

Recent Threats to Nigeria's Cultural Identity and Patrimony

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Abstract

For more than five decades, emphasis has been on the looting of Nigeria's cultural materials which ultimately get into museums, university collections and private vaults in Europe and North America. Scholars have continued to argue back and forth that looting has seriously undermined the integrity of the objects and the nexus binding them to their social cultural contexts. This paper critically examines the loss of cultural heritage which includes skewed collaborations which tend to favour some parties in the agreement; inadequate conservation and preservation of monuments and objects. For example, the potsherd pavements identified in Akingbola in Ibadan may soon disappear as the community continues to trample on the 'invaluable objects'. Pavements are just one of many objects/monuments that dotted Nigeria's landscape that need close attention. While poverty and civil strife accelerate the destruction of tangible cultural heritage (Schmidt and McIntosh, 1996) religion, media and lately, the use of the social media networks tend to bury the remaining vestiges of local practices and beliefs of the various ethnic and tribal groups. The third major flank of the paper hinges on the fact that young Nigerians in primary and secondary schools no longer receive information/teaching bordering on national pride and history. Unfortunately, for the country, private ownership of schools – primary, secondary and even tertiary education continues to be emphasised without structures to instill national cultural pride. Findings from randomly sampled schools in Ibadan showed a clear preference for foreign cultures and ideas with little or no knowledge of Nigeria's cultural materials/heroes. The unidirectional penetration of Nigeria's cultural terrain by foreign cultures under the guise of the world being a global village is a major drawback in the bid to attain industrial and technological breakthroughs. Countries as China and Japan have clearly shown that if properly harnessed, culture could be a major springboard for industrial and technological innovations.

Undermining Nigeria's Cultural Heritage

Looting of Nigeria's cultural heritage is not a recent phenomenon. From the colonial era till the present, individuals including missionaries, colonial officers, military men, diplomats, artefact merchants, petty thieves and even scholars have been robbing the nation of its heritage.

Being a multi-ethnic nation, Nigeria's heritage is as diverse as its ethnic configurations. The nation's landscape is dotted with rich archaeological sites, cultural landscape (Sukur, Osun, Ogbunike caves) vernacular architecture, Brazilian, Islamic and Colonial architecture, places of cultural memory and oral expressions such as spiritual places, palaces, shrines, grooves, mausoleum, cemeteries among others; they constitute relics that are reminders of the past of Nigerians and the people of the diaspora (Olorunnipa and Eboreime, 2000, Adekola, 2009; Adekola 2013).

Several of these cultural items have suffered varying degrees of looting; even those kept in custody (as in museums) have not been spared. According to Kusimba and Agbaje Williams (2006). In 1988, one of the best terracotta heads, Obalufon was stolen from the showcase of the Institute of African Studies Building, which is the former Archaeology Department, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife. In 1992, a host of Ife bronze heads were stolen from Ife museum after one of the security personnel was allegedly drugged (Kusimba and Agbaje Williams 2006: 134). During the 1990s, an estimated 429 objects were stolen from 33 museum institutions in Nigeria. Between 1993 and 1994 alone, about 40 objects were stolen from the Ife museum while 34 stone statues were stolen from the

Esie museum between 1993 and 1995 (Gundu, 2012). Various scholars have actually documented the theft of Nigerian antiquities (see Shyllon, 2007; Darling, 1999; Opoku, 2008; Jegede, 1996) among several others. In all, government officials have not been exonerated.

The team carrying out the ongoing archaeological investigations of the Nok area has also reported the massive looting of the entire region: "Just recently we came across, a site where an area of approximately a square kilometre has been perforated by holes, done by apparently large groups of well organised diggers, leaving behind hundreds of unsaleable fragments of terracotta, potsherds, even complete pots, grinding stones and iron slag" (Breunig, Neumann, and Rupp, 2012). It is obvious there is no record of the quantity and kinds of the objects that might have been looted before the research team met the gaping holes left behind by the antiquity looters.

