

Heritage in Danger: Armed Conflict in West Africa and the Blue Shield Approach

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Abstract

The present paper is an evaluation of the issue of the protection of heritage resources in the event of armed conflicts in West Africa which is the object of interest of the Blue Shield. The armed conflict in Mali in 2012 presented the first occasion for Blue Shield to seek an intervention in West Africa for the protection of heritage resources in the course of a war following the wanton destruction of heritage sites by the radical Islamist insurgence. The subject of the protection of World cultural and natural heritage resources had for a long time preoccupied the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and there had been a number of international conventions to address the problem. The Hague Convention of 1954 specifically seeks to protect heritage resources in the event of armed conflicts and it forms the basis for the Blue Shield approach.

Keywords: Heritage Resources; Armed Conflicts; Cultural Heritage; Blue Shield Approach

Introduction

Folorunso [1] examines the history and nature of armed conflicts in Africa and the implications for heritage resources and established that while the provisions of 1954 Hague Convention tend to address armed conflicts as understood in the western world where conflicts are usually trans-border, the African experience of armed conflicts is quite different as they tend to be more of civil wars and communal conflicts than trans-border conflicts. Therefore, the challenges to the protection of heritage properties in the event of armed are more complex than as envisaged in the Hague Convention of 1954.

The Hague Convention construes armed conflict to be trans-border war with the use of light and heavy

artilleries involving conventional states' armies. The article 19 of the Convention states among others that: in the event of an armed conflict not of an international character occurring within the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties, each party to the conflict shall be bound to apply, as a minimum, the provisions of the present Convention which relate to respect for cultural property (<http://www.icomos.org/hague.convention.html>).

Boylan [2] expressed the view that „those drafting the 1954 Convention probably envisaged war in terms of well-defined international conflicts between structured and well-disciplined military commands on the pattern of the two World Wars“. He then observed that this was probably a mistake, even in historic terms as „more than half of all the armed conflicts resulting in fatalities that

occurred between 1820 and 1945 were mainly internal rather than external conflicts, or mixed conflicts, and certainly, the great majority of the perhaps almost two hundred armed conflicts that have occurred in the world since 1954 have been sub-conventional and guerrilla wars" [2]. The 1954 Convention however sought to address these other forms of conflict through the decision of the 1954 Intergovernmental Conference „to follow Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, and extend the protection of cultural property beyond the traditional definition of “war” into the difficult area of internal armed conflicts, such as civil wars, “liberation” wars and armed independence campaigns [2].

Boylan [2] also noted that: in the years since the adoption of the 1954 Convention non-international armed conflicts, particularly those relating to internal strife along national, regional, ethnic, linguistic or religious lines, have become an increasingly common feature of the world order and in losses of monuments, museums, libraries and other cultural repositories [2].

The recent wars in Kosovo, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali and Nigeria have highlighted the complicities of armed conflicts and their impacts on heritage resources. The impacts of the invasion of Iraq by the Allied forces in 2003 and the subsequent political instability on cultural properties had been sufficiently documented by some agencies such as an online list server platform named Iraq crisis. The activities of militias of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the destruction of museums, monuments and sites were captured on video cameras and brought to homes around the world on television screens. Scholars of various fields such as Archaeology, Museology, Anthropology and Archival Studies made revealing presentations on the destruction of cultural properties in Iraq and Syria by ISIS at the World Archaeological Congress meeting in Kyoto, Japan in 2016 under the theme, War and Conflict.

Interventions included but not limited to the following: “Sufi Cultural Heritage and the War on Terror”, “Parsing Propaganda: How the ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives sorts myth from reality in Syria and Iraq”, “The weaponization of „Canonical” Images: An Analysis of Cultural Heritage Destruction, Performative Actions, and Shifting Landscapes in Syria”, “Aleppine Ottoman „ajami Rooms, Destruction and reconstruction”, “The Islamic State/Daeshs Socially Mediated Terrorism”, “Current Situation of Syrian Cultural Heritage and the Prospects for the Future”, “Neighbouring Crisis: Situation of Syrian Cultural Heritage seen from Lebanon”, “Palmyra Rescue Project” and “Japanese contribution on the Rehabilitation of Iraqi cultural heritage” [3-11].

