

Research Article

Sociological Implications of the Vandalism of the Mitcha Cemetery, in the Municipality of Lubango, from the Perspective of Its Employees

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Abstract

This article analyzes the sociological implications of vandalism at the Mitcha Cemetery, located in the municipality of Lubango, in the Hu ía province of Angola, from the perspective of its employees. The main objective of the research was to understand the perceptions, causes, and consequences of vandalism in funeral spaces, highlighting the social and cultural impacts of this practice. The relevance of this study lies in the need to promote respect for cemeteries as cultural and symbolic heritage, considering that the desecration of these spaces compromises both collective memory and the health and safety of the community. The research adopted a quantitative approach-characterized as exploratory-descriptive. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to 15 cemetery employees and a representative of the Lubango Municipal Department of Environment and Basic Sanitation. Methods such as content analysis, data triangulation, and simple statistical analysis were also used. The results reveal that 80% of study participants acknowledge that acts of vandalism have occurred in the cemetery, with beliefs in witchcraft (73.33%) and theft of materials (26.67%) being the main causes. There was also a strong call for respect for burial spaces, considered sacred sites of collective memory. The research highlights the urgency of preventive and educational measures to raise public awareness about the preservation of these spaces. This study contributes to the debate on the symbolic value of cemeteries and reinforces the importance of public policies aimed at their protection.

Keywords

Sociological Implications, Vandalism, Cemetery

1. Introduction

Cemetery vandalism is a phenomenon that transcends the realm of crime and penetrates the cultural, social, and symbolic realms of society. In the African context, especially in Angola, cemeteries represent not only physical burial spaces but also sacred sites of memory and cultural identity. [5] Cemeteries are open-air museums, where not only bodies but

also the history and identity of a people rest.

In this context, the Mitcha Cemetery - CM, located in Lubango, has been the target of successive acts of vandalism, ranging from the destruction of graves to the desecration of mortal remains, motivated by witchcraft and theft. Such actions reflect not only the fragility of security, but also the

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erosion of the social, cultural and religious values of the surrounding community [19].

This article seeks to analyze, from the perspective of cemetery employees and Municipal Management, the main causes, manifestations and consequences of vandalism in this space, as well as discuss its sociological implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vandalism and the Devaluation of Public Space

Vandalism is a form of deviant behavior that results in the deliberate destruction of material goods, particularly affecting public spaces. It can arise as a result of social frustration, a lack of civic awareness, or even as a form of symbolic protest against institutions and power structures. Vandalism is a multifaceted phenomenon that reflects the fragility of social ties and the lack of belonging individuals have in relation to the spaces they occupy [7].

In the Angolan context, this issue becomes even more sensitive, especially when it comes to memorial sites such as cemeteries. The CM, in the municipality of Lubango, is not only a burial site, but also a cultural and symbolic space that carries with it the meanings of ancestry, spirituality, and respect for the deceased. Its vandalism, therefore, represents a transgression that is not limited to the physical realm, but extends to the symbolic and ethical realm of society.

Vandalism is a form of symbolic violence against heritage that represents history and collective identity, characterized by wanton destruction, often motivated by ignorance, negligence, or social marginalization. This definition is reinforced by the following definition: the destruction of public or private property reveals the rupture between the individual and the community, signaling the existence of institutional failures in the process of socialization and citizenship [1, 2].

The lack of effective public policies to protect public property, combined with a lack of civic awareness, contributes to the prevalence of practices such as vandalism. In Angola, many public spaces lack basic security infrastructure, such as lighting, police patrols, or community surveillance, making them easy targets for destructive actions. [22] They highlighted that the precarious management of urban spaces in Angola, combined with the lack of oversight and cultural abandonment, facilitates the occurrence of vandalism, even in sacred places such as cemeteries.

When citizens do not feel represented by institutions, they tend to break with established social norms, generating behaviors of resistance or destruction. [14]

Furthermore, the lack of educational initiatives that promote respect for heritage contributes to the perpetuation of this situation. [11] Heritage education is essential for building collective identities and valuing places of memory, such as

cemeteries. When this education is neglected, it paves the way for the violation of what should be preserved and respected.

2.2. Sociocultural Function of Cemeteries

Cemeteries, beyond their obvious role as burial spaces, assume a symbolic, historical, and sociocultural dimension of extreme relevance to societies. They are places of memory, where respect for the dead is observed, but also where beliefs, values, and collective identities are expressed. [5] Cemeteries are veritable "open-air museums," where funerary art, architecture, and mortuary rituals communicate how a given society views death, mourning, and the continuity of spiritual life.

