

## THE HISTORY AND CURRENT SITUATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE CARE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Information about the contribution of Sub-Saharan Africa to the diversity of world culture is either missing or very insignificant. The author found it vital to point out some facts regarding the history of cultural heritage care in Sub-Saharan Africa, to identify the current problems and propose some possible means to overcome the existing problems. After assessing the alarming situation how the number of representatives of cultural heritage personnel from Sub-Saharan Africa decreases at international conferences, symposia and congresses, the paper also tries to propose how to kill two birds by one stone, i.e. to establish one department/training centre for related subjects as Archaeology and Cultural Heritage care in Sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>1</sup>

### *History*

For most of the world, Sub-Saharan Africa is a synonym of poverty and a politically unstable part of our planet. News of this kind attracts media coverage, but intentional information about the contribution of Africa to the diversity of world culture is either missing or very insignificant. When did Sub-Saharan Africans begin searching and caring for their cultural heritage? What are their concepts and current situations? And do they have any perspectives? This paper tries in a very brief manner to answer these questions. Sources devoted to the history of cultural heritage care in Sub-Saharan Africa trace the possible beginning of cultural heritage care in Sub-Saharan Africa to the period of the scramble for Africa by the colonial powers. As A. Holl. precisely described it as “a child of the colonial enterprise” (A. Holl in Robertshaw 1990:297). It was started around 1850 by colonial settlers, administrators and amateur researchers, who began to search for artefacts from the past of Africa and under the cover of “better understanding” immediately smuggled them back to their respective countries. British explorer Seton Karr in course of numerous journey in the horn of Africa made a large collection of artefacts and then distributed them to fifty different museums throughout the world (J.D. Clark 1954:22). It was dur-

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ing this period that the colonial powers took an interest in the indigenous cultures. For instance, in 1897, when Great Britain sent her army to conquer the West African city of Benin, the officers and some members of the army, who participated in this invasion, brought back bronze statues from the Ife Culture, some of them life-size. In 1910-11, the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius also pilfered Ife cultural artefacts (K. Willett 1967:18, J. Kense Francas in Robertshaw 1990:140). About 1929-30, these foreigners tried to publish a book about the past of the continent, on the basis of sporadic research, and mostly concerning the northern and southern parts (A. Bruel, 1931). About the same time, another effort produced "South Africa's Past" (M. Burkitt, 1928). Around 1931, recording, investigation and protection of archaeological and cultural heritage sites was put in the hands of professionals and of course these were foreigners. After Africa was almost fully colonized, and especially after the Second World War, the colonial powers began to set up institutions. They had already prepared the legislative framework and started to research and record the continent's remote history, for example the foundation of IFAN (Institut Français d'Afrique Noire) with its centre in Dakar, and the British Institute of East Africa. The establishment of these institutes helped to ensure that the continent's cultural heritage was also studied in Africa. Before this, all collected artefacts had been sent to France or Britain. From this time onwards, artefacts began to be analysed in Africa, in the respective centres at Dakar and Nairobi. This basis for experience and technical infrastructure, later became the starting point for cultural heritage care in the new independent states, especially after about 1960, when the majority of African nations regained their independence. These activities created the pre-conditions for establishing national museums, for example in Accra, or archaeology departments, for example at Legon, the first Black African university (Thurstan in Robertshaw 1990:209).

If we examine the Nigerian case, in 1920 a colonial education officer conceived the idea of conserving Nigerian traditional works of art, and another officer was appointed to search the impact of European influence on the indigenous culture. This ultimately led to the establishment of what was initially called the Nigerian Antiquities Service. By 1950, government functionaries of Nigerian origin had a growing awareness of the importance of their indigenous cultural heritage. In 1953, this led to the enactment of a cultural management law (N. Nzewunwa in D. Miller, M. Rowland, C. Tilley 1989:34). In Togo the National Museum was founded in 1975, and from this time onward sites and monuments were put under its control. In Ghana proper cultural heritage care started in 1948 (K. Myles 1989:118). Legislative measures protecting the heritage of Madagascar can be traced back to 1937, when the French colonial government brought out a decree on sites and monuments of natural or historic interest (D. Rasamuel in H. Cleere 1989:128).

