

Situating *Marombo* as sacred spaces in climate-change discourses among the Ndaou people of south-eastern Zimbabwe

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While work on sacred spaces has persisted for decades, their agency in mitigating climate change remains less explored, especially from indigenous communities' perspectives. The article unpacks the concept of Ndaou *marombo* as sacred places by exploring how *marombo* can be used as an agency in a world ravaged by climate change. Rather than seeking generations concerning sacred spaces, this qualitative research was conducted in a Ndaou village of Chipinge District, Zimbabwe. Fifteen people aged 55–70 years participated in this study. If one uses the coloniality of knowledge theory, the findings show how Ndaou *marombo* belief and practice in Ndaou traditional religion uphold environmental astuteness. In this article, I argue that with substantial and targeted support for the use of indigenous knowledge, rural communities can withstand the adverse impacts of climate change.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study contributes to the already existing literature on indigenous knowledge and climate change from the perspectives of Ndaou spirituality on sacred places. Upholding the sacredness of places is helpful in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 13, *Climate Action*.

Keywords: African traditional religion; decolonial; indigenous knowledge; sacred places; Ndaou; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This article presents the Ndaou indigenous knowledge and spiritual concept of *marombo* as sacred places.¹ *Marombo* are set-aside spaces used as meeting places for the living and spiritual worlds. They are mostly revered by ensuring that no deforestation takes place around them. They are thickly covered by evergreen trees and grass. They act as shrines where the Ndaou people carry out rituals for and with their departed ones. This conceptualisation of *marombo* resonates with Ezenweke and Nwachukwu (2023:124), who posit that sacred places and/or sites are revered 'spaces of deep spiritual connection, serving as sanctuaries for religious, cultural, and communal practices'. The aim of this article is to explore how Ndaou *marombo* can be innovated to be an indigenous knowledge agency for the fight against climate change among rural communities. To perform this exploration, the article adopts Afrocentric qualitative methods, including observations and interviews, to gather data from key traditional leaders of the Ndaou people. The study starts this activity with a brief history of the Ndaou people upon whom the study was carried out, followed by a review of literature on sacred places and/or sites from an African perspective, the methodology adopted in collecting data, presentation, and discussion of findings, and ends with a conclusion section.

Background

Climate change has attracted the attention of the United Nations. It is addressed in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 13 focuses on *Climate Action*, whereby the United Nations is urging all nations to take action to minimise the effects of climate change in the form of earthquakes, tsunamis, tropical cyclones, and flooding. These have left devastating consequences for all people in general and marginalised and non-developed communities in particular. The Ndaou people of south-eastern Zimbabwe are no exception. For the Ndaou people,

1. The term sacred spaces in this article is interchangeably used with sacred places, for the two mean the same in this article. Whenever reference is made to sacred places, I still mean sacred spaces.

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climate change brings newer and more complicated challenges for them. Communities need to develop strategies that make them more climate-change proof.

Epistemologically, the Ndaou indigenous knowledge is never taken seriously, as is the case with most indigenous communities, under the guise of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) frames as the 'geopolitics of power and knowledge'. Yet this knowledge can be helpful in alleviating some of the world's existential challenges, such as climate change. In the midst of this crisis, there are epistemological questions that need to be asked. For example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2020) questions about where to go, who to learn from, and who and which knowledge and/or epistemology is to be privileged are instructive for this study. Can Ndaou indigenous knowledge and spiritual beliefs on the concept of *marombo* sacredness be privileged as mitigation measures against the adverse effects of climate change? Given that efforts have been expended on searching for solutions to combat climate change, this article submits that there is no singular system of knowledge that can be used to address climate change. There is a plethora of alternatives. This article aims to explore how Ndaou *marombo* sacredness can be an agency in this crisis. Tackling the environmental crisis caused by climate change requires the shifting of mindsets and the adoption of a multisectoral approach, which Escobar (2018) coins as 'pluriversity', a world in which many worlds of epistemology coexist. Religion, particularly African indigenous religion, has been left out in most modern crises' interventions all over the world, yet it has influenced how humans view nature in general and the environment in particular. Sipeyiye (2020) argues that religions have not been seriously considered potential partners in providing solutions to the environmental crises. Yet most faith traditions stress the importance of honouring creation, acting as responsible stewards, and recognising the interdependence of all living beings (Alokwu, Nweke & Green 2025). Realising this importance ensures sustainable conservation of the environment.

