



Research Article

Heritage forfeited and forgotten: some issues with state control in Tanzania

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Central governments have controlled cultural heritage management in most African countries since colonial times. Focusing on Tanzania, the authors here argue that heritage sites are at risk from the institutions tasked with managing them, citing an institutional reluctance to protect threatened sites, delegation of responsibility to unqualified organisations, inappropriate development of sites as income-generating entities and a resistance to working with and recognising local community initiatives. The deleterious impacts of such management are explored through four case studies, which the authors hope will help sound an alarm in the international community and provoke calls for a national review of policy.

Keywords: Africa, Laetoli footprints, Kilwa Kisiwani, Kondo rock art, Kaiija shrine, antiquities legislation

Introduction

Over the past seven decades, various African countries have modified heritage laws inherited from colonial rule. These interventions have resulted in minor changes in intent and substance, but core principles remain much the same, leaving in place vital focal points that include delimiting criteria for heritage sites, permitting processes for

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archaeological excavations, penalties for violations and the state's right to antiquities (Ndoro & Wijesuriya 2015). Foremost is the provision that central authorities protect and administer antiquities and heritage sites. In most African countries, the central authorities with such powers are national museums, monument commissions and antiquities departments (Abungu & Ndoro 2022), often wrapped into ministries with diverse portfolios. In some countries, such as Tanzania, these institutions are often moved from one ministry to another, but their purpose remains the same—to protect national heritage (Ichumbaki 2016). In this article, we assess how effective policies, laws and regulations for archaeological heritage management are within Tanzania and examine what happens when the state relinquishes control over responsibility for the implementation of legal mandates and assigns heritage protection to ancillary state institutions. We further examine the implications of such reorganisation of archaeological heritage governance in the face of deficient institutional qualifications and influences from commodity-based natural heritage tourism. We argue that this hasty switch to lateral governmental institutions carries significant risks to the conservation of heritage at high-value archaeological heritage sites in Tanzania through unfettered development initiatives. This approach, however, does not apply to non-state actors, with community-managed heritage assets viewed as a threat to state control even under these transformed approaches—all of which leads to accelerating erosion of state effectiveness and destruction of priceless heritage assets.

Legal and policy issues in protecting cultural heritage

Two policies guide cultural heritage protection in Tanzania: the 1997 cultural policy, popularly known in Kiswahili as 'Sera ya Utamaduni'; and the 2008 Cultural Heritage Policy. Respectively, these policies fall under the administration of the Ministry of Information, Culture, Arts and Sports (MICAS) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT). Both policies demand that cultural resource impact studies precede all development projects, whether on land or underwater (see online supplementary materials (OSM) section 1).

The 2008 Cultural Heritage Policy (URT 2008) was intended to deal with antiquities, monuments and sites as opposed to the 1997 policy (URT 1997), which includes various genres of heritage (language, arts, crafts, etc.). It encourages collaborations among local and central government departments, the private sector, local communities and national and international organisations—a well-meaning component that remains mostly unrealised (see OSM section 2 for more details). What is exceptional with the 2008 cultural heritage policy and is specifically lacking in heritage policies of other African countries, is a pledge to turn cultural heritage assets into engines of socio-economic development through tourism. The government, through its Department of Antiquities (DoA), championed this policy, believing it would ensure that cultural heritage sites and other heritage expressions contribute to inclusive growth (URT 2008).

Structural realignment and resistance to collaborative community management

While the foregoing scenario prevails for the cultural heritage sector, natural heritage (notably national parks) contributes significantly to economic growth through tourism—a history that we see as influencing the DoA to accept that a commodification of archaeological sites could also generate substantial tourism income. Because the DoA failed to assess economic potential and to build sufficient infrastructure, it failed in making cultural heritage assets engines of economic development. In 2018, the government, through the MNRT, decided to remove the DoA from custodianship of all cultural heritage sites and delegated that responsibility to other institutions (URT 2020). Institutions with such mandates include the Tanzania Wildlife Authority (TAWA, caring for the World Heritage Site of the Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Ruins of Songo Mnara), the Tanzania Forest Services Agency (TFS, caring for the World Heritage Site of Kondoa rock arts) and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA, caring for the Laetoli footprints site) (see OSM section 3 for a full list of sites under each agency). TAWA, TFS and NCAA took over the management of cultural heritage sites in 2018/2019 and the changes were confirmed through Government of Tanzania Notice Number 632 of 14 August 2020. The criteria used to assign sites to different institutions were not disclosed.

