

Chapter 20

Religion as a Catalyst for Conservation of Sacred Spaces and Endangered Species Among the Shona People of Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, religious and cultural beliefs significantly contribute to the conservation of natural resources and species. This paper explores how indigenous belief systems can be harnessed to protect the environment. The Shona worldview reveres certain trees, forests, springs, animals, and shrines as sacred, ensuring their conservation. This sacredness deters tampering and exploitation, promoting environmental preservation. By respecting these sacred places, the Shona people demonstrate a traditional yet effective approach to natural resource conservation.

INTRODUCTION

African traditional religions play a positive role in the conservation of sacred places and certain animal species, as seen in the Shona culture and belief system. These religions attribute psychic powers to the natural environment, viewing it as the abode of gods and goddesses, which in turn promotes their protection and encourages conservation. Despite the erosion of these traditional practices due to Western influence they remain crucial in preserving the environment by protecting sacred areas from exploitation (Eneji et al., 2016).

The indigenous belief systems, as demonstrated in the Shona worlds hold certain places and species sacred and encourage their conservation. These systems, which ascribe supernatural powers to specific parts of the environment, act as explicit protection areas from exploitation. Taboos and forbidden areas associated with worship further promote conservation (Muzondi, 2014). Despite the erosion of these

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belief systems due to western cultural influence incorporating them into contemporary conservation efforts can foster sustainable use of natural resources.

The Shona people, among others, hold religious beliefs regarding certain trees, forests, springs, animals, and shrines as sacred, which contributes to their conservation. These sacred sites and entities are believed to house deities and ancestral spirits, making them untouchable and deserving of respect (Mahohoma, & Gundani, 2020). Consequently, the traditional taboo systems, including restrictions on access and extractive practices, emerged to protect these sacred spaces from pollution and exploitation. Although these cultural practices are evolving, the fear of divine reprisals continues to deter people from damaging sacred sites, thus ensuring their preservation.

The Shona culture and religious belief system in Africa place great importance on conserving sacred places and certain animal species. This conservation ethic, rooted in the belief that natural environments are the abodes of gods and goddesses is reflected in practices like protecting sacred forests, forbidden areas, and totemic objects (Eneji et al., 2012). However, the influence of Western religions and cultural practices has led to the erosion of these traditional strategies for natural resource conservation (Banda, 2022). African traditional religion, therefore, is not destructive to the environment but to a greater extent aims at conserving it. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe exist beliefs and taboos that when properly utilized would be of importance in conserving the environment.

PROBLEM QUESTIONS

The study seeks to address several critical questions. Firstly, it aims to explore how sacralizing non-sacred species and spaces can enhance environmental conservation among the Shona people. This question addresses whether extending the sacred status to more species and areas could amplify conservation efforts and ensure broader environmental protection. Secondly, the research investigates the roles that religious and community leaders can play in promoting and enforcing conservation practices. Understanding the influence of these leaders could provide insights into how traditional authority and religious guidance can be leveraged to bolster environmental conservation. Finally, the study examines the effectiveness of the current legal framework in protecting sacred species and spaces, and identifies necessary improvements. This question seeks to assess whether existing laws are adequate and what changes could enhance their efficacy in safeguarding these vital ecological and cultural assets.

OBJECTIVES

To address these questions, the study has several key objectives. The first objective is to investigate the potential benefits of sacralizing non-sacred species and spaces for environmental conservation among the Shona people. This involves examining whether assigning sacred status to additional species and areas could lead to more comprehensive conservation practices and better protection of natural resources. The second objective is to assess the roles of religious and community leaders in promoting and enforcing conservation practices. This objective focuses on understanding how these leaders can influence community behavior and adherence to conservation principles, and how their involvement could strengthen conservation efforts. The third objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of the current legal framework in protecting sacred species and spaces and to recommend necessary improvements. This involves an-

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