These are aside from the pillage of Nigerian antiquities in diverse form during the colonial period. For instance, several thousands of Benin cultural objects were looted during the British invasion of Benin in 1897. Interestingly, one of the objects, a Benin pendant was offered for sale in 2011 by an international auction house, Sotheby in London. It was only the intervention of Nigerian academics in the Diaspora in conjunction with spirited efforts of an organisation, Nigeria Liberty Organisation that stopped the sale. Till date, the Nigerian government has been silent on the issue and neither has it requested for the pendant to be returned to Nigeria (Ogundiran, 2011).

Leo Frobenius "scientific" explorations of Ife and other parts of the Yoruba country

between 1910-1912 clearly made it clear that scholars too have been found wanting in terms of acquisition of artistic objects/cultural items. The initial task of the expedition was aimed at the advancement of ethnological knowledge and the geography of civilisation (Leo Frobenius 1913:30), but it later metamorphosed to massive acquisition of cultural objects particularly in Ibadan and Ife. Ironically, while Frobenius was fascinated by the artistic objects, the makers were described in multi-fold unpleasant words. Words like “poor devils” (Frobenius, 1913:51), shamed faced paupers (Frobenius, 1913:51), consummate clever thieves and burglars (Frobenius, 1913: 147) were freely used to describe the Yoruba.

One other area that Nigeria needs to pay close attention is the identification and conservation of cultural objects. Many objects, monument and ruins of settlements dot the landscape in various parts of the country, and these are begging for government attention. For instance, the potsherd pavement identified by the writer at Akingbola, Ashi in Ibadan North Local Government may completely give way any moment from now. The occurrence of the pavement in Ibadan regarded in Yoruba oral mythology as a war camp following the inter-tribal wars in Yoruba land is yet to be critically examined in the context of Yoruba history.



Figure 1: Potsherd pavement in Akingbola, Ashi (photo credit: author)



Figure 2: Residential buildings right on top of the pavement (photo credit: author)



Figure 3: The pavement at the back of one of the residential buildings (photo credit: author)

The pavements are daily trampled upon by humans, animals and even vehicles.

From the pictures, it can be observed that residential buildings have been erected on the pavements. Likewise potsherd pavements identified in Oro by Aleru and Adekola in the ongoing archaeological investigation of Esie and its environs are daily threatened as they are located inside the ever busy Oro market,

making it susceptible to daily trampling (Adekola, 2011).

The pavement identified in Akingbola is just one example. In Ibadan, several traditional and colonial buildings are also facing destruction.

Mutual Partnership or What?

The controversies surrounding the ongoing archaeological work in the NOK area would not have arisen but for lack of an explicit Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) well couched to protect Nigeria's cultural heritage. The work currently being undertaken by the Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany aims at rescuing data about the cultural context of the famous Nok terracotta (Breunig, P. Neumamm, 2012).

The Archaeological Association of Nigeria (AAN) has accused the investigators of unethical practices based on:

- (i) the lack of an MOU between the Germans and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments;
- (ii) the lack of responsible collaboration between the Germans and Nigerian archaeological community;
- (iii) the alleged unwholesome carting away of archaeological resources excavated by the Germans in the Nok valley to Germany;
- (iv) the unethical treatment of local communities by Germans in the Nok valley and lastly;
- (vi) the alleged inducement of local people to indulge in subsistence digging and looting of Nok terracotta (Gundu, 2012).

The response from the team of investi-

gators led by Professor Peter Breunig, Dr. Katherina Neumann and Dr. Nicole Rupp borders on the fact that the current work is the most comprehensive work ever carried out in the region. They also claimed that all materials exported to Germany are in that country temporarily and in fact left Nigeria in compliance with Nigerian law, with permits from the National Commission for Museum and Monuments. They further claimed that the exported materials are mainly:

- (i) archaeo-botanical remains, that is charcoal, charred seeds and fruits which will provide insights into the environment and are to be used for radiocarbon dating.
- (ii) soil samples for X-ray fluorescence analysis in order to identify the structure of the Nok sites by means of element mapping.
- (iii) samples of stone tools specifically for the detection of micro-residues and typological analysis (Breunig, Neumann and Rupp, 2012).