ISIS affiliated groups in West Africa equally destroyed valuable heritage resources in Mali which had also been documented and seen on television screens around the world. Information is replete on the internet through the various search engines such as Google on the destruction of cultural properties in the various theatres of armed conflict. The Boko Haram in Nigeria, which is also affiliated to ISIS, has been very destructive to cultural properties but its destructive activities have not been properly documented.

The Blue Shield Approach

The forerunner of the Blue Shield, the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) was created in 1996 by four founding organisations – the International Council of Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). The Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS) was established in 2008 while the ICBS and the ANCBS amalgamated in 2016 to become the Blue Shield (<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/history>).

The primary context for the Blue Shield is the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999. The purpose of the Blue Shield is therefore to promote the protection of cultural property as defined in the Convention against threats of all kinds and to intervene strategically with decision makers and relevant international organizations to prevent and to respond to natural and man-made disasters. The Blue Shield in its article 2.1 of 2016 Statutes states its mission as a commitment to the protection of the world’s cultural property, and a concern for the protection of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, in the event of armed conflict, natural or human-made disaster. The Blue Shield in its concern for the protection of cultural properties has gone beyond considering armed conflicts and natural or human-made disasters as its main focus but to include for its intervention other causes of damage and destruction of cultural properties such as urban development and expansion; development of agricultural technology; increase in land used for agriculture and consequent destruction of trees and forests; general neglect; lack of resources; speculation; inappropriate conservation decisions and ineffective legislation; inadequate tourism management; lack of proper conservation of movable objects, buildings, monuments, sites and landscapes; theft and looting of cultural property and its illicit trafficking; vandalism and terrorism and environmental deterioration

(<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/ethics-approach-principles/>).

Also to note is the importance that Blue Shield attaches to the protection of cultural properties to justify its approach. The Blue Shield considers people's culture and heritage as major elements of tourism that constitutes a significant proportion of the national economies, therefore cultural property is not only important for memory and identity formation, but is an important element in protecting individual livelihoods, the national economy, and security. The deliberate destruction of cultural property may be classed as a war crime and damage to cultural property might be prosecuted under international criminal law. Yet another economic activity that is criminal is the identification of evidence for the looting of cultural properties during „asymmetric“ armed conflict as providing funding for some parties involved in conflicts. “By restricting such looting, the military can therefore choke-off a strand of funding for the opposition and potentially save lives and shorten the conflict” (<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/ethics-approach-principles/>).

The Blue Shield has also noted that cultural property could be used as a political weapon as was exemplified during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, where cultural properties were “specifically targeted by every warring faction as each strove to remove all evidence that other communities had ever inhabited particular localities”. Targeting of cultural properties by belligerents is considered to also make “post-conflict stabilization more difficult as different sections of a population fail to come to terms with the destruction of their cultural properties and may, as happened in Iraq, continue to damage and destroy the cultural properties of their enemies in the „stabilization phase“ of a conflict”. It has also been noted that there are examples of where belligerent or peacekeeping forces, or troops deployed to help following environmental disasters, have failed to protect cultural properties or, worse, unintentionally damaged them through their action. Such action can alienate the local community (<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/ethics-approach-principles/>).

The functions of the Blue Shield are listed as follows:

- To promote the ratification and implementation of the Hague Convention and its protocols, with the emphasis on advocating ICBS's philosophy and principles.
- To encourage safeguarding and respect for cultural property especially by promoting risk preparedness.
- To train experts at national and regional level to prevent, control and recover from disasters.

- To act in an advisory capacity for the protection of endangered heritage.
- To consult and co-operate with other bodies including UNESCO, ICCROM and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The Blue Shield and Africa

A sizable number of people in Africa might be taken to have some knowledge about international conventions guiding warfare as they relate to humanitarian issues and crimes against humanity, particularly from the publicity offered by the international and national news media on such issues. However, a little is known about The Hague Convention and the protection for cultural properties in the event of war, as such awareness is limited to few academics and some professionals who have interest in cultural heritage issues. While the Red Cross organization is well known for providing humanitarian service in war and natural disaster situations, the Blue Shield is hardly known for providing protection to cultural properties in war and natural disaster situations. The present author first heard about Blue Shield at the World Archaeological Congress (WAC 6) in 2008 at Dublin, Ireland. A quick survey of some colleagues at University of Ibadan shows that almost all of them had never heard of Blue Shield.