While this restructuring of archaeological heritage management and policy implementation appears to be a decentralising move by the central government that resembles the application of neoliberal approaches elsewhere in Africa (Buscher & Dietz 2005; King 2025) that privilege non-state actors, there is no evidence that the heritage sector has been touched by such approaches. Rather, by adopting a commodity-based model from a sister agency in the same ministry, the DoA seized a quick solution—without considering its implications—to escape decades of stasis over the enforcement of legal mandates (Schmidt & Ichumbaki 2020). This realignment of responsibility for protection, conservation and development of heritage marks a critical departure from the colonial model that had dominated heritage in Tanzania and many other African states (see OSM section 3 for details). These substantial changes carry significant implications, foremost of which is that only the National Museum of Tanzania (NMT) has the trained personnel, experience and knowledge to manage heritage sites within this new structure. TAWA, TFS, NCAA and Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) personnel typically do not have a background in antiquities and cultural heritage management, and these institutions have no budget lines to recruit employees with appropriate cultural heritage management expertise, nor do they have personnel capable of making informed decisions about the possible impact of development activities on cultural heritage under the economic development mandate.

This crippling of cultural heritage management holds perspectives that eschew non-state actors and marginalise community management of important heritage sites, with Kaiija shrine in Katuruka village, Kagera Region, the foremost example. This development, contrary to legislative policy that compels community collaboration, further threatens cultural heritage conservation and interpretation in Tanzania. Given the

treatment of community initiatives, and the delegation of authority to TAWA, TFS, NCAA and TANAPA, we query if Tanzania has the wherewithal to ensure the sustainable protection of archaeological heritage sites, let alone ensure they will become engines of economic development. We also ask, why do they diminish community initiatives that demonstrate sustainable outcomes? This is more than a rhetorical question, as the future of the past in Tanzania demands a clear-headed analysis of the immediate and long-term consequences of these changes.

We evaluate the initial results arising from this shift and assess the state of archaeological heritage preservation in Tanzania by focusing on the failure of state apparatuses in four case studies from coastal, central, north-western and north-eastern regions. These sites are Kilwa Kisiwani, Kondoa rock art sites, the Laetoli footprints site and the Kaiija Early Iron Age shrine in Katuruka (Figure 1). A discussion of the methods used in our investigations is provided in OSM section 4.

Kilwa Kisiwani

Kilwa Kisiwani is an island off the southern coast of Tanzania that has monumental structures dating between the tenth and seventeenth centuries AD (Ichumbaki & Munisi 2024). Eight kilometres south of Kilwa Kisiwani, the island of Songo Mnara has monumental structures dating between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1981, the monuments on both islands were inscribed on UNESCO's list as one World Heritage Site: The Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Ruins of Songo Mnara. Both have comprehensive historical narratives, captured in travellers' accounts. The inhabitants of Kilwa Kisiwani interacted with other communities worldwide for trade (Horton & Middleton 2000; Kusimba 2024), which grew exponentially between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD, with Kilwa Kisiwani emerging as an important port-of-call (Ichumbaki & Pollard 2021). Historical and archaeological evidence document the globalisation of the island and how other parts of the world considered it an important trading centre.

Popular historical evidence describing the position of Kilwa in international trade is held in the Kilwa chronicle, a text thought to be a written account of oral traditions compiled during the sixteenth century AD (Freeman-Grenville 1962). The text describes the origins of Kilwa and the genealogy of Kilwa rulers, famously known as 'the sultans'. The existence of commercial interactions between the people of Kilwa and the Shiraz of Persia is also documented in the writings of Al-Masudi, a tenth-century Arab historian and geographer.

Heritage destruction at Kilwa Kisiwani

The construction of buildings to service tourism has resulted in the destruction of buried archaeological heritage at Kilwa Kisiwani. These new structures include two large buildings, three toilet blocks and a footpath (Figure 2). A 25 × 20m building now stands at the entrance to Kilwa Kisiwani, an oversized, tall structure out of scale with the nearby ruins. It is built of brick and cement, roofed with corrugated iron sheets and