In Zimbabwe, climate change has resulted in extreme weather patterns characterised by unprecedented floods and droughts. For example, Zimbabwe is still trying to recover from Cyclone Idai, 'which caused untold devastation in Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts, Zimbabwe' (Chirongoma & Chitando 2021:64). Up to now, no full explanation has been given as to what really happened to have such a calamity. Chirongoma and Chitando (2021) refer to African spirituality in which religion, particularly African indigenous religion, featured prominently in explanations of the tragedy. Droughts have become a perennial crisis in most parts of Zimbabwe, where rainfall has drastically declined. Climate change, in terms of extreme hot temperatures, has made the land very dry. Forests and vegetation have been greatly affected, leaving the land barren. Food insecurity abounds in many communities. It is against this backdrop that the Ndaou concept of *marombo* is explored with a view to assessing its potential in addressing climate change in south-eastern Zimbabwe.

The context: The Ndaou people of south-eastern Zimbabwe

The Ndaou people are a minority ethnic group found in the Manicaland province in south-eastern Zimbabwe and south-central parts of Mozambique (MacGonagle 2008; Shenjere-Nyabezi 2015; Sipeyiye 2020). Konyana (2016) states that these people are concentrated in Chipinge and Chimanimani Districts, sprawling into the central parts of Mozambique. It has been noted that this ethnic group has been largely marginalised in scholarship (Sipeyiye 2020). Religiously, the Ndaou are as religious as all Africans (Mbiti 1969; Muyambo 2025). They believe in a ubiquitous Supreme Being presiding over several deities. The belief in ancestral, alien, and nature spirits is quite conspicuous among the Ndaou, evident in the several ceremonies and rituals they conduct periodically. On matters of nature and the environment, the Ndaou understand that they are nature and nature is them. This interconnectedness and dependability are quite evident in the way they steward nature. They have mechanisms in place to ensure that nature is not irresponsibly exploited, such as taboos and sacred spaces, which is the subject matter of this article. To emphasise this interconnectedness and dependability, Sipeyiye (2020:93) argues that the 'Ndaou have respect and a strong belief that the natural world provides a habitat to the spiritual world, and it is the provider of foods, minerals, and other resources'. For him, the sacred shrines, wetlands, and woodlands are spiritual habitats and the foundation of survival. As a marginalised community, most of the Ndaou people live in extreme poverty. Climate change brings newer and more complicated challenges for them. This article is, therefore, an exploration of how the Ndaou aspect of sacred places, particularly *marombo*, can be leveraged in the mitigation of climate change.

A brief literature review

There is a plethora of literature that appraises the use of indigenous beliefs and practices in the conservation of the environment. Nevertheless, there exist significant gaps in how marginalised and underdeveloped communities' indigenous knowledge on sacred places can act as buffer zones against environmental crises such as climate change. Most research conducted so far has focused on the sacredness of grooves, forests, mountains, and rivers, with no close reference to the nexus between sacred spaces and climate change or environmental crises. This study is an attempt to close that gap by exploring how sacred spaces can intersect with climate change in rural communities.

Mgumia and Oba (2003) state that sacred sites are important as a tool for in situ conservation of flora and fauna because of their widespread distribution and their roles as reservoirs for local biodiversity and threatened species. Sacred places and/or sites, therefore, are set-apart places with a cultural, historical, and religious significance for a particular group of people or community. They are revered places that hold an aura of spirituality. Hence, sacred places are associated with a fear of venturing near them in case one angers the spirits.

It is against this understanding of sacred places that there are arguments that sacred places can be used as buffer zones for mitigating unprecedented environmental challenges that confront the world, such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources (Adekomaya & Majozi 2022). Climate change, for example, has devastating consequences for all people in general and marginalised and underdeveloped communities in particular. It has resulted in extreme weather phenomena that require urgent, sustainable interventions. Incessant droughts and destructive floods have characterised weather patterns the world over. There are critical scientific and technological solutions that have been put in place. However, they seem to yield minimal results, as was the case with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). The Ndaou concept of *marombo* as a cultural and religious capital can be used for the conservation of the environment. To achieve this, the study explores how the *marombo* practice can effectively help the Ndaou people in cushioning the effects of climate change, identifies the threats and risks the practice faces, and proffers suggestions as to what should be carried out to usher climate-change-proof interventions that utilise the agency of sacred places.

