

The Social, Environmental and Economic Factors Leading to the Degradation of the Sacred Sites in the Eastern Free State, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The ecological crisis of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State has become a matter of concern both provincially and nationally. From various quarters, attention is drawn to the harm human beings and their activities do the environment and the need to arrest this menace. The paper argues that environmental conservation concerning the sacred sites is not a recent phenomenon. Past generations knew about environmental degradation and the need for preservation of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State. The paper investigates the factors leading to the social, environmental and economic decay of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State in South Africa. Further, the paper aims at monitoring the abuse of the sacred sites by the pilgrims and those residing on them. The paper seeks to show that the disregard for traditional checks and balances, especially of those visiting the sites, has adversely affected their status.

INTRODUCTION

The paper departs from the premise that South Africa's landscape has changed dramatically over the past few centuries, largely through human settlement and associated activities. Short-sighted development, inappropriate land use practices and poor land management have significantly impacted on the ecosystems that form the core of the nation's natural capital. Yet South Africa relies on these very ecosystems to provide the life-support services that sustain its people and its rich biodiversity. The sacred sites are prime examples of ecosystems that, despite their provision of beneficial services, functions and products, have not escaped the impacts of human activities, either positively or negatively. Although no systematic provincial or national survey of sacred sites has been undertaken, studies in several major catchment areas reveal that the benefits they provide, have already been lost or severely degraded.

The Free State province has several sacred sites which are believed to have special cultural and historical importance. The most notable and specific sacred sites in the Eastern Free State are the following: *Motouleng*, *Matsopa* and *Mautse*. These sacred sites are the foundations to our religious and cultural beliefs of individuals of different ethnic groups in South Africa, particularly the South Sotho-speaking people. The sacred sites are significant to people who feel religiously and culturally attached to them

and those who tend to visit them believe that there is an interaction with God and the ancestors by undertaking such visits. Further, there is also a common belief by those embarking on pilgrimages to these sites that the ancestors' spirits rest in the mountains, caves, and rivers of such sacred sites. The association of these sites with healing, as well as spiritual guidance for the visitors adds vibrancy to their significance. Owing to the above highlighted historical and cultural significance of these sacred sites, those have become tourist attractions, not only for the inhabitants of the Free State Province, but for the country as a whole and those coming from neighboring countries. People, who believe in the 'holiness' of these sites, visit them to perform rituals/sacrifices in order to evoke the ancestors spirits.

It should be noted that sacred sites have a number of rules and regulations regarding people's behavior in relation to them. There are also environmental concerns and economic reforms with regard to these sites; the rules and regulations sometimes being disobeyed or viewed as controversial. Despite the above value of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State, in recent times they have been subject to social, environmental and economic degradation.

Problem Statement

In South Africa, certain elements of cultural heritage may be of special significance to partic-

ular groups of people and serve to demarcate particular cultural, religious, ethnic or historical identities. Therefore, sacred sites are an important indicator of, and influence on cultural identity. Rural communities residing in the vicinity of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State are closely and inextricably linked to the natural environment in which the sites are embedded. Several studies on the sites in the Free State province have been conducted by various researchers from different institutions. However, the studies conducted and the journal articles generated do not unpack the issues pertaining to the environmental, social and economic degradation of such sites. Therefore, this study was conducted to unpack the abovementioned issues which have been consciously or unconsciously neglected by researchers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this research was aligned to the qualitative approach because of its narrative nature. One other reason for choosing qualitative research methodology, as postulated by JK Smith was that 'it seeks to unfold people's attitudes, behavior, value systems, concerns, motivation, culture and lifestyle' (Smith 1998: 8). The paper is based on primary and secondary sources including journal articles, books, dissertations, archived newspaper clippings/articles and oral testimonies. The data collected from the oral testimonies was used to enhance and corroborate information provided by other relevant sources. In addition, the fact that the sites were known to accommodate almost everyone from anywhere, the information collected for the study was not limited to ethnicity, gender, age or location.