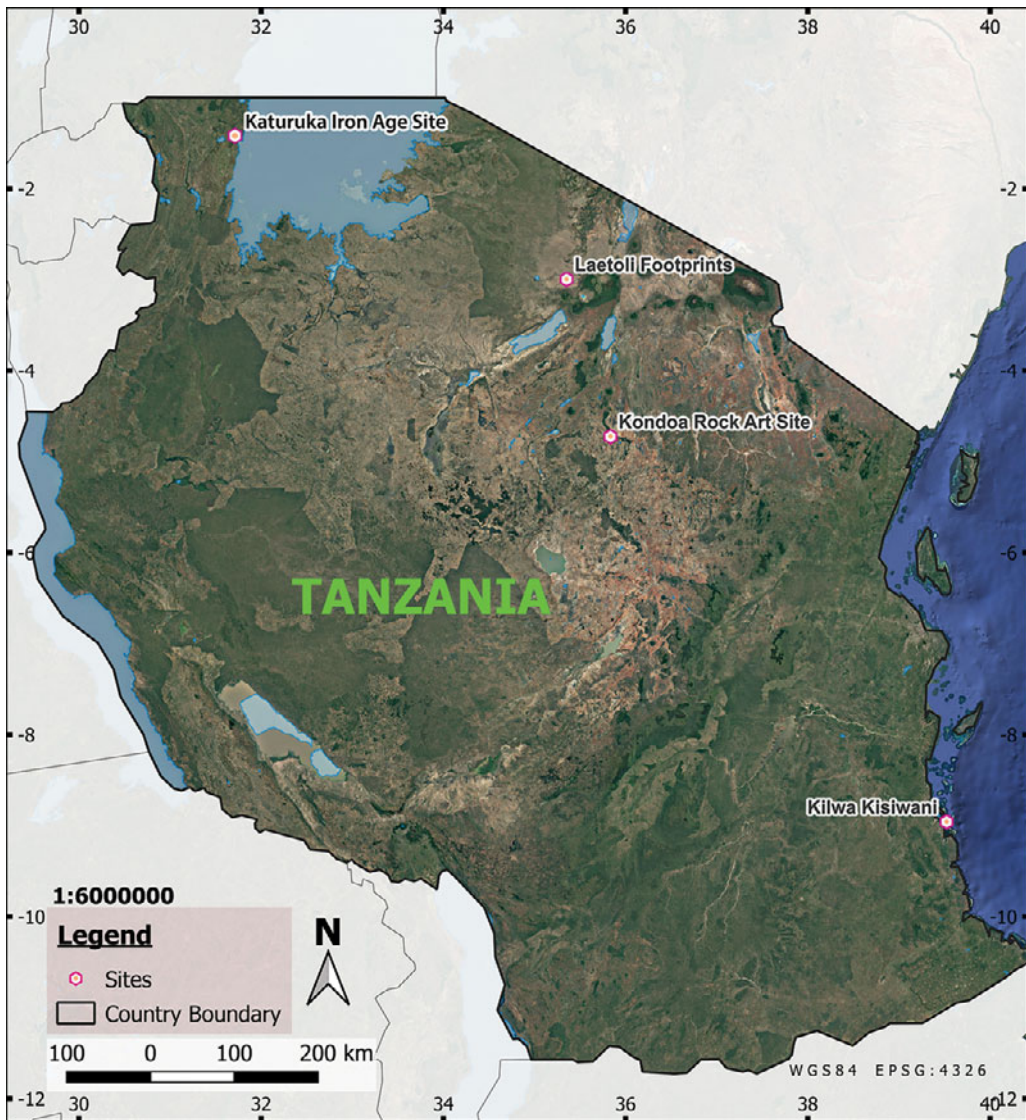


Figure 1. Location of cultural heritage sites discussed in the text (figure by John Kanyingi).

fitted with six large glass windows, starkly out of keeping with its surroundings. About 10m to the south, TAWA erected a 5.5×4.5 m toilet block, standing in the open near a path.

Heading south towards the Makutani Palace via the Great and Small domed mosques, TAWA constructed a footpath of modern pavers with concrete borders that measures 600m long and 1m wide—an intrusive structure requiring excavation into undisturbed middens. Rather than keep toilets off-site, TAWA erected another 5.5×4.5 m toilet block behind the small domed mosque, violating the norms of Islamic



Figure 2. Newly constructed buildings (a & b), toilet (c) and paved footpath (d) at Kilwa Kisiwani World Heritage Site (photographs by authors).

spatial distancing between religious and polluting structures. One resident, who participated in the construction projects, reported that stones from an underground foundation were reused to build the toilet block. Adding to these intrusive activities, TAWA erected another large (7 × 9 m) building about 100 m north of the fourteenth-century palace of *Husuni Kubwa* (great palace). This building is an interpretation centre to serve tourists visiting *Husuni Kubwa* and *Husuni Ndogo* (small) palaces. Nearby, there is yet another on-site toilet.

All these structures were erected without conducting cultural heritage impact assessments, an obvious oversight in planning and development within a UNESCO World Heritage Site, given Tanzanian and international requirements. These failures resulted in the destruction of archaeological material critical for enhancing interpretation of the site. A visitor to Kilwa may walk around the buildings and along the paved path and observe disturbed ceramics, beads and coins dug from the subsurface when construction occurred.

Our inquiries among Kilwa Kisiwani residents who worked as labourers during the construction project revealed that small artefacts were encountered when digging the foundations, which the engineers then mounded on nearby areas. One resident related that “at the ‘house of the bats’ we encountered so many ceramics, and the site manager (an antiquities official) instructed us to put all the ceramics in the buckets and pile them

in one location for further analysis. Later, the piles of ceramics were moved to [the] antiquities' office" (28 July 2022). This commentary on the absence of on-site monitoring and the disregard for provenance amplifies the lack of planning and attention to environmental setting that foregrounded this exercise. An additional issue arises at Kilwa Kisiwani and other heritage sites administered by other institutions: officers of the DoA are present as managers, a holdover from pre-reorganisation times. Despite their responsibilities, they have been co-opted by the development mandate, becoming complicit in activities that destroy, visually harm and devalue heritage.

