The Nyero Rock Art Site in Uganda: Heritage or Ritual Site?

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Abstract

The paper is a study of the Nyero Rock Art site in eastern Uganda. This is a terrain that is made up of a set of six rocks with cavernous spaces that provide shelter to visitors for ritual or entertainment purposes. The rocks, for long considered credible contenders for UNESCO’s World Heritage Site listing, are famous tourist destinations that portray diverse art forms, cutting across paintings, engravings and drawings that date back to the Late Stone Age and depict both natural and human figures. While issues concerning meanings of the Nyero rock paintings, authorship and symbolic essence have been greatly explored, their cultural heritage of ritual concerns was still unclear. The ideology of “art for art sake” drove the bulk of studies on the Nyero rock paintings so much that the real social organisation to which the site is connected was neglected. The main objective of the paper was to examine the interplay between heritage management and ritual practices at Nyero rock art site. The study had three specific objectives which were to examine the ritual practices associated with the Nyero Rock art site, identify how these practices either enhance or diminish efforts directed at conserving the cultural heritage associated with the site, and establish a link between the conservatory effort and ritual activities carried on at the site. This work was undertaken through documentary review, observation and ethnographic methods such as open-ended oral interviews. The findings revealed that ritual practice being part of heritage actually enhances heritage conservation. This is because ritual practice emphasizes the importance of the site as a cultural landscape that is revered and is part and parcel of heritage.

Keywords: Rock art; heritage; ritual; Nyero rock paintings