

# **An Encroachment of Ecological Sacred Sites and its Threat to the Interconnectedness of Sacred Rituals: A Case Study of the Tonga People in the Gwembe Valley**

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## **Abstract**

The problem of encroaching sacred sites is one of the biggest challenges most developing countries face. In the name of development people's sacred sites and rituals are either destroyed or relocated to other sites. This paper uses two cases to discuss the value of sacred sites and sacred rituals and their religious connectivity to Tonga ecology. The paper begins with a brief discussion on the Tonga ecology and the effects of the construction of the Kariba dam in the 1950s to local people's religiosity, worldviews and perceptions of environmental issues. Thereafter the paper deals with another ecological practice of the Tonga people called lwiindi ceremony. Within this practice the paper employs gender lens to analyse the value of religion in the practice and how the practice is slowly being trespassed by political interests thus overriding its significance to peoples' understating of crop production and rain patterns. This study has found out that indigenous peoples' religion is embedded in their understating of ecological sites and rituals. Therefore development programmes working in these spaces need to take into consideration the religious significance attached to these sites by the local people. This will help enhance environmental care and respect for people's religious beliefs and spiritualities. This however does not mean romanticising indigenous knowledge as though it has no ecological challenges.

**Keywords:** Sacred Sites, Tonga Rituals, Ecology, Religion, development, lwiindi

## **Introduction**

A 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014 Aljezeera news report by Tania read, ‘there were fears that the Kariba dam had a crack on the walls which was likely to cause massive destruction once the dam opened up. Government officials from Zimbabwe and Zambia assured the people living along the banks of the dam that everything was under control and that there was no need to panic’. In the same vein, the reporter quoted one of the chiefs of the villages around the Kariba dam saying, ‘the crack is as a result of the anger of *nyami nyami*<sup>1</sup> the river god who was disturbed during the construction of the dam’<sup>2</sup>. This is not the first time that such a statement has been released by the local people. During the construction of the Kariba dam in 1960s a group of white men who were involved in the construction drowned in the Zambezi River and their bodies could not be retrieved for a number of days.<sup>3</sup> Some of the village headmen stated that *nyami nyami* the river god was behind their disappearance. The argument of the local people was that the construction of the dam disturbed *nyami nyami*’s residing place which is the Zambezi River

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<sup>1</sup> *Nyami Nyami* is a famous name given to the river god of the Tonga people; he is believed to be residing in the Zambezi river and the Kariba dam. During the construction of the dam the Tonga people believe that *nyami nyami* was angered by the constructors who not only disturbed his residence but separated him from his wife when they divided the waters to construct a dam. For more information see ...Murder is everywhere: Will nyami nyami ever be reunited with the wife? Available at: <http://murderiseverywhere.blogspot.com/2011/06/will-nyaminyami-be-reunited-with-his.html>. (Accessed on 20 August 2014.)

<sup>2</sup> Available at: [www.aljazeera.com/.../2014/.../damage-massive-africa-dam-raises-alarms](http://www.aljazeera.com/.../2014/.../damage-massive-africa-dam-raises-alarms) (Accessed on 15 August 2014.) Cached. Damage to massive African dam raises alarms: Zambia and Zimbabwe trying to raise \$250m to repair the Kariba dam, which has developed serious structural damage. Although the report focused on the responses from the government official, she also took time to interview one of the chiefs living along the banks of the Kariba dam.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see: Murder is everywhere: Will nyami nyami ever be reunited with the wife? <http://murderiseverywhere.blogspot.com/2011/06/will-nyaminyami-be-reunited-with-his.html>. See also: Balon (1978); Clements (1960); Mc Dermott (2007); and Scudder (2005).

and it also separated him from his wife. The local people assured the investors that this could only be resolved through a ritual that involved slaughtering a white goat and let it float in the Zambezi River. An agreement was not reached and the ritual was performed. The following day the bodies of the drowned men were found floating on the river and the body of the goat had disappeared. Looking at this scenario whether it was a coincident or not, one is able to see the value that local people attached to their religious beliefs. While a developmental perspective will look at the incident of the drowning of these men as a technical issue or natural cause, the local people associated it with religious mischiefs. Their perception of the incident can be alluded to the fact that in most African worldviews cause and effect of a phenomenon is always associated with the spiritual world.

