

SOUTHERN AFRICA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Introduction

Summarised, the risk to heritage in Africa is a product of two different but related “sins” that is: the Sins of Omission and the Sins of Commission. Within these two broad categories there are a variety of spectra both plain and kaleidoscopic at once; both construed and imposed at once both natural and abnormal. Therein lies the complexity of the problem; its multifarious nature makes diagnosis simple yet at the same time elusive. The cases presented here are designed to illustrate this complexity as much as to highlight the Gorgonic nature of the problem. It also demonstrates that there are extremes arising from ignorance on the one hand, as well as too much knowledge about the nature and importance of the heritage on the other. Lastly, the presentation highlights the fact that sometimes there is a tendency to look at heritage as a product of *homo sapiens*’ perception and recognition, when in fact humanity itself is a product of heritage and better still is endangered heritage, ie part of heritage at risk. How?

Humanity as heritage at risk

There is a group, the !Kung, who belong to the indigenous group popularly known as the Sarwa in Botswana or the San or “Bushmen”. This community is resident at Tsodilo, in North-West Botswana in the district of Ngamiland. The State Party of Botswana intends to have this area on the World Heritage List and there are a host of reasons why that site could qualify for world heritage status. The bottom line of it all is that the Tsodilo site is the product of thousands of years of !Kung occupation. Such occupation is characterised by hunting and gathering. The advent of new “economic” and “development” pressures has seen these people “displaced” from the core settlement area of Tsodilo to the “buffer zone” area, albeit after compensation had been paid. The bottom line of it all is that the !Kung are part of thousands of years of heritage, part of the landscapes on which they left their imprint, eg in the form of the rock art of Tsodilo.

They have always seen the area as sacred and so is the art : *We have gone up the Male hill with Samuchau over ten times. We passed exactly in front of the same paintings and Samuchau never showed us those rock paintings for a period of 20 years. Tsodilo is not a place where you reveal its sacredness to any strangers.* (Tjako Mpulumbusi)

The sacred nature of Tsodilo, that is, spiritual heritage without people at the core of it represents a devaluation of cultural values. Turning these people to selling curios to visiting tourists debases them just as much. Transforming them from hunter-gatherers into pastoralists or agriculturists reduces them to servitude. Heritage is about values, take away those values, then *Heritage is at Risk*.

“Development” and the risk factor

Cases from Zanzibar

“Development” has been described as a global undertaking with multiple dimensions – economic, social and cultural, that influ-

ence one another. Yet in that threesome, the cultural dimension is a long-neglected aspect of development, despite the much publicised UNESCO *World Decade for Cultural Development* and the various forums held to discuss the issues of “Culture and Development in Africa”. Not only that, heritage has been systematically destroyed to make way for development projects or simply to make way for human existence.

The following cases from Zanzibar Stone Town illustrate this scenario:

The origins of the Stone Town, the triangular peninsula of land on the western side of Zanzibar, lie in a 12th century fishing village known as Shangani. Through the influence of Kilwa, a trading centre grew as a result of the introduction of the art of building in stone, the manufacture and use of lime and wood carving, by the Shirazis of Persia. This transformed Shangani into a typical Swahili town. The Portuguese intervention of 1498, followed by 200 years of Portuguese rule, saw the decay of coastal towns but in the Stone Town, evidence of this era is marked by a massive fort.

When the Portuguese rule was overthrown in 1700 through the efforts of Sultan Bin Seif of Oman, a decision was made by the Oman ruler, Seyyid Said, to move from Oman to Zanzibar. The Stone Town became the capital of the empire. Stone buildings proliferated and the Stone Town became an economic and commercial powerhouse with tentacles reaching the entire Indian ocean area. The impact of Arab culture and contacts with India had a decisive influence on the development of the architecture. For example, the Omani-type house had a message, influenced by the Islamic concept of privacy, while the Indian influence introduced “bazaar” architecture – the house frontage serving as a shop with living quarters at the back of narrow streets.

With the British arrival, “colonial” architecture was introduced, in the Vuga and Mji Mpya suburbs. Colonnade porticoes, verandas and landscaping all characterise this phase. However here, through the work of John Sinclair, “Sinclair Saracenicism” prevailed – the blending of British architecture with existing styles of Zanzibar and the attempt to orientalise the architecture by introducing arches and domes. What this all adds up to is that Zanzibar Stone Town is a kaleidoscope of a heterogeneous society in a constant process of homogenisation, testimony to an architectural synthesis that symbolises the cultural synthesis of the Stone Town. The fundamental message of it all is *Harmony*. That is the authentic message of the Stone Town. There are no layers or evidence of stratification: there is a blending of cultural traits – a sum total of human relations developed over two centuries and perhaps longer. Yet the Stone Town is an embodiment of *Heritage @ Risk*.

Following the Revolution of 1964, there was a radical social transformation that saw the departure of many of its former urban owners and occupants who were replaced by rural families who could not identify with the urban tradition. The social and spiritual components changed. By 1997, of the 1709 buildings in the Stone Town, about 75% were in a deteriorating condition.

