

ERITREA

The Ethiopian invasions conducted on the southern and the western parts of Eritrea have destroyed many places of natural and cultural heritage in the country. Among the natural heritage, huge and ancient sycamore trees have been cut down for fuel and other purposes. The sycamore tree is sacred and symbolic in Eritrea, because the old customary written laws were made under such trees. Discussions, meetings, debates and judicious matters are still held under the shade of these large ancient trees. Sometimes they are known as the open-air parliament of ancient Eritrea. Moreover, crimes against cultural property such as archaeological sites, ancient monasteries, churches, mosques and historic monuments have been committed. Some historic monuments, such as patriots' cemeteries, have been destroyed and defamed. All these cultural resources were victims of indiscriminate heavy artillery, air bombardments, as well as looting. Other historic structures and ancient monuments have been deliberately knocked down by explosives and crushed by tanks.

The archaeological sites, ancient monasteries, mosques and historic monuments of Eritrea, as with all cultural resources are the common heritage to all humankind. In fact, some of these sites – such as the archaeological site of Qohaito and Mettera – have already been nominated (1997) as World Heritage Sites under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. The sites have been selected as World Heritage sites because of their universal significance and/or their cultural representativeness. Therefore, Eritrea's stewardship of these priceless resources should address not only issues of historical identity, but it is also clear that sustainable responsibility rises to a level of global importance.

Some of the endangered and destroyed archaeological sites and monuments date back to the first millennium BC, and the ancient monasteries and churches have in their possessions some of the finest and the oldest manuscripts and mural paintings that date to the 14th century AD.

The Stele of Metera

The small, fast growing and lovely town of Senafe is one of the many Eritrean towns and villages that were destroyed under the Ethiopian Military occupation. The stele of Metera, which is located close to the town of Senafe has been deliberately knocked down by an explosive that was placed at the foot of the monument, and many fragments of the stele lie scattered all over the place.

The stele is one of the most important ancient monuments of Eritrea, dating back to the middle of the first millennium BC. The stele of Metera is unique, with its pre-Christian symbol of the sun over the crescent. The stele stood 4.68 metres above ground, with another 1 metre extending below ground, its width at the bottom measures 0.8 metres and its thickness is 0.28 metres. The most precious part of the monument is the non-vocalised Ghe'ez inscription, which translates as: 'King Agheze dedicates this monument to his fore-fathers who have defeated the mighty people of Awe'alefene and Wetsabelan'.

Today, however, the ancient stele lies shattered on the ground, deliberately knocked down by the Ethiopian soldiers. Should history be held hostage and then destroyed because of ignorance and hatred? Should the Ethiopians who are proud of their own history destroy one of the most important and irreplaceable examples of material culture of not only Eritrea, but of all humankind. In fact, the archaeological sites that are found in this region of Eritrea are the precursors of the Axumite civilisation. Did not the Ethiopians write most of their ancient history utilising the material evidence from the so-called pre-Axumite and Axumite sites of Eritrea. It is strange that the Ethiopians, who are proud of their ancient history and who are attempting to recuperate the stele of Axum from Italy, show no regard for Eritrea's cultural property.

International Co-operation & Responsibility

There can be no justification for attacking civilian populations and for the destruction of cultural property. It is the duty of a leader to forbid these acts of brutality and to prevent the pointless destruction of the noblest production of the human spirit. Pointless destruction of an irreplaceable culture is never excusable.

The International Peace Conference of 1907 played a particularly pioneering role in the development of the protection of cultural property in times of war. It clearly stated that all seizure or destruction of, or wilful damage to institutions of this character, historic monuments, works of art and science should be made the subject of legal proceedings by the competent authorities.

In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps must be taken to spare buildings dedicated to religion, art, science or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected (Articles 27 & 56, 1907).

The Hague Convention of 1954 provides a comprehensive code for the International protection of the Cultural heritage of humankind. The most recent conference regarding this convention was held at Hague from 15-26 March 1999, under the auspices of UNESCO. UNESCO has been increasingly called on to respond to emergencies caused by conflicts that have resulted in the destruction of items of cultural property. To that end, the active assistance of UNESCO and other international organisations – such as ICOM, ICCROM and ICOMOS – in the protection of cultural resources is imperative.

Therefore, the damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since all groups make a contribution to the culture of the world. Consequently, considering that the preservation of cultural heritage is of great significance for all peoples of the world, it is important that the Eritrean cultural properties that are being destroyed by the Ethiopian army should receive attention and international condemnation. It is not only because it is a crime committed against the cultural patrimony of the people of Eritrea, but it is also the deliberate destruction of one of the most significant cultural heritages common to all humankind,

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