Writing from the Chinese perspective, Risamasu (2025) focuses on the Akit community, among whom the argument is that the earth is sacred and that this wisdom is shared through the reweaving of indigenous knowledge. The writer is of the opinion that communities, particularly the Akit, deeply respect the intrinsic value and interests of nature. This perspective is evident in their ethical practices, such as the *Denes* ritual, which reflects a profound respect for natural elements and acknowledges the spiritual significance of these practices (Hasbullah et al. 2022:63).

Tolulope et al.'s (2025) study in Nigeria emphasises the application of indigenous knowledge by communities as coping strategies of climate change, but goes further to indicate that such initiatives do not yield much without the requisite support. They argue that, 'without substantial and targeted support, rural communities will struggle to withstand the ongoing and future impacts of climate change' (Tolulope et al. 2025:6).

In Zimbabwe, Mubaya et al. (2025) reflect on how sacred heritage sites act as catalysts in transforming the livelihoods of rural communities in south-eastern Zimbabwe. Focusing on Chingoma Falls, they argue that the sacred site transforms the livelihoods of local Mudzami residents by assisting local farmers in forecasting the coming of good harvests and droughts, and informing farmers to plant timeously and choose appropriate seed varieties every season.

Focusing on the Ndaou people, Sipeyiye (2020) views communal existence as the heartbeat of the Ndaou people. Their respect for nature and the environment is anchored by this perspective. He argues that the Ndaou people's attitude to aquatic life, wetlands, woodlands, and sacred trees is

indicative of interconnectedness, reverence, embeddedness, and reciprocity that exists between them and nature. It is a symbiotic relationship of give and take. Hence, the emphasis is on the protection of nature at all costs, for nature feeds them and it, in return, requires their good stewardship.

Muyambo and Maposa's (2014) study demonstrates the sacredness of wells and the beliefs and practices associated with them. Their major finding was that the Ndaou people are ecologically conscious that any harm to the environment has disastrous consequences for humanity. Their argument is that it is possible to link culture and technology in water resource management in a world where clean water is increasingly becoming a scarce resource.

While the brief literature review above demonstrates that communities have their beliefs and practices that can be leveraged to withstand the vagaries of environmental crises such as climate change, this study builds on such literature and goes further to suggest that there is a need for substantial and targeted support for rural communities, in particular, to realise their hidden potential to address 21st century environmental challenges. If one argues from a coloniality perspective, this takes concerted efforts by governments, non-governmental organisations, and civil society to educate communities that their long-standing traditions, which have been vilified during colonisation (coloniality of power, knowledge, and being), can be tailored to address the issues of climate change. It is suggested and recommended that more work needs to be performed on the efficacy of indigenous knowledge surrounding sacred spaces in the context of environmental challenges such as climate change.

Theoretical framework

The research was informed by insights from Grosfoguel's (2007) model of coloniality with its dimensions of (1) coloniality of power, (2) coloniality of knowledge, and (3) coloniality of Being (Seroto 2018:4–5). It examines the impact of colonisation on a people's power to identify themselves, people's indigenous knowledge and knowledge production, and people's Being (Seroto 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) is of the view that the worst form of colonisation in Africa is an epistemological one. In other words, that is colonisation that relegates a people's knowledge about themselves and knowledge production to the margins while centring the knowledge of the coloniser. For Cesaire (2000:32), a leading decolonial theorist, colonisation is a 'disruptive, decivilising, dehumanising, exploitative, racist, violent, brutal, covetous, and "thingfying" system'. This experience leaves people at a loss as to how their own 'Power', 'Knowledge', and 'Being' can help them rediscover themselves. In other words, this impact has resulted in the 'Othering' of the African people to such an extent that they can no longer hold fast to their beliefs and practices. Yet these beliefs and practices are their safety nets in times of crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the 'geopolitics of knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020), in which indigenous knowledge was never given a chance to address the pandemic. Grosfoguel's coloniality model was

helpful in identifying that the Ndaу people's resilient beliefs and practices, particularly their concept of *marombo*, could be leveraged to address climate change, especially where Western knowledge has failed. The article argues that there is scope for leveraging indigenous beliefs and practices in addressing world challenges. If the beliefs and practices of the Ndaу concept of *marombo* are given substantial and targeted support, one of the SDGs, SDG 13, which focuses on Climate Action, can be realised.

