



Research Notes on the Plundering of Tangible Heritage Resources in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is one among the many African countries where heritage properties have not enjoyed adequate protection in the face of factors such as construction works, urban renewal and outright looting of archaeological sites and museums. The present research notes are to highlight some areas of concern and the nature of the problems for conservation.

Introduction

It had been repeated over and over again that space of development in Africa had been slow that tourism is one avenue for Africa to earn more income. While some notable achievements had been made in wildlife tourism in some African countries, Nigeria is yet to explore the full potentials of her touristic resources. Efforts are geared towards developing cultural festivals and carnivals as tourist's attractions while tangible heritage resources are left to continuous destruction. When tourists flood Athens, Cambridge, London, Paris, Rome and other European towns they seek to experience the preserved ancient landscapes and not just festival and carnivals. It would be regrettable if the present destruction of the Nigerian cultural landscape reaches an irredeemable level before the relevant authorities would realise that tangible heritage resources are non-renewable.

Background to Looting in Nigeria

The first recording of looting in Nigeria was during the Benin punitive expedition of 1894 when the British forces invaded Benin and looted the palaces of the Oba and his chiefs of priceless art works and other cultural artefacts as war booty which now adorn many Museums in Europe and North America [1]. In 1910 before the amalgamation of the British Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria into a single entity in 1914, the German anthropologist Leo

Frobenius visited Ile Ife in south-western Nigeria and dug up several terracotta figurines and also made the local people to dig up sacred spots in search of terracotta figurines. It was the high quality art works that made him to make the interpretation that the art works were made by a Hamitic race and not the forebears of the Ife people [2].



Figure 1: Source: American Historical Association.

The activities of tin mining on the Jos Plateau brought into the open the Nok terracotta figurines through accidental findings. The Department of Mines in Jos made collections of artefacts that included tools of different periods of the Early Stone Age, polished stone axes of the Later Stone Age, iron objects and pottery, and a small terracotta head of a monkey from the mines. The terracotta head of a monkey was found in 1928 [3]. Since these discoveries the Nok Valley had become the theatre of massive looting of archaeological sites (Figure1).

Lootings of sites and Museums

The international trade in antiquities was and is still the main driving force behind the mindless looting of archaeological sites and museums in Nigeria. The growing market for export of antiquities had made nonsense of the 1970 UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit trafficking of cultural property that was meant to assist countries confronted with the problems of looting of cultural materials. The problem of the looting of archaeological sites and burglary of museums' exhibition galleries and storage facilities is very pronounced on the African continent in general and embarrassingly damaging particularly in Nigeria.

Several factors may account for the situation in Nigeria, and they include poverty, greed, corruption and the effect of widespread illiteracy. While in the Benue valley, the local populations have customs and traditions relating to archaeological sites which they guard jealously, in areas with immigrant populations who have no historical links to the archaeological sites in their present abode, the situation is different. Such is the case in the Nok valley and the Kwatokwashi area in North-western Nigeria where terracotta figurines are mined indiscriminately from archaeological sites by the local people commissioned by antiquities dealers. Those involved in the looting of archaeological sites are vicious vandals who are ready to take life in the course of their operation as they are alleged to carry firearms. The looters are usually local peoples recruited and encouraged by persons belonging to the international network of antiquity dealers to ravage archaeological sites within their neighbourhood.

Museum collections are also target of looting by antiquity thieves in Nigeria. There is hardly any museum in Nigeria that had never been looted. One may identify two forms of looting in museums in Nigeria: The first form is the clandestine removal of artefacts from storage facilities of museums that goes on unnoticed for a long time until such a time when there is transfer of staff. This kind of looting is perpetrated by the staff of the museums who belong to the international network of antiquity dealers. Instead of

being the custodian of the museum objects they are the actual antiquity thieves. The second form of looting in the museums is outright burglary with persons breaking into museums' galleries to steal objects on display. Again some staff of the museums are believed to be implicated in the incidence of breaking into exhibition galleries and storage facilities by providing information to the burglars on how to beat the security arrangements in the museums.

Other points of looting of artefacts in Nigeria include private/community shrines and palaces. These places are noted for housing antiquities and communal cultural objects. In these cases some unscrupulous elements in the community are recruited and encouraged to remove cultural objects from shrines and other locations within their communities and sell the objects to antiquity dealers. Sometimes objects are removed from private shrines by individuals related to the custodians under the pretext of discarding fetish objects on religious basis but those objects are subsequently sold to antiquity dealers. It is disheartening to observe that most of the looted objects from Nigeria find their way to museums in Europe. In some cases, facts had emerged to suggest that some established museums might have commissioned burglars to break into museum galleries in Nigeria to steal objects they wanted for specific exhibitions.

The looting of archaeological sites and museums is a big problem for the practice of cultural resource management in Nigeria as the country is deprived of the opportunity of curating and enjoying its heritage resources. Looting of archaeological sites is more destructive for the fact that context of the artefacts is destroyed and not known. The digging of the objects was not systematic and in most cases the objects were damaged and were therefore made to lose their scientific value. It is always difficult to establish provenance of looted objects from archaeological sites since the digging was done clandestinely and as such the country cannot legally lay claim to such objects for the purpose of repatriation. In the case of looted museum objects, there would be records on them including photographs and as such ownership claim could be made when they are eventually located.

