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## **The management of the Matobo Hills in Zimbabwe : perceptions of the indigenous communities on their involvement and use of traditional conservation practices**

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## 6. The Traditional Conservation Practices of the Matobo Hills

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the traditional conservation practices of the Matobo Hills and explores how the local indigenous communities use these practices to manage their cultural landscape. By exploring the practices, the chapter is intended to address one of the objectives of this study which is to establish if there are traditional conservation practices that are locally distinct and evident that can be reinstated or restored after they were disregarded during the colonial period when the European authorities domineered the cultural landscape. While the traditional conservation practices of the Matobo Hills are examined in this study, it was not feasible to identify and examine all the practices that may have existed or that still currently survive in this world heritage cultural landscape considering the complexity and extent of the area. This is because the informants who were interviewed and who engaged in discussions during the fieldwork may have failed to remember several practices since, as explained below, by their nature, they are ingrained in memory and not written down.

### UNDERSTANDING TRADITIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Chapter 1 argued that interest in the traditional conservation practices of world heritage cultural landscapes has been increasing in recent years. This is partially due to the assumption that such practices can contribute to the effective conservation of world heritage cultural landscapes. For this reason, traditional conservation practices have been a subject of discussion among archaeologists, anthropologists, cultural heritage managers, ecologists, and other scholars primarily for conservation reasons. In an effort to ascertain a suitable term that best describes traditional conservation practices, scholars have derived a number of terms whose meanings are closely related such as traditional conservation methods (Makuvaza and Makuvaza 2012, 2014),

customary laws (Chiwaura 2005; Jimoh et al. 2012), indigenous knowledge systems (Mapara 2009), traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes 1999; Berkes, Colding and Folke 2000), and traditional conservation practices (Boaten 1998; Folke and Colding 2001). However, although all of these terms generally refer to the traditional knowledge that is embedded in the cultural traditions of local indigenous communities, referring to this knowledge as traditional conservation methods or laws, as some scholars have done, is not appropriate. Instead, in accordance with scholars who perceive traditional knowledge of conservation as practice supports the argument that the term *best* describes the norms, customs, myths, legends, stories, beliefs, and taboos that were or are a component of everyday initiatives by the local indigenous communities to manage their cultural landscapes.

According to Ohmagari and Berkes (1997), traditional knowledge of conservation may be holistic in outlook and adaptive by nature and accumulated over generations by observers whose lives depended on this information and its use. Ohmagari and Berkes further contended that this knowledge often accumulates incrementally, is tested by trial-and-error, and transmitted to future generations orally or through shared practical experiences. Thus, traditional knowledge of conservation entails norms or customs, myths, legends, stories, beliefs, and taboos that are typically perceived as practices of indigenous communities (see also Adams and Hulme 2001). The term *methods*, however, refers to procedures which are usually carried out according to definite, established, logical, or systematic plans. It is a way of doing certain things that can be repeated by others in similar conditions (Urbina 2002). The term *laws* refers to a standardised system of written formal rules which a country or community recognises as regulating the actions of its members or citizens (Reynolds 1983). In this case, laws are enforced by the police and applied by trained judicial officers in a public court whereas traditional conservation

practices are enforced by community leaders and applied by chiefs or headmen at a traditional court. Methods and laws are inscribed whereas traditional conservation practices are not; they are learned and performed within the local indigenous communities, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home. Conversely, methods and laws are studied at a formal institution of education such as a university or college.

The term conservation can simply be described as the act of managing and protecting a cultural landscape from being destroyed or damaged. Broadly, it involves the management of both the tangible and the intangible aspects of a cultural landscape and the changes that may affect it. Typically, this involves taking corrective measures by restoring or eliminating existing damage and by reducing or preventing any future changes.