In African societies, cemeteries play a particularly significant role. Death is understood as a passage to another state of existence, and funerary spaces are imbued with symbolism, spirituality, and reverence. [4] In the Angolan context, cemeteries represent the link between the living and the dead, serving as places of worship, silence, and introspection, and should therefore be protected as cultural and spiritual heritage. This understanding is shared by traditional communities, who often associate cemeteries with the presence of ancestors, who continue to influence the lives of the living.

However, modern society's growing indifference toward these spaces reveals a process of symbolic emptying. [21] The devaluation of cemeteries is directly linked to the crisis of community ties and the loss of collective meaning surrounding death and symbolic heritage. When a society allows a cemetery to be desecrated, it also allows the link between past and present, between memory and oblivion, to be severed.

2.3. Motivations for Vandalism in Cemeteries

The motivations for cemetery vandalism are multifaceted, encompassing cultural, social, economic, and symbolic factors. In contexts such as Mitcha Cemetery in Lubango, these motivations reflect both criminal practices and ritualistic actions linked to beliefs in witchcraft, as well as contempt for collective heritage.

Vandalism in funerary spaces can be explained by three main vectors: (i) the practice of thefts motivated by economic interests, especially metals and marbles used in tombs; (ii) the performance of esoteric or religious rituals that involve the desecration of corpses; and (iii) the institutional and social abandonment of these spaces, which makes them vulnerable to invasion. [26]

These motives are confirmed by local investigations. A report from the Hu Ia National Police (PN) [24] revealed that several acts of vandalism in cemeteries in the region were associated with the removal of body parts and the destruction of tombstones for witchcraft or the sale of recyclable materials.

It's also important to consider the influence of economic factors. Extreme poverty and unemployment make any item with commercial value an easy target. Marble stones and aluminum doors and windows ripped from tombs become commodities for informal sale. [10] The socioeconomic degradation of peripheral neighborhoods creates conditions conducive to the trivialization of public property, seen as a means of survival.

Furthermore, neglect or a lack of understanding of the symbolic and historical values of cemeteries is one of the aggravating factors. [5] Cemeteries should be understood as spaces of memory, culture, and spirituality. When this understanding is lost, the dead are treated as mere bodies and tombs as unimportant structures. This reveals a decline in the appreciation of spiritual and funerary heritage and a profound ethical and moral crisis.

Thus, the motivations for cemetery vandalism are not limited to simplistic explanations. They involve cultural, symbolic, economic, and structural dimensions that, combined, constitute a difficult phenomenon to combat, requiring integrated public policies, heritage education, and the strengthening of community networks.

2.4. Sociological Implications of Vandalism

Vandalism in cemeteries, beyond the obvious material damage, carries profound sociological implications. Such acts compromise not only the integrity of physical and symbolic assets, but also the collective, identity-based, and spiritual values of a community.

Funeral rituals and burial spaces are a fundamental part of social cohesion. They establish a relationship between the living and the dead, symbolically regulating feelings of belonging, respect, and cultural continuity. [9] When a cemetery is vandalized, this symbolic order is disrupted, generating a sense of collective disrespect and a devaluation of memory. [13] Modernity often dissolves ancestral practices and symbols without offering effective substitutes for social integration.

Furthermore, the sociological implications of vandalism are not limited to the religious or symbolic sphere. There is also a direct impact on public trust, the population's relationship with the government, and the perception of institutional negligence. When residents see abandoned, vandalized, and unprotected cemeteries, a social representation of poor governance and impunity is formed. [3] Urban insecurity, when chronic, is a reflection of the failure of social and institutional safety nets.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand cemetery vandalism not only as a criminal act, but also as a sociological phenomenon that reflects a crisis of values, the weakening of traditions, and the fragility of public policies. Combating this problem requires integrated actions involving heritage education, community surveillance, security policies, and the appreciation of collective memory.

2.5. Heritage Education and Vandalism Prevention

Heritage education plays a crucial role in preserving symbolic spaces like cemeteries. It not only informs but also raises awareness of the historical, social, and spiritual value of these places. Acts of vandalism reveal the urgent need for educational initiatives that promote respect and a sense of belonging.