In what appeared to be a ridiculous interpretation of the AAN position, the Germans dismissed the claims of the association, describing it as being propagated by a single Nigerian archaeologist, Dr. Zachary Gundu (President of the AAN) whom they accused of showing aggression against the NOK project since its inception as a long term project in 2009. They also claimed to have moral support from all the communities in the region. An example given was that of Janjala where a parcel of land on which the temporary store house for the project is built freely given to them by the community (Breunig, Neumann and Rupp, 2012).

This however contradicts the position of

some of the communities particularly that of Ham. According to Gundu (2012) on 31 October, 2011, the President of the Ham Development Association sent a letter to the AAN in which he complained about the way the Germans are doing archaeology in the Nok valley. In the letter, he also questioned the whereabouts of the archaeological artefacts excavated by the Germans in the valley. The position of the Ham Development Association was entirely endorsed and even amplified by the paramount ruler of the community, Kpop Ham at his palace in Kwoi on 2 December, 2011 when the AAN executive paid a courtesy visit to the palace.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and the Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany apparently contained loopholes that can be exploited. Several articles of the Memorandum need amendment. For instance, under the obligation of Goethe University, the number of Nigerians to participate in the project was very low while little or no room was provided for the participation of Nigerians particularly those in the academia outside the Commission (Article 2 (a)). The same article 2 section d states that “the project was undertaken to promote the cultural and historical richness of Nok to the German and Nigerian public”. One would rather think the promotion of the richness of Nok cultural materials ought to be first in Nigeria before Germany.

Article 3 was on the obligation of the Commission, with inputs from AAN members outside the Commission, the lapses in some of the provisions of this crucial part of the Understanding has also been addressed. For instance, according to AAN, the Commission's

overall mandate is to ensure that the project is conducted with utmost scientific integrity with respect to the local community, Nigeria laws and with high ethical standards. Some other steps were also proposed for the Commission. It is to provide storage space and adequate security for all the materials handed over by the research team to the Commission while its functions also include expecting all materials received to be appropriately catalogued by the research team. The Commission was also advised to have an Advisory Council comprising of representatives of the Archaeological Association of Nigeria, the ranking chiefs of the Nok catchment area and to also advise the Director-General on the bi-annual review of the project, making sure that the contents of the MOU and best practices are upheld.

To further show the commitment of the Archaeological Association of Nigeria (AAN) to its case on the Nok project, the position of the Association was read at the Society of Africanist Archaeologists Meeting held at the University of Toronto between June 20-23, 2012. The report read by Professor Akin Ogundiran was duly signed by practically all practising archaeologists at the University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and IBB University Lapai, Niger State.

Nigerian University academics must be encouraged perhaps through AAN to be part of the project. If Germany intends to have PhD holders from the project, Nigeria deserves equal number. The ongoing consultations must be consolidated and all the parties-AAN, NCMM and the German team put all the cards on the table to protect Nigeria cultural artefacts. A comprehensive inventory of all the

materials exported to Germany so far must be made while a definite date is agreed upon for their return.

The Future of the Past

The third major challenge to Nigeria's cultural heritage has to do with the low-level of awareness at the foundation stage, that is, at the primary and secondary school levels. It may not come as a surprise that history as a subject has practically disappeared from Nigeria's school system. In the course of teaching a first year archaeology course at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology University of Ibadan, it was discovered that out of the twenty two (22) students admitted into the archaeology and anthropology programmes by the Faculty of Arts in 2012 only two had offered and sat for history at the Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE). The worst was to come in class when they were asked to discuss the contributions of Bashorun M.K.O Abiola towards the nation's nascent democracy following the brouhaha that trailed the re-naming of the University of Lagos. With the exception of the two same students, none was able to make adequate contributions.

Perhaps more dis-comforting to heritage managers is that there are no structures at the primary and secondary school levels to instil national cultural pride, while very little is done at the university level even as the government tend to promote the study of science and technology. In the course of our investigation, many of our respondents (teachers, parents and pupils) agreed that our national heritage is clearly a reflection of our identity and it has a lot with development. They however affirmed that we were fast losing grip of our national heritage.