On the website of the Blue Shield, there are twenty-seven countries listed as having registered committees and they are Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Chile, Curacao, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Guatemala, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Macedonia, Madagascar, Netherland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States of America. Twenty-four countries are listed as having committees under construction and they are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Mexico, Palestine, Peru, Russia Federation, Slovenia, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and Venezuela. Among all these countries only three African countries, Benin, Madagascar and Senegal were listed as having registered committees while Egypt was listed as having a committee under construction (<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/ethics-approach-principles/>). At the General Assembly of the Blue Shield in 2017 at Vienna, Austria only Senegal was represented while Nigeria was in attendance and it was obvious that Senegal did not have a working committee. Enquiries also revealed that the committees in Benin, Madagascar and Egypt were probably only on paper. One can safely say that the Blue Shield does not in reality exist on the African continent.

Blue Shield Approach and the West African Experience Mali

The political crisis in Mali in 2012 presented the Blue Shield the opportunity to try an intervention in a region where as earlier established in this paper it has no representation. The crisis started after the collapse of the government of Mali in the coup of 22 March 2012. Several militant groups exploited the resultant power vacuum to establish bases in the northern parts of the country. Three such groups were the notable terrorist organizations: al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was the region's dominant armed group. Its relationships with Mali's two jihadist groups, Ansar Dine (supporters of religion) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) were deep and interconnected. Almost 1,000 kilometres south in Bamako, a transitional government struggled to exert control over the vast territory amid violent demonstrations and counter-coup attempts. Though the Tuareg separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) had declared an independent state in the north, the al Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine led by the veteran Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghaly rejected the idea and stated that the group's objective was to impose Islamic law in Mali. The Ansar Dine, along with Tuareg rebels and other armed groups, swept through northern Mali in March and April 2012, seizing the northern half of the country and its ancient towns of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal [12].

Timbuktu was a centre of Islamic learning from the 13th to the 17th Centuries and played a major role in spreading Islam in West Africa; the oldest dates from 1329. It has holdings of 700,000 manuscripts surviving in public libraries and private collections, books on religion, law, literature and science, letters between rulers, advisers and merchants on subjects as varied as taxation, commerce, marriage and prostitution. Timbuktu has 333 tombs of holy saints among which 16 are classified as UNESCO World Heritage Sites including that of Sidi Mahamoud Ben Amar, a learned scholar considered the most sacred in Timbuktu. These include the Sankore, Sidi Yahia and Djingareï-ber mosques - the latter Timbuktu's oldest, built from mud bricks and wood in 1325 - the famous manuscript libraries and the 16 mausoleums of Timbuktu [12,13].

The Ansar Dine and the Tuareg separatist MNLA movement considered all the local monuments and distinctive sun-baked mosques renowned for palm trees protruding from earthen walls, sprinkled throughout Mali, as idolatrous and contrary to their strict interpretation of Islam and stated that the monuments were "un-Islamic"

[14]. Some Islamists view shrines as idolatry but traditional Muslims, especially Sufis, see shrines as part of accepted Islamic custom. In Egypt and Libya, Salafists had in the past attacked several Sufi shrines. In a similar Islamists' reaction to heritage sites in 2001, the Taliban dynamited and destroyed two 6th century BC statues of Buddha measuring 55 and 37 meters (180 and 121 feet) high, carved into a cliff in Bamiyan in central Afghanistan [12]. The subject of shrines in Islamic religion had been examined by some scholars [15,16]. The Islamists considered prayers at shrines as „haram“ (forbidden) and expected worshippers to ask God directly rather than the dead.

Militants of the Ansar Dine on 16 May 2012 were reported to have assembled outside the clay-coated Sidi Yahya mosque in Timbuktu armed with pickaxes and shouting "Allahu Akbar". They broke down the entrance and destroyed a door that was believed to be kept shut until the end of the world, prompting UNESCO to declare Timbuktu an endangered world heritage site. The assault on the Sidi Yahya mosque provoked festering anger among ordinary Malians but the more people denounced them, the more they defied the international community to prove they were masters in their own territory [14]. In a statement read on the national television the Malian government said; "we have learned with indignation of the desecration of tombs perpetrated by lawless individuals. The government condemns in the strongest terms this unspeakable act in the name of Islam, a religion of tolerance and respect for human dignity" [12].