In the Portuguese colonies, although rock paintings were reported to the Portuguese Royal Academy in 1721, very little notice was taken of the past of Mozambique until the beginning of the 20th century (P.J.J. Sinclair in P. Stone & MacKenzie 1989:152).

The post-war economic boom of the later 1950s and 1960s, which was accompanied by the independence of many colonial territories, enhanced the activity of cultural heritage care over the whole continent. Many newly independent Sub-Saharan African countries believed that the colonial regime had disrupted their cultural continuity, so they were enthusiastic about researching their past. Almost every country has at least an embryo of an archaeology, antiquities and museum service, but they also repeat a mistake of the colonial period. The colonialists mostly focused on care for the heritage of their own past in Africa. The independent states also focus on their own past and neglect their colonial remains. The situation in Asia and Latin America is similar. In my opinion, the colonial period also belongs to our past.

Countries, which were not subjected to colonial rule, have the advantage of preserving their cultural authenticity because of isolation, but the disadvantage of having to tackle all the difficulties common to developing countries, without experience in the areas of legislation and training from the period of colonial rule. Ethiopia is a typical example.

Today, the former colonies use the forums they have created (the Commonwealth, Francophonie or other) to establish training programmes to facilitate cultural heritage care in their countries.

### *Concepts*

The concept of cultural heritage care in Africa is exactly the same as in any other country of the world. There is sufficient understanding that preserving and protecting the cultural heritage helps to shape the identity of the nation and local communities. The sum of knowledge and experience is well recognized as the basis for decisions about the future at all levels of society. Monuments are also protected for their educational value. The importance of the cultural heritage for tourism is rapidly growing. It is also important to preserve the cultural heritage as a database for academic study.

In developing regions such as Africa:

The members of a tribe or clan are bound together by their religion, which embodies the corporate traditions of the group and is usually expressed in tangible terms by association with certain sites or constructions. Most of the nations in Sub-Saharan Africa do not possess written historical sources, so preserving oral traditions has great value. Natural habitats and wild life exist in sufficient abundance to form a foundation for strong conservation programmes.

The cultural heritage of Sub-Saharan Africa includes historic towns, districts, sites and monuments, and movable objects likely to be collected by museums. It also includes the signs and symbols used in art and literature, as well as languages, traditions, beliefs and ceremonies.

### *The Current Situation*

Although the continent faces many social, economic and political problems at present, by January 1996, 17 African cultural sites were included in the world



National park [Malawi] listed on the world heritage list [1984]



Rock-hewn church [Ethiopia] on the world heritage list since 1978

cultural heritage list. They are situated in eight countries: Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Tanzania, Senegal and Zimbabwe (see appendix 3).

According to some African scholars, the number does not represent the real situation. They stress that the African cultural heritage is especially underrepresented. That is why the African experts have discussed the African cultural properties already on the list, and proposed an initial approach to the types of African properties, which should be nominated for inclusion in the list (World Heritage Newsletter 11/96:4-5).

They have also drafted a new approach to the convention, which they consider to be well-situated and innovative, and which would allow the consideration of types of cultural property, which are almost unrepresented on the present list, although they are essential to many of the world's cultures (ibid). Apart from the above mentioned problems, drought, famine, ethnic conflict

and poor infrastructure complicate heritage care activities in Sub-Saharan Africa. To achieve a comprehensive view, we will examine the impacts of political, economic and social factors, and of development programmes.

### *I. Political Impact*

Although most of Sub-Saharan Africa (48 countries) has undergone major political and social changes since 1990, and most of close observers agree that some countries seem to be following a "progressive" path to democratic transition, coups d'état and ethnic conflicts, mostly headed by army officers, are a regular practice in the continent (C. Monga 1997:156). After seizing power, these officers immediately replace the high officials, including those in culture, with their own supporters. This process affects the application of existing cultural policies, and is associated with the constant drafting of new policies, leaving cultural heritage care without long-term continuity.

We all know that different ethnic groups inhabit the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries. A new government may represent only one group, or a minority of the population. Usually, they give priority only to the culture of their own ethnic group. Not in the remote past, but in recent times, we have seen that



The royal palace of Abomey [Benin] listed since 1985

Old town of Dejenne [Mali] listed on the world heritage list since 1988 (right)



the replacement of one social group or ideology by another has led to the destruction of all cultural assets associated with the old regime. Unfortunately such ugly experiences have occurred not only in Africa, but also in Eastern and Central European countries.