A total of ten schools were surveyed around the University of Ibadan. Of the number, five were public schools while the remaining five were privately owned. It was dis-heartening to note that we were unsuccessful in getting responses from the private schools for reasons that appear to be obvious, a reflection of the disdain for the local culture. Questions posed to the respondents ranged from their views of the local culture; its relevance or otherwise in our contemporary society; the implications of embracing/jettisoning aspects of the local culture; the influences of foreign cultures, ideas and religion on the indigenous culture. To ensure that our respondents feel free we neither administered questionnaire nor did we use a tape recorder to record the information freely given. The beauty of this was that those respondents who spoke with us, five teachers, seven students and a vice-principal spoke freely with no fear of repercussion or harassment from any quarter.

A school teacher with the Technical College, Orita-Aperin, Ibadan, Mr Adesina Adewunmi was of the opinion that the country got to this stage of low-level of cultural appreciation owing to the fact that many parents no longer consider it mandatory to teach their wards/children about our customs and traditions. According to him, to speak the local language at home is a taboo and woe betide such a child as the parents believe that the mastery of the colonial language, English, is crucial in overcoming the diverse difficulties of today's world (Adesina Adewunmi, 2012 Personal Communication).

The fact that some of our indigenous language may go into extinction in the nearest future is not the only challenge as the "future leaders" are at a loss with many of our

traditional customs and traditions. For instance, it is no longer fashionable among many of our youths today to wear “buba” and “sokoto” not to talk of “sanyan”, “etu”, or “alaagba”. It is also an irony of fate that today’s urban youths cannot fathom local farming practices as plucking of orange, “a nkaosan”, removing the chaff from maize – “a nyaagabado”, harvesting of cassava, “a nwaegbe”, and so on. When one of our respondents, a 20-year old female student in one of the federal universities in the southwest was asked on how farmers get oranges, she simply said “won ma lo raloja” meaning they get it from the market.

For Nigeria to move out of its present economic dilemma, it has to go back to the roots and explore the traditional ways of operations of our forefathers, maybe by so doing the nation’s development trajectory can be unique and be African in its ramifications. (Adesina Adewunmi, 2012 Personal Communication). These views were also echoed by another respondent, a classroom teacher in a primary school, who holds a Bachelor of Education Degree Certificate in Nursery and Primary Education.

On issues of children’s attitude to learning of Nigeria’s cultural heritage and its idiosyncrasies’, she said it is pathetic that school lessons on cultural heritage are of low quality in the school curriculum particularly at the pre-University level. According to her, there is a dearth of textbooks on the subject while teachers have to depend on moral teachings (which they probably received from home) to impact instructions to the kids. “Even in Yoruba, the textbooks are of poor quality (Ojo, 2012 Personal Communication).

Though Abadina College School 3 offered Creative and Cultural Arts as a subject, the

situation was not different in the school as students only pay attention to cultural issues during the period of the class and on special occasions such as send off gatherings for outgoing staff and end of the year party. The school Vice-Principal (Academics), Gbolagade Akanbi and Creative Arts Teacher, Olayinka Adetona affirmed that Nigeria has to go back to its roots for any meaningful development to occur. Akanbi, a Bachelor of Education Degree holder, identified the practice of Christianity and Islam as having very negative impacts on the nation’s cultural activities as people nowadays consider anyone who engages in cultural practices as idolaters. In his words, the two religions are not at all sympathetic to African customs and traditions.

While relating a unique experience, Akanbi said we may perhaps have short changed our memory by completely jettisoning both the positive and negative sides of our cultural heritage. He recalled that in one of the schools he had served in the past, the children who came from families that worshipped Ifa were far better in their academic work than all the other children in the school. This according to him could have been a result of the continual memorisation of several ifa corpuses in their day-to-day activities. Not only this, according to Mr Akanbi, their behaviour was significantly different from the others as respect for elders was held in high esteem by them while honesty and transparency appeared to be values they did not toy with (Akanbi, 2012 Personal Communication).