What emerges from this case study of tourism development at the Kilwa Kisiwani World Heritage Site is the impression of an institution invested with management and development responsibility but lacking expertise in appropriate development, ignoring opportunities to call on outside expertise and acting with a remarkable degree of hubris.

The Laetoli footprints site

Laetoli is a Plio-Pleistocene site within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. The site has volcanic and sedimentary rocks rich in palaeontological and archaeological deposits, including fossil remains and stone tools. The Laetoli geology and cultural materials are important for they help us understand our deep-time biological and cultural evolution (Harrison 2011). Laetoli is best known for the presence of hominin, animal and bird footprints dating to 3.66 million years ago (Figure 3a; Deino 2011; Kevin *et al.* 2016). Although footprints are observable at multiple localities, hominin footprints have been documented at two sites in locality 8. Mary Leakey and colleagues recorded a footprint trackway at Site G in the 1970s (Leakey *et al.* 1976; Leakey 1987), which have since been the focus of multiple research projects, leading to many internationally renowned publications (e.g. Leakey & Hay 1979; Leakey 1981; Leakey & Harris 1987; Masao *et al.* 2016).

A second set of footprints was recorded at Site S in 2014 when a team from the University of Dar es Salaam conducted cultural heritage impact assessments before construction began on a museum and research/teaching facilities. The new trackway revealed two individuals (S1 & S2) moving in the same direction as those recorded at Site G and provided evidence of body size variation among the early hominin species of *Australopithecus afarensis* (Masao *et al.* 2016). When data from sites G and S are considered alongside the skeletal remains recovered from other sites, we gain a deeper understanding of both the behaviour and morphology of this early bipedal species.

The destruction of the Laetoli site

In 2008, Mr Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, the then president of the United Republic of Tanzania, visited Laetoli with participants of the Leon H. Summit to see the earliest hominin footprints. The delegates instead viewed only a 2m section of the tracks and the piles of stones that experts from Tanzania and the Getty Conservation Institute, long engaged in the conservation of the footprints, had placed on top of the tracks to preserve them (Getty Conservation Institute 2000; Demas & Agnew 2006). Certainly,