Research methods and design

Description of the study area

The study was conducted in the Manzvire village of the Chipinge District in south-eastern Zimbabwe, which is located approximately 90 km south of Chipinge town. The village is on the Tanganda-Chiredzi highway, about 10 km before Checheche town. It falls under Region 4 and Region 5 with very erratic rainfall patterns, receiving good rains in some seasons and very dry seasons at times. The village is agro-based, relying on rain-fed agriculture. The local subsistence farmers plant maize during good seasons, and sorghum and other drought-resistant indigenous grains like finger millet, among others. Some farmers venture into cotton and sesame as cash crops.

Research methods

This was qualitative research in which observations and key informant interviews were used to gather data on *marombo* as sacred places among the Ndaу people. As the researcher is a member of the community under study, observation and memory were some of the methods that were used to gather data. This observation technique was used during the *makoto* rain-petitioning ceremony held in September 2025, as well as relying on memories of narratives told and events seen when I was still young in the village. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were held with the village head, eight traditional assistant leaders of the village, and six senior women of 60+ years. These were purposively sampled owing to their vast knowledge in the preservation of sacred places within the village. The women were selected as they were the ones heavily involved in ensuring that all that was/is required during rituals carried out in *marombo* spaces is available. For example, they brew beer used whenever a ritual is to be performed at the places, sing obscenities during the rain-petitioning ceremony, and bring the first harvests of the season to the places for dedication to the spiritual world. Their views, therefore, were of paramount importance for the study. All research protocols were judiciously followed, and participants' consent was obtained verbally after everything about the study was explained to them. Issues of access were not a problem, as most of the participants knew me as a 'son' of the village. Data collected were transcribed and then translated into English, as data were collected in Ndaу language. For fear of losing the original meaning through translation, I quoted the participants in the vernacular. The data were analysed thematically. Given issues of positionality in which researchers are members of the community under

study, I applied the phenomenology-of-religion approach of *epoche*, which implies holding back presuppositions and giving research participants their sole right to share their knowledge without my being judgemental. As a trained religious scholar, my data collection and analysis were never influenced by this positionality.

Findings

This section provides empirical data gathered through interviews with key informants and observation. Themes developed from research questions used in interviews are used to guide the sub-sections of the fieldwork results.

Marombo: An overview

Findings from the key informants and observations indicated that *marombo* are set-apart places that are meant to serve as meeting places between the living and the departed. The village head said:

'*Marombo* is a place where we believe our ancestors are. These are the abodes of our departed elders of the village. It is where their spirits are. These places are different from the graveyards. The graveyards are where the bodies were buried, but the spirit does not stay there. The Ndaу people believe that spirits stay in other places where we, the living, can meet them and give them our grievances or thanksgiving. *Marombo* are accessible, unlike the graves.' (VH)

Another key information (K13) confirmed that *marombo* is an identified place where the community meets its departed ones, especially the community spirits, not family spirits (ancestors). He further indicated that when a community has something to share with the community spirits that are looked after by the village head lineage, the village head leads the proceedings.

Observations of these places indicated that *marombo* are characterised by trees that are there and one big tree at the centre, under which proceedings take place. In some instances, there is a mud and thatch hut in which proceedings take place. The mud and thatch hut is looked after by the community. When its poles and roof need repair, the community gathers to repair them so that it remains presentable. If it is a tree under which proceedings take place, the place is occasionally swept so as to keep it presentable.