Based on the above approach, traditional conservation practices should be defined as cumulative bodies of traditional knowledge, stories, and beliefs that are produced, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to the next through the word of mouth for the purposes of protecting a cultural landscape. Unlike methods and laws, traditional conservation practices have no formalised structures since they are handed down from one generation to the next through the word of mouth. Since they are not written down, they are primarily mental cognisance. They also do not have detectable external influences or outside interventions with new conservation practices with which people were unacquainted (Jopela 2010, 2011). Traditional conservation practices are, therefore, understood through day to day norms, folklore, oral traditions and songs, and they are enforced or applied through prohibitions in the form of taboos. Taboos were or are social or religious customs that prohibit or restrict a particular practice or association with a particular person, place, animal, bird, or object. The purpose of taboos was to instil fear into people to discourage them from performing immoral acts. For that reason, taboos threatened severe penalties and misfortune for anyone who violated them (Masaka and Chemhuru 2011). In terms of conserving cultural landscapes, taboos informed moral values that emphasised profound environmental awareness even

though they may give the impression on the surface to have been straight forward prohibitions on the use of archaeological sites, sacred sites, mountains, rivers, caves, water pools, and wildlife within a cultural landscape.

Traditional conservation practices can also be regarded as intangible cultural heritage which local indigenous communities inscribe on their cultural landscapes. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses customs, languages, songs, stories, beliefs, and many other cultural practices that cannot be touched or interacted with (Boswell 2008). It is commonly the intangible cultural heritage that provides information about the history, identity, and ways of living of the local indigenous people surviving in cultural landscapes (Andrews and Buggey 2008). Just as with traditional conservation practices, intangible cultural heritage, therefore, provides an enormous amount of information on how local indigenous communities perceived, symbolised, and ascribed meaning to their cultural landscapes for conservation reasons. Without intangible cultural heritage, cultural landscapes on their own contain no essential cultural value in and of themselves. Rather, they can only be considered to have cultural value if the intangible elements that give them context and meaning are embraced (Bradshaw, Bryant and Cohen 2012). Intangible cultural heritage, therefore, cannot be mutually exclusive from cultural landscapes. There is always an association between intangible and tangible values and a dynamic relationship between nature and culture in a cultural landscape (Mitchell 2008).

According to the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (2008), it is not only inherited “old” traditional knowledge of conservation that comprises intangible cultural heritage. Modern-day customs and traditions practiced by local indigenous communities in cultural landscapes can also be considered as intangible cultural heritage. Some scholars refer to this type of intangible cultural heritage as “living religious heritage”, “living heritage” or “living cultural heritage” (Stovel, Stanely-Price and Killick 2005; Bwasiri 2008; Kreps 2012). To be considered living, intangible cultural heritage is deemed as alive, ongoing, and regularly practiced and is also seen as practices in everyday life.

Living implies a type of cultural heritage that is still in use (Inaba 2005). Intangible cultural heritage as “living cultural heritage” was also incorporated into the initiatives of the local indigenous communities for conserving their cultural landscapes.

Intangible cultural heritage can be used to define and claim land rights by local indigenous communities. In cases where land was inherited from ancestors, it is regarded as heritage (see Mararike 2001), and intangible cultural heritage together with archaeological sites located on the land are, at times, used by local indigenous people as evidence of ownership when reclaiming ancestral lands. In eastern Zimbabwe, for example, according to Mupira (2013), upon independence of the country, the Chikukwa people demanded the return and re-erection of the Nzvinzvi sacred shrine, a typical archaeological site with double concentric stone enclosures located on a spur ridge southeast of the Hangani primary school. The shrine is believed to be the burial place of the founding fathers of the SaUngweme people who had once settled in the area. The Chikukwa people have also been claiming the restoration of the portion of Martin Forest in which a number of archaeological sites and shrines are located. In the Limpopo-Shashe valley on the South African side, several Venda clans have also been claiming some parts of the Mapungubwe cultural landscape using archaeological sites (Pikirayi 2011). In addition to these examples, there are many other cases across the globe where local indigenous communities have used archaeological sites and intangible cultural heritage in the form of stories, myths, and legends to claim their ancestral lands.

