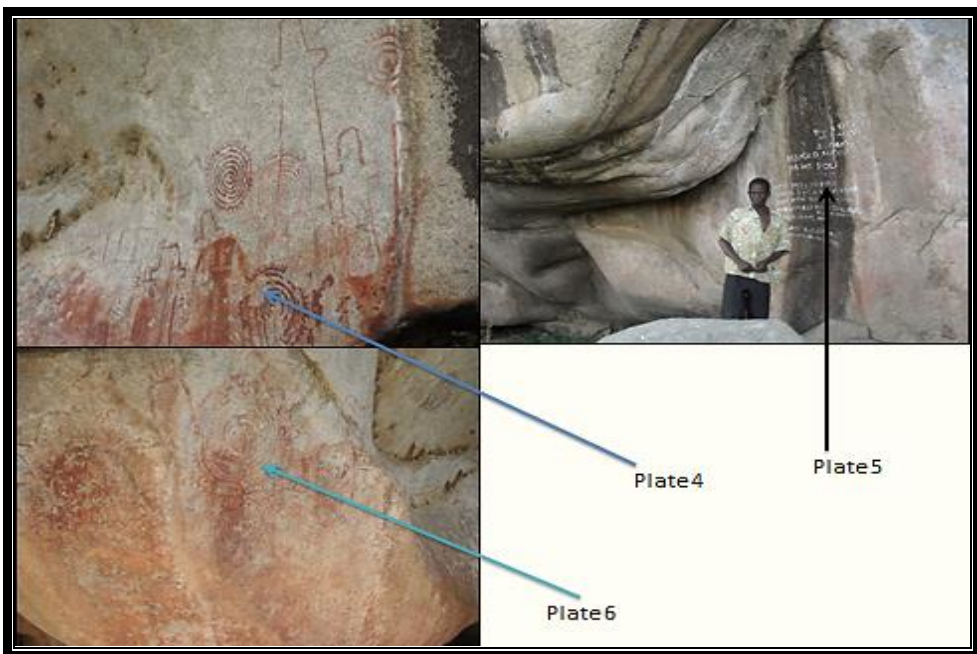


Plate 4: the magnitude of deterioration of rock painting at Nyamang'ora rock shelter is evident. **Plate 5:** shows graffiti at Nyankingi rock shelter. **Plate 6:** illustrates the magnitude of deterioration of rock painting at Nyankingi rock shelter.

Natural agents constitute another kind of serious challenge to heritage conservation. To the paintings in rock shelters of Nyankingi in particular, water erosion poses a major threat (Kikula 1999), as does wind erosion (Rijssen 1987) along with excessive sunlight (Mabulla 2005) that is fading some of the paintings, since Nyankingi is facing eastward.

Protection against these threats caused by natural elements – soil erosion and sunlight – is difficult to achieve in rock art sites (Deacon 2006). Intervention measures can work best when the natural processes can be retarded by deflecting the flow of water over painted surfaces with a well-designed artificial drip line, or installing a boardwalk to cut down on dust, or discouraging the growth of algae or moss, or reducing the risk of fire in the vicinity of a site. Conservation efforts are least successful when the local environment is drastically changed, for example by clearing vegetation to make a site more accessible, or by covering painted surfaces with silicone sealant (Deacon 2004, 2006).

Kasoma Village lacks any guiding by-laws to protect the shelters and the overall ecosystem. One major conservation instrument is the implementation of guiding principles. In this regard, the National Antiquities Legislation that was amended in 1979 (United Republic of Tanzania 1964) can be the basis for deriving regional bylaws that govern and protect cultural heritage resources in the area. The realization of this task in Kasoma Village may be problematic, however, because some key questions remain unanswered: Who is going to create and implement such by-laws to protect a site that is still not under the Antiquities Department watch list? How can progressive legislation be enacted when the required revenue to facilitate reform measures is inadequate; and while available government resources are diverted to famous (therefore prioritized) sites in other parts of the country? Who is going to educate locals on the importance of these shelters? Who is going to train community members and traditional culture custodians to integrate their local knowledge and use of these shelters with modern conservation strategies?

It is now widely recognized that some of the local communities in cultural heritage sites in Tanzania and the world at large share common challenges when it comes to the level of awareness and conservation of those sites (Bwasiri 2011, Clottes 2008). Only the magnitudes of those challenges distinguish them. It remains clear that in most regions of Tanzania, sustainable conservation and local awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage assets are goals yet to be attained (Mabulla 2000, 1996; Masele 2007, Mturi 1996).

