

A Contested Territory in a Sacralized Landscape: The Fight of the Gich Community over Semien Mountains National Park

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Abstract : Local community involvement is widely considered vital for the sustainability of heritage management. Yet, it is often the case that heritage-related projects lag behind in community involvement. In the Semien Mountains the creation, first, and expansion, later, of the National Park has led to several conflicts with the local communities that for centuries have inhabited the area. Local communities have only been passive actors in the plans to expand the Park set up by UNESCO and by local decision makers. This paper investigates the causes that led the Gich community, one of the communities affected by the Park's expansion, to refuse the resettlement plan offered by the authorities. Qualitative research methods were employed, including document analysis, community conference and interview of informants. The paper shows that although the local community of Gich was highly attached to the Park's heritage assets, their level of involvement in the heritage management was very low due to shortcomings in the design and implementation of official policies. Therefore, their attitude towards the Park's managers has been until the present one of mistrust and opposition. The paper recommends to policy-makers a series of measures more sensitive towards local communities, such as that the development agencies act as true communication facilitators and regional authorities nurture sincere relationships with the locals.

Keywords : Gich, heritage management, local communities, Semen Mountains, sustainability, UNESCO, world heritage site

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