Heritage conservation in Africa: The good, the bad, and the challenges

AUTHOR:
Shadreck Chirikure[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Shadreck Chirikure

EMAIL:
shadreck.chirikure@uct.ac.za

POSTAL ADDRESS:
Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

One of the greatest ironies about African heritage is that, despite being priceless, it often ranks very lowly in terms of government priority scales. The expectation from this priceless tag is that the benefits of heritage conservation to society are so immense that they should not be compared to those of competing endeavours. Heritage is a public good, essential for national identity, national cohesion, employment generation, education, and cultural and religious values.[1] Increasingly, African heritage sites are threatened with various forms of economic development.[2] The rationale from governments is always that they must create job opportunities and uplift underdeveloped areas. There is a raft of laws and policies that are designed to mitigate the negative impact of development on heritage conservation.[3]

However, stakeholder groups such as heritage experts and advocacy groups are keen to point fingers at governments for trading the 'soul of nations' for finite development. For example, the iconic World Heritage Site of Mapungubwe has been in the media for the last few years because of threats posed to its integrity by mining. In a different context, Swaziland withdrew the Ngwenya Middle Stone Age ochre mines from the UNESCO World Heritage Sites nomination list in favour of reviving industrial iron ore extraction. In the Sudan, vast stretches of cultural landscape hosting valuable and less valuable heritage are under threat from dam construction.[4] Surely, if heritage is the soul of any nation, then its conservation should be at the top end of the priority scale. Of course, just as pro-heritage campaigners point fingers at government ineptitude and corruption, the same governments accuse the advocacy groups of campaigning to freeze African landscapes. Governments are required to balance conservation needs against the needs of other stakeholders such as local communities that may need the hospitals, the jobs and the income associated with developments.[5,6]

This divergence of opinion invites us to explore some of the most salient features of heritage conservation in Africa. These observations were drawn from a dedicated literature review, participation in projects related to mining and heritage (in Mapungubwe, South Africa and Oranjemund Shipwreck, Namibia) and discussions with heritage managers and practitioners.

Heritage conservation in Africa: The good

With varying degrees of effectiveness, African countries have legal frameworks for conserving heritage.[3,5] Such laws have created administrative structures responsible for heritage protection in its various forms. For example, the Antiquities Department of Tanzania, the South African Heritage Resources Agency and the National Museums and Monuments of Ghana are mandated with heritage protection in their countries. These administrative bodies maintain inventories of heritage assets. They are also responsible for the identification, protection and conservation of heritage resources. African heritage management systems have provision for ranking heritage places according to significance. In countries with a clearly defined system of ranking sites, such as South Africa, national heritage sites or monuments are at the top of the value scale, while provincial monuments or sites occupy the intermediate position. Local sites have the least value or significance. Often, national heritage sites enjoy double protection because they are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites, whereas local sites are sacrificed to accommodate development.

African antiquities bodies collaborate with intergovernmental agencies, such as UNESCO and the African Union, to build capacity in heritage conservation. For example, the African World Heritage Fund, whose membership consists of African governments who ratified the 1972 UNESCO Convention, assists member states in capacity building and investing in heritage.[7] The broad aim is to use heritage as a pedestal for poverty eradication. Indeed, heritage sites such as Goree Island in Senegal, Timbuktu in Mali and Robben Island in South Africa are famous for attracting large numbers of tourists.[8] More importantly, even human origins sites like the Cradle of Humankind are now significant revenue generators.

International professional bodies, such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), also play an important role in African heritage conservation through technical cooperation. Their training and capacity building workshops often fill a vacuum created by a lack of programmes in heritage conservation at African universities. Similarly, multilateral funding bodies such as the World Bank require adequate heritage impact assessment before the projects which they fund are carried out.[9] Associations of African archaeologists and allied specialists are also working hard to promote good ethics and sound heritage stewardship.[10] These efforts have improved the awareness of the importance of heritage conservation and associated returns. The message is bold and clear – effective heritage conservation is vital for sustainable heritage utilisation.

Heritage conservation in Africa: The bad

Side by side with the good efforts and policies are areas of concern that may compromise the long-term future of Africa's heritage resources. Heritage protection is often not given sufficient resources when compared to other endeavours such as defence and health. Because of resource scarcity, antiquities departments are understaffed, and most of the staff are inexperienced.[11] This lack of resources compromises on delivery. Furthermore, legal frameworks operating in most countries were gazetted in the 1970s before strong links between heritage protection and environmental stewardship were forged.[3] Lamentably, such laws have no provision for pre-development impact

assessments. In the entire sub-Saharan region, only Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have legislation which makes it mandatory for impact assessments.[2,12] Given that Africa is experiencing extractive industry led economic growth, the absence of strong impact assessment regimes condemns most heritage sites, which are the staple of palaeosciences, to destruction. There is also the possibility that archaeologists take advantage of ineffective laws in some countries to carry out sub-standard work.

Perhaps the biggest problem that faces pre-development impact studies in Africa is that there are no quality-control measures – both for archaeologists and antiquities departments. The standard practice is that consultants submit reports to antiquities bodies for evaluation and authorisation. Often the antiquities bodies are understaffed and projects are given the go ahead without full consideration of the consequences for heritage. In South Africa, the Association of Southern African Professional Archaeologists accredits its members to carry out heritage impact assessments. However, the Association lacks a legal standing and there are no consequences for sub-standard work.[12] The South African Heritage Resources Agency also does not sanction such perpetrators although it has recently started 'to be firm' with sub-standard reports. Thus even in cases where strong laws exist, impact assessments are not producing a quality database essential for future conservation and research endeavours.