Discussion

Though looting is a global issue, there must be pro-active responses to stem the tide, particularly in Nigeria. The pace of public and

professional education must increase at all levels particularly at the local level where many of these cultural resources are located. Issues of growing poverty must be squarely addressed. If individuals have means of basic livelihood, it could perhaps reduce the risk of being susceptible to temptations of aiding in ferrying cultural objects. A good example along this line was provided by the ethnographer, Leo Frobenius in his account of his dealings with the people of Ibadan.

Not a single one of them thought of rushing greedily at our filthy lucre. We often haggled over some one article or the other for days together, and I often missed a really fine piece because the wretched starvelings suddenly raised money elsewhere for their immediate needs. I observed something new to me in Africa in these early days which gave me food for thought. Whenever one of these poor fellows had arranged to part with a good antique at a price and his well to do relatives came to know of it, the richer ones among them, who as a rule, were quite indifferent to the fate of their poor relation now offered him substantial sums in order to retain the family possessions (Leo Frobenius 1913: 51).

In other words, it was the “outcasts” who were offering their heirlooms for sale but the richer members of the family were nearly always willing to pay to have these materials retained (Hambolu, 2010: 34). Though Frobenius succeeded in making some of the locals to part with their cherished patrimony, he also affirmed that it was not an accepted practice in Africa to sell antiquities (Leo Frobenius 1913: 52). If that was the case in 1910, over a century ago, how come the sale and looting of antiquities have increased geometrically but for the fact that poverty has perhaps increased across the nooks and crannies of the Nigerian federation.

Public education would also help in reducing the effect of religion on Nigeria's cultural patrimony. Massive recruitments by both Christians and Muslims have led to a situation whereby people felt disdain for their heritage. Just as Togola (2002) argued for Mali, many sculptural forms in Nigeria have been burnt by new converts to these religions. These materials were seen as being obstacles to the spread of these religions. One of our respondents revealed that her family worship Esu, the deity renowned for being a trickster (not the biblical Esu or Satan as referred to by Christians) and that as a Christian it would be difficult for her to affirm that in church because of the fear of the ridicule that would bring to her and her family. Invariably, once an individual gets converted to either of the two religion, the figurines, the charms, images and symbols of the “former life” must be burnt because “old things have passed away”.

It is even so bad that many adherents of these religions (Islam and Christianity) consider it offensive to give their wards indigenous or traditional names. Common local names have been dropped for names like O' Possible, Marvellous, Favour, Righteousness, Mercy, Gift, Goodness, Praise, Promise, Faithfulness, Melody, Peculiar, Lovelyn, Marylyn among several others. Hardly would you come across popular names of the past as Faleti, Fadeyi, Ogunwale, Ogunsanya, Ogundiran, Awosanya and so on.

The current idea of complete disdain for our cultural life is in stark contrast to the situation in some parts of Nigeria before the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914. For instance, in 1889, Lagos teachers resolved to wear only African dress and many of them began to change their

English names to Yoruba names: D. B. Vincent became Mojola Agbebi, Edward Macaulay became Kiteyi Ajasa, G. Johnson preferred to be called Osokele Tejumade Johnson, E.O.O. Moore changed his name to A.K. Ajisafe while Alexander Johnson dropped his English name to be called Oguntola Sapara (Ogundiran 2011: 6).

According to Ogundiran (2011) as a colonised people, our unbridled pursuit for modernisation has created a predicament in which our culture is disembedded from the philosophical and intellectual basis of our social existence. This is clearly evident in our educational system which is skewed in such a way as not to recognise the “labours of our heroes past” as rendered in the Nigerian national anthem.

For more than sixteen years now, (the current democratic government in Nigeria popularly referred to as the fourth republic started in 1999), the Nigerian government has placed undue emphasis on the teaching of the so-called science and technical subjects at the foundation level of its education to the detriment of humanities related disciplines. It was even so bad that a former governor while in office, in one of the South-western states from 2003-2007, claimed that in today’s world, subjects as history have no space in the bid for technological and industrial breakthrough. A major fall-out of this was a drastic reduction in students’ enrolment for history and related disciplines at the secondary level while teachers offering those subjects were massively disengaged from government service in the state. This was not peculiar to the state. History as a subject at the pre-university level is almost out of the window in almost all parts of the country. Our educational system needs reforms in a way

that would place our heritage at the core of our knowledge production. China and Japan are two good examples of countries that have been able to achieve this, although recent development in these countries is also worrisome. The cultural benchmark not only translated to their economic growth but also has given them their unique identities in the comity of nations.