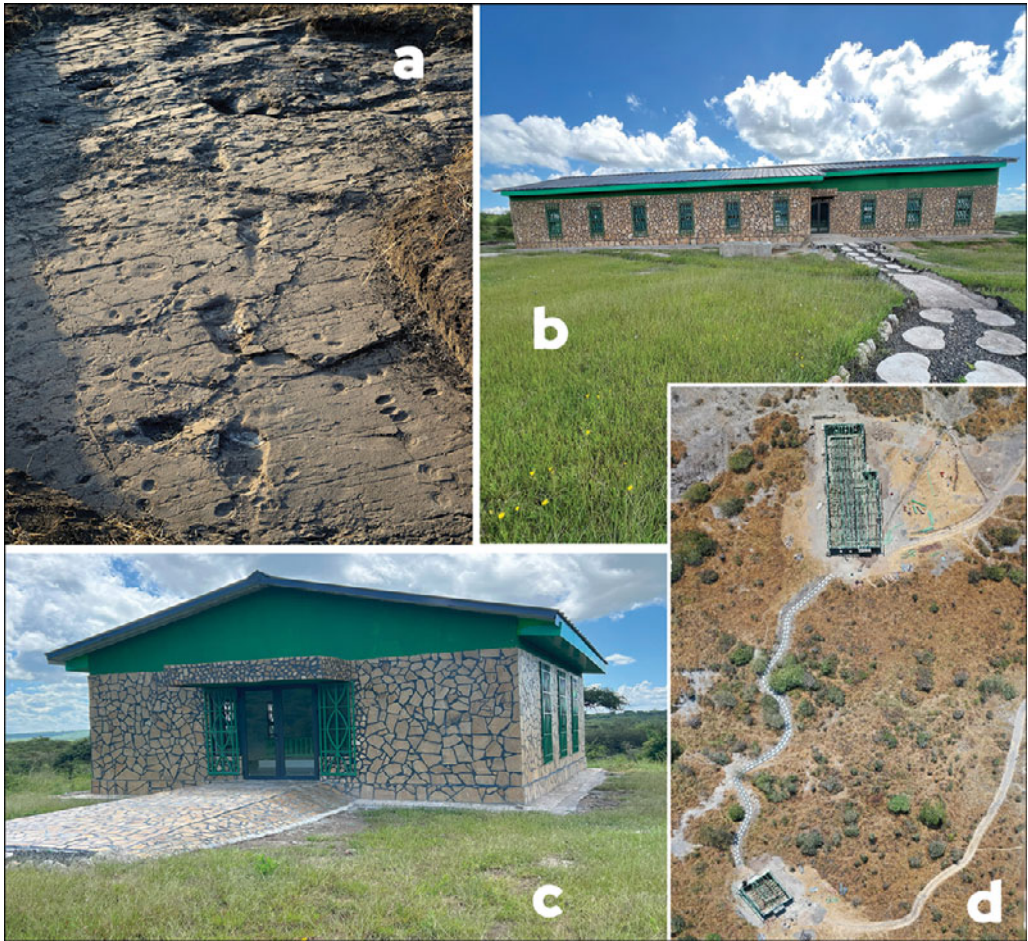


Figure 3. Laetoli: a) hominin footprints at site S; b & c) completed buildings at sites G and S, respectively; d) aerial view of sites G and S during construction (photograph (a) from Masao *et al.* 2016: fig. 8 (<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.19568.013>), reproduced under licence (CC BY 4.0); photographs b–d by authors).

this scenario was disquieting to the president who had travelled over 200km to see the famous footprints. Accordingly, he ordered that the footprints be reopened and on-site infrastructure developed to allow visitors to view this important heritage. A few years after the president's directives, the NCAA initiated plans to construct a state-of-the-art on-site museum. As engineering and structural design continued, a cultural heritage impact assessment was conducted—unlike at Kilwa Kisiwani—to identify the best location to place infrastructure that would support research and training activities in addition to the on-site museum. This assessment led to the discovery of new hominin and animal tracks in 2014/2015 (Masao *et al.* 2016), resulting in the project being put on hold.

In 2023, the project resurfaced, but without expert consultation and with rapid construction of what NCAA officials call 'semi-permanent structures' at Site G and at the southern part of Site S. At Site G, a rectangular structure (47 × 12m) has an interior

foundation (40 × 8m) to support a viewing platform with an average height of 2m. The building (Figure 3b) is constructed of bricks and mortar and covered by a roof of metal rafters and corrugated iron sheets. A smaller structure at Site S (12 × 10m; Figure 3c) also has an internal foundation that supports a platform to enable visitors to view the footprints from above. The structure at Site S is placed at the trackway where four fragile footprints (see Masao *et al.* 2016: fig. 8) are recognised by the Maasai as markers of *Lakalanga*—their hero (Ichumbaki *et al.* 2019). The construction of this structure across a hominin trackway disregarded the integrity of this irreplaceable evidence of early hominin life, a matter of grave international concern for a site of such fundamental importance for evolutionary history.

Two walkways were constructed between Sites G and S, about 150m apart, using large pavers mimicking hominin footprints. These walkways were laid after land leveling, an activity that inevitably impacted previously undocumented fossils and stone artefacts. On-site observations documented a heavy excavator moving between the sites during construction, crossing a landscape with recorded animal tracks (M10; see Masao *et al.* 2016: fig. 2) as well as hominin footprints (M9; see Masao *et al.* 2016: fig. 9). Thus, the construction of permanent structures at sites G and S and of two walkways between the sites, as well as the activity of a heavy mechanical excavator, disturbed the footprint-bearing sediments, leading to loss of contextual fossil distribution and impacting stratigraphic integrity. Simply stated, the NCAA has a licence to act without attention to established impact guidelines on any heritage site within its jurisdiction.

Kondoa rock art sites

In Kondoa Irangi, central Tanzania, a series of rock art sites are scattered over the landscape. Although some natural rock shelters (about 150) have been surveyed, recorded and monitored, some scholars estimate that between 150 and 450 paintings decorate caves, rock shelters and overhanging cliff faces. There is also evidence of continued ritual activities at some sites as local communities still conduct spiritual practices that reflect their rituals, beliefs and cosmological traditions (Bwasiri 2011). Typical images include animals, human figures and agricultural tools such as hoes (see Figure 4a–d). The sites embody living traditions based on the paintings to reinforce links with the ancestors who created them (Bwasiri & Smith 2015). Local communities continue to use the rock art sites for various activities, including rainmaking, healing, initiation and divination, demonstrating a cultural continuum (Kisusi & Lwoga 2021). The Kondoa rock art sites have been protected by a series of legislative acts since the colonial period (see OSM section 5 for details). Following this incremental protection, UNESCO inscribed the sites to the World Heritage List in 2006 under Criteria III and VI.