In a world where the rights of host communities are increasingly becoming more recognised, local communities are still not widely involved in heritage conservation endeavours.[5] Involvement is crucial because there are so many stakeholders in heritage beyond the practitioners, governments, researchers and developers. Most heritage legal instruments have no role for these communities which make them spectators in the study and protection of their own heritage.[3] It seems that such a problem is more acute for human origins sites because most date so far back that no local people directly associate with them. The tendency has been for scientists to carry out their work without involving local people or by merely employing them as labourers. If local people are to associate with this heritage and therefore support its conservation, more effort must be invested in programmes aimed at bringing them onboard. Even in South Africa where the law requires community involvement, consultation is often carried out towards the end of projects when all major decisions would have been made.

Although international cooperation has resulted in the accrual of massive benefits for African heritage conservation,[7] there are other areas that can be considerably improved. International cooperation programmes typically involve capacity building for heritage conservators in the form of workshops and seminars. A good example is the programme Africa 2009 which was sponsored by ICCROM and other bodies. Spread across many African countries, the Africa 2009 project built capacity in identifying heritage assets and developing inventories. Useful publications also came out of the project. However, the main problem is that despite having the capacity, most countries still do not have good heritage inventories because they lack resources.[13] Without credible inventories, heritage conservation is a big challenge. One of my personal observations is that different training courses sponsored by various organisations in the last decade or so, are attended by the same people, creating a group of 'professional workshop attendees'. These attendees have a long list of workshops on their résumés but have done little to implement what they assimilated in those workshops. Part of the problem might be that some courses are pitched at technicians who are not responsible for policy implementation, resulting in their newly acquired skills not being used.

Heritage conservation in Africa: The challenges

How can Africa ensure that its heritage resources are adequately protected for societies of today and tomorrow? Resources sufficient to permit responsible authorities to carry out their work effectively must be provided. However, as Africa grapples with problems such as unemployment, disease and hunger, in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, heritage is often accorded low priority. With no resources, there is

nothing that antiquities departments can do. They cannot attract the best talent or pay the salaries needed to retain talented individuals. However, the shortage of resources has been a mantra for a long time and yet even the few resources that are available are not used wisely. For example, there are some who believe that top management of antiquities bodies spend project money attending meetings and not protecting heritage. Therefore, a more prudent and creative use of scarce resources can contribute to effective heritage conservation in Africa.

As Africa strives to catch up in terms of economic development, more emphasis is being placed on the economic potential of extractive industries, such as oil, gas and mining. Given that these activities are associated with massive infrastructure development that alters the landscape, they pose a danger to heritage. For example, many heritage sites are threatened with destruction if huge areas of the Nile are flooded to create dams in the Sudan.[4] Swaziland opted to resuscitate iron mining rather than have its first World Heritage Site. Many regions of Africa, including the DRC, Zimbabwe and Cameroon, are also experiencing a boom in extractive industries and with that increased concerns for heritage. On the other hand, infrastructure development also provides the opportunity to survey areas that were previously unknown and thus contributes to improving our knowledge of the past.

While heritage practitioners are often quick to accuse the government of corrupt tendencies, particularly in the authorisation of developments, the same governments accuse archaeologists of failing to compromise and behaving as if they are the only stakeholders with rights and an opinion that matters. Heritage competes with other equally important needs and it is important to balance heritage conservation with development.[14,15]

Those in the heritage fraternity do acknowledge that there is a shortage of funds and that development results in the identification of unknown resources. Therefore, and despite the challenges, it is important for both development and heritage conservation to coexist. In countries such as the DRC, the distribution of sites follows the location of mines. Similarly, two of the most important human origins sites – Broken Hill and Sterkfontein – were discovered through mining. Rather than exchange accusations, all stakeholders should work together by adhering to ethics and standards of good practice.

There has been an upsurge of conflict in many African countries, from the Great Lakes region through the horn of Africa to West and North Africa. This conflict often affects important sites such as places of worship. Churches and mosques are often targeted in Mali, Nigeria and Egypt. The North African revolutions that toppled former dictators were also associated with the looting of sites. Good inventories and heritage documenting is essential to assist in post-conflict reconstruction and restoration of built areas. Objects, however, can end up in private hands and may be lost for many years.

Finally, these conflicts and other unforeseen disasters expose Africa's lack of risk management protocols for its heritage assets. Important sites such as Kasubi Tombs and the Royal Palaces of Abomey were destroyed by fire; evidence suggests that no risk control measures were in place. Robust risk management frameworks require the establishment of up-to-date inventories and GIS databases for management purposes and are crucial for saving heritage during disasters and conflict.

Conclusion

The conservation of African heritage includes good and bad aspects which create significant challenges. In moving forward, African universities must teach heritage conservation using their local experience. Such teaching should draw from other disciplines, such as planning, environmental studies and conservation, to best prepare graduates to conserve heritage. New research must also devise local best practice for managing African sites. There are many stakeholders in heritage conservation, and their interests must be balanced without privileging one group over another. Thus, there is need for compromises that allow controlled development to coexist alongside heritage protection. Often archaeologists point fingers at developers, but a look 'inside their own house' shows much that must be improved. For example, the regulation

of the archaeology profession is weak and ethics and good conduct are only perfunctory. Governments and professional associations should enforce high standards of practice and work with other stakeholders to ensure that the public good that is heritage is sustainably protected for generations to come.

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