Although success stories could be highlighted when a research of this nature was conducted, it should be noted that to a certain degree the researchers were faced with certain challenges in undertaking this study. The first challenge was the scarcity of written source material on the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State. The second challenge was related to conducting interviews. For example, most interviewees were reluctant to provide certain information as culturally, it is regarded as taboo to talk about certain aspects of African culture. The third challenge pertained to the issue of providing compensation to those individuals who were pre-

pared to be interviewed. However, the researchers managed to handle professionally all the above challenges.

Literature Review

The three Eastern Free State sacred sites have been historically valued, by those visiting them, as sites where various religious and cultural activities can be practiced. Coplan (2003: 975-993) wrote an article on the pilgrimages on the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State but did not address the issue of degradation of such sites in his work. Understandably, this was not his scope of research; hence concentration was mainly on the historical significance. In most cases, recent studies by academics and heritage practitioners have attempted to give an account of the cultural and historical significance of these sites without focusing on the environmental, social and economic degradation. The following writers: Twala (2009: 1-6, 114-132), and Masooa and Twala (2014: 387-394) failed to address the abovementioned issue of the degradation of these sites. Equally, with regard to the abovementioned sentiments, Mensele's (2011: 1-109) dissertation entitled *A study of rituals performed at two sacred sites in the Eastern Free State* does not address the issue of the degradation of the sites. This research gap propelled the researchers to undertake this project.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Anim and Chauke (2014: 48) contend that: 'Human productive and social activities and thus social structures and relations are shaped, to a significant degree, by a number of factors, inclusive of the available natural resource mix, physical geography, weather patterns, the amenability of natural conditions to transformation, and a variety of other environment characteristics. In the Limpopo Province of South Africa, environmental degradation, including depletion of renewable and non-renewable resources and pollution of air, water and soils, has been a significant source of stress upon the farming communities'. Clear challenges have emerged with respect to the sustainable development of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State. To a certain extent, from the preservation point of view, there is a lack of policy and legislative response to the range of environmental degradation of

such sites. Moreover, a degraded sacred site can accelerate the problem of impoverishment because the rural people residing on these sites depend directly on them. There is also a lack of civil society and private sector initiatives in addressing this problem.

Sacred sites, overlap with both archaeological sites (rock art sites) and buildings (for instance, mission stations, and churches, such as the Rose Chapel cave church at the Anglican Mission Station of St Augustine's at Modderpoort). However, there are some important sacred sites which do not fall into these categories, but which are very much part of the Free State's cultural heritage. These are sites of pilgrimage. The researchers agree with Danso et al. (2002: 5-6) notion that the interrelationships between farming activities and nature, and the importance of environmental health to social health, should become widely acknowledged.

Social, Environmental and Economic Challenges

Contravention of Rules and Regulations Pertaining to Observances on the Sites

There are certain rules and regulations to be followed by those visiting and residing on the sites. The following should not be done on these sites: using vulgar language and swearing; urinating in the place, etc. The fact that the sites are viewed as sacred and 'holy', respect is demanded from those visiting them. It is believed that failure to show respect could lead to back luck for such persons. Any sign of disrespect could be interpreted as undermining the spirit of the ancestors and the might of God at these sites. In an exclusive interview with Mofokeng (2010), he stated: 'Sometimes we find used condoms and bottles of liquor on these sites. People don't respect these places'.

The Sites Used as Haven for Thieves

In March 2000, the *Sunday Tribune* exposed cases of stock theft that were rife at most of the sacred sites. This was due to the fact that in many instances worshippers and visitors trespass over other farms to get to the site and along the way, some steal livestock to conduct rituals and ceremonies (Dube 2000: 3). Besides the theft of livestock, a case of murder at one site was

reported in which a gatekeeper and his wife were murdered. The suspects were identified as immigrants from Lesotho. As stated in the newspaper, immigrants allegedly go to the site to worship in the caves with the intention of checking out the security on the farms (Dube 2000: 3).