## *II. Economic Impact*

### *a. Inadequate Finance*

Apart from a few selected countries, the majority of Sub-Saharan African states face severe economic problems. The situation deteriorated especially after the end of the Cold War. The rich countries have focused their attention on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the conditions are much better than in Africa, and towards Asia, which has become a very promising trade zone. This has influenced the shift of capital investment, as a result of which Sub-Saharan Africa remains where it was. Since we all know that cultural institutions are financed by state subsidies, we can imagine what level of effective performance can be expected from these institutes. In such a deteriorating economic situation, the cultural heritage centres are not in a position to employ new qualified personnel, and there are times when they are also forced to dismiss experienced workers. This results in insufficient work and storage space, laboratory equipment and vehicles, and insufficient documentation (maps, air photography, subscriptions to journals). In addition, private funding of academic research is still not encouraged through tax incentives.

Today, any conservation or preservation activity requires big investment and adequate know-how. The total budget of some museum, archaeology and cultural heritage departments in Sub-Saharan African countries, does not exceed \$50,000. We can see from this, the circumstances under which cultural heritage

care is carried on, and how much money might be needed for conservation purposes (Hasen and Abera 1997).

Some countries benefit from fees paid by some international research expeditions. According to my information, foreign researchers must pay 10% of their total project capital. Since this is a way to increase state revenue, these foreign excavators are privileged compared to native archaeologists. There have even been cases, where the projects of domestic researchers have been rejected simply because they required government finance.

Such limited funds, accompanied by lack of skill in applying for grants, and lack of familiarity with the variety of potential funding institutions and agencies, handicaps the native scholars. In my opinion, spreading modern management approaches might reduce these shortcomings. Fund raising know-how seems to be as important as the ability to devise strong projects, which address national priorities as well as the grantor's interests.

Increasing the ability of African cultural heritage personnel to compete with foreign consulting agencies will produce a healthier and more productive research climate.

#### *b. Enable to Attract*

In Sub-Saharan Africa, archaeology graduates from African universities could be employed only as museum curators or secondary school teachers. If a graduate is lucky, he can be a practical archaeologist, or work in preserving cultural heritage. All these activities are financed by state budgets and mean being employed by the ministry of culture and education, which is not very attractive. As is well known, men are the main providers of income in African households. Women usually make no significant financial contribution, and remain as housewives. It is not easy to support a large family (with an average of 4.5 children), so skilled men are forced to seek better incomes.

#### *c. Poor Facilities*

Surviving cultural objects, such as monasteries, churches and ancient centres of civilization, are situated far from the main centres, and the poor infrastructure services of these countries hinder the preservation, protection and monitoring of them. Most museums in Sub-Saharan Africa are concentrated in urban areas, but the majority of the population still lives in rural areas. Some efforts have been made to solve this imbalance. Museums have initiated programmes to serve the rural communities, for example travelling exhibition services, mobile units, museum caravans and travelling boxes (PREMA News Letter 6/96:24).

### *III. Lack of Skilled Man Power*

In the majority of Sub-Saharan countries, the number of trained personnel is too small to carry out any significant work in this field. This provides fertile ground for the establishment of a permanent patron-client relationship between Africa and the developed world. I think this is why we still observe the continu-

ing imbalance of knowledge, power and money, which ensure the long-term dependence of Africa.

Let us demonstrate this fact using some randomly selected data, comparing the numbers of native African and other participants in training courses, symposia or conferences at regional or international levels.

The international symposium held at Poznan (Poland) in 1984, devoted to the "Origin and early development of food producing cultures in North Eastern Africa", had 77 participants, but only two of them were native Africans (one from Sudan and the other from Kenya) (L. Krzyżaniak & M. Kobusiewicz 1984:13-14).

The fifth international meeting of experts on the "conservation of earth architectures" at Rome in 1987, delegations from all the continents except Africa participated (A. Alejandro & H. Hoben 1987).

The sixth international conference on the "conservation of earth architecture" in the USA in 1990, had 80 participants from 30 countries, but only three of them were from Africa (1990:vii-x).

The number of African representatives remained the same at the seventh international conference on the "study of conservation of earth architecture" in Portugal in 1993, but here the total number of participants increased to 110.