One important thing to note about traditional conservation practices is that they were and are not static. They were constantly recreated by the local indigenous communities in response to their needs as they interacted with cultural landscapes. This process also continues in contemporary times. These changes are usually influenced by internal and external factors which have an effect on how the local indigenous communities managed their cultural landscapes. Traditional conservation practices were thus created and recreated depending on the values that the local indigenous communities wished to protect or inscribe

on their cultural landscapes. This means that there could be, in a cultural landscape, diverse versions of myths, legends, beliefs and stories of protecting the area, archaeological sites, or shrines which could be explained as layers of history. As discussed in the next chapter, traditional conservation practices, therefore, are also continually in the process of being shaped and reshaped by social, economic, political, cultural, and natural forces that have an effect on their meanings. In that aspect, traditional practices of conservation that were considered no longer relevant were probably disregarded while new ones that were considered relevant were created or modified to suit the existing needs of the local indigenous communities for protecting their cultural landscapes. This resulted in the establishment of new sets of social, religious, and political values which subsequently added a new layer of meaning or meanings on a cultural landscape.

## **THE TRADITIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES OF THE MATOBO HILLS**

The traditional conservation practices of the Matobo Hills were a range of beliefs, customs, folklores, and taboos which regulated the conduct of the local indigenous communities on how they utilised the cultural landscape. In the Matobo Hills, taboos comprised activities that were or are prohibited or sacred based on the religious beliefs and morals of the indigenous people. The traditional conservation practices, however, formed an integral part of the local indigenous communities’ moral values in the Matobo Hills. They had a fundamental ethical role towards the wellbeing of both the individual and of the local indigenous people living in the entire cultural landscape. As a knowledge practice-belief complex (see Berkes 1999), traditional conservation practices in the Matobo Hills accordingly included an unwritten body of long standing customs, world view, and religious beliefs of the local indigenous communities. As in many other cultural landscapes in southern Africa, the traditional conservation practices in the Matobo Hills did not, therefore, have any discernible foreign influences or persuasions. Their main objective was, by and large, to promote sustainable use and

conservation of both the natural and cultural values of the Hills. In many ways, traditional conservation practices were intangible cultural values that the local indigenous communities of Matobo had attached to their ancestral lands which they regard as heritage.

In the Matobo Hills, the traditional chiefs and political authorities worked together in shaping and maintaining the traditional conservation practices of the area (Ranger 1999). The cooperation of the political and religious authorities served to generate taboos which ensured that the surroundings as well as the economic and cultural traditions in the Hills were always kept intact and protected. In principal, these traditional conservation practices, therefore, were espoused by the shrines which advanced an ideology of conservation and ensured the balance of the ecosystem. The shrines derived their importance not only from their historical significance but also from the perceived influence that they had over the people and the contiguous environment (Nyathi and Ndiweni 2005).

The following paragraphs will present the traditional conservation practices of the Matobo Hills, some of which, according to the informants I interviewed and had discussions with during fieldwork, are still currently being practiced. However, given the multiplicity of the local indigenous communities in the Matobo Hills as seen in chapter 4, I did not attempt to identify and classify the traditional conservation practices according to their types or according to the local indigenous communities that practice or value them. The main reason for not categorising them is that the local indigenous people of the Matobo Hills observe homogeneous traditional conservation practices.

While conducting the fieldwork, I observed that the local indigenous communities had developed practical traditional conservation systems that were significantly influenced by religious beliefs and economic requirements to conserve vegetation in the entire cultural landscape. The majority of informants stated that trees continue to play an important function in shaping the general temperament of the Matobo Hills. The informants also indicated that, prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the area and

the subsequent introduction of formal laws to protect trees, there were taboos and beliefs which proscribed the unsanctioned cutting down of trees in the cultural landscape.

According to Pathisa Nyathi, certain tree species were not supposed to be cut as it was one way of protecting the Matobo Hills, and the local indigenous communities associated them with a range of cultural practices (P. Nyathi, pers. comm., 10 March, 2014). These trees include the umphafa or umlahlabantu [*Ziziphus mauritiana*] whose branches were cut and placed on the grave of a person soon after burial as a death seal (see also, Bozongwana 1983). The ichithamuzi or idungamuzi [*Philenoptera violacea*] was also not supposed to be cut or used as firewood because it was believed that doing so would destroy one's homestead by causing conflict among the family members. The Umnondo [*Burkea africana*] tree, which does not produce ash when burnt and was typically used for iron smelting by the early farming communities in the Matobo Hills, was also not supposed to be cut. This was because the leaves were the only food source for edible caterpillars or mopane worms, amacimbi, which are harvested during the rainy season, mainly in January and February, in the Matobo Hills and the surrounding environments. These caterpillars are an important source of protein and are dried for consumption later in the year.