In the past few years, there have been reports that some people from the neighboring townships surrounding the sites commit crimes and go into hiding at the sites, thus evading the police. Selebano (2009) recalled: 'In the past it became clear that some people used the sites for their own corrupt and selfish activities. Some people would commit criminal activities such as rape, murder and stock theft and thereafter come for hiding here. In fact, that compromises the real meaning and significance of these sites. Some people would go to an extent of coming here and have dagga plantations. They would do this knowing very well that the place is not easily accessible by the police. We are therefore appealing to such people to respect these sites'.

Destruction of the Sites through Neglect

In most cases there were reports that veld fires at the sites were caused by visitors who did not appreciate the importance of these sites or who lacked respect of them. In 2000, *Motoutleng* experienced a huge veld fire. This carelessness resulted in the fire damaging about 20 000 hectares of land which was also a concern to the farm-owner. In an interview conducted with the journalist from the *Sunday Times*, she noted that 'the site used to be a clean holy place but recently the local people don't even set foot there because of the murders, corruption and the improper conduct of the visitors and those who live at the site'. Some of the residents at the site were concerned with such activities of consciously degrading the sites. Selebano (2009) further notes: 'In some cases due to the lack of respect, some visitors come to the sites under the influence of liquor. Cigarette stumps thrown all around the area cause some veld fires. The damage caused by the fire on the medicinal plants is huge. It is my plea to those who visit these sites to show some signs of respect'.

The Problem of Littering at the Sites

Without doubt, littering at the sites causes environmental degradation. For example, at

Mautse, empty liquor bottles lie around and plastic bags can also be seen. Written appeals on scraps of paper and lottery tickets are left behind to request the ancestors' and the prophets' blessings (Selebano 2009). According to some traditional healers such as Lepele, the fact that social disruption occurs leaves one with the question as to whether the sites are still sacred or if their sacredness is degraded (Lepele 2012). Furthermore, Lepele argued that the level of sacredness that used to prevail at *Mautse* and *Motouleng* had declined due to the undermining, bad and disrespectful activities taking place at the sites. Alcohol abuse amongst traditional healers and prophets in training and the visitors had become another aspect that compromised the sacredness and credibility of the sites (Lepele 2012). Lepele opines that unlike *Mautse* and *Motouleng*, *Mantsopa's cave* at Modderpoort remains sacred and no littering is experienced. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the site continues to be under the jurisdiction of the Anglican Church and access to it strictly controlled (Lepele 2012).

Lepele issued this warning to those visiting the sites: 'All the sacred sites need to be respected. People visiting them should also respect themselves by refraining from doing things that are signs of disrespect to the ancestors. The last thing that people can do on the sites is to disrespect the ancestors. People should try by all means to uphold the sacredness of these sites for future posterity. The farm owners where the sites are situated deserve respect from the visitors. It is unfortunate that these sites are located on private properties. It is my conviction that all these people deserve respect from the people residing on the sites and those frequently visiting them' (Lepele 2012).

The Building of Permanent Settlement Structures on the Sites

Amongst the challenges as being facing *Mautse* and *Motouleng* are the people who have built permanent structures and have set up communities at the sites. These mushrooming informal communities at the sacred sites depend on freshwater sources, where water use, sanitation and waste disposal are all unmanaged activities. Thus, there have been reports of environmental hazards, especially water pollution (Vos and Cawood 2010: 189). It is also disheartening when

one visits the *Matsopa Church Cave*; the front façade of the original opening of the cave has been closed with concrete cement and with a steel door. Without doubt, this restructuring of the site compromises its originality. The above clearly showed that there was disrespect on the sites.

Water Pollution

In 2009, the Institute for Groundwater Studies at the University of the Free State, in conjunction with the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs, conducted a study which aimed at determining the impact that the activities that take place at the sites have on the surrounding the environment and water. As evidence, at *Mautse* the study was conducted at different sections such as *Tempeleng* and *Yunivesithi*. At *Motouleng* the study was conducted at the Klein Caledon River that flows past the cave, the stream near the parking area, and the surrounding area. Samples were taken from the selected areas; they were studied and experiments conducted. The study showed that the water quality at both sites is poor. According to the findings of the study, the water is affected by algal growth which could result in problems for the environment and illness for the people living on the sites (Vos and Cawood 2010: 185). Furthermore, faecal coliform bacterium was found at both sites. According to the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs, this was an indicator of faecal pollution (pollution caused by human excretion). The danger of this bacterium is that it could cause gastro-intestinal illness and skin infections (Vos and Cawood 2010: 186).