In the mid-1980s, realising the decline of properties, the Government instituted a programme to privatise houses on the

understanding that the new owners would have the means to maintain and improve the buildings. More than 300 buildings were sold in this way. In 1989, the programme was suspended because of anomalies in the disposal system.

Heritage is also endangered as a consequence of poverty; there are three categories of property ownership:

WAQK Properties – Deterioration a consequence of poverty

WAQK is an Islamic practice whereby the owner surrenders his right to a property and turns over the income from it to a specific charity. Many families fleeing the 1964 Revolution surrendered their properties. In 1982, 30% of the Stone Town buildings belonged to WAQK, but the percentage has since declined to 20%. These properties are largely neglected. Rapid deterioration of the property is attributed to *poverty*. Islamic rent is below market rent and so the declining revenue cannot sustain the maintenance of these properties.

WAQK properties are in real danger of disappearing and swift action is required.

Government properties – Deterioration a consequence of inadequate resources and lack of central direction

The Government of Zanzibar owns about 30% of the properties which are steadily deteriorating, primarily because of a lack of funding and a lack of clarity as to who should do what. Most of these buildings are in the Shangani and sea-front areas, eg landmark buildings like the High Court, House of Wonders and Msi-gii Mambo. Cosmetic repair and maintenance work is restricted to lime washing and repainting.

This heritage is in danger of disappearing and swift action is required to save this invaluable heritage.

Privately-owned properties – Deterioration a consequence of affluence

The two categories mentioned above are in part sins of omission unlike the third category which is wholly a sin of commission.

In 1982, the private sector owned 30% of property but with trade liberalisation the number in private hands doubled between 1982 and 1992. Aesthetically many of these private properties are in good condition but in reality they are physically destroyed because they have been unethically “conserved” and reconstructed. Five types of alterations have taken place, ranging from the new and radically altered buildings using the crudest forms of concrete and block work construction through to extensions adding storeys, exterior modifications (eg concrete balconies) and interior transformations. A survey carried out in 1992 showed that 85 buildings were radically altered or newly constructed. Currently because of trade liberalisation and the revival of mass tourism there is a hive of building activity that

defies all norms of authenticity and integrity. There are many instances where property owners deliberately allow properties to deteriorate and collapse, thus circumventing Government regulations for historic buildings. When the properties collapse, the owners then construct entirely new buildings which are used for tourism-related facilities, eg hotels, curio shops, restaurants, bureaux de change etc.

Abdul Sheriff’s words are a swan song, *The Old Town has been buffeted by a contradictory whirlwind of rapid development that threatens to destroy and disfigure even while it builds.*

The Old Stone Town is a candidate for the World Heritage List: there lies a strong case for the List to take on board this endangered heritage in order to save it.

Cases from Nigeria

Benin has always struck the world as the “by-gone” centre of the arts; its world famous bronze pieces, legally or illegally grace the best museums, art galleries and private collections of the world. These are but epitomes of a great civilisation that climaxed in the Benin Empire, which was destroyed by the British army only in 1897.

One of the phenomena left by this Empire are the massive earthworks of Benin. Steeped in the depths of time, estimated to be 2000 years, and culminating in the massive 20 m high rampart around present-day Benin City, only superlatives can describe this feat of African endeavour. The linear earthworks of Benin are estimated to extend over 6500 km² with total length estimated to be between 8000 to 24,000 km. The Great Wall of China is three to four times shorter than these earthworks. With a total 37 million m³ of earth, the earthworks are indeed unique universal heritage, which the State Party of Nigeria is now preparing for consideration for world heritage listing. A lot remains undiscovered and unnarrated. Because of their sheer vastness in extent, mystery surrounds their construction, and their varied nature in terms of their patterns and size. What is true is that they provide a territorial record of unknown state formation processes; they have a utilitarian role in defining space in terms of ownership and usage; they are part of religious symbolism and practice, with principal shrines, festivals and ceremonies centring on these earthworks. They mean a lot to the people of Benin.

Yet they are *endangered heritage* because of:

Population pressures

The density of population in Benin City and its environs is one of the highest in the world. As a consequence, space for building homes etc is very limited. Given the vast expanse of the earthworks (*iya*) the temptation and practice has been to build on these *iya* or to dump rubbish and to establish informal sector industries on the *iya*. Away from the city in its surrounds are areas such as Ekho where agricultural pursuits have resulted in the *iya* being used as agricultural land, resulting in land degradation and erosion of the earthworks.

Modernisation

A different threat is posed by changing life styles and preferences, not to the *iya per se* but to people's other forms of heritage, eg vernacular architecture.

Traditional adobe-under-thatch structures are giving way to cement and corrugated iron sheeting. In many places however, eg in Ekho, that transformation is at an intermediary stage where components of both the traditional and foreign materials, techniques and workmanship are in a state of balance. There is a need to reinforce the traditional, in order to shift the balance in its direction.