The bark of the *Burkea africana* tree was used to dye the fiber which is woven into baskets. The roots were used to treat stomach pains and toothaches. For both treatments, the outer skin of the roots was scraped away, and the roots were cut into small pieces and boiled for five to ten minutes. For stomach pains, the mixture was cooled and three cups were taken per day. For toothaches, the mixture was rinsed while warm in the mouth around the aching tooth for approximately three minutes and then spat out. This was repeated three times a day, once in the morning, afternoon, and in the evening just before going to bed. The bark of *Burkea africana* tree was also used as traditional medicine in many parts of southern Africa (see Palmer and Pitman 1972; Palmer 1977). Wild fruit trees from which both people and wild animals such as baboons, monkeys, and birds depended on for food were also not supposed to be

cut. A number of wild fruits such as umbumbulu, [*Mimusops zeyheri*], amaxakuxaku [*Azanza garckeana*], umngono [*Strychnos spinosa*], umtshwankela [*Vitex payos*], umqokolo [*Flacourtia indica*], umkhiwa [*Ficus sur/capensis*] and many others are abundant in the Matobo Hills. Community leaders in the Matobo Hills prescribed traditional ways of harvesting wild fruits and other tree by-products. Members of the local indigenous communities were dissuaded from collecting more wild fruits than was necessary as this was regarded as a sign of disrespect and greed. Only ripe fruits that would have fallen to the ground were supposed to be collected. It was taboo to curse or to pass a negative comment on the quality or taste of wild fruits, for example, remarking on their bad taste. The belief was that one could become insane or disappear in the forests of the Matobo Hills. For the offending individual to return, the ancestral spirits had to be appeased usually by offering an animal to them.

It was taboo to cut down trees in areas that were considered sacred places of the Matobo Hills such as caves, forests, and hills. This was because the local indigenous people believed that their ancestral spirits reside in forests, hills, caves, hollowed trees, and in water pools (Nyathi and Ndiweni 2005). Ancestors were believed to symbolise the past and were considered to be individuals who deserve a higher order of being. Chief Mathe from Silobi stated that these ancestors were often referred to as Izinyoka (snakes) and were believed to have established high standards of moral excellence that succeeding generations living in the Matobo Hills were expected to embrace and practice (Chief Mathe, pers. comm., August 16, 2014). Cutting down trees in the Matobo Hills, therefore, was tantamount to exposing ancestors and Mwari/Mwali in the open. The local indigenous communities attached great respect to the Hills because they believed that, by desecrating the cultural landscape, they deprived their ancestors and the spirits of a home to live in. If anyone had a project with the land and planned to cut down trees in the forest or a shrine area, permission had to be sought from the Mwari/Mwali priest or priestess providing convincing reasons why trees had to be cut from that piece of land (Ranger 1999; Technical Committee 2004). Trees that were struck by lightning during

the previous rainy season had to be removed as part of cleansing the Matobo Hills. As further explained by Nyathi, land was considered barren until it was watered and had to be cleansed before the rains came in September or October (P. Nyathi, pers. comm., March 10, 2014).

During the pre-colonial era, the local indigenous communities of the Matobo Hills depended on swampy areas for farming. Cultivation of crops, however, was not allowed on certain swampy areas that were considered to be sacred in the Matobo Hills (Ranger 1999). Traditionally, the swampy areas and other sources of water symbolised the socio-ecological well-being and stability of all the local indigenous communities in the cultural landscape. They also provided important habitat for a wide variety of wildlife species. The swampy areas were known as nuta or goba (P. Nyathi, pers. comm., March 10, 2014) and also as amaxaphozi (S. Sibanda, pers. comm., August 15, 2014).

Obtaining drinking water using a black vessel was not allowed in swampy areas that were considered to be sacred places. Women experiencing their menstrual cycles were also not allowed to fetch water from sacred swamp areas. It was one way of promoting hygienic standards of water sources while simultaneously managing the welfare of the natural environment in the Matobo Hills (W. Moyo, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). The belief was that failure to observe the above moral codes would lead to the swampy areas drying out.