Destruction of the Kondoa rock art sites

Visits to various sites documented that conservation challenges, including the destruction of rock art, have existed and increased for decades (also see Leakey 1983; Kisusi & Lwoga 2021). Treasure hunters disturbed many sites, leading to the loss of contextual

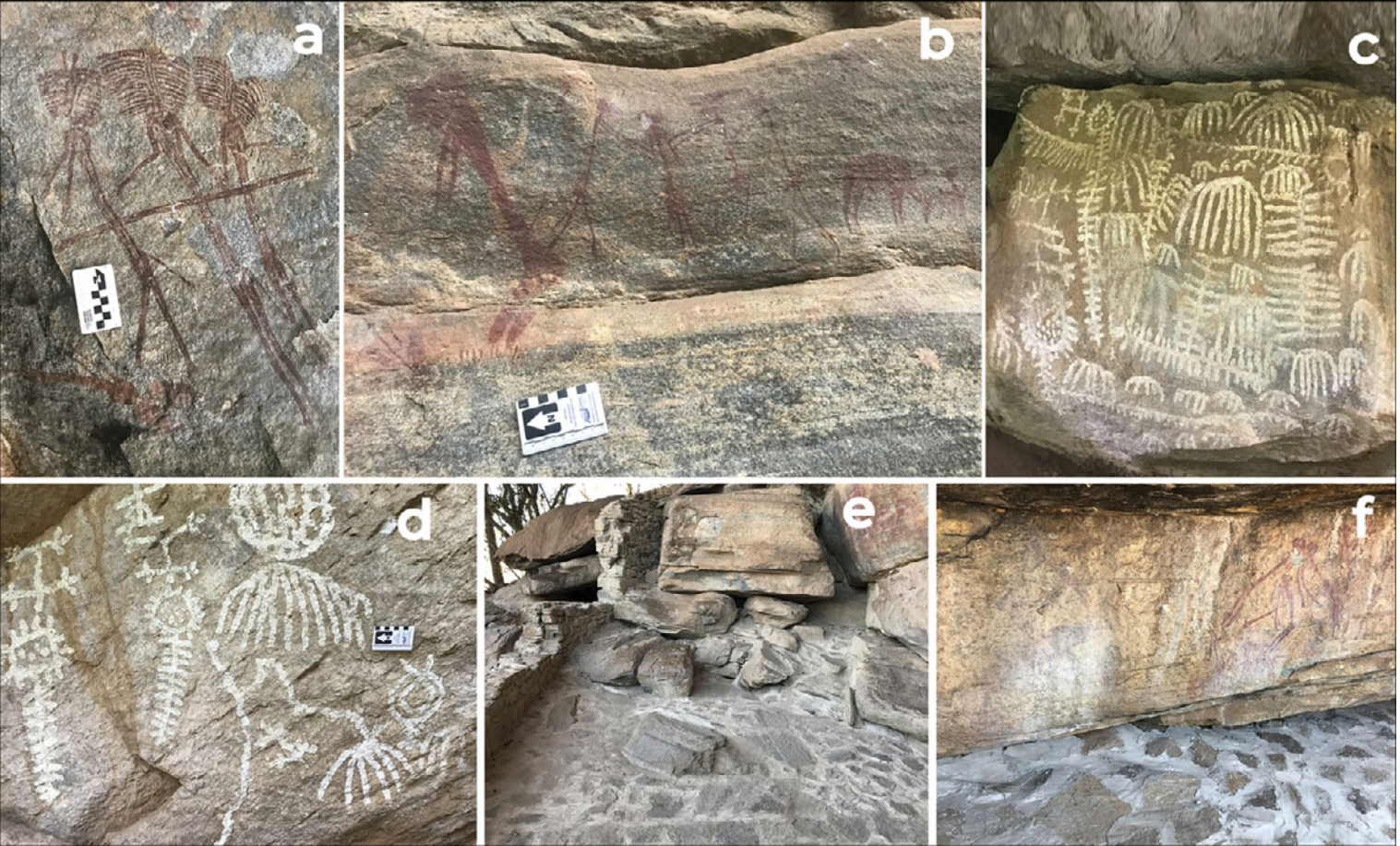


Figure 4. Various images depicted at rock shelters at Kondoa (a–d) and the cemented floors constructed in 2016 at the site by the DoA and the TFS (e & f) (photographs by authors).

material. Also contributing to modification of the rock art are ritual activities, such as divination, healing, rainmaking and initiation ceremonies during which community members perform libation by pouring animal fats, blood and local beer onto the paintings to appease their ancestors. To minimise these events, the Tanzanian government erected cages around the art-bearing rock, a strategy that failed when the locals destroyed them [cages] (Mturi 1996), repurposing the materials for domestic use. This is a poignant lesson with global implications: protective devices such as cages are last-resort measures, they must be avoided in favour of collaborative, participatory approaches that use community stewardship and monitoring, and acknowledge that such sites are vital and living places with deep cultural values to local communities (Churikire & Pwiti 2008; Agnew *et al.* 2015).

In the name of developing the site to attract tourists, the DoA and the TFS have performed two activities that we consider detrimental to the site's integrity. Antiquities officers constructed a concrete platform on the floor of the Kolo B1-B3 sites—rock shelters and overhanging cliffs with paintings (Figure 4e–f). The site manager at the time of construction justified this intrusive structure as minimising dust that dirties both paintings and tourists and water damage that erodes the cultural materials. Both issues require more appropriate interventions than concrete floors, an all-too-common option that informs decision-making at Tanzania's heritage sites.

