

Expectations of Community: Meaningful Uses of Caves (beyond Archaeology) in Contemporary Zanzibar

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ABSTRACT

For archaeologists, caves throughout Africa and Eurasia are synonymous with scientific narratives about bipedal human ancestors (e.g., Sterkfontein in South Africa and Zhoukoudian in China), early diversified subsistence strategies (e.g., Klaises River Mouth in South Africa and Niah in Malaysia), and 'rock art' (e.g., Apollo 11 in Namibia and Chauvet in France). Thus, most archaeologists attribute caves' relevance to deep pasts. However, this tendency sidesteps historical and current uses of caves by contemporary residents. Inevitably, by treating caves and communities in such a manner, archaeologists foreshorten the study of human engagement with landscapes and disregard the impacts of present activities for earlier indications of use. The entanglement of contemporary communities with caves shows that these unique and persistent places play an integral role in understanding and interpreting the present and past.

KEYWORDS: caves, rock, art, Zanzibar, heritage

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1. Background

For archaeologists, caves throughout Africa and Eurasia are synonymous with scientific narratives about bipedal human ancestors (e.g., Sterkfontein in South Africa and Zhoukoudian in China), early diversified subsistence strategies (e.g., Klais River Mouth in South Africa and Niah in Malaysia), and 'rock art' (e.g., Apollo 11 in Namibia and Chauvet in France). Thus, most archaeologists attribute caves' relevance to deep pasts. However, this tendency sidesteps historical and current uses of caves by contemporary residents. Inevitably, by treating caves and communities in such a manner, archaeologists foreshorten the study of human engagement with landscapes and disregard the impacts of present activities for earlier indications of use. The entanglement of contemporary communities with caves shows that these unique and persistent places play an integral role in understanding and interpreting the present and past. The island of Zanzibar (locally known as Unguja) lies in the western Indian Ocean on the continental shelf off the coast of central Tanzania (Figure 1). The island's coral foundation includes limestone caves near its coast and inland. Until twenty-five years ago, the caves on the island were unknown to scientists. In the late 1990s, first Tanzanian and then foreign archaeologists launched systematic investigations at select caves, a trend intensified in its scope during the last decade. Such studies in Zanzibar have addressed three issues: 1) Late Pleistocene to Middle Holocene changes to environments and the human-environment interface, 2) human settlement and lifeways, primarily based on technological and subsistence remains, and 3) exchange with communities in the wider Indian Ocean region during the last two millennia. Striking to us is that these archaeological studies wholly ignore the current people living on Unguja Island and their pragmatic and magico-religious interactions with caves.

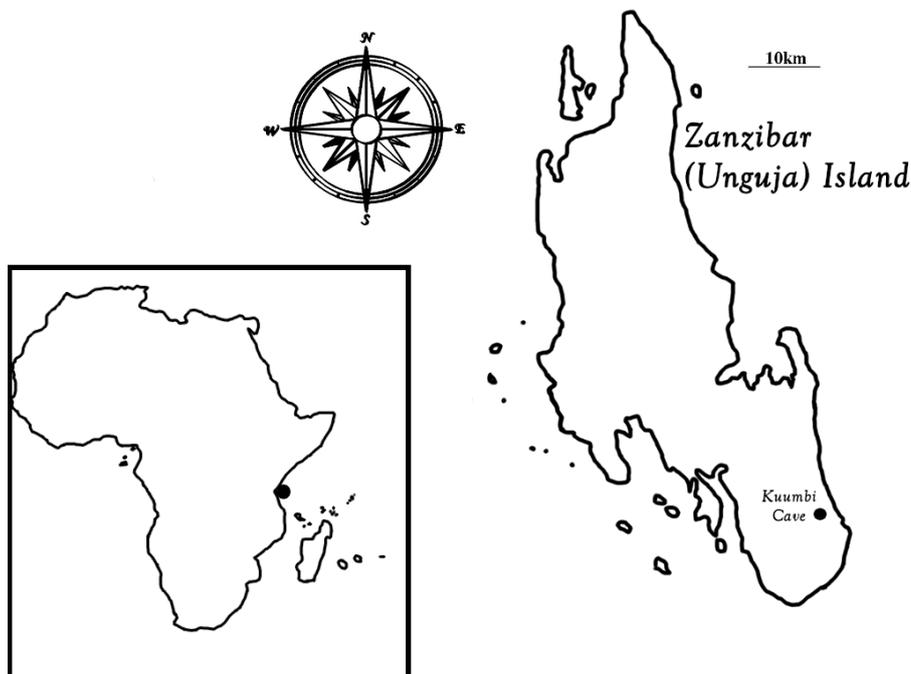


Figure 1: Map of Zanzibar (Unguja) Island with location of Kuumbi Cave.