The Commercialization of Bottled Water

The Anglican Church has learned to benefit from *Mantsopa's* enduring influence at Modderpoort Mission. They market her unique contributions to Modderspoort's history by bottling water allegedly from *Mantsopa's* fountain under her name. This commercial bottling of water under two brands, namely, Cathedral Spring Water and *Mantsopa* Spring Water, is a lucrative economic function of the water allegedly from the site. Their most faithful market is the pilgrims who believe in the spiritual cleansing properties of the water. The people from Mantsopa Local

Municipality also benefit from the spiritual properties of the water because money granted has enabled Post-Ordination Training and courses for clergy schools which continue to be conducted at Modderpoort, as well as skills development in the agricultural and hospitality trades. A school also operates under contract with the Department of Basic Education where 200 learners from neighboring farms and the local community are taught (Colman 2010: 38).

Upgrading Plans on Mantsopa's Site

The *Mantsopa* sacred site attracts a wide variety of worshippers from both mission and independent churches, from all corners of the country. Plans of improvement, development and modernization of the site have been one of the top priorities by the Anglican Church and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. The plans were drafted with the aim of improving access and the convenience of facilities for the community of Modderpoort and the surrounding areas. The upgrading plan was rejected by those who take pilgrims to the site, arguing that such an upgrade would affect and change the original landscape of the area (Colman 2010: 54). In the planning for the upgrade, there were discussions of renovating and later turning the place into a lodge. The location was to remain as close as possible to its original appearance in *Mantsopa's* time (Colman 2010: 54).

Emerging Claims Over the Ownership of the Sites

The issue of ownership of the sites has been a major question during the past few years. In 1994, a traditional healer who claimed to be a descendant of *Mantsopa* alleged that she was sent by her ancestors to claim the farm as her own. Her plea was not granted but she was given permission for a month to pray and conduct her rituals. However, she started charging people R2 for access to the shrine, but was soon evicted from the site by the police (Colman 2010: 90-98). Another incident involved the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) members who also claimed that *Mantsopa's Cave* belonged to them. In 1996, they expressed anger at the Anglican Church in a documentary broadcast by the SABC wherein the latter claimed that the said cave belonged to the Anglican Church. In 1998 a land claim by the

Bataung was lodged in which 58 farms were targeted, including the *Mantsopa's* sacred site. The *Bataung* alleged that 'a large percentage of the community and their descendants were transformed from their African way of life to cheap oppressed laborers, and that reinstated rights to the land are necessary for the restoration of their African culture, tradition and dignity' (Colman 2010: 90-98).

Possible Solutions to the Above Mentioned Challenges

Rehabilitation of the Sites

To save the lifespan of the sites, both the private and public sectors should join forces in coming up with rehabilitation projects which could include program partners, such as ecological, hydrological and socio-economic elements. The projects should have clear links with government priorities and applied within the context of a spatial framework that identifies priority geographic areas within which to focus interventions. Objectives for rehabilitation projects should be set in collaboration with local partners and this may vary from the ambitious restoration of original conditions to the stabilizing of observed degradation. All rehabilitation interventions should be undertaken within the context of improving the integrity and functioning of the sites, and include measures that address both the causes and effects of degradation. Rehabilitation can only be sustainable if landowners (private, state and communal) understand and take ownership of completed rehabilitation work. A number of mechanisms, including statutory, contractual and educational tools, should be developed to promote the closer involvement of landowners in rehabilitation and to ensure that its benefits will be maintained.

