

Heritage Tourism: Implications for the Preservation of Traditional Haya Architecture in NW Tanzania

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Located in Katuruka village are a suite of sacred sites of great antiquity that are currently being restored and revitalized. These restorative activities are crucial in order to present properly to visitors the shrines and other landscape features that are of great historical significance. This summer I set out to investigate how the construction and use of traditional *omushonge* houses of large circular design constructed of wood, elephant grass, woven bark fiber and thatch can appeal to a growing heritage tourism sector in Kagera Region, Tanzania, while simultaneously avoiding negative questions of authenticity.

During my first visit to Katuruka village the previous year, I assisted in the documentation of the construction of an *omushonge* spirit house honoring the Bacwezi ancestor Mugasha. This attraction has been recently enhanced further by the reconstruction of another *omushonge* style spirit house in the old royal palace compound. Both of these structures have been reconstructed from the accounts of elder informants who had personally witnessed the original structures in the past. Thus, while they are reconstructions, the authenticity of form is beyond reproach. Using the Katuruka *omushonge* shrines as my investigatory setting, I surveyed visiting tourists to gauge their reaction to this traditional architectural style. I found that *omushonge* architecture is an element of local culture that has great appeal to visitors. Thus tourist preferences articulated at the Katuruka site could form a foundation for recommendations pertaining to further development of traditional architecture at heritage sites.

A second component of my research was to document ethnographically the cultural meanings associated with traditional *omushonge* domestic structures. In order to do this I conducted interviews with thirteen individuals who maintain traditional *omushonge* houses and six residents of *ekibanda*, rectangular, style homes for purposes of comparison. The interviews covered issues including the biographical history of each house and an explanation of interior space use. I used a compass and laser range finder to measure



internal and external dimensions of all architectural elements and documented each photographically. Residents provided valuable information regarding the symbolic meanings of many structural elements of *omushonge*, although the significance of these elements varies widely. When informants were asked how *omushonge* style houses differ from that of *ekibanda* style houses opinions were unanimously in favor of the traditional *omushonge* style residence. The reasons include the ability to maintain a comfortable interior temperature, a floor plan more suited to family cohesion, as well as veneration for the ancestors

which are thought generally to be more accessible in *omushonge* structures.

Indeed tourism has a role to play in historic preservation and revitalization at a local level. In order to promote economic decisions that simultaneously enhance the cultural well-being of local communities, it is my aim to provide empirical evidence that will encourage the authentic representation of traditional Haya architecture.

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