Heritage education aims to foster critical thinking, an appreciation of collective memory, and respect for cultural heritage. When individuals understand the historical and emotional significance of a cultural asset, they tend to protect and care for it. Therefore, investing in heritage education programs can significantly reduce vandalism rates. [12]

Furthermore, heritage education must begin in schools and extend to communities through integrated projects involving public agencies, churches, community leaders, and educational institutions. [6] Physically protecting heritage assets is not enough; it is necessary to educate citizens so that they are aware of their cultural and symbolic value. This is particularly important when funerary heritage coexists with vulnerable social realities and the absence of structured public policies.

Heritage appreciation depends on individual experience with cultural assets. Thus, allowing Mitcha residents to actively participate in cemetery conservation-through community cleanups, wall painting, and preservation of old tombstones, among other activities-can help reduce vandalism and strengthen the emotional connection to the space. [25]

The topic should also be included in school curricula, through subjects such as history, sociology and citizenship, in order to encourage reflection on the importance of collective memory.

Finally, heritage education must be understood as a long-term policy, combined with investments in security, signage, lighting, and monitoring. This integrated approach will preserve the Cemetery as a dignified, respected, and protected space, both by the public and by government authorities.

3. Methodology

Methodology is the fundamental axis of any scientific investigation, as it defines the paths taken to achieve the proposed objectives and validate the results. In this study, which seeks to understand the sociological implications of vandalism at the Municipality of Lubango, a quantitative approach was chosen.

This study is characterized as applied, as it seeks to propose strategies to minimize a specific social problem: the vandalization of funerary heritage. [27] Applied research aims to generate knowledge geared towards practical application, with the objective of solving specific problems that affect communities.

Regarding its objectives, the research is exploratory-descriptive. Exploratory because it addresses a phenomenon little investigated locally, opening paths for future studies, and descriptive because it seeks to identify, analyze and record facts and perceptions related to vandalism in cemeteries, as argued by [15-20].

A quantitative approach was adopted. The quantitative aspect allowed us to quantify the opinions and perceptions of study participants through structured questionnaires, which were transformed into statistical data and presented in tables.

A questionnaire was administered to cemetery staff, including gravediggers, security guards, and maintenance personnel, as well as to the Lubango Municipal Department of Environment and Sanitation (DMASB). The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended questions, aiming to obtain institutional information on the occurrence of vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery. The data are presented and analyzed separately, initially from cemetery staff and subsequently from DMASB.

The choice of this instrument is justified by its effectiveness in collecting objective data and the possibility of analyzing different perspectives on the problem [17-29].

The research used the following technical procedures: bibliographic - consisted of consulting books, scientific articles and official documents on vandalism, heritage, heritage education and sociology of disrespect, with the aim of theoretically supporting the study.

Descriptive statistics: used to quantify survey responses, facilitating the presentation of data in tabular form [18].

Data triangulation: made it possible to compare and validate information obtained from different sources (questionnaires and literature), strengthening the reliability of the results [8].

The target population of this study is composed of CM employees and a representative of the Municipal Directorate of Environment and Basic Sanitation of Lubango.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Collected Data – Cemetery Employees

Question 1 – Perception of vandalism

The unanimous responses also echoed the meaning of vandalism. They associated the term with the destruction of monuments and public or private property. This response reinforces that the authorities' understanding aligns with the classic definition of vandalism in scientific literature.

The convergence between workers' common sense and the academic definition demonstrates a deep awareness of the negative impact of these practices on collective space. [19] Vandalism is not only a physical act of destruction, but also a symbolic attack on identity and social memory, especially in places like cemeteries, which represent the history and values of a community.

Another relevant aspect of this response is the realization

that vandalism in cemeteries is not an isolated act, but rather part of a disrespectful and even violent behavior against society's intangible heritage. This destruction affects not only the families of the deceased, but also the entire symbolic structure surrounding respect for the dead and funerary traditions.

Table 1. Question 2 – Have there been any reports of vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery.

Vandalism record	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Yes	12	80%
No	2	20%
Total	15	100

Of the 15 respondents, twelve (12), representing 80%, stated that there had been instances of vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery, while three (3), representing 20%, stated that they had never witnessed such an incident. The discrepancy in responses may reflect differences in the length of service of employees or a lack of adequate information about incidents that have occurred at the site.

The majority (80%) who acknowledge the occurrence of vandalism reinforce the seriousness of the problem. The lack of security, the cemetery's size, and its proximity to neighborhoods considered dangerous encourage crime. [30] The Mitcha neighborhood is characterized by a low police presence, a lack of public lighting, and a general sense of insecurity, factors that directly contribute to the vulnerability of the space.