Vandalism

Pure Vandalism

With some varying degrees of frequency, vandalism does take place on natural and cultural heritage sites. The reasons are as diverse as the variety of property. However, they can be summarised as ranging from puerile to serious schizophrenic cases, and within the range is a whole variety of political, socio-economic, and cultural-religious factors that may be the trigger and/or the underlying cause of the fits and starts that characterise attacks on heritage. The prevalence of canister-type spray paints has facilitated the increase in this type of crime: *crime it is in all heritage legislation*. The more isolated the sites, the more vulnerable they are to attack. Given the clandestine nature of the activity, the rate of apprehension of the criminals is very low. Ignorance or lack of appreciation of the importance of natural and cultural heritage on the part of the law enforcement agencies compounds this problem.

In Africa, the top of the list of targets are rock art sites which are numerous but generally in remote areas. Their sheer numbers makes the effective presence of heritage personnel impossible. The Domboshawa site in Zimbabwe is a bizarre example of the dangers posed to this type of heritage.

Domboshawa cave, 35 km north east of the Zimbabwe capital, Harare, is a proclaimed national monument. Its components include rock paintings and Stone Age archaeological deposits, as well as its sacredness as a site which is used for rainmaking ceremonies. The site also has economic value attached to it as it draws local and international visitors.

On 14 May 1998, the site was vandalised during the night. The graffiti are very severe. A dark brown enamel (oil-based alkyd) paint was used to obliterate the paintings as a result of which 75% of the painted surface was affected. Of the 146 paintings, 65–70% were damaged. Fortunately methods have been found to remove the paint – a painstaking and expensive exercise indeed. The cleaning method has successfully removed the graffiti, leaving the original paintings intact. What contributed to this measure of success was the silica encrustation process over several decades. What happens is that over the years of exposure, a silica crust develops on top of rock paintings to form a natural protective coating that is very difficult to remove. A lucky escape for *Heritage @ Risk*.

Not so lucky are some forms of heritage. For the love of "pot" (intoxicating drugs) all the invaluable wooden window frames were ripped apart and the building destroyed by one property owner in Zanzibar.

Tourism

For the love of souvenirs, tourists have equally caused damage to the heritage they purportedly love. In order to carry with them memories of their visits to rock art sites, these tourists smear emulsive oils (eg linseed) on the art, so that the photograph comes out clearly. What these tourists leave behind is no memory for posterity. Sites abound in the Matopo Hills (Zimbabwe) where havoc has been caused.

Tourists pose a different threat to Zanzibar: here the target is the carved doors. The elaborately covered door, that manifestation of the Indian Ocean maritime cultural region, remains the hallmark of both the by-gone and present eras of this continuing tradition. Theotifs highlight the maritime origins of Zanzibar, the fish scales and wavy lines point to an important source of food for maritime Swahili people, all this is enshrined in the carved door. The door remains a strong tradition as every house-owner wants a carved door. However, that too is *Heritage @ Risk* because tourists are making for the centuries-old authentic carved door and will buy it at any price.

Again the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" continues to widen, as the former take away the lasting semblance of the "have-nots" heritage. Sayed Naqvi's words are ominously true, *Where there is not bread how can we say let them have museums (cultural heritage) instead?* The challenge for Africa is to retort, with reason that *This is a false alternative; our cultures themselves are an infinite richness whatever the level of economic development and what produce is not bread or heritage but bread and heritage.*

Benign neglect

Naqvi's message resonates with the views of former inmates of Robben Island (South Africa), the latter now a World Heritage site. Known for its history as a prison for political detainees, the most famous being Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, the physical structure has two aspects to it. The "B" wing (which held Mandela) has tended to be the focus of public attention and of all conservation efforts. A major section, unknown to many, is the original prison, which is closest to the heart of many former inmates. Regrettably, it is this section that has been ignored and allowed to degenerate into a dumping ground for rubbish. Unless attended to, it is also *Heritage @ Risk*. It is this threat that hounds the lives of the "have-nots" (former inmates).

It is this kind of threat that underlines Africa's predicament. The chilling fact is that all the cases made in this presentation are only the tip of an iceberg. One shudders to think what the real dimension of the problem is, for example given the constant wars and natural disasters, such as floods, on the African continent.

Dawson Munjeri, Vice-President of ICOMOS

TOURISM IN AFRICA

To many African countries, tourism is the main source of income. Eastern and south eastern Africa with their lovely beaches and corals are at risk from mass-tourism that can definitely cause damage to cultural heritage places. That is espe-

cially obvious in the Arabian Gulf, where Swahili towns and harbours are located on the beaches, which are also a target for resorts and hotels. This is clear at for instance, Bagamoyo, on mainland, Tanzania, Lamu in Kenya, and to a certain extent at Stone Town, Zanzibar. Another threat is that dwelling-houses

are converted to a large extent into hotels and guest-houses, completely changing the life of the town.

These threats raise a demand for sustainable cultural tourism programmes that take the integrity and authenticity of places into account.