One key informant (KI2) stated that this place should not be neglected. The village head, with the assistance of the community, ensures that the place remains presentable in all seasons. The key informants revealed that elderly women of the community, who have reached menopause, ensure that the hut or the shade under the tree is kept clean. They are empowered by the village head and his leadership to make the sacred place presentable. Whenever these women want to do some work at the shrine, they notify the village head, who in turn accompanies them, or he sends his 'policeman' (not the government policeman but his *purisa* in Ndaу vernacular language) to accompany the women.

Cultural and religious activities at *marombo*

On what exactly happens and when at *marombo*, several cultural and religious practices were cited. The village head revealed that there are several activities that take place at the *marombo* shrine. He cited *makoto* (rain-petitioning ceremony) and *kudira zvemuminda* (first-fruits harvest thanksgiving) as some of them. This fact was confirmed by a woman informant (KI5), who indicated that the *marombo* shrine hosts the holding of *makoto*, as the community informs the community spirits of the impending season. They petition for good rains that are not heavy but calm. Every family brews beer and takes it to this shrine on a date made known by the village head. The village head presides over the ceremony, being assisted by his aides and other members of the community. The day is a special day for the community as they all gather, feasting with beer and food after the village head has led the rain-petitioning rituals.

It also came out through the interviews and observations that another activity that takes place at the shrine is the first-fruits harvest thanksgiving. A key informant said:

'After *makoto*, rains come, and we get busy in our fields. When our grains are ready for harvest, we do not just eat the grains before we thank the same spirits to whom we petitioned for rains. Our first harvest is therefore dedicated to the spirits at the *marombo* shrine. Women gather the first harvest and carry them to the shrine. It is only after this has happened that we can then eat the harvest. Before that happens, no one is allowed to eat the harvest.' (K17)

The above sentiment was confirmed by observations I made as I was growing up in the community. We were not permitted at all to eat the field harvests before this ritual was done. We were warned of frightening incidents like having one's mouth shut for life if one dares to eat before the first-fruits harvest thanksgiving. This fact was confirmed by the key informant (KI6), who revealed that if anyone eats before the ritual, unusual happenings occur in the community, like unexplained pestilences such as sudden illness or children behaving indecorously, such that an explanation is sought from diviners. Once the cause is known, the causer is punished with a fine of some cattle or goats or money to the village head, who, in turn, ritually makes amends with the wronged spirit.

Another activity that takes place at the *marombo* shrine is when the community wants to know what the future holds for its members in general. The village head selects his aides and spirit mediums and goes to the shrine with either beer or snuff. He presents the issue at hand, and the mediums get possessed. Once possessed, the spirit mediums talk to the members gathered. The members are told what is going to happen, what the cause is, and how to remedy it. An example the key informants gave was that when a pandemic is about to happen, it is known through such consultations with the dead by the living.

The sacredness of *marombo*

The key informants revealed that *marombo* places are revered and are normally covered by thick vegetation. The living, especially the traditional leaders of the community, visit these places whenever they have either a grievance or a compliment to make to the clan spirits. For example, the key informants revealed that *marombo* are sacred places where the traditional leaders and spiritual leaders of a community converge in order to convey a message to the departed. The message could be either unexplained occurrences in the community or thanksgiving to the spirits of the community. One key informant (KI2) indicated that when a harmless lion is seen roaming the community, the traditional and spiritual leaders go to *marombo* and inform the clan spirits of the occurrence. The spirit mediums get possessed, and the reasons for the presence of the harmless animal are outlined. The informants indicated that once this is known, then corrective measures are taken.

It also came out that *marombo* are not ordinary places because these are where the living meet the dead. The village head categorically stated that *marombo* is a holy land that cannot be tampered with. Since these are the abodes of the spirits, they are all covered in vegetation. The informant continued:

'*Marombo* are not ordinary land where anyone can do anything. There are restrictions that govern these places, such as not cutting trees here, not taking grass here for thatching, not grazing animals here. The vegetation should be as thick as it is. I, as the custodian of this land, I make sure no profaning happens, such as having sexual intimacies here. This angers the spirits, and the punishment can be to individuals who have done it or the community gets punished as well in one or the other.' (VH)

Upon probing, the village head indicated that those who violate the restrictions may be punished by being bitten by snakes during the act, see harmless lions as a warning, or may roam about in the thicket until they are caught by aides to the village head. Upon being caught, the culprits are heavily fined, and rituals are performed to make amends with the spiritual realm. Some of the key informants indicated that if the culprits are not caught, the community is punished on their behalf. Unusual things happen, such as long periods of no rain, and lions killing animals in the community, such that diviners are consulted for the cause. Once the cause is known, the community led by the village head makes amends and life normalises again.