We came to Zanzibar with scholarly backgrounds and interests in anthropology and Critical Heritage Studies. During the last five years, we have visited more than thirty caves on Unguja Island, Pemba Island (to its north), Mafia Island (to its south), and along mainland Tanzania's marine coastline. Time spent with residents and at caves has made it abundantly clear that caves, like Kuumbi Cave (on Unguja Island, Figure 2) and Makangale Cave (on Pemba Island), hold profound social significance to current residents and their immediate ancestors. By listening to community members and by observing present practices and residues, we documented 1) community expectations for entering and being present in caves and 2) the diverse uses of and accepted community practices at caves. These guidelines, uses, and meanings have broad similarities across the region but vary somewhat from community to community, from cave to cave, and for different individuals based on their age, gender, and status.



Figure 2: Kuumbi Cave. Photo: Jonathan Walz.
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At caves on Zanzibar, communities perform rituals of protection, thanksgiving, fertility, healing, learning, and guidance (good leadership/governance). Rites and performances occur on Mondays and Thursdays, when participants visit together inside of caves, for example as they do at Kuumbi Cave. While at the cave, participants cook and eat together as a way to celebrate with their community's nature spirits (also, Larsen 2008). A prominent healer at Jambiani (a village near Kuumbi Cave) keeps a hand-written text (in Arabic) that documents healing/harming practices associated with the wider landscape. The python—a revered nature spirit—lives in Kuumbi Cave and has been witnessed by one of us (Walz).

At Kuumbi Cave, one of us (Sarathi) conducted archaeological investigations with national research clearance but also with community permission and participation. The days before this research were spent observing and performing ceremonies to request permission of resident nature spirits to enter and be in the cave. Dates, incense, bananas, and Coca-Cola were placed close to the pool of water inside the cave, where community members remarked that spirits resided. The primary collaborators for the project were six residents from Jambiani and three government officials (the latter required by law). An interpretive protocol was established so that community collaborators discussed what materials in the cave (items from the present and past) meant to them. Encouraging community events, interpretations, and dialogue about the cave enabled alternative narratives based on local knowledge or the reconciliation of local sensibilities with scientific plausibility. During the last five years, we met with more than 75 residents, including healers (*waganga* in KiSwahili) and senior or prominent community members (*wazee*, Figure 3), many of whom expressed exhaustion with previous archaeologists who were naïve to community expectations and interests. They remember first alerting archaeologists and heritage businesses, and later scolding them, for failing to address community expectations at caves in their areas. Repeatedly, we were told that violations desecrated spaces and angered spirits (*vipepo*):

The foreigners [*wazungu*] stayed many days. They made noise and entered the cave again and again. They dug with shovels and took things including bones. They talked to the chairman [administrator of our village], but we do not work with them. (Ali Omar, September 13, 2017)



Figure 3: Interview with community members about uses of caves.

Photo: Maximilian Chami. Reproduced with permission of the photographer

At select caves, such as Pange ya Kati, it was apparent that religious (including those incorporating Islamic, animistic, or hybrid beliefs) and political discourses were interwoven into the meaningfulness of caves in public and private debates. According to residents in that area, tourism ventures – for visiting

these unique environments, swimming in cave pools, and learning about ‘culture’ – commodified caves to the detriment of their locally scheduled uses and expectations. Visits by groups of secondary school students (who arrive through their schools to learn about the caves) and tourist activities have caused tensions. School excursions to caves, particularly groups of secondary school pupils (often drawn from outside the local area or comprised of children of urban and/or devoutly Muslim families), also have caused tensions.