In the Matobo Hills, wild animals were allowed to drink at swampy areas where people would not fetch drinking water. Domesticated animals such as cattle, goats, and sheep were rotated and allowed to graze in swampy areas during the dry months of the year. However, after harvesting in July, the animals were moved from the wetland areas to graze on cereal stalks left in the crop fields. During the rainy season beginning in October or November when the swampy areas began to become waterlogged and the lands cultivated, they were moved back to the summer grazing areas. Bedding and ridging systems were also practiced during farming in order to retain moisture and to prevent stream and gully erosion (Ranger 1999).



Fig. 6.1 Dula Hill in south eastern Matobo as viewed from the south in which the shrine is said to be located (Photo by Author).

These swampy areas and other water sources were also believed to have been protected by the injuzu (mermaids) (see Ranger 1999, 2001) who are believed to live in the sacred permanent water pools which persist even through the driest seasons of the year. The myths associated with injuzu are widely held among many indigenous communities in Zimbabwe and in many southern African countries. The mythology is featured very strongly among the local indigenous communities of southern Africa including the Venda, Sotho, Ndebele, Tswana, Kalanga and the Shona.

According to Bernard (2003), it is believed that injuzu could submerge a person under water for hours, days, or even up to a number of years after which the individual would emerge as a skilled traditional healer. Relatives of the person taken by the injuzu were not supposed to mourn or demonstrate any indications of grief as that would make the person who was taken disappear forever. It was also believed

that the submerged person is taken to a dry area under the water pool where the ancestors or water spirits live and have a lifestyle similar to people who live on earth. The relatives of the submerged person had to perform a ritual libation by pouring an offering on the ground and telling the spirits that the person has gone to the spirit world and that the spirits should look after the person while under the water pool (Aschwanden 1989). Individuals who have had such experiences commonly report to have visualised snakes, mermaids, or even their ancestors while under the water pool (Bernard 2003).

The local indigenous communities in the Matobo Hills still believe that injuzu live in swampy areas, water pools, and in shrine caves. In Matobo, Mwali adepts are said to have gone down into the water pools for years on end to be taught by the injuzu and learning, among other things, how the Hills should be conserved and protected. For instance, at Dula, a shrine that is located in the south eastern part of



Fig. 6.2 A Khami-type site, which was once a shrine and sacred to the local indigenous communities in the Fumugwe area (Photo by Author).

the Hills (Fig. 6.1), prophetess Juliana claims to have been taken by the injuzu and lived under water for four years. During this period, she was instructed to go back and teach people to live according to law and order so that it will rain in the whole of the Matobo Hills (Ranger 1999, 284, 2001). Given the belief in injuzu, there is a wide variety of taboos which surround the access and use of water sources in the Matobo Hills. The use of soap to wash clothes or to bathe in water or cave pools was not allowed in the cultural landscape as this would pollute the water. In the same way, metal containers could not be used to draw water from the rivers or pools believed to be inhabited by injuzu. Only gourd cups called *inkezo* were used to obtain water from these water sources. Great care was thus taken in the Hills to avoid disturbing or angering injuzu. Respect of injuzu means respect for water pools, caves in which rock art was painted, and rivers where they are thought to have been living and, for this reason, water sources and archaeological sites were safeguarded in the

Matobo Hills. In the Matobo Hills, local indigenous people would keep rock art sites and shrines as a secret that were considered to be sacred. One such site which the Nyubi people kept as secret was a Khami-type site (Fig. 6.2) found in the south western part of the Matobo Hills and is approximately 2 kilometers west of Fumugwe Township. It is located at the summit of a low-lying granite hill called Sixobeni in Phumuzamaphiko village. There are a number of stone cairns at the site which are believed to be “graves” of people who previously settled at the site (M. Dube, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). These graves are marked by the *iminyela* [*Commiphora africana*] trees that are planted on graves according to the cultural practice of the local indigenous communities in the Matobo Hills (Fig. 6.3). Planting *iminyela* trees on graves is also widely practised in much of the Matabeleland region even up to the present day. A study of the archaeological site data base at the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo indicates that the site was never officially documented or reported