Looking at this incident and the two stories recorded in the media and how the story of *nyami nyami* is continuously emerging even after many decades one is compelled to ask the question as to whether the Tonga people's religious belief systems have an effect on the Kariba dam. To what extent do sacred sites such as the Zambezi River affect development? Can the comment made by the chief be considered by the development specialist in their reconstruction of the Kariba dam as the cause of the cracks found on the dam? This study attempts to answer these questions in an effort to analyse the value of sacred sites and rituals of the Tonga people and their effect to Tonga religious and environmental conversation. The paper uses the Tonga concept of ecology as its frame of reference. It also uses theoretical reference to the experiences of the Tonga people of Gwembe on how the resettlement affected their religious life.

## **Tonga Ecology and the Response of the People on the Construction of the Kariba Dam**

The Tonga people are found in the southern part of Zambia. Geographically the Tonga people are divided into three groups called the *Bantu botatwe* (literally meaning three people). The *bantu botatwe* consists of the plateau Tonga, those found along the line of railway including the lenje people; the Ila people and the Tonga of the Gwembe valley. These groups are scattered in different parts of the southern and part of central provinces of Zambia. This study is focused on the Tonga of the *Gwembe* valley. This is the group found along the Zambezi River. Historically this is the group that was affected by

the resettlement during the construction of the Kariba dam in the 1950s. Many scholars have shown that the decision to construct a dam created enormous conflicts between the local people and the federal government (Colson 2006; Kaoma 2013). The result of this development was a serious loss of life where more than 57 000 people were displaced from the lower Zambezi valley to the high lands and those who refused to move to high lands lost their lives through the floods when the water was released (Colson 2006). Those who were moved to the high lands found the new place not conducive for cultivation and for livestock. The main crop grown by this group of people is sorghum and millet, geographically the climate on the high lands is not conducive for these crops.

The other reasons that were placed forward for refusal to move besides the preferred geographical setting were; refusal to leave their shrines behind; they also did not want to leave the graves of their ancestors and finally they wanted to be close to *nyami nyami* their famous god of the river Zambezi (Kaoma 2013). Destruction of sacred places and sacred sites also affected the observance of ritual ceremonies such as *lwiindi*, *budima* and other ceremonies that required to be celebrated at a particular sacred site. Responding to the loss of sacred sites Hubert argues that there is no doubt that many sacred sites throughout the world are under threat, one major threat is commercial development such as construction of roads, bridges, shopping centres and dams (1994:9).

From an ecological perspective, the Tonga people are an ecologically inclined community whose connectedness to nature is one of embodiment and commitment to the relationship that exists between humanity and nature (Colson 2006). This is clearly reflected through the ways in which nature is revered by this community. For example the land and livestock are embodied as part of one's being and identity. If there are signs of a drought or a life threatening disease to livestock the whole community will gather to seek guidance from the ancestors on how to address the problem. The Tonga people are also environmentally friendly people whose belief systems are ecologically determined. As such there is a tendency to romanticize the past in their discussion of ecology and natural sites such as the Zambezi river and the Victoria falls which is also named as *Musi-o-tunya* (the water that thunders). This is reflected through their negative attitude to modern ways of addressing ecological issues. For example up until now there are still people on the Gwembe valley who still resist the use of modern seed for planting in

their fields. Their argument is that it would pollute their soil besides the seed is not dedicated to their ancestors for blessing. Therefore, it is seen as cursed seed that does not carry a blessing with it. The dedication of the seed and crop to the ancestors is a very important ritual that cannot be overlooked during periods of cultivation and harvest. One such ceremony that is addressed in this study as the ceremony that was affected by the resettlement is the *lwiindi* ceremony.

### ***Lwiindi* Ceremony as a Sacred Ritual Ceremony**

This is one of the most significant rituals of the Tonga people which is ecologically associated with agricultural management. There are different types of *Lwiindi* ceremonies celebrated in this ethnic group and the two major ones are *lwiindi lwaku mwaka* which is associated with preparing the land for planting of seed and *lwiindi lwa kooloka* which is observed during harvest. In this study I wish to focus my attention on *lwiindi lwa kooloka* the harvest celebration as observed among the Tonga people of the Gwembe valley. The aim of this function is to thank the ancestors for the good harvest and to pave a way for the community to begin harvesting their crops. The ritual takes place at the time when the crops are ready for harvest. Not until this ceremonial ritual has taken place the people are not supposed to start harvesting. During preparation for the ceremony the *sikatongo* (earth priest) announces the date of the ceremony to the people in order to give them a period for preparation before the ceremony. A study by Kaoma (2013) found out that in the past one of the preparatory rules was for the whole community to abstain from sex over a number of days, funerals and any rituals that was deemed to be disturbing the ancestral spiritual order. The notion attached to this restriction is that of impurity. In this ethnic group sex is associated with many religious rituals at the same time it is also seen as a threat to crop production and the polluting to the land. Molyneaux argues that the sexual union for male and female is a metaphor of creation in many mythologies...more commonly the earth is female reflecting the consonance between nature fecundity and fertility of women (1995:10). Death too is associated with some rituals that may be associated with impurity.