The twelfth international congress of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (XIIth UISPP), held at Bratislava in 1991, had more than 900 participants from 52 countries of the world, but there were only 14 native Africans, from 8 countries.

At the ICOMOC-CIF international conference on "conservation training needs and ethics" in Finland in 1995, only two of the 75 participants were native Africans (A. Ahoniemi & Cale 1995:231).

According to the list of participants in ICCROM from 1966-1990, from 82 countries, 99 people from 29 Sub-Saharan African countries joined ICCROM courses (ICCROM Newsletter, 1991, 11) (see appendices 1, 2).

#### *IV. Social*

##### *a. Backward technology*

The majority of the population of Africa (60-80%) is engaged in the agricultural sector of the economy and equipped with very backward agricultural equipment. Where there is no sign of change since time immemorial, with working conditions forcing people to spend two thirds of their time in the fields, it is hard to expect people to participate in cultural heritage care in any way. If we want active participation from this group, radical measures are required in the economic area.

##### *b. Development programme*

Some development programmes, mainly influenced by industrial manufactured materials and the so-called modern way of life, are leading to the countryside steadily losing its traditional architecture and settlement pattern, together with social values and meanings.

### *Recommendations*

1. The top priority must be to settle the political situation:

Settling past grievances,

Restoring legitimacy,

Showing solidarity and compassion,

Expanding the political market,

Ensuring military neutrality (C. Monga 1997:68-69).

To design an effective strategy to improve social well-being.

The single path towards this goal is to teach parliamentary pluralism, taking into account the multi-ethnic composition of the country. Achieving political stability means opening the door to the investor. The final result will be economic growth, which is the key to solving the above mentioned problems.

2. How to prepare trained manpower?

There are different approaches to training cultural heritage personnel. The model recommended here could be applied in countries where archaeology, art history or architecture has been a first degree programme in universities. These degree courses could provide the option of specialization in cultural care. The other alternative is to establish a centre, at least on the advanced diploma level, within the framework of an NGO. Short courses (2-3 months) or workshops could be organized at regional level (for instance for East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, North Africa) in close cooperation with international organizations such as ICCROM and ICOMOS. Rural settlement patterns and traditional architecture (adobe buildings) must be supported by modern facilities (electricity, infrastructure).

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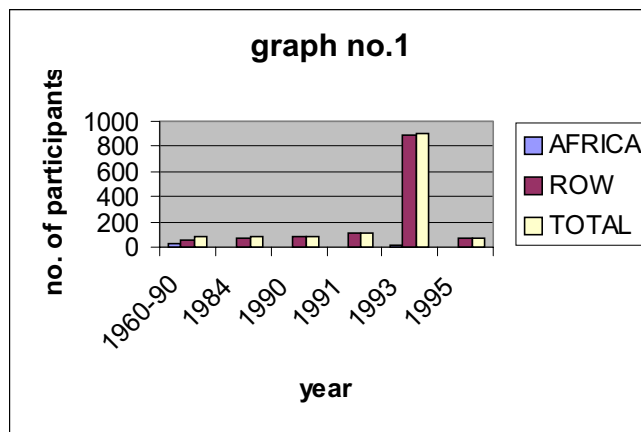
## APPENDICES

### The 17 African cultural sites included in World Heritage List up to 1st January 1996

Benin	Royal Palaces of Abomey
Ethiopia	Rock-hewn Churches, Lalibela Fasil Ghebi Lower Valley of the Awas Tiya Aksum
Ghana	Lower Valley of Omo Forts and Castles, Volta Greater Accra, Central and Western Regions Ashante Traditional Buildings
Mali	Old Towns of Djené Timbuktu Cliff of Bandiagara (Land of the Dogons) (mixed sites)
Mozambique	Island of Mozambique
United Republic of Tanzania	Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Ruins of Songo Manara
Senegal	Island of Gorée
Zimbabwe	Great Zimbabwe National Monument Khami Ruins

**Statistically illustrated the above data's (pages 13-14)**

YEAR	AFRICA	%	ROW*	%	TOTAL
1960-90	29	34.4	53	64.6	82
1984	2	2.6	75	97.4	77
1990	3	3.8	77	96.3	80
1991	3	2.7	107	97.3	110
1993	14	1.6	886	98.4	900
1995	2	2.7	73	97.3	75



\*ROW=Rest of the World