In terms of archaeological works in Nigeria, government must provide funding to raise the level of archaeological work in the country. The three existing federal universities offering archaeology must be strengthened with modern facilities and equipment just as funds must be provided for fieldwork. Other federal universities yet to have archaeology departments could also be encouraged to establish such. In fact, as Gundu (2012) argues, it may be good for government to have archaeology departments in at least a university in each of the six geo-political zones across the country. Government should also help the institutions in having well equipped laboratories in tandem with global best practices. Till date no Nigerian university has a radio carbon dating laboratory. The Nigerian government should without delay encourage the setting up of at least one in the country and also bankroll the training of some Nigerian archaeologists in manning such laboratories. The only available radio carbon laboratory in West Africa is at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal. Establishing a radio carbon laboratory in Ibadan may not really pose a challenge as a federal nuclear agency already exists with capable physicists on ground in the university.

It is heart-warming that the Nigerian government is considering the review of the existing cultural laws in the country. By now, a

committee ought to have been set up on this as a follow up to the workshop on the review of antiquities laws held in Abuja on 6 October, 2011. Several portions of the Nigerian cultural statute of 1979 need to be reviewed. These include penalties for the violation of the laws (Okeleye, 2012), the undue importance given to mining at the expense of monuments and the failure to adhere to international conventions. The latter is important because it has been observed that no country has the resources to protect its cultural heritage (Brodie, 2002). Similar to this, it may perhaps be in Nigeria's best interest to be covered by the US emergency import control which *allows the US to impose import restrictions on categories of archaeological or ethnological materials subject to pillage that jeopardizes the cultural patrimony of a source country which is also a state party to the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (McIntosh, 2002:241). Mali has benefitted greatly from this not only in terms of stemming illegal trafficking of cultural objects but also in the training of Malians by educational institutions in the United States (McIntosh, 2002).

The review of Nigerian cultural laws must also ensure that all collaborations between the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) and any foreign research team must be known to the Nigerian archaeology community. In fact, a sizeable number of the investigators from the Universities must be part of such projects from its inception, which is at the time of conceiving the idea through to the proposal stage. Through such joint effort, Nigeria cultural heritage would be better protected. More funding should be

giving to NCMM to carry out its mandate, the parastatal needs to have more archaeologists who should be given regular training and re-training. It is not in Nigeria's best interest to have curators who have little or no knowledge of Nigeria's archaeological materials. Training of museum professionals must be embraced with individuals interested in such training encouraged to do so. The heritage managers available in the country are inadequate for a country the size of Nigeria. Government funding certainly must be complemented with the resources from the private sector. The private sector in Nigeria is yet to show meaningful response to issues of cultural heritage protection. Those involved in construction – road and estate – should perhaps through legislation be mandated to set aside certain percentage for archaeological salvage operations.

Conclusion

The challenges facing Nigerian cultural heritage in the 21st century are enormous. This paper has been able to identify three immediate ones bordering on looting, skewed collaborations entered into by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and the failure of the Nigerian educational system to address the issue of the complete integration of our heritage into the core of our school curriculum. Suggestions have been made but these were certainly not exhaustive; however, if faithfully implemented could help in solving some of the current difficulties. The future of Nigeria is certainly not in holistic borrowed technology and ideas but rather in a thorough reflection with the sole aim of extracting the innovations, and ideas that could be modified

to face the challenges of the 21st century. The future of Nigeria certainly lies in its past.

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Oral Information (Key informants)

Mr Gbolagade Akanbi – Teacher, 45 years, place of contact – Ibadan, 2012.

Mrs Ojo – Teacher, 42 years, place of contact – Ibadan, 2012.

Mr Adesina Adewunmi-Teacher, 35 years, place of contact Ibadan, 2012.

Mrs Olayinka Adetona – Teacher, 32 years, place of contact – Ibadan, 2012.

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