The significant human figures in the *lwiindi* ceremony of the Gwembe people are the *Sikatongo* – (mostly a male earth priest) and *Mulela* (the woman official custodian) of the *kaanda ka malende* the sacred hut.

These are the most important figures who act as spirit mediums between the community and the ancestors (Colson 2006). From a gender perspective the *Lwiindi* ceremony can also be a power space where rites of power that reinforce political order and patriarchy are expressed during the ceremony (kaoma 2013). In this case both the *Sikatongo* male earth priest and *mulela* the female care taker have significant roles that qualify them as spirit medium. Like other environmental cults such as the *chisumpuli* cult of Malawi (Phiri 2000) the Tonga people accord high position to women when it comes to offering prayers at rain shrines and environmental cults.

During preparation for *lwiindi*, the *sikatongo* and *mulela* go into seclusion from the community over a number of days. Women brew Traditional beer that is presented to the ancestors. The day before the ceremony the preparation processes involves collecting of the first fruits of the harvest and presenting them to the earth priest (*sikatongo*). As the one in charge of the earth he is responsible for all the environmental concerns of the community including health livestock and good harvest. Members of the community are required to bring the best of their products to the *kaanda ka malende*, (the ancestral hut) *sikatongo* then blesses the crops and presents them to the ancestors and the Supreme Being<sup>4</sup>. After the produce has been blessed it is handed over to the women to be cooked and distributed to the whole community for a communal meal. The concept of communal fellowship is one of the cores of Tonga community life. Eating together also helps to appease the ancestors who are believed to be part of the community of the living dead. My experience of the *lwiindi* ceremony is that even people like myself who went there for work were compelled to participate in the ceremony, especially the eating together of the foods prepared from the harvest.

This celebration is one of the biggest events which also involve visiting the *malende* (Tonga rain shrine) to offer supplications to *balezya* or *mizimo* (the rain ancestors) for a good harvest and to ask for more rains in the year ahead. At the rain shrine, women gather around the sacred hut barefooted dressed in a black outfit singing songs of praise and supplication to the *mizimo* or *balezya* requesting for more rain in the next season. Writing about bare foot theology (Moyo 2009) argues that the barefoot symbolises connectedness and interdependence between humanity and nature. The author

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see Kaoma (2013).

has extensively analysed barefoot theology in relation to gender justice, women's sexuality and ecofeminism. Moyo argues that women's interconnected and interdependence with mother earth is part of their embodiment with life. Therefore, walking barefoot at the rain shrine is a sign of experiencing their spirituality of being connected to mother earth as reproductive beings. At the same time taking off of the shoes also symbolises the sacredness of the ground, which can also be related to the story of Moses in the book of Exodus. Lockyer comments that:

The command to Moses to remove his sandals was in keeping the custom observed by the Egyptians before the time of Moses of removing from their feet sandals and shoes on entering a temple palace or even a private house of some great person...here ordered by God it was an indication for Moses to reverence the place...Jacob in Genesis 28:16, 17 also had a similar experience (1961:44).

Both Moyo and Lockyer have shown that in all religions the concept of sacred places is directly connected to spirituality. Therefore, in the Iwiindi ceremony removing of shoes goes beyond the value of reverence of the holiness of the place to spiritual interconnectedness and interdependence. The black outfit symbolises the anticipated dark rain clouds that will bring the required rains for a good harvest, while the sitting posture grants the truth of their cry for rain as they study the signs of the sky.

According to Kaoma (2013) Tonga people believe that the sacred aspects of nature such as good rain pattern which later lead to good harvest need to be guarded and protected without which misfortune may befall. Some of the feared ecological disasters include drought, famine, floods and epidemics that will kill both livestock and humanity. This fundamental attitude to land is predominantly religious and is located in the fear of mystical sanctions from the ancestors.