Following the development mandate, TFS determined to make the Kondoa sites accessible to tourists by constructing a 900 × 3m gravel road to replace a footpath so people could walk through surrounding vegetation as they climbed to the hill with paintings. The road was constructed without cultural heritage impact assessment and monitoring, which was a significant violation of best practices in a highly sensitive environment where we may expect to find evidence for ancient activities conducted by communities responsible for the rock art. On-site observation in January 2020 identified that this construction activity destroyed artefacts and disturbed the contexts of many lithic artefacts. At this World Heritage Site, this appears to be 'business as usual' for the institutions invested with cultural heritage stewardship. In this and the other cases cited, there are obvious lacunae between the implementation of state management practices at World Heritage Sites and monitoring by UNESCO, a chronic global issue (see, for example, Sigiriya World Heritage Site in Sri Lanka; Weerasinghe & Schmidt 2019).

Kaiija Early Iron Age shrine, Katuruka

The disengagements of Tanzanian authorities from the conservation of national and local heritage are manifest in a rejection of local initiatives to interpret and preserve heritage values at the community level. We present here the most poignant example of how local initiatives are treated: the Katuruka heritage site of Kaiija shrine in Kagera region, north-western Tanzania. Before the restructuring of antiquities management, there was a period when the degradation of heritage sites was ignored by the DoA (Schmidt & Ichumbaki 2020). Despite the 2008 Cultural Heritage Policy encouraging collaboration with local communities, lack of engagement with the Katuruka community led to the endangerment of East Africa's most prominent and ancient shrine. Known as the Kaiija Tree, this monumental heritage locale is situated within the seventeenth-century capital

site of King Rugomora Mahe (Schmidt 1978, 2006, 2010). Collaborative investigations with Haya elders during 1969–1970 unveiled an ancient centre of iron production under and around the Kaiija Tree, the name of which means ‘place of the forge’. Excavations at Kaiija revealed an Early Iron Age forge dating to the late first millennium BC, even more remarkable because of detailed oral traditions that attribute extensive iron working at the site (Schmidt 1978).

Kaiija memorialises an apex economic activity—iron production—that ensured prosperous agricultural activity and thus the reproduction of society (Schmidt 2006, 2017). This intimate, synergistic entwinement of economy with human reproduction meant that the deep-time antiquity of Kaiija and its embodiment of the most basic human elements of life elevated Kaiija to a point of centrality in Haya (a social group in Tanzania) life for over two millennia. These findings, published widely (e.g. Schmidt 1978, 2006, 2010), were well-known to Antiquities officials. Despite constant prompts to protect Kaiija by regional cultural officials and the investigators during the 1970s and 1980s, it was an era with an almost exclusive focus on palaeoanthropology. Inertia prevailed.

The demise of Kaiija shrine and community initiative

The importance of Kaiija shrine emerged, again during 2009–2011, when Katuruka villagers initiated a project to document living oral traditions and to preserve sacred sites including Kaiija (Schmidt 2010, 2017). These initiatives, while marking a remarkable revitalisation of heritage interests, were provoked by the death of the Kaiija Tree during the mid-1990s when a neighbouring landholder killed it, because it overshadowed his banana farm. This violation of centuries-old norms thrust the community into a state of ennui but also created a deep determination to recuperate the past. Local initiatives, implemented through the creation of a representative community committee and a non-governmental organisation (NGO), were taken to reconstruct the king’s spirit house, restore other shrines and develop an interpretative infrastructure to commemorate Kaiija.

Despite the initial vitality of preservation efforts, the community activists encountered other impediments (see OSM section 6). Foremost was the envy and greed—a characterisation used by Katuruka villagers—of a collateral branch of the royal clan, without traditional ties to Kaiija and with a history of land-grabbing at the neighbouring shrine of Bwogi (Mushumbusi 2011). Land claims were launched against the Katuruka NGO in 2012, using intimidation and a lawsuit to try to seize control of land held in legal stewardship by the committee. This attempt to distort heritage values and to control a community-heritage property for private profit was appealed to the Kagera Region authorities, copied to the Minister responsible for Antiquities, a resident of a contiguous village (Katuruka Preservation and Conservation Association 2012). This appeal by the village committee and other local stakeholders went unanswered, resulting in a costly defence in the District Land and Housing Tribunal. The case dragged on for four years, with one plaintiff ignoring a June 2012 court order to stop harassing visitors. Through these years, one plaintiff built a new ‘royal house’ nearby and seized control of the heritage infrastructure—leading to the destruction of Buchwankwanzi house, the royal divination structure (see Figure 5a & b).



Figure 5. The reconstructed Buchwankwanzi ritual house in Katuruka before (a) and after destruction (b) (photographs by authors).