From observations, it is clear that *marombo* are spaces that an individual cannot venture into. They are associated with cultural and religious significance such that there are restrictions and/or taboos that must be observed by community members lest they invite the ire of the spirits. Respondents in the study revealed that if one cuts trees there, he and/or she roams there until the village head is notified. If one collects firewood without seeking permission from the village head, one may not get out of the place. It is only dry wood that people are permitted to collect for use in their homes. No cutting of fresh trees. *Marombo* are imbued with fear and anxiety, and as such, they are highly respected.

Participants' conscious awareness of climate change

On whether the key informants were aware of climate change and its impacts, the village head did not identify the scourge by name but described weather characteristics which he said were no longer predictable as they were in the past. He cited prolonged droughts that leave the earth vulnerable and very destructive rains. Other key informants concurred that the seasons have changed. One key informant (KI2) revealed that they were used to get to Christmas time when their grains were almost ripening, which is no longer the case. Rains, which should have started around September, may meaningfully come around at the end of January. This has not only changed their planting time but also changed even the type of seeds to plant.

The key informants indicated that such changes in the weather patterns have an impact on their sacred places, as the tree species and vegetation that provide a habitat for the spirits die as a result of moisture stress during those prolonged droughts. When it rains, the rains are very destructive and carry away the soil cover and vegetation, leaving behind gullies. This situation was confirmed through observations that there were gullies everywhere, a sore sight for the researcher, for this was not the case when he was growing up in the community. The next section is on what the participants viewed as the threats and risks that *marombo* spaces face in contemporary times.

Threats and risks faced by *marombo* spaces

On whether *marombo* are safe from depletion, the key informants indicated that these spaces face a plethora of challenges. One major challenge revealed by the respondents in the community of study is the cosmopolitan nature of the community, which has been ushered in by population increase and expansion. The village head made it clear that his village now has people from other areas, with their own faiths. He cited the proliferations of white garment churches, Pentecostals, and even other people with different cultural orientations. For him, such people do not share the community's long-standing traditions of set-apart places. He cited an incident in which he had to contend with religious groups using *marombo* as their worship places. He also cited the use of human rights, in which individuals do not adhere to the restrictions associated with sacred places.

The observations also indicate that African traditional beliefs and practices no longer hold the fort in this century. Most people, commonly referred to as *ama2k*, meaning those born from 2000 onwards, no longer care about the sacredness of such places. This situation was confirmed by a key female informant who intoned that:

'Children of nowadays no longer have respect, respect for us elders, our traditions, and our sacred places. You see them using our sacred shrines as places for love-making, drinking, and all sorts of mischief. This has driven away the spirits that used to abide in such places. This is the reason we now have persistent droughts or rains that are destructive.' (K19)

The above submissions paint a very sad situation that has turned what used to be sacred places into what Eliade (1959) referred to as profane. The places that used to be protected as sources of people's cultural and religious capital are now being decimated, under the watchful eye of the informant above.

The increasing rural demand for firewood as a source of energy was cited as another threat to *marombo* spaces. The respondents indicated that because of the high level of depletion of other woodlands where communities used to obtain firewood, *marombo* became the hunting ground for firewood. Despite the restrictions, people clandestinely fetch firewood, and the rate at which this is happening is quite alarming. An interviewee (KI11) indicated that even the village head has been disempowered. She said there are several factors that have made traditional leaders powerless, ranging from politics, secularisation, and issues of human rights. Upon probing, she revealed that the presence of a councillor in a ward, for example, yields more political power than the village head's, and most of these councillors are the *ama2k* referred to earlier on, who have no respect for community traditions.