Some historical, cultural, and pragmatic uses of caves on Zanzibar not accounted for in the published texts of archaeologists from outside the region—who continue to delink caves from contemporary and historical communities and uses—include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Places for observing the surrounding landscape and above/below in a context where day and night unite (in a dark daytime space or a fire-lit night time space), in other words the collapse of space and time;
- Locations to practice *uganga* (KiSwahili for healing/harming), evidenced by flags and offerings (food, pots, coins, rosewater, and so forth);
- Spirit dwellings (*mizimu*) of ancestor beings/nature spirits (*vipepo*), including mythological serpents, leopards, and other forms;
- Origin places of medicines composed of cave water and/or unique cave items of mineral, plant, or animal (Metcalf et al. 2010);
- Sites of religious practice for Muslims, as evidenced by offerings, gatherings, and pronouncements;
- Historic places to contain prisoners or enslaved people;
- Historic places of retreat and refuge for maroons (escape slaves) (Kiriama 2009);
- Sites of water for agricultural use by community members (via pumping into proximal fields);
- Locales for mining bat guano for use as fertilizer in agriculture;
- Vicinities for ‘cultural tourism’; and,
- Sites with water pools for swimming by tourists.

For the people of Zanzibar, caves are essential to know the world (i.e., part of their epistemology). They offer naturalized places that bridge aspects of time (past/present, night/day, etc.) and space (above/below). Religious ceremonies still occur at prominent caves in Zanzibar and elsewhere in East and southern Africa. For instance, at Kruger Cave in South Africa, a Christian pastor and his supplicants regularly pray and proselytize (Bradfield and Lotter in press). Which, past or present, should receive primacy in terms of how archaeologists engage the location and study it and its communities or conserve its intangible heritage? Do community practices at caves have broader significance in representing heritage as contested, i.e., at odds with the interests, preferences, and interpretations of archaeologists, Antiquities officials, and heritage managers?

The communities (but not necessarily all individuals) we met with and listened to in Zanzibar were aware that many caves on Unguja Island, such as Kuumbi Cave and Machaga Cave, have been gazetted as Tanzanian national heritage (Chami and Chami 2020). What does this mean for how local versus national interests about caves are integrated into heritage plans? A negotiated plan to conserve the physical and intangible heritage elements of these meaningful caves is advised, where communities play a primary role and make significant input to outcomes. Open dialogue will help to establish acceptable activities (for entry and use, as well as preferred scheduling) to protect people and sites through collaboration and care (Kiriama 2013).

Based on our experiences with communities, treating caves as ‘of the past’ does a disservice to people, interpretations, and contextualized science. Mizimu, including caves, should be approached with veneration according to community precepts. The community should be engaged through their custodians and elders with regards to new research or other projects proposed to occur at or near caves. Espoused customary laws will contribute to guidance about access to caves and the surrounding areas regarded as sacrosanct by residents. Otherwise, violations may erode or destroy community knowledge and disconnect residents from their key resources of physical, social, and psychological sustenance at caves. Critical heritage approaches can help to prevent harm and/or to facilitate responsible uses of caves. Such interdictions should recognize local epistemology, interpretations of meaning, and ethics.

From different standpoints and because of our diverse experiences with communities in Zanzibar, we feel it is essential to raise the expectations for archaeologists who work in caves, since archaeologists working on Unguja Island largely have not done so themselves (for a general recognition of this problem, Chirikure *et al.* 2010). Such archaeologists may not genuinely value communities or be inclined to engage them. In addition, foreigners may neither speak KiSwahili nor be aware of the overall social atmosphere on the island. All these factors are unbecoming of informed and ethical practitioners. Ignoring community practices in published archaeological narratives about caves goes against the tenants of an ethics of care. To resolve this violation requires listening to and attending to community expectations above the expediency of exclusively scientific projects.

We intend for this essay to inspire reflection in archaeologists who engage caves on Unguja Island. It is time, in this region, to fully recognize caves as a part of heritage that also deserves integration into scholarly narratives and treatment. Colonialist archaeology in East Africa (re)inscribes exploitative practices. The expectations of communities, and our expectations of each other, must move beyond a strictly materialist archaeology. In contemporary Zanzibar, this is a goal that we have set-out to achieve to overcome the reputations of scholars who seemingly value Zanzibar only for self-aggrandizement (for critique, Kusimba 2017). The potential for a community archaeology lies in collaborations which embrace heritage work that integrates or privileges residents and their perspectives and interests. The study of pasts and the sustainability of livelihoods require patience, listening, and cooperation to build trust. Inclusivity and self-awareness about impacts to communities and environments are at the core of any

robust and enduring archaeological practice. Working to avoid exploitation and abuse is not enough. Our experiences compel us to think harder and to work in more genuine ways toward the coproduction of knowledge and care of one another that invests in our shared humanity and recognizes difference as always meaningfully constituted.

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