Recommendations

As noted by Bwasiri (2011b) and Mabulla (1996), the Antiquities Department and other stakeholders including relevant non-governmental organisations, community-based associations, and private sector business agents, should participate in sensitizing local practitioners about how they can continue to use the sites for ritual activities without jeopardizing their valuable but perishable heritage assets. For instance, since continual splashing of water and setting of fires at the shelters is likely to result in serious deterioration of the rock artwork, establishing alternative venues nearby for ritual activities would prevent further threats of this kind. This strategy was adopted for the Kondoa rock shelter (Bwasiri 2011a) and might be adopted as well in Kasoma Village. Raising people's awareness should be prioritized through frequent and repeated training opportunities and a range of public education measures (Mabulla 1996). These include publication affordable books for lay adult readers and children, including setting appropriate texts for the schools, free public lectures, digital imagery, poster campaigns, radio and television exposure (Mabulla 2000, Clottes 2008, McKercher and Du Cros 2002).

Through these strategies a special effort should be made to include local populations at every stratum, involving them in such a way that they can benefit directly from observing conservation protocols. For example, a simple and regular site monitoring and maintenance program, run jointly by locals themselves in collaboration with the heritage conservation expertise from the University of Dar es Salaam or the Antiquities Department, could prompt pre-emptive measures to offset foreseeable adverse threats to the sites investigated in this research (Burra Charter 2013, Jopela 2010a, Hall 1999, Mabulla 1996).

For such heritage monitoring and ongoing maintenance to be feasible, a proper site management plan must be laid down with the help of expertise from a recognized institution that is respected in the region. This plan will highlight the nature of the heritage resource recognized in a specific site, its value as a cultural and historical icon regionally and globally. The plan will also clarify site use, ownership, and agents' involvement in responsibilities and monitoring of a site. It will also act as a benchmark for

proper site planning (Masele 2007). A site management plan is a critical document that serves as a map of protecting and developing a cultural heritage site. As Masele stresses, the challenge is how to develop this document. Therefore, locals need some expert advice and this may come from Antiquities Department or from cultural heritage expertise from the University of Dar es Salaam. Enforcing laws and by-laws is the best way to protect resources (Masele 2007). With the help from Antiquities Department, local government and other legal institution, the locals must be guided in developing by-laws that suit their local environment.

Clearly, funding is needed to commission appropriate local individuals to safeguard and oversee a heritage site. But local participation plays a significant role in conservation, and this is not unduly expensive. Fundamentally, success of any conservation initiative depends upon the participation of locals. Wherever local stakeholders control the process, conservation activities is maximized (Mannon 2010, Hall 1999). As noted by Bwasiri (2011a), locals should be able to determine how best the site should be used for tourism, awareness, and education as well as research. They should also advise on how to reactivate traditional custodianship practices at the site. As noted by Jopela (2010), throughout Africa many communities still deploy traditional mechanisms that ensure culturally significant sites are protected and sacred spaces are respected. So the Antiquities Department of Tanzania must encourage the use and dissemination of local knowledge and customs in these campaigns advocating conservation of rock art throughout the country (Bwasiri 2011, Kamamba 2009).

If awareness raising and knowledge dissemination are properly executed, and if management of conservation programmes is genuinely collaborative, involving local population representatives in the planning and implementation decision making at every stage, a positive response to proposed changes and reforms can be expected. Interventions properly managed can be expected to yield an increased sense of investment in the success of conservation pro-active participation of villagers in adapting culture and custom to conservation priorities in Kasoma Village (Bwasiri 2011, Jopela 2010, Mabulla 1996).

Conclusion

As noted by Mannon (2010), lack of awareness on the significance of cultural resources is a major stumbling block in attaining sustainable conservation and utilization of a resource in many sites and this could be the case in Kasoma Village the area. This paper has highlighted challenges encountered by this researcher at Kasoma Village when doing an archaeological study of the area's rock shelters. Most of these challenges stem from lack of awareness of the significance of cultural heritage assets, which in turn contributes remarkably to the continued deterioration of the sites investigated. If the invaluable cultural heritage assets in the form of rock paintings are to be sustainably conserved, then it is imperative that involved stakeholders are sensitized about the importance of the paintings, so as to attract institutional funding and sponsorship to facilitate research, documentation, protection and wider public awareness (Clottes 2008). The proposed mitigation strategies should involve a series of outreach campaigns aimed at educating locals from grass roots to elders (including village leaders) about their responsibilities in conservation and utilization of cultural heritage resources.

The challenge of communication between local community and people who visit their area for research purpose needs to be addressed clearly and openly so as to create a healthier environment for both parties which can play a part in communicating the significance of the heritage resource, and the need for its conservation, to the host community and to visitors. Access to heritage is both a right and a privilege, and brings with it a sense of duty to respect heritage values, interests and equity of the present-day host community. Ultimately, successful conservation is the outcome of actions taken by indigenous custodians who are the inherent beneficiaries as well as the owners of the historic property involved, and who assume enlightened responsibility for the cultural landscapes from which that heritage evolved (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS] 2002).

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