Furthermore, concrete cases corroborate these allegations. In 2021, five people were arrested for removing marble, doors, and windows from tombs, and in 2023, two young men were arrested for desecrating graves, according to a report published by Novo Jornal [23]. These reports reinforce the authorities' statements and demonstrate the urgent need for public policies to prevent these acts and protect funeral spaces.

It's important to emphasize that acts of vandalism in cemeteries affect not only the physical structure of the site, but also the collective sense of respect for the dead and the right of families to be remembered. The lack of regular policing and electronic surveillance exacerbates the situation and requires structured interventions by the competent authorities.

Table 2. Question 4 – Causes of vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery.

Causes	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Belief in witchcraft practices	11	73.33%

Causes	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Theft of material goods	4	26.67%
Total	15	100

Most employees (73.33%) cited belief in witchcraft as the main cause of cemetery vandalism, while four (26.67%) attributed the phenomenon to the theft of material goods. This perception points to an interconnectedness of cultural beliefs, spiritual practices, and social factors such as poverty and marginalization.

The connection between vandalism and witchcraft is ancient and recurrent in the African collective imagination. [16] Acts of vandalism in cemeteries are often associated with attempts at spiritual or material enrichment through rituals involving mortal remains. It is, therefore, a desecration of sacred space driven by practices that defy social morality.

The testimony of an authority, reporting that "people seek out the kimbandeiros to make pacts involving actions in cemeteries," is corroborated by empirical evidence in other provinces, such as Moxico, in the city of Luena. According to Mayor Rodrigues Maliji [16], some individuals vandalize graves with the aim of extracting teeth or organs from corpses for witchcraft rituals. These practices, in addition to representing an aggression against the dead and their families, indicate a sociocultural phenomenon that requires investigation and combat with interdisciplinary actions.

However, the material factor cannot be ignored. The theft of items such as marble, metal, windows, and tomb doors points to the existence of an illegal trade chain for these materials. This reveals that vandalism also has an economic dimension, fueled by parallel markets and a lack of oversight.

These two motivations-spiritual and economic-demonstrate the complexity of the problem. Cemetery vandalism, therefore, must be understood from a broad sociocultural perspective, considering religiosity, poverty, institutional neglect, and the fragility of public security and heritage policies.

Question 4 – Perception of finding a body outside the grave

All authorities have stated that they have never found bodies outside their graves at Mitcha Cemetery. This statement brings some relief, as it demonstrates that, to date, the desecration of corpses has not reached extreme levels. Still, the absence of formal cases does not mean the phenomenon does not exist, as reports of grave destruction and the presence of suspicious remains may indicate occult practices.

Reports from authorities about destroyed crosses, boxes of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and even sharp objects scattered throughout the cemetery reveal that the area is visited at inappropriate times and for inappropriate purposes. These factors indicate that the site, even without visibly exhumed bodies, is vulnerable to the activities of groups that use it for nefarious purposes.

The literature indicates that clandestine exhumation of

bodies, when it occurs, is carried out quickly and generally during periods of low traffic, making identification difficult. [28] Beyond legal considerations, cemeteries should be viewed as symbolic and spiritual assets, and the violation of tombs is a serious attack on human and cultural values.

Therefore, although no bodies have been identified outside the graves to date, the evidence of physical vandalism and the social context of the neighborhood require caution and justify the reinforcement of preventive measures.

Question 5 – Damages of having a body outside the grave

The fifteen (15) employees at Mitcha Cemetery responded affirmatively to this question, recognizing that exposing a body outside the grave can cause various harms. The employees' perception reveals a basic understanding of the social and health implications of irregular exhumation or exposure of bodies. This understanding is relevant, especially in a context where public health regulations associate contact with decomposing bodies with biological risks.

From a health perspective, the decomposition process releases pathogens that can cause disease outbreaks, as well as attracting transmitting insects, such as flies, putting not only cemetery workers but also the surrounding population at risk. Beyond the health impact, there are also cultural and symbolic impacts. Many employees mentioned the idea of "disrespecting the corpse" and even the belief that digging up a corpse "brings bad luck." Such perceptions align with traditional values that consider cemeteries sacred spaces, whose violation leads to spiritual imbalance. [5] The necropolis serves as a place of faith, art, and collective memory.

For these reasons, the exposure of corpses must be avoided at all costs, not only for technical and sanitary reasons, but also because of the need to safeguard moral, cultural and religious values that guarantee respect for the dignity of the deceased.