Fig. 6.3 Misheck Dube pointing at a stone cairn that he asserted is one of the “graves” of people who once resided at the site (Photo by Author).

to the NMMZ. This could be part of the reason why it is still currently well protected. Also, the conservation of wildlife in Matobo was steeped in taboos, customs, clanship, ancestors, and spirituality of the local indigenous communities. During a group discussion at Fumugwe Township in the western end of Matobo Hills, informants stated that the local descent people in the the cultural landscape still believe and value the idea of totems and clans (Fig. 6.4). The informants also said that each individual belongs to a clan which claims descent from a common ancestor and has its own particular isitemo (totem). These totems, they said, are a shared identity marker that they are still following and respecting in the cultural landscape today. The informants further indicated that these totems vary throughout the Matobo Hills and that the majority of the items forming the main element of totems are terrestrial and aquatic animals as well as birds. They attach a taboo to the totem animal or to a certain part of its body, and members of the totem animal are not supposed to eat the animal or a particular part of its body. Terrestrial totem animals that were not to be eaten or a particular part of their body include impofu (eland), ingulungundu (warthog), inyathi (buffalo), idube (zebra), indlovu (elephant), and many others. Aquatic totem animals, which were likewise not to be eaten, include the hippopotamus, crocodile, and fish. The consumption of animals that stand for a clan was strongly discouraged in the Matobo Hills (O. Ngwenya, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). Ngwenya further said that he cannot, for instance, eat a crocodile as it is his totem animal. J. Moyo (Pers.

comm., April 8, 2014) remarked that he may not eat the heart of any animal whether it is domesticated or not since his totem is moyo (heart). Similarly, as the informants further added, those who fall under the nyoni (bird) totem will not, in the same vein, eat birds. Also, these animals were not to be killed as they were sacred to the local indigenous people (N. Sibanda, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). Going against such practices was believed to cause illness or the loss of the offender’s teeth.

The local indigenous people in the Matobo Hills practiced selective hunting to safeguard their wild animals. They would not kill animals that were young or those that were in the gestation period; these were left to grow and reproduce (L. Dube, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). During traditional hunting in the Matobo Hills, when a wild animal escaped into the forest, the chase was immediately called off as it was considered to be part of the sacred herd and was not, therefore, supposed to be pursued and killed. Wild animals in the sacred areas did not belong to an individual and, as a result, no one could hunt them with impunity. This way, wildlife was protected in the Matobo Hills (Technical Committee 2004). There are many other taboos and beliefs that are associated with totems, however, some of them, such as the one that forbids people of the same totem to marry, were not associated with the conservation of the Matobo Hills and lie outside the scope of this thesis.

The informants further indicated that Wednesday is respected as the resting day in the Matobo Hills. It is known as izilo and is also considered as a day of ancestors (T. Mahlangu, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). During this day, no one is allowed to do any work in the fields (see also, Ranger 1999, 24). The informants added that all the shrines in the Matobo Hills are accessible throughout the week except on Wednesday. Those who disobey and do not comply with the observance of the day, it was believed, would be struck by lightning (if it is during the rains season), bitten by a snake, or chased away from the fields by a male baboon (Bozongwana 1983). Anyone who breaks the rules is brought before the traditional chief, tried at a traditional court and, if found to be noncompliant, are fined (Makuvaza 2008).



Fig. 6.4 A group discussion at Fumugwe Township with some members of the local descent communities.

Several informants also said that rain making is one of the cultural practices that is still linked to the fertility of the land and to the conservation of the entire Matobo Hills cultural landscape. The practice is still being followed and venerated in the area. The informants also stated that there were and are many shrines where rain making ceremonies are still being performed in the the cultural landscape. Before the national park was established, some of these shrines were located in an area that is now a national park while others were outside of the area. In the eastern part of Matobo Hills, there was Khozi, Zhilo, and Dula. Lunuwa was in the western part of the Matobo Hills while Mashakambayi was in the national park. Except for Dula and Zhilo, all the other shrines are no longer active, especially those that were located in the national park (M. Dube, pers. comm., April 4, 2014). Dube further said that the shrines were distributed in such a way that those people who live near Khozi could travel to Khozi, those near

Mashakambayi would go to Mashakambayi, and those near Lunuwa would go to Lunuwa. Dube also said that, even though the shrines were not similar to the modern churches that were introduced in the Hills by the European missionaries and later by the Pentecostal Churches, they considered these shrines as their churches.