Irina Bokova, the then Director-General of UNESCO summed up the situation of heritage properties in Northern Mali as paraphrased below:

The destruction of Timbuktu's shrines adds a moral and cultural crisis to a desperate humanitarian situation. This destruction is deliberate, undertaken in cold blood to catch the world's attention and destroy the last defenses of Malian identity and strength.

The attack on Timbuktu's cultural heritage is an attack against - history and the values it carries -- values of tolerance, exchange and living together, which lie at the heart of Islam. It is an attack against the physical evidence that peace and dialogue is possible.

Protecting culture is not a luxury-it is a security issue. Attacks against cultural heritage are attacks against the very identity of communities. They lead to devastation that can be irreparable, with an impact that lasts long after the dust has settled. Attacks on the past make reconciliation much harder in the future.

As globalization accelerates, people feel ever more the need to protect their identities and sense of belonging. Culture has today a central role in peace building and conflict prevention. This is why it is such an easy target for fanatics [17].

Two of the listed functions of the Blue Shield now become of particular interest to us as they are relevant to the case of Mali and they are as listed below:

- To encourage safeguarding and respect for cultural property especially by promoting risk preparedness.
- To train experts at national and regional level to prevent, control and recover cultural properties from Disasters (<https://theblueshield.org//about-us/ethics-approach-principles/>).

At the break of the Malian crisis the General Secretary of Blue Shield wrote to a professional in Nigeria with the hope that some links could be established with the Nigerian Military that was going to deploy troops under the auspices of the African Union. A section of the mail is reproduced below:

From the Blue Shield we have been trying to pass information to French, UK, and NATO forces about cultural sites in Mali. I attach the list that has been circulated to these organisations. I'm also aware that the UK has offered to send 300 military trainers to train the Mali army – and we are trying to get a slot in the training programme for these trainers before they leave the UK to explain the importance of cultural property protection and for them to include it into their training programme for the Mali army.

Is there any way you could get this attached information to the West African organisation that is, I understand, leading on this for the AU. Also, could you offer training to any West African (or other African) troops who might be deploying?

On the request from the Blue Shield and with no previous experience on the subject matter a letter was addressed on 28 February 2013 to the General Officer Commanding, 2 Mechanized Division Nigerian Army, Odogbo Barracks, Ibadan, being the closest military formation to us. The Army formation in Ibadan later directed that we address our letter to the Chief of Training and Operations, Nigerian Army Headquarters, Area 7, Garki, Abuja and on 30 April 2013 the letter was written with the subject "Troop Deployment to Mali and the Protection of Heritage Sites in Mali". Sections of the letter are reproduced below:

The International Blue Shield, the association that is preoccupied with the protection of heritage sites and properties in the event of armed conflicts has been making contact with the military authorities of countries involved in troop deployment to Mali to ensure that cultural properties are adequately protected in Mali. The Blue Shield has requested that I make contact with the Nigerian military authority on its behalf. A document containing a sizable number of heritage sites in Mali, detailing the nature and locations was sent to me and I have put it on the accompanying CD.

I will be grateful if you would take the necessary action to achieve the desired objectives of the International Blue Shield in the deployment of the Nigerian troop to Mali. On the request of the International Blue Shield, I have also accepted to provide training to the Nigerian troop on the issue of the protection of heritage resources in the event of armed conflict.

The response to the above letter came in the form of a telephone call from a senior military officer at the Nigerian Army Headquarters in Abuja to acknowledge the receipt of the letter and to also to indicate their readiness to cooperate on the request of Blue Shield. However, the Nigerian Army posed a question as to who would pay for the training. A formal written reply was expected from the Army for us to start discussion on the modalities of the training. The letter never came as events moved fast and Nigeria also found herself entangled in armed insurgency leading to the review of deployment of troops to Mali.

Nigeria

The Boko Haram insurgency whose activities are localised in North-Eastern Nigeria but in the past extended to the Federal Capital Territory and other parts of Northern Nigeria, particularly Kano State. Boko Haram which is affiliated to the ISIS has as its agenda the eradication of western education. Initially its targets of attacks were churches, Police Stations, government establishments and international organisations. Observers quickly noted that Boko Haram was not attacking educational institutions which should ordinarily be its primary targets. Boko Haram then expanded its targets to include mosques, market places and motor parks. It later started attacking educational institutions by destroying schools, killing students while sleeping in their hostels and finally kidnapping over two hundred female students from their school at Chibok in Borno State in April 2014.