Leveraging Nda *marombo* in a climate change crisis: Critical reflections

This section offers reflections on how *marombo*, as sacred spaces, can be agencies of climate change mitigation. Findings reveal that *marombo*, as sacred places among the Nda, have cultural and religious significance. The Nda hold such places with awe to an extent that no one dares tamper with such places. The places are supposed to remain holy as the meeting place of the dead and the living. This sacredness of *marombo* sets them, in Eliade's (1959:11) words, 'as wholly different from the profane'. For Eliade (1959:20), 'some parts of space are qualitatively different from others'. This resonates with the key informants' submissions as they indicated that *marombo* are not ordinary spaces but set-apart places where the spirits of the community abide. Eliade (1959) makes it succinctly clear when he separates sacred places from profane space. For him, a sacred place is non-homogeneous whereas profane space is 'homogenous and neutral, no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass' (Eliade 1959:22).

While the Nda people seem not to see a link between their sacred *marombo* and the need to leverage it (*marombo*) to fight climate change, there is scope in tapping *marombo* not only as culturally and religiously significant but also as places for conserving the environment from climate change. The participants indicated that *marombo* are safe from depletion because of the cultural and religious significance attached to them as habitats of the dead. What needs to be interrogated here is whether the respect accorded *marombo* and the claims made about the repercussions of violating them are out of genuine respect for the environment. Taringa (2006) argues that while the romantic attitude of the Shona people to nature

can be viewed as being environmentally friendly, it is also possible that the people's reverence for nature is out of fear and respect for the ancestors rather than nature itself. If one takes a cue from this argument, then *marombo* are revered not because of the intrinsic value in themselves but because of the fear of the wrath of the living dead. Narratives from the participants reveal that most people 'respect' *marombo* not because they are conscious of their value for climate change mitigation but because of the fear of the nature spirits.

Findings reveal that there are many taboos that surround the efficacy of *marombo* as habitats of the spirits of the dead. These taboos, such as anyone who violates *marombo* may meet roaming lions, are meant to ensure that no one dares *marombo*, even for cutting trees for firewood or other domestic chores. It is interesting to note that taboos or avoidance rules are generally made to influence members of society to conform to society's values and norms (Chigidi 2009). For him, taboos are meant to guarantee conformity by threatening people with unpleasant consequences should they disobey the rules. Osei-Tutu (2017) admits that taboos are a distinct type of informal institution for effective and efficient natural resource management. However, he argues that taboos are being eroded as communities transform, leading to a loss of their influence on resource-use practice. These circumstances cast a shadow of doubt on the Ndau claims on *marombo*. The youth, as revealed by the participants, are no longer sanctioned by these taboos that are meant to protect and preserve *marombo*. This case points to the fact that the Ndau concept of *marombo* can be an efficacious intervention measure against climate change. Arguing from Grosfoguel's coloniality model, this study submits that there is a need to decolonise the minds of the youth who are future custodians of this heritage.

Inasmuch as there are threats and risks faced by *marombo*, as outlined in this article, there are possibilities of substantial and targeted support for the rural communities from other stakeholders such as the government, non-governmental organisations, and other well-intentioned entities. These stakeholders can be handy in complementing communities in safeguarding their environment, thereby minimising the impacts of climate change. They can educate local communities on how best they can link their beliefs and practices with technology. The use of new technology as energy sources for rural communities can alleviate the pressure on environmental degradation. For example, governments and non-governmental organisations must partner with rural communities and traditional leadership in preserving sacred places. The use of solar, biogas, and other renewable energy for community household needs, such as cooking, reduces deforestation for firewood. Once communities have access to these modern sources of energy, the pressure on woodlands is eased, thereby preserving the natural environment. This step enhances rainfall patterns, vegetation growth, soil conservation, and a balanced ecosystem. Successive weather shocks such as droughts, floods, high temperatures and food insecurity caused largely by climate change could be brought under check.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that the concept of *marombo* can be an agency in mitigating climate change. The research has focused on the themes that emerged from the study to illustrate how *marombo* can be leveraged for the management of the environment. The article has also outlined some of the challenges that confront *marombo* as an agency towards the attainment of SDG 13. Thus, despite the disregard of *marombo* by the youth and the Christian religion, it can be concluded that a lot needs to be achieved to push back the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being, which are largely responsible for the wanton disregard and scorn of *marombo* as sacred places in African cosmology.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Tenson Muyambo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

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