## **Ecological and Religious Significance of Sacred Sites and Sacred Rituals**

Sacred sites also have some ecological implication to the Tonga religious beliefs. First point to consider is that although many indigenous peoples extend the concept of sacredness to the whole of their land (Hubert 1994:13),

they still have specific places of worship that are singled out and reserved for that purpose such as mountains, rivers and rain shrines. For example, Tonga people believe that the whole landscape along the valley is sacred even though there are specific places that carry significance sacredness. These are regarded as sacred places of spiritual powers, places like rain shrines are rarely visited by ordinary members of the community except for purposes of offering sacrifices. In some of the rain shrines there are beliefs that *mizimo* the custodians of these shrines appear in form of snakes, tortoise, or crocodile. Each of these species carries a significant message to the community. Hubert raises a concern that although some of the rain shrines can be seen as natural sites that can attract tourism which is an increasing source of income there is also likelihood of potential damage in spiritual terms. The sites remain sacred in that they are the indwelling places for the *mizimo* ancestors. They symbolise the importance of the earth and the powers inherent in nature.

Second, sacred sites are also threatened by increasing technology (Hubert 1994: 9). A good example as relating to this study is the construction of the Kariba dam where thousands of people were displaced in the name of economic development. Their separation from *nyami nyami* and their ancestral ritual sites and graves may not be seen as an issue by development expertise and the policy makers whose interest would be to improve the area in terms of bring new technology. But it this has religious implications as seen in the dialogue of the headman with the journalist from Aljezera. Therefore theology has a task to challenge policy makers in developmental strategies to consider local peoples' religious worldviews as they introduce new technologies.

Third, sacred sites and sacred ritual ceremonies are linked to gender justice, gender roles and issues of purity. In the case of *lwiindi* ceremony the *Sikatongo* and *mulela* both appear at the hut performing different roles. The roles are socially and culturally defined that is why their positions are hereditary and are assigned according to lineage and gender. In terms of purity most women who are custodians of sacred sites are post menopause and if not they are prohibited from conceiving since they are regarded as married to the ancestors such as the case of *mulela*. Another form of restriction on women is that during the period of praying for rains and visiting the shrines, menstruating women are not allowed to participate in the ceremony or come near to the sacred sites. This includes women who have



just given birth or have had a miscarriage. This is because they are considered to be a danger of polluting the land due to their impurity. In most world religions female blood has sparked numerous scholarly debates. Numerous theories have been developed around women's menstrual blood some of which has denied women the access to participate in ecological rituals. De Troyer argues that the concept of menstruation is also tied to religious gender injustice. The author states that blood is a very important element in the reconciliation process between humankind and God. But if blood is that important then why must the women stay away from the sanctuary and not be allowed to enter sacred spaces or touch anything considered holy? What is the relationship between the blood that purifies and the purifying blood (2003:50).

Fourth, sacred places also reveal a complex system of spiritual powers which do not differentiate between the secular and the sacred. In my community there is a belief that at the *malende* site there was a snake that used to be found either in the river or on the big stone sun bathing. The snake was only seen by a few elders who are associated with spirit medium. If the snake continuously appeared, then it was a sign that the ancestors are sending a message to the community in connection with ecological order. Either they are warning the community of the possible drought or floods to come. The community then would report the matter to *Sikatongo* who will later assign *mulela* the woman care taker to go and pour maize meal on the stone or river to appease the ancestors so that they can reveal whatever message they have to the community. From an ecological perspective we see a scenario where these creatures are associated with spirit medium. Nyami nyami the snake on the Zambezi river is seen as the river god respected by the community. The concept behind all this is that the ancestors use nature to communicate to human beings about possible natural destructions or a way of protecting the community.

Fifth sacred sites create a communal space and interconnectedness between nature and the community of the living, although the *Sikatongo* the earth priest is seen as the in charge of these sacred places *malende* (rain shrine) traditionally he is just a custodian of these sites on behalf of the community. The nyami nyami on the other hand is seen as the god of the river in charge of the waters of the Zambezi river. Sacred sites in the African context are imbued with communal spiritualities. The community is also part of these sites. They are a meeting place for the community to offer their

prayers and supplications to the ancestors. Each member of the community has a responsibility towards these sites. Therefore if one member of the community trespasses these sites the whole community is affected. My experience of an encounter of intruding the sacred site was in the Gwembe valley when World Vision International was setting up offices in a place called Munyumbwe. During the period of clearing the place for construction, the constructors cut down a tree at a sacred place. When the *Sikatongo* was notified of the incident WVI was charged for intruding the sacred and they were informed that the ancestors were angry with the act and if not appeased the whole community will suffer. Despite the failure to fully understand the implication of paying a penalty for cutting a tree in the name of development by management this fine was paid by the organisation and later presented to the *Sikatongo* who had to perform a ritual in order to appease the ancestors.

