

Spirituality and community attachment with Birchenough Bridge, Eastern Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Birchenough Bridge is a magnificent and breath-taking steel arch bridge in Eastern Zimbabwe spanning over Save River and was constructed in 1935 as a gift to the public of the then Southern Rhodesia from the funds of the Beit Trust. This bridge is a significant heritage place within the community which participated in its construction. Up to this day, the communities surrounding Birchenough bridge attaches historical, nostalgic, socio-cultural and architectural values to this physically imposing landmark that is in their midst. Birchenough Bridge was designed by Mr. Ralph Freeman, consulting engineer to the Beit Trust, who also designed the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Beit Bridge over the Limpopo River. It was named "the Birchenough Bridge" in recognition of the services given to the country by Sir Henry Birchenough, Bart., G.C.M.G., the Chairman of the Beit Railway Trust and President of the then British South Africa Company. The bridge crosses the Save River with a single arch which rises to 280 feet above the river, and is 1,080 feet in length. The bridge deck provides a roadway width of 7,2m with two footways and is suspended 20m above the river bed. The bridge superstructure contains 15 40 tonnes of high tensile steel. This paper will look at the cultural significance of Birchenough Bridge as a heritage place among the surrounding communities members who revere this monumental structure so much. The spiritual significance of the bridge is still felt even today because a number of local people who were working as construction workers died in various on site accidents before the final completion of the bridge. Thus some locals still regard the bridge with reverence which is derived from the spiritual attachment they have with the deceased. Furthermore, the cremated ashes of Sir Henry Birchenough and that of his wife are interred in one of the pillars of Birchenough bridge. Thus this particular space also occupy part of the spiritual landscape that is largely associated with this bridge and will also be interrogated in this paper.