Njelele remains the main shrine where everyone travels for the rain making ceremony every year towards the beginning of the rainy season between August and September. Asking for rain from ancestors has always been a way of looking after the Matobo Hills since it is known that, when it rains, animals, insects, trees, grass, and everything else would be able to survive (M. Dube, pers. comm., April 4, 2014). Njelele as the central shrine is still associated with the cultivation of crops and conservation of the entire cultural landscape. According to Ranger (1999, 24), the shrine “lay(s) it down when planting



Fig. 6.5 Lucydale Farm signpost located in the north western section of the Matobo Hills just west of Matopos Research Station (Photo by Author).

can start and where; where fire could be used for clearing the farm land and where not; what days to rest and when harvesting shall commence". People visit the Matobo Hills from all over the country on a regular basis to consult the shrines, especially Njelele, on issues which affect their personal lives.

Rain making spirit mediums, which are known as amawosana, also continue to play a very significant role in the protection and conservation of the Matobo Hills. According to Cecilia Malinga, an iwosana living at Lucydale Farm (Fig. 6.5), the rain making spirit mediums are intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the spirit. They can make oracular pronouncements and perform traditional ceremonies that can ensure good rain and crops in the whole of the Matobo Hills. Malinga also said that, as an iwosana, her job is to converse with the existing local indigenous communities through traditional chiefs regarding any grievances that the ancestors may have about the misuse of the Hills, pollution of water sources, or other environmental exploitations that can anger the spirit guardians and could cause drought or late rains in the cultural landscape. The spirit medium further noted that the conservation of the Matobo Hills is ensured by the rain making ceremonies, which are still being performed in the cultural landscape. She also said that the amawosana who dance for rain are still currently found in much of the Matobo Hills. In the western part of the Hills, they are found at the Manyangwa and Ntogwa shrines (C. Malinga, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). Manyangwa

is a well known rain making shrine and is actually located about thirty kilometers from the border town of Plumtree to the northwest in chief Mpini's area while Ntogwa is in the Ramokwebana area across the border in the north eastern part of Botswana. Both shrines are intrinsically linked to Njelele in matters of rainmaking and the general traditional conservation of the Matobo Hills (see Werbner 1989; Nthoi 2006). In the Lushumbe area, amawosana are found at shrines in the south central and eastern parts of the Hills such as at Msekesa, Dula, and Zhilo (T. Moyo, pers. comm., June 21, 2014).

Malinga further narrated the roles that the shrine custodians play in the administration of the Matobo Hills. She said that the custodians ensure that the environment around the religious shrines is safely protected and that they also preside over the rituals that are performed at the sites. Pilgrims are not allowed to visit shrines or their vicinity alone without a shrine custodian. The spirit medium also pointed out that these practices were not static; they were also occasionally changed, especially as a result of the introduction of objects of European origin in the Matobo Hills. When entering a shrine or its environs, the acceptable behaviour is to remove and leave objects of European origin such as shoes, wrist watches, and money outside the sacred area. Visitors to the shrines are expected to leave these items at the residence of the custodian. Failure to observe these customary practices, it is believed, can result in individuals or their families or the entire local descent communities being punished by the aggrieved ancestral spirits. The ancestral punishment could come in the form of diseases, pestilence, poor harvests, or severe drought in the rest of the Matobo Hills. One of the common traditional ways of conservation still found in the Hills, as Malinga recounted, is that only shrine custodians are allowed a limited annual allocation of firewood from the forest for personal use. Ordinary people are not allowed to retrieve firewood in areas around shrine areas (C. Malinga, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). Also, some hills in the Matobo area were said to have a magical significance and could not be pointed at with a forefinger (see also, Cooke 1965). Pointing at a sacred hill with a finger was believed to invoke bad luck. This behaviour was most likely meant to

protect the sacredness of the hills and shrines and to prevent their defilement by pilgrims. It was also a sign of respect for the entire Matobo Hills cultural landscape area.