### **The Protection of Sacred Sites and Sacred Rituals as a Form of Environmental Conservation**

One of the arguments raised by this study is the value of sacred places in relation to environmental preservation. The protection of sacred places may be seen as one part of a larger issue of environment concerns that needs to be acknowledged in our discussions of the value of indigenous knowledge systems to environmental preservation. Modern science may to a large extent be inappropriate as a model of reducing nature to measurable elements rather than focus on the holistic interconnectedness of all creation which is essence of the cosmotheistic religions of many peoples (Hubert 1994:6) However it is unrealistic to expect to halt popular growth or technological development in order to protect the sacred sites as was the demand of the community in the construction of the Kariba dam. On the other hand there is need for a growing realisation among scholars and those involved in modern development of the value of these sites as religious sites of worship which need to be respected (Northcott 1996:177) argues that the spirituality of the indigenous Africans give full value to creation as a dynamic and highly integrated web of life. It exudes life giving values to the sacredness of the land reverence to all creatures. Discussing the cosmic interwovenness of nature to the spiritual world, Kyung points out that:

When African and Asian people approach or pass a river, trees,

mountains or when they plant ... or harvest they often ask permission from the spirits of the land .... they do not take from nature more than they need or without asking for what they need for life. They try to return to nature in some other ways what they have taken, as if to repay this debt. Therefore when we incorporate African ... indigenous spirituality to ecofeminist spirituality we begin to perceive the meaning of nature, God and humanity in a fresh way (Kyung 1994:177).

African Women Theologians are among the African scholars who are responding to issues of ecology. Their scholarship has made a unique contribution to this field in that it has created a paradigm shift to the conceptualisation of ecofeminism. Through their use of indigenous knowledge systems most of the African women theologians have focused their writings on the interconnectedness and interdependence between women and nature. The works of some of these scholars demonstrate the need to advocate for sacred sites and sacred rituals as religious sites. They also show that women are not only victims of nature but also preservers of nature. This has created a shift from a dualistic model that see women and nature as victims of patriarchal oppression to seeing them as custodians of nature as in the case of *mulela*. This is despite the fact that women are also seen as a threat to nature especially through the way in which they use natural resources such as trees for firewood, and water for domestic purposes. Women's involvement in preserving nature has also provided a framework for proper articulation of the role of women in sacred sites and rituals ceremonies such as *lwiindi* of the Tonga people, where women act as spirit mediums between the community and the ancestors. An example of such scholars include (Phiri 2000), (Rakoczy 2004), and (mukonyora 2012). The works of these women has shown how women in different contexts have participated in caring for sacred sites and sacred rituals. For example Phiri (2000) and Mukonyora (2012) discuss the role of women in environmental cults while Rakoczy places much emphasis on ecofeminism and spirituality. African women theologians have also attempted to propose an African ecofeminism which embraces embodied spiritualities that are found in ecological sacred sites. As a result of this, discussions on ecology have proved to be useful resources to empower African women as agents for sustaining the integrity of creation (Phiri 2000). Shiva writing from a Third

World Indian perspective observes that the women who participate in and lead ecology movements in countries like India are not speaking merely as victims. Their voices are voices of liberation and transformation which provide new categories of thought in new exploratory directions that deem women as subjects of environmental degradation we also need to celebrate the role that women have taken to help improve the environment (2000:70). In the case of *lwiindi mulela* holds the following positions: She is the official keeper of *kaanda* the sacred hut where the *sikatongo* spends special nights and attend to all traditional rituals before the *lwiindi* ceremony. *Kaanda ka malende* is also known as the place where ancestors reside so *mulela* is also the guardian of the ancestors; *Mulela* is also the keeper of the royal artifacts; *Mulela* confers power on the *Sikatongo* by handing him traditional spears and axe during the ceremony (Kaoma 2013:41).