Raising Awareness and Promoting Environmental Education

Sacred sites are potential means to educate and inform the present and future generations about what took place at a certain time in their country. They are supposed to be places of dignity and respect. Many sacred sites in the Free State province are degrading rapidly and the reason for is that they are undervalued. Sacred sites are an integral part of the development and sur-

vival of people living around and depending on them. Inadequate resources and competition in the allocation of resources are, together with population growth and economic development, the main factors which affect the preservation of cultural heritage resources. Pressure on resources by an expanding population is a general force, but authorities need to be proactive in dealing with the increasing needs of the population. Heritage resources are often sidelined, as they are perceived as adding quality to life rather than sustaining it. Mortari (2004: 110-111) argues that there is a need for an ecological ethic to care for the environment as a whole and that children should be taught accordingly.

People need to be aware of the significance of certain areas within their locality which they can own and preserve. Former Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Rejoice Mabudafhasi once claimed: 'With regard to the environment, community ownership will ensure traditional healers who need to cut trees for herbs and roots will do so with more consideration and preserve forests or can alternatively create nurseries to stop plundering their own environments' (Sibanda 2000: 18).

Promotion of Partnerships

A lack of understanding about the importance of sacred sites on the part of government, municipalities and local communities contributes to feelings of non-connectivity to certain sites or structures. This leads to a lack of will to allocate funding for maintaining resources and in some cases, even to their willful neglect, acts of vandalism and illegal occupancy. The issue of sacred sites cuts across the mandates of several government departments and spheres of government, as well as requiring the committed involvement from civil society and landowners.

Declaring These Sites as Provincial Heritage Sites

The sacred sites under discussion in the Free State should be declared as provincial heritage sites, as this will be one way of underlying the importance of conserving them. It is also imperative that communities should feel that they have a stake in the declared sites in the province. Besides, it is necessary that sites relevant to previously neglected history should be add-

ed to the provincial register. T Wakashe made the following observation to the *Sunday Tribune* in relation to the importance of cultural and heritage sites: 'Cultural and heritage symbols are part of the soul of a nation and need to be showcased to all South Africans. We need to create policies that are sensitive to preservation and expose communities who traditionally have not been involved in heritage to cultural heritage-based symbols' (Russouw 2005: 23).

CONCLUSION

The paper sincerely investigates the factors leading to environmental, social and economic degradation of the sacred sites in the Eastern Free State in South Africa. The problem of neglect which had resulted in veld fires at one of these sites was also addressed. It became evident in this study that littering and the problem of water pollution as a result of rituals, such as the slaughtering of animals by visitors and those residing on the sites, in one way or another had contributed to this degradation. Furthermore, the study also proposed further solutions to the issue of degradation of these sacred sites. The economic function of how the sites are managed could benefit the communities, as well as the Free State province as a whole, was also examined. The study has shown that indigenous groups adapt to their natural environments in ways that conserve both their ecosystems and themselves as an integral social, ecological and economic system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The state of preservation of cultural heritage resources in the Free State varies from well-preserved to virtually destroy. This could be directly related to whether the site was properly managed and whether funding was available. In many cases, the sites do not have adequate facilities to cope with tourists and are not robust enough to withstand unsupervised visits. A lack of funding is regarded as a major contributor to the decay of structures, as these are often not maintained and the fabric decays.

Sacred sites are an important component of the Free State province's cultural, artistic, historical and religious legacy. They are widely regarded as sanctuaries of national consciousness, cultural continuity and tradition, and many

possess a broad economic potential. However, the degradation of these sites is a serious concern. The general state of preservation is poor; a significant number of sites in the province are in urgent need of preservation and some restoration. The preservation cannot only be placed on the doorstep of the Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation. It is recommended that an intergovernmental approach should be sourced out to assist in this regard. The vandalism taking place on the sacred sites should be condemned. Authorities should allocate the resources necessary to both prevent such acts and perpetrators brought to book.

It is vital that the sacred sites be identified as tourist attractions and to have management plans. This will ensure that the site is monitored, that tourism is controlled, and visitors prevented from vandalizing them.

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