Unlike the events in Mali the activities of Boko Haram in North-eastern Nigeria were never seen to be detrimental to heritage properties and there was no cry to that effect. It was therefore not unexpected that the Blue Shield never indicated interest for the protection of heritage properties in the region of the conflict. However, it should be noted that Borno and Yobe states which constitute the theatre of Boko Haram activities are home to precious cultural landscapes and archaeological sites for which there are yet any reports concerning their fate. The region had undergone archaeological explorations that had yielded sites ranging from the Late Stone Age to the Historic Period. The archaeological sites had been adequately reported to show the importance of the region to human history in Africa. Of particular interest are the settlement mounds which show occupations from the Late Stone Age through to the historic period, sites that have yielded unique objects such as the 8000 year-old dugout canoe from Dufuna in Yobe State and sites that produced terracotta figurines [18-31].

Sites relating to the so culture and ancient Kanem-Bornu Empire had been reported in the region, particularly the ruins of the capitals of the empire. Birnin Ngazargamu, located close to the Lake Chad on the south-western shore was the site of one of the capitals of the empire. Even before the Boko Haram crisis, the site and others of the same period had been extensively looted by the locals who removed burnt bricks used for the construction of houses and walls for re-use in house construction in their settlements. The bricks removed from the ruins had been adjudged to be of very high quality compared to those of recent production [32-35]. The Sukur Cultural Landscape which is a World Heritage Site is located in Adamawa State which is within the theatre of the Boko Haram insurgency. Unconfirmed media reports had it that Boko Haram had sabotaged this precious cultural heritage site, had destroyed the thatched roofs and granary covers, and the raids had permanently damaged the structure of the residence of the chief. Some other media reports on heritage issues had it that Islamist militants loyal to Boko Haram had destroyed cultural sites they considered idolatrous.

Conclusion

It has become very obvious that the 1954 Hague Convention on the protection of cultural properties in the event of armed conflict could only be enforced in cross boarder conflicts involving states' armies. We have seen how destructive civil and insurgency wars could be to cultural properties particularly when the conflicts were underlined by religious contestation over practices considered to be idolatry as exemplified in the conflict in

Mali. We have also established the complete absence of the Blue Shield as an organization in West Africa which made it difficult for Blue Shield to identify persons and relevant authorities that could assist in the matter of cultural properties.

The Blue Shield would therefore need to double its efforts to extend its lofty ideas of protecting cultural properties to Africa just as the activities of the Red Cross are known and felt all over the world. The problems of threat to cultural properties in Africa are more than armed conflicts to include more devastating causes such as urban development and expansion; increase in land used for agriculture and consequent destruction of trees and forests; general neglect; lack of resources; inappropriate conservation decisions and ineffective legislation; inadequate tourism management and the theft, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property. All of the aforementioned causes had already been identified by the Blue Shield as requiring attention. Blue Shield could be a motivating factor to get the nations in Africa to faithfully implement the provisions of all the UNESCO conventions that seek to protect cultural properties. There are also policies of international financial grant bodies for development such as the World Bank, that encourage the protection of cultural properties in development projects but which have been played down or totally ignored in many African nations. The Blue Shield can serve as a watchdog to ensure compliance to the policies.

The problem in Africa had been and it is still the failure of most African countries to identify culture and heritage as major elements of tourism that could significantly boost the national economies. It has therefore become important and urgent for African countries to protect the non renewable cultural properties before there is nothing left to protect. For this to happen, there is the need to professionalize the agencies entrusted with the management of cultural properties. In many African countries such agencies are headed and staffed by persons with little or no training and interest in the relevant academic disciplines related to cultural heritage. The agencies therefore function as mere extension of the civil service with their structures of staffing not reflecting any set goals to be achieved.

Lastly, the Blue Shield should endeavor to expand its activities to Africa by engaging professionals in the cultural heritage sector. The African Union could be engaged to obtain access to the national armies of the various countries in order to achieve the objective of providing troops with information relating to the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflicts. This would ensure thinking about when and

how cultural heritage experts could support and perhaps influence national ministries of defense and their armed forces to prepare for, and conduct, operations across the spectrum of conflict as the armies are often involved in peace keeping operations. Providing detailed cultural property intelligence is crucial for the armed forces to better understand the cultural landscape, and to be better equipped to protect it. This is more required for national operations of restoring peace during civil disturbances by African armies where countries are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingua.

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