## **Religion and its Relation to Sacred Sites and Rituals in Developmental Strategies**

In concluding this paper I want to reflect on the value of religion in ecological sacred sites. From an African perspective religion embraces all spheres of a person's life that is why Mbiti (1975) states that Africans are notoriously religious. During the construction of the Kariba dam one of the core values that was not well documented was how the religion of the people was affected by the resettlement. Most of the documentation from the federal government will show that the religion of the local people was not part of the agenda of the colonial government. Insensitivity to the cultural and religious values of the people affects the way in which those wishing to bring development behave towards the local people. The comment made by the chief that *nyami nyami* is angry that is why the Kariba dam has a crack should not be taken lightly.<sup>5</sup> The embedded belief systems of the Tonga people cause them to believe that the Zambezi River is a sacred place for *nyami nyami*. This is a very strong belief and once this sacred place is infringed the community feel accountable to the ancestors. The chief's response just showed how the religion of this particular group of people

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<sup>5</sup> This is the latest comment coming out of the same community over the river god. The details of this report can be accessed on Aljezeera news of 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

influences their ecological belief systems. Bunjo states that the African conceives of personal salvation as being connected to the cosmos, one can only save oneself by serving the cosmos. It is no surprising then that many liturgical African rites call for the participation of all nature. All beings organic or non-organic living and inanimate...this is most important because the cosmos in its variety of forms speaks of a language that reveals the highest form of life (2009:282). Therefore interfering with peoples' sacred sites and rituals is the same as interfering with their religion.

Whilst there is need to respect people's religion when encroaching religious sacred sites, I also wish to caution against romanticising these sites as a recurrent theme in African religions and ecology. This may give rise to notions that assume that an eco-golden age once existed where people had a less harmful impact towards the environment. A generation where people were more cautious of environmental issues and the ecological order was stable and peaceful. Singing such kind of praises and songs about a culture tends to essentialize the life style of the indigenous people as the true environmentalists while blaming the industrial societies as the course for environmental degradation. The limitation of this view is that it can daunt development at the expense of guarding sacred sites. The Tonga of the Gwembe valley's attitude towards ecology as recorded by anthropologists such as Elizabeth Colson<sup>6</sup> claim as though nothing has changed in the Tonga culture and yet the Tonga people despite holding on to their cultural heritage have experienced a lot of changes in their ecological understanding. For example a number of commercial companies that have invested in the Gwembe valley apply modern ways of farming in places where ancestral spirits had a bigger role to play in the blessing of the land. Crops such as cotton, wheat and maize are now grown on commercial basis making it difficult for the people to perform a *lwiindi* ceremony on such mass production.

The other changes that have taken place can be associated with colonialism. Traditionally the role of *Sikatongo* was to guard the earth

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<sup>6</sup> This is one of the most renowned scholars who have written extensively on the life of the Tonga people in the Gwembe valley. She spent much of her life among this group of people especially before and during the construction of the Kariba dam. Her work has greatly impacted current research by other scholars in this ethnic group.

besides looking after the people in his village. This has since changed, previously the Tonga people did not have a village headman instead the *Sikatongo* did all the caring for the community. The colonial government and missionaries changed this setting. They used the *Sikatongos* to collect taxes from the people in their villages, as such their roles began to be change and they were now called *Sibbuku* (literally meaning the one who holds the book for tax collection). Today we seldom hear of the name *Sikatongo* being used, instead the *Sikatongos* are called the village headmen. In a modern Zambia where there are other emerging religions, it becomes a big challenge to hold uncritical to the old ways of responding to sacred sites and rituals. There is need to see these sacred sites and rituals as events and places that can be challenged by many factors.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the Tonga ecology through an analysis of the value of ecological sacred sites and sacred rituals. The study has found out that sacred sites and sacred rituals play a very significant role in environmental conservation therefore, there is need for policy makers and developmental strategists to be made aware of the relevance of these sites to peoples' religions. The comment made by the chief who to me seems to have followed the history of the construction of the Kariba dam on the crack found in the dam goes to show how this group of people respond to the ecological crisis. It also shows how their religious socialisation is associated to environmental concerns. Therefore while we accept scientific knowledge as legitimate form of knowledge, there is also need to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge that come from the local communities. Greene argues that individual African societies need to be studied comprehensively in all their diversity in order to illustrate the range of cultural forms that can exist within a single society (2002:7). At the same time there is a need to caution against romanticising the past knowledge. The study also reviewed the gender dimensions found in the Iwiindi ceremony thus propose an indigenous Afrocentric approach to ecology that acknowledges the contribution of women to ecological debates from an indigenous knowledge systems perspective.

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