Landscape Modifications

Lagos: The modification of the landscape in Nigeria had been an uncontrolled exercise. There is no legislation regulating land modification to protect heritage sites and properties. In the first instance heritage sites and properties are poorly defined and with the exception of few properties which had been declared national monuments but had not enjoined privileged status to protect them from adverse impacts in the environment. The recent event of assault on heritage properties was the demolition of Ilojo Bar an Afro-

Brazilian heritage on 11 September 2016 in central Lagos. The structure was built in 1855 and declared national monument in 1956 but was left uncared for by the relevant organ of government. The owners of the structure sold it to developers who demolished it in 2016. Figure 2



Figure 2: The state of Ilojo Bar before demolition.

Landscape and architectural design conservation is generally a big problem in Nigeria. Since the oil boom period of the 1970s, many Nigerian towns and cities, particularly Lagos, had changed in outlook, with old buildings and structures (bridges and paved walkways) of cultural and historical significance destroyed in the process of rebuilding these towns and cities. The colonial and the early post-independence cultural and architectural landscape of Lagos Island had been destroyed. The Marina of the 1960s with paved walkway and trees lining the lagoon had disappeared and replaced with concrete fly-over bridges. This had happened at the expense of the serenity and harmonious environment of the past. Several colonial style and Brazilian architectural buildings similar to the Ilojo Bar mentioned above had been demolished to give way to sky-scrapers that are not in harmony with the neighbouring buildings.

University of Ibadan

The University is Nigeria's premier university established in 1948. As a citadel of learning, it is expected to be a custodian of the history of the nation and provide leadership in the conservation of heritage. It is therefore distasteful that the kind of destruction and distortion that were happening to the cultural landscape of Lagos in particular and nationwide in general are also found on the university campus. The sport field which generations of students of the university had known is now the site of a gigantic faculty building that is out of place in the surrounding despite the fact that land is available elsewhere on campus for the building. Also the Central Administrative Block of the University which is a two-storey building and adjoined by the University Tower which is the most important landmark on the university was re-designed to have additional two floors. The original

architects had placed the surrounding building to be in harmony with one another being generally about the same height. These buildings include the Establishment Office block, Mellamby Hall and Trenchard hall which are now dwarfed by the additional two floors. The University Tower has lost its integrity as it has been choked up by the additional floors and out of harmony with the surrounding. It was a very good example of how not to modify the landscape. All these were happening while the University had an expanse of vacant land where new structures could be built but the authorities have chosen to put new wine in old skin. Figure 3 and 4.



Figure 3: University of Ibadan Central Administration Building during modification.



Figure 4: University of Ibadan Central Administration Building after modification.

Urban Renewal in Nigeria and Heritage

Generally urban renewal and developments are impacting greatly on archaeological resources. While it may be easy to enumerate public works that had been

executed without taking into consideration the protection of archaeological resources, it is quite difficult to document private developments that impact on archaeological resources. Such destruction could only be observed if they are ever brought to the attention of archaeologists. A good example is the case of the Kano city walls which in the recent past had been described as West Africa's most impressive monument. They were 25 km long and up to 18 metres high with narrow fortified gateways. The gateways have had to be modified and widened to allow for modern motor traffic. Nature has also taken its toll on the walls as they have become severely eroded today, with borrow-pits for housing encroaching from both sides and the rich of the society are building ostentatious houses right across the old wall [4].

The Zaria city walls had also suffered the same fate as the Kano city walls while on the sites of the old Kanem Bornu empire of the Lake Chad basin, burnt bricks used for the building of houses and the wall surrounding the town had been removed from ruins for re-use in house construction in the modern day settlements. The site of Birnin Ngazargamu in Borno State was one of the capitals of the old empire and it had been extensively looted of burnt bricks because the bricks had been adjudged to be of very high quality compared to those being made presently [5].

In Ibadan, urban renewal and expansion are taking their tolls on the ancient cultural landscape which could hardly be assessed, as there is no mechanism by which they could be monitored. However, there could occasionally be chance finds of such impact of urbanisation on the cultural landscape as was the case at Akingbola area of Bodija in Ibadan where potsherd pavements were found spreading over a large area on un-tarred roads and close to the foundation of houses. Investigations revealed that the area was occupied in the early nineteenth century by a powerful warlord of the Yoruba civil wars. The potsherd pavements are presently at the mercy of the people now occupying the area that seem not to pay attention to it or recognize the importance of the archaeological features in their vicinity. Similarly potsherd pavements had been reported on un-tarred roads and settlement areas in Oyan, Ashi, Ila-Orangun and other towns in the northeast of Osun State.

Nigeria's Infrastructural Development and Heritage Issues

When the Kainji Dam was designed in the 1960s, there were preliminary archaeological survey but as the dam was

being constructed there was no planned salvage archaeology. What was eventually done was an impromptu intervention that was rather late. At the end not much was achieved in terms of archaeological investigation. The 1970s witnessed renewed prosperity in Nigeria with the incidence of the global oil boom. There were many projects involving large areas of land, and in the past forty-five years, a number of airports, thousands of kilometres of highways, and a number of farm settlements and industrial projects including petrochemical industries, pipelines and power plants have been constructed without any preliminary archaeological survey being carried out before the constructions. It was also during the 1970s, precisely in 1975 that a new capital territory was proclaimed for Nigeria. The Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan and the Department of Antiquities which later became the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) planned to conduct extensive archaeological survey in the capital territory. Some survey work was done between 1977 and 1981 and the result was not different from the failed Kanji experience mentioned above. To date, there had been no salvage or rescue operation in the Federal Capital Territory (falls within the Nok Culture area) where acres of land are being bulldozed in the name of construction and archaeological sites are being destroyed without any records of them being made. Working with a construction firm on a site in Benin revealed that the engineers and machines' operators could not identify simple indicators of archaeological sites such as the spread of pottery remains not talk of differences in the relief on the landscape that may indicate the presence of moats and ditches.

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