In the Matobo Hills, the local indigenous communities also believed in the existence of spirits called *amalinda*. They believed that when aged people die, their spirits return to dwell among their descendants, and they become the guardian spirits of the area. These ancestral spirits, especially those of former traditional chiefs, are thought to often take the physical form of lions. The actual *amalinda* spirit mediums are believed to be men and women who lead ordinary lives as members of the local indigenous communities. They concern themselves with the welfare of their descendants and with maintaining harmonious relations between people and their natural and cultural environment. They are also believed to possess the power to heal and protect people against misfortunes (C. Malinga, pers. comm., April 8, 2014). Before the Europeans arrived in the Matobo Hills, shrines such as Njelele are indicated as having been guarded by the *amalinda* spirits (see Ranger 1999).

In the north eastern part of the Matobo Hills, folklores were relayed that helped protect and conserve rock art sites. One such archaeological site that is extensively featured in the folklore of the cultural landscape is Ntunjambili Cave (Fig. 6.6). The cave is said to have been an important rain making shrine controlled by a male priest called Dada and later by his daughter Nhlangiso Mmemeke (Ranger 2001). Before the colonial period, the cave is said to have been the dwelling place of the *amazimu* who were believed to be giant human beings driven to cannibalism by famine and were eating human flesh. With the story of *amazimu* being told to children, no one would enter the cave and, as a result, the paintings in the cave were completely protected (W. Masuku, pers. comm., August 15, 2014). Masuku, however, recalls that this changed with the coming of the Europeans to establish the nearby Matopo Mission in 1898. The missionaries would take school children into the cave labyrinths using lamps so that they could track back to the entrances of the cave. As a result of the school excursions, the *amazimu* story of Ntunjambili Cave was then realised to be just folklore meant



Fig. 6.6 Ntunjambili Cave in the north east of the Matobo Hills (Photo by Author).

to discourage people from visiting the site. It is probably for this reason that the site eventually lost its sacredness as, soon after that, the cave was turned into a common visitor consumer site, and all of the paintings were affected by fading. According to Masuku, the local descent people refused to have the site proclaimed as a national monument as they thought that its sacredness could be ruined as was the case with other similar sites that were already appropriated from them. The Disappearance of the paintings was also one of the reasons why the Monuments Commission did not proclaim Ntunjambili as a national monument.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has explained the meaning of the term traditional conservation practices and argued that scholars use the term differently depending on the subject of study although, in actual fact, the terms all refer to traditional knowledge of conservation which embraces norms, customs, myths, legends, beliefs and taboos that the local indigenous communities used to conserve their cultural landscapes, shrines, and archaeological sites. As explained in this chapter, the traditional conservation practices were learned within the communities, memorised, and passed orally from one generation to the next. For this reason, they were thus considered to be part of the world views, social, economic, and belief systems of local indigenous communities surviving in the cultural landscapes.

This chapter also demonstrates that, prior to the introduction of European management systems in the Matobo Hills, the supervision of the area was deeply rooted in traditional conservation practices and beliefs which the local indigenous communities were using to safeguard their cultural landscape. These traditional conservation practices constituted an integral element of the cultural identity of the local indigenous communities in the Matobo Hills while their knowledge of managing the cultural landscape was embodied in the wealth of experiences they had gained through direct practices and was transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Consequently, as seen in this chapter, a number of the traditional conservation practices still currently survive in the area. It appears, however, that after the eviction of the local indigenous communities from some parts of the Matobo Hills during the colonial era, several traditional conservation practices were revived or continued in the communal areas in which people were now residing. It is in the communal areas where the surviving traditional conservation practices, therefore, were transmitted orally from generation to generation up to the present times. It would also appear that these traditional conservation practices were completely discontinued or abandoned in the national park and on private farms due to the introduction of European approaches of management. As seen in the previous chapter, the local indigenous communities no longer had access to the national park and private farms which means that they could not continue to manage these portions of the Matobo Hills through their traditional conservation practices. It also appears that, even if some traditional conservation practices are still surviving in the Matobo Hills, they are no longer valued or practiced and some of them are gradually dying a natural death.