Regional government officials sent messages to DoA and the University of Dar es Salaam to get relief for Katuruka. Two visits by DoA staff occurred, mostly focused on interviews with one plaintiff. There was no legal action taken. Subsequently, in late 2015, the Assistant Director of Antiquities held a telephone conversation with the Regional Development Co-ordinator, during which spurious attacks made by the plaintiff were repeated against Peter Schmidt, impugning his integrity by claiming that he had removed a “pot of rupees” during the 1970 excavations, adding that he was conducting research without a permit (*pers. comm.* 7 October 2015). This move to discredit long-standing attempts to have Katuruka protected typified the attitude of Antiquities officials, despite assurances from them that the site would be protected: “The site has the potential to be protected as national heritage and this for sure we will work on at our earliest possible time” (*pers. comm.* with Assistant Director of Antiquities, 16 February 2016). Multiple attempts, including meetings to negotiate the site’s protection, elicited only silence—what we came to understand, two years later, as a foregrounding to the reorganisation of heritage management responsibilities in Tanzania. The DoA absented itself from any resolution of this case, a position consistent with other cases where it avoided attempts by communities to protect heritage assets (Schmidt & Ichumbaki 2020).

The history of Kaiija shrine carries potent messages to communities and to those who care about the competence of governmental authorities who are invested with heritage management. It is a cautionary tale for postcolonial states elsewhere in Africa, Asia and the Americas as central governments often resist local management and interpretation. Moreover, it marks a contradiction to a formal, unrealised neoliberal policy that invests responsibility in non-state actors. Rather than invoke the power of national antiquities law to protect and, if necessary, take ownership of significant heritage sites, the DoA disengaged from preservation, demonstrating again their long-term reluctance to take up legal challenges (Schmidt & Ichumbaki 2020). As the residents of Katuruka continue to review their ordeal of challenging illegitimate private ownership, they await the next legal challenge after both the High Court and the District Housing and Land Tribunal declined jurisdiction.

Discussion and final remarks

Recent scholarship addressing threats to cultural heritage in Africa considers issues of climate change (Vousdoukas *et al.* 2022), ethnic wars (Ahmed 2023), developmental initiatives (Ichumbaki & Mjema 2018) and neoliberalism (King 2025) as major concerns affecting the sustainability of heritage sites. With this article, we add another critical threat—the failure of state control to protect globally important heritage sites. The case studies are vivid testimony to how harm results from policies within heritage management institutions in Tanzania. The structural changes we document were prefigured by several decades of disengagement by Antiquities officials who often opted to ignore cultural heritage issues, letting community interests wither. These trends are seen globally, for example in the deleterious impacts of other forms of decentralisation in China (Yang 2021), where unschooled, pro-profit local authorities often destroy sites and

ignore intangible heritage and community participation—values that are omitted from the development plans of Tanzania's newly vested managers.

The contradictions arising from Tanzania's treatment of viable local initiatives become more vivid when other national-level agencies without the expertise to manage vulnerable heritage are elevated into responsible roles. The DoA adopted a commodity-based model from National Parks to meet their development goals, using heritage assets. While this management approach appears to move toward decentralisation, it simultaneously precludes genuine decentralisation with local management and is a lateral transfer within central government.

Our unveiling of the damaging consequences of delegation to institutions without expertise or interest in sustainable and appropriate archaeological heritage development, is meant to sound an alarm in the international community of archaeology, palaeontology, architecture and heritage scholars and practitioners. It reveals to the leadership of Tanzania that there are significant systemic problems: heritage sites of local, national and global significance are being destroyed by Tanzania's own institutions. When such errors are made in the name of tourism, it does not take long for informed tourists to understand that the heritage values that attracted them have been degraded, producing a profound economic disability.

We tender these observations with the hope that they will provoke a review of national policy that turns away from the current pathway and embraces policies that ensure a sustainable heritage future. A starting point is for the government to implement Article 20 of the Antiquities Act Cap 333: select qualified, non-political appointees for the Advisory Council for Antiquities, an institution created under the amended Antiquities Act that has remained without representation since its inception in 1979. Once filled with qualified representatives, the next step is to provide a mandate to the Advisory Council for a comprehensive revision of how antiquities are to be protected and managed into the future, with strong acknowledgement of the key roles that independent heritage experts and members of local communities play in all processes from documentation to management. By meeting the original mandate of Article 20, there is hope that Tanzania may reverse the damage occurring under the present heritage governance structure.

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Online supplementary material (OSM)

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10361> and select the supplementary materials tab.

Author contributions: CRediT categories

Elgidius B. Ichumbaki: Conceptualization-Lead, Data curation-Lead, Formal analysis-Equal, Funding acquisition-Equal, Investigation-Equal, Writing and editorial review-Equal. **Peter R. Schmidt:** Conceptualization-Co-Lead, Formal analysis-Equal, Funding acquisition-Equal, Investigation-Equal, Writing and editorial review-Equal.

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