Question 6 – Importance of respecting cemeteries as places of rest for people

All employees unanimously stated that cemeteries should be respected as resting places for loved ones. This response points to a greater appreciation of cemeteries as symbolic and affective places, reinforcing their importance in society's culture and collective memory.

Respect for burial spaces is essential not only for their spiritual function, but also for their heritage value. [28] Cemeteries are living heritage sites, where history, art, religion, and cultural identity intertwine. Violating them is also a form of symbolic violence against the traditions and families of the deceased.

This perception also aligns with the sociological perspective [9]: funeral rituals play an essential social role in the cohesion of human groups. Disrespecting a cemetery violates not only the dead but also the symbolic organization that sustains the social and spiritual values of a community.

Furthermore, the cemetery represents one of the oldest expressions of the bond between the living and the dead.

Therefore, ensuring its respect and physical and symbolic integrity protects the memory, mourning, and history of an entire community.

5. Analysis and Discussion of Data from the Municipal Directorate of Environment and Basic Sanitation – Lubango

The DMASB plays a key role in the management and supervision of public cemeteries, particularly the CM. According to data collected through the survey, this entity confirms that the cemetery in question has fifteen (15) employees, who perform guard duties, gravedigger duties, weeding duties, cleaning duties, and management duties. This organizational structure indicates a concern for the physical maintenance of the space, though not necessarily for security and surveillance during critical periods, such as nighttime.

The Municipal Administration acknowledges that it has received reports of vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery, the main motive being the theft of objects. This coincides with the perceptions of the employees interviewed, who identified theft and involvement in spiritual practices as the main causes. This convergence of data reinforces the consistency of the information obtained and confirms the presence of a worrying social phenomenon, which combines social exclusion, crime, and loss of values.

It is clear that, although the Board has no record of bodies found outside of graves, it recognizes that such an occurrence would cause serious harm to public health, primarily due to the exposure of decomposing matter. This demonstrates that the Board is aware of the dangers, but perhaps unprepared to prevent them.

Furthermore, the Council emphasizes the importance of respecting cemeteries as resting places for the dead. This perception aligns with the views of sociologist Higino. [16] Cemeteries should be treated with respect, as they symbolize the bond between the living and the dead, functioning as markers of collective identity. This institutional stance demonstrates cultural sensitivity, although it needs to be translated into practical measures.

However, one of the most important points highlighted by the Council was the suggestion to install public lighting in the cemetery as a way to deter vandals. This proposal reveals an attempt to link technical solutions to social problems. Indeed, improved lighting in public spaces has been highlighted by recent studies as an effective means of deterring crime [31]. This proposal should be urgently considered as part of a community safety plan, integrated with the National Police and traditional authorities.

The Council also recognizes that the circulation of people at inappropriate times in cemeteries must be controlled. This statement is in line with the preventive logic of public safety.

Finally, the testimony of the City Council representatives

reinforces the need for public policies that also include heritage education, raising public awareness of the historical and cultural importance of cemeteries. This educational approach, combined with security, maintenance, and cultural appreciation, can be crucial in preventing acts of vandalism.

6. Conclusions

The study highlighted that vandalism at Mitcha Cemetery is not an isolated or merely criminal phenomenon, but rather a complex expression of sociocultural, economic, and spiritual factors. The survey revealed that most staff recognize the recurrent occurrence of vandalism, associating it primarily with witchcraft and theft of materials. Such practices compromise the physical and symbolic integrity of the burial space, profoundly impacting the collective memory and social cohesion of the community.

It became clear that the cemetery is understood as a space of memory, spirituality, and cultural identity, and its violation is perceived as an attack on the dignity of both the dead and the living. The lack of effective preventive measures, combined with poor lighting and supervision, contributes to the weakening of the space, making it vulnerable to profane acts.

Valuing cemeteries as heritage requires an integrated approach, encompassing heritage education, public safety policies, local community involvement in preserving the space, and strengthening a sense of belonging. Respect for cemeteries transcends institutional duty—it is also a collective responsibility for preserving social and cultural memory.

7. Study limitations and future research

This study was limited to a small sample of participants and a single cemetery, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research should expand the sample, include different cemeteries, and involve diverse social actors. Qualitative research on the symbolic impact of vandalism is also recommended, as well as studies evaluating public protection policies and educational strategies for preserving funerary heritage.

Abbreviations

CM	Mitcha Cemetery
DMASB	Municipal Directorate of Environment and Basic Sanitation
PN	National Police

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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