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"Zimbabwe's Chinhoyi Caves: 1845-1945"

Kwashirai, Vimbai C.

Kwashirai, Vimbai C. "Zimbabwe's Chinhoyi Caves: 1845-1945." *Global Environment* 5 (2010): 71–100. Republished by the Environment & Society Portal, Multimedia Library. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7554.

This study historicises environmental issues at the Chinhoyi Caves that are of contemporaneous resonance with the ecological crisis faced by the modern world. It deals with important themes like water-resource management, indigenous knowledge and its efficacy in the preservation of nature, colonialism and its environmental implications, forest use and deforestation, dislocation and displacement of indigenous people, and the interaction of the local with the global. The subject addressed here has global dimensions and is related to the ongoing debate on Western-indigenous and human-nature interactions. From about 1845 to 1890, the Leya and Kore Kore communities strategically established homesteads, pastures and hunting grounds in proximity of the Chinhoyi Caves, Chinhoyi District, northern Zimbabwe. They survived on the available natural resources: fertile and well-watered soils for the production of various food crops, particularly millet, pastures for livestock, as well as edible wildlife and spontaneously growing fruit and roots. As a strategic niche offering a source of water as well as protection from enemies, the Chinhoyi Caves played a role in political conflicts. The caves also had significant cultural and religious importance, as they served as a sacred religious centre for rainmaking ceremonies (mupwerera). Sacred forests around the caves (rambotemwa) could only be cut with political and religious sanction. Indigenous knowledge and practices of water-forest consumption and conservation were embedded in religion and taboo. These customs were changed from the 1890s under British colonialism. The caves came to international prominence in 1888, when hunters and travellers like Frederick Selous wrote about them. European settlers of Italian origin expropriated indigenous lands, displacing the Leya and Kore Kore onto dry and infertile areas. A wealthy Italian officer, Margherito Guidotti, sponsored the first agricultural group settlement scheme, involving ten Italian settler farmers. In 1900, the caves were gazetted as a national park. From a sacred site, the Chinhoyi Caves thus became a tourist destination.

— Text from The White Horse Press website

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Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7554
